Evidence of Less Blame and More Acceptance of Obesity as a Medical Condition Among U.S. Adults

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Background: Among U.S. adults, many view obesity as a matter of personal choice and responsibility. In 2013 the AMA ruled obesity is a complex chronic disease, but skepticism remains. Bias that denies the physiology of obesity and blames persons with obesity (PwO) harms patients. The present study aimed to detect possible shifts in public opinion about obesity and blame directed at PwO.

Methods: A total of U.S. 7,076 adults completed online surveys – 3,530 in Nov 2017 and 3,546 in May 2020. Each respondent answered only one question – either a multiple choice question to describe the type of problem they believe obesity to be (personal problem of bad choices; community problem of bad food and inactivity; a medical problem; or none of the above) or a 5-point Likert scale item to indicate their agreement regarding whether or not a) obesity is the fault of a PwO; b) obesity is a problem because PwO are blamed for the disease instead of receiving needed medical help; or c) they would interview a PwO for a job.

Results: Between 2017 and 2020, there was little change in participants’ views that obesity is a matter of personal choice or responsibility; 35% of respondents endorsed this view in 2017, versus 34% in 2020. However, more respondents in 2020 agreed with the narrative that PwO need less blame and more medical help, which increased from 30% to 42%. Respondents were nominally less likely to assign blame to PwO (a drop from 31% in 2017 to 25% in 2020) and more likely to agree that obesity is not their fault (up from 11% in 2017 to 16% in 2020). Finally, 66% of respondents in 2020 indicated they would interview PwO for a job, up from 58% in 2017.

Conclusions: Personal responsibility remains a dominant view of obesity among U.S. adults, despite its classification as a disease by the AMA. However, fewer
respondents in 2020 explicitly blame PwO, deny the need for medical care, or say they would discriminate against PwO in employment.

**Category:**
Track 6 Policy/Public Health
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ObesityWeek 2020
What Is Weight Bias?

- Negative:
  - Attitudes
  - Beliefs
  - Judgments
  - Stereotypes
  - Discriminatory acts

- Based solely on weight
- Subtle or overt
- Explicit or implicit
Weight Bias & Stigma Are Pervasive

- Family and friends
- Community, education, and employers
- Healthcare providers
Bias Compromises Quality of Care

• Less empathetic care
• Less preventive care
• Patients feel berated and disrespected
• Obesity blamed for every symptom

“You could walk in with an ax sticking out of your head and they would tell you your head hurt because you are fat.”

Source: NY Times, Sep 25, 2016
COVID-19 Concerns for People with Obesity

- Patients avoiding healthcare
- Increased fear of being discounted
- Extreme fear of infection and hospitalization
- Concerns about changes in eating habits, exercise, weight gain
People Typically View Obesity as the Result of Poor Choices

70%

Environment • Choices • Genes
The Truth Is That

Obesity Is a Highly Heritable Chronic Disease

- Heredity plays a dominant role in obesity risk
- But environmental factors serve to activate it
- Then, people can choose what to do about it

Heritability 70%

Source: Musani, Erickson, and Allison, 2008, AJCN
In 2013 AMA Resolved That Obesity Is a Complex, Chronic Disease

Milestones in Regarding Obesity as a Disease

- 1977: HCFA: “Obesity is not a disease”
- 1998: NIH Guidelines
- 2002: IRS Deductibility
- 2004: Social Security
- 2006: CMS: “Obesity is not a disease”
- 2008: CMS Surgery Coverage
- 2012: Obesity Society White Paper
- 2013: AMA: “Obesity is a disease”

Source: Kyle, Dhurandhar, and Allison, Endocrinol Metab Clin North Am, 2016.09
Explicit Bias Is Down, But Implicit Bias Is Up

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Explicit Bias Trend 2007-2016</th>
<th>Implicit Bias Trend 2001-2016</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality</td>
<td>Down</td>
<td>Down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>Down</td>
<td>Down</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Down</td>
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<tr>
<td>Age</td>
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<td>Flat</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>Down</td>
<td>Flat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Weight</td>
<td>Down</td>
<td>Up</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Charlesworth and Banaji, 2018, Patterns of Implicit and Explicit Attitudes, Long-Term Change and Stability From 2007 to 2016
Earlier Research Suggested a Trend Toward Less Blame Between 2013 and 2017

- Fewer people think of obesity as a problem of bad personal choices
- People are shifting toward more diverse views of obesity

Source: ConscienHealth/OAC weight bias tracking research, 2013-2017
Study Objectives

- Detect shifts between 2017 and 2020 in public opinion about:
  - Obesity
  - People living with obesity
  - Blame directed toward them

Self-Portrait, photograph © Mike Fritcher / flickr
Web and Smartphone Samples Obtained via Google Consumer Surveys

Sample Size

- 7,076 total
- U.S. adults
- 3,530 in Nov 2017
- 3,546 in May 2020
- Only one question per respondent
No Big Shifts from 2017 to 2020 in the Public’s Primary Views of Obesity

“Which phrase comes closest to describing the type of problem you think obesity is? Personal problem of bad choices, community problem of bad food and inactivity, medical problem, or a something totally different.”

A proportional odds baseline category logit model demonstrates that differences between 2020 and 2017 responses are not significant, p > 0.18.
How strongly do you agree or disagree? “Obesity is such a big problem because too many people get blamed for this disease instead of getting the medical help they need.”

A proportional odds cumulative logit model demonstrates that differences between 2020 and 2017 responses are significant, $p=0.001$. 

**May 2020**
- Strongly agree: 19.6%
- Agree: 22.5%
- Neutral: 32.2%
- Disagree: 12.6%
- Strongly disagree: 13.1%

**Nov 2017**
- Strongly agree: 17.9%
- Agree: 12.2%
- Neutral: 31.4%
- Disagree: 16.3%
- Strongly disagree: 22.2%

389 responses weighted by demographics

360 Responses
Respondents Trended Away from Agreeing Obesity Is the Fault of People Who Have It

How strongly do you agree or disagree? “If a person has obesity, it is their own fault.”

**May 2020**
- Strongly agree: 11.8%
- Agree: 13.0%
- Neutral: 38.6%
- Disagree: 18.6%
- Strongly disagree: 13.1%

**Nov 2017**
- Strongly agree: 12.9%
- Agree: 18.0%
- Neutral: 39.3%
- Disagree: 16.1%
- Strongly disagree: 13.7%

A proportional odds cumulative logit model demonstrates that differences between 2020 and 2017 responses are not significant, p=0.101.
Respondents Trended Toward Agreeing Obesity Is Not the Fault of People Who Have It

How strongly do you agree or disagree? “If a person has obesity, it is not their fault.”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opinion</th>
<th>May 2020</th>
<th>Nov 2017</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strongly agree</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Agree</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>43.6%</td>
<td>45.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Disagree</td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td>20.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strongly disagree</td>
<td>16.0%</td>
<td>22.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A proportional odds cumulative logit model demonstrates that differences between 2017 and 2020 responses are not significant, p=0.163.
Respondents Became More Likely to Agree They Would Interview a Person with Obesity for a Job

How strongly do you agree or disagree?
“If I were an employer, I would interview a person who has obesity for a job.”

May 2020
395 responses weighted by demographics

- Strongly agree: 46.8%
- Agree: 19.3%
- Neutral: 19.7%
- Disagree: 5.7%
- Strongly disagree: 8.5%

Nov 2017
365 Responses

- Strongly agree: 37.4%
- Agree: 20.4%
- Neutral: 24.3%
- Disagree: 8.0%
- Strongly disagree: 9.9%

A proportional odds cumulative logit model demonstrates that differences between 2020 and 2017 responses are significant, p=0.001.
Conclusions

- Personal choice remains a dominant, though misleading theme in public opinion about obesity
- The public has become more open to a medical narrative for obesity
- Marginal trends suggest less inclination to blame people with obesity
- Public sentiment increasingly disagrees with discriminating against people with obesity
Implications

• Explicit bias against people with obesity may be declining
• Implicit bias may be more challenging and deserves attention
More Information

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