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New Weight Bias Study Finds Women More Likely Than Men to Blame Themselves for Weight Stigma

Hartford, Conn. – Weight stigma can contribute to obesity, as individuals who experience stigma about their weight often cope with this distress by eating and avoiding exercise, increasing the likelihood of weight gain. Weight stigmatization can also impair emotional wellbeing, contributing to depression, anxiety, low self-esteem and body dissatisfaction.

Despite higher rates of obesity among women and minority populations compared with white Americans, less is known about differences in weight stigma or strategies for coping with weight stigma across gender and racial groups.

In a new study by the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at the University of Connecticut, researchers found that although weight stigma is equally present across different groups (Asian, black and Hispanic, and white men and women) there are differences in how particular groups are likely to respond to being stigmatized.

“We found differences both by gender and race. Women were more likely than men to blame themselves for being stigmatized, while black and Hispanic individuals were less likely to blame themselves for being stigmatized compared with white individuals,” said Mary Himmelstein, a UConn Rudd Center post-doctoral fellow and the study’s lead author.

The new study, published today in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, highlights the importance of race and gender in people’s experiences of weight stigma, their tendencies to blame themselves for this stigma, and the coping strategies they use. As such, the study holds important implications for understanding how weight stigma experiences and coping strategies for dealing with weight stigma contribute to weight-related health, particularly among individuals who are at higher risk for obesity yet underrepresented in research.

The study involved a national sample of 2,378 American adults (1,539 white, 391 Latino/Hispanic, 308 black, and 140 Asian, with 50.3 percent women). Participants were asked whether they had ever been treated unfairly, discriminated against, or

teased because of their weight, and to indicate how they typically cope with these experiences.

Specific findings include:

- Nearly 41 percent of the participants experienced weight stigma, with whites, blacks, Hispanics, and Asians reporting similar experiences with weight stigma.
- Compared to white women, Hispanic women were more likely to cope with stigma by engaging in disordered eating behavior (e.g., bingeing, starving, or purging), whereas black women were less likely to cope by engaging in disordered eating behavior.

These findings suggest that black women may be buffered from some negative health consequences of weight stigma compared to white women, and Hispanic women may be more at risk for health problems relative to white women, according to the findings. The findings suggest that Asian men and women are similar to white men and women in coping strategies, weight stigma and self-blaming for being stigmatized.

“Overall, our results suggest that we need to identify effective strategies for coping with weight stigma, and prioritize increasing racial and ethnic diversity in research on weight stigma,” Himmelstein said. “Failure to meaningfully examine racial identity means missing important and unique experiences which contribute to obesity-related health disparities.”

Study co-authors include Rebecca Puhl, Deputy Director of the UConn Rudd Center and Professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies at UConn, and Diane Quinn, Professor in the Department of Psychological Sciences at UConn.

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About the UConn Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity

The Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at the University of Connecticut is a multi-disciplinary policy research center dedicated to promoting solutions to childhood obesity, poor diet, and weight bias through research and policy. The Rudd Center is a leader in building broad-based consensus to change diet and activity patterns by conducting research and educating policy makers and the public. For more information, visit www.uconnruddcenter.org or follow us on Twitter at www.twitter.com/uconnruddcenter or on Facebook at www.facebook.com/uconnruddcenter.