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„Slim, Smart and Happy?” Stigmatization of Obesity Among Preschool Children

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Abstract

Nowadays, the idea “the slimmer – the better” has gained such an enormous power in our culture that it significantly affects even the youngest members of modern society. For this reason, obesity is particularly traumatic for children and young people. It was decided to examine whether these important cultural changes also apply to the youngest members of today’s Polish society, moreover there is lack of studies of this problem in Polish literature. Hence, the authors of this paper have focused on the question whether and how preschool children stigmatise obesity?

The study was conducted on a group of 122 children with a three-silhouette technique, based on a method proposed by Tremblay et al. (2011). The results show that being classed as overweight means being perceived as lacking in physical and interpersonal attractiveness, so obesity appears to elicit a very strong negative stigma. The features of the slim body shape equal physical and interpersonal attractiveness (but only in the field of playing together).

Key words: obesity, body image, attribution, preschool children, silhouette test, obesity

Obesity – the problem of XXI century

Nowadays, modern culture creates a certain type of appearance which is regarded as beautiful. Beauty and physical attractiveness are a serious matter for

more and more people. It seems that the idea “the slimmer – the better” has gained such an enormous power in our culture that it significantly affects even the youngest members of modern society (Maddow and Liederman, 1969; Sarwer et al., 2003).

Such treatment of an individual has several negative consequences. First of all, the body in modern times is increasingly seen as a phenomenon that can be shaped, decorated, and trained in order to express individual identity. As a result, physical appearance is often identified with the value of the individual, which often manifests itself in the content of social ratings and the quality of social relationships.

This is a fully understandable phenomenon, bearing (for example) in mind the fact that mass media remains a strong vehicle for socio-cultural attractiveness standards, and children, as well as adults, are their users and recipients. Therefore, just like adults, young people wear fashionable clothes, receive and play with slim dolls, etc. Mass-media can also trigger tendencies to become too self-conscious about one’s own body. This involves excessive striving for perfect fitness, negation of natural physical processes (like growing up or getting older), the multiplication of requirements concerning appearance, or simply undergoing an excessive number of beauty treatments or even plastic surgeries. The above-mentioned phenomena may induce prejudices against other body types, as well as disorders in the perception of one’s own body, further leading to eating disorders, and incorrect social attribution towards people with an undesirable body shape (the obese). In conclusion, such a situation may lead to the acceptance of a slim figure as a generally-applicable standard, which might result in discrimination towards people of certain looks.

Obese people are not discriminated against because they have medical problems, but because their obesity is viewed as a reflection of poor character. For many people, obesity means that a person is lazy, incompetent, lacking in self-discipline, self-indulgent and has emotional problems (Puhl and Brownell, 2001; Paul and Townsend, 1995). Negative attitudes toward obese persons unfortunately have become an acceptable form of prejudice in Western societies (Falkner et al., 1999).

For this reason, obesity is a very serious social problem for many people – “The societal message about being fat in the 21st Century is clear; it is bad to be fat” (Schwartz and Puhl, 2003, p. 64). This problem seems to be particularly traumatic for children and young people. Research shows that younger and younger children have problems with self-acceptance (Dohnt and Tiggemann 2006; Engle and Kasser, 2005; Maltby et al., 2005; Thelen and Cormier, 1995;

Tremblay and Limbos, 2009).

It appears that in a group of adolescents and young adults, the negative assessment of one's own body (as obese) was connected with low self-esteem (Mendelson et al., 2000; Mendelson et al., 2001; Tiggemann and Wilson-Barett, 1998; Tremblay and Limbos, 2009; Pierce and Wardle, 1993; Sands et al., 1997), depression (Fabian and Thompson, 1989; Rierdan et al., 1988; Verkuyten, 1990; Noles et al., 1985; Storch et al., 2007), social anxiety (Cash and Fleming, 2002) or victimization (Storch et al., 2007). However, some research suggests the rather reverse nature of the dependency – overweight/obesity is the factor causing psychological problems (Goodman and Whitaker, 2002).

Numerous studies also proved that the early tendency towards the negative assessment of one's own body (or e.g. overestimating its parameters) was closely connected with ED [Eating Disorders], or that these were their predictor, or led to problems in socializing with peers throughout the whole of one's life, including adulthood (Cash and Deagle, 1997; Stice, 2002; Coovet et al., 1988; Heinberg, 1996; Davison et al., 2003; Engstrom and Norring, 2002; Shisslak and Crago, 2001; Schur et al., 2000; Fabian and & Thompson, 1989). Obese children are socially rejected by their peers (Latner and Stunkard 2003; Cramer and Steinwert 1998) and – what is particularly distressing – by adults (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1999).

Research studies conducted on groups of children and adolescents show that the tendency to stigmatise the obese appears quite early (Cohen et al., 1989; Cramer and Steinwert, 1998; Feldman et al., 1988; Thelen and Cormier, 1995; Tiggemann and Wilson-Barett, 1998; Sigelman et al., 1986). Obesity was often the reason for exclusion or hostile attitudes towards others, including peers, or the cause of their negative evaluation (Collins, 1991; Lunde et al., 2006; Worsley, 1981). Cramer and Steinwert (1998) reported that 3–5-year-old preschool children described an overweight child to be a more mean and undesirable playmate in comparison to an average-weight child. Others have found that even preschool children ascribe more negative characteristics to fat figures than to normal ones (Turnbull et al., 2000). Likewise, Brylinsky and Moore (1994) found that children, starting at the age of 3, associated overweight individuals with being mean, stupid, ugly, unhappy, lazy and having few friends. In another study, which examined weight-based stigma among 7–9-year olds, it was reported that ratings were most favourable for pictures of thin children and least favourable for chubby children (Kraig and Keel, 2001).

The year 1989 marked the beginning of great social change in Poland. This process was (and still is) very complicated and difficult. A symbolic step (a mile

stone) was the Polish accession to the European Community. Polish society has increasingly conformed to Western societies. There were huge, groundbreaking, positive changes, but also negative changes have come about, especially in social life. The boundaries between countries have disappeared, we have got to know the culture of the West, while information technology and the Internet have turned the world into a global village, which has contributed to the changes in lifestyle in Poland. However, there are also negative phenomena, among them a strong tendency to the social exclusion of “others”. One of such groups of “others” are people who are overweight and obese – a very important group, as it keeps growing in number (Latner and Stunkard, 2003; Schwartz and Puhl, 2003; Els et al., 2005, Burke and Wand, 2011). According to studies, this is a group facing a high risk of stigmatisation and social rejection (Latner et al., 2007).

Cat Pause, lecturer at the School of Arts, Development & Health Education at Massey University, NZ (2012) points out that although laws against racism and sexism are being introduced, discrimination against fat people is not only tolerated, but in some ways even encouraged by governments which conduct campaigns against obesity. She argues that the “the war against fat” is currently ongoing, and most societies manifest so-called “fat phobia”.

A majority of studies have focused on the phenomena occurring in Western societies. The cited results show that stigmatising attitudes and behaviours were observed not only in relation to adults, but also children. Moreover, the term “stigma”, is not only connected with physical, but also psychological effects, threatening the psychosocial health of both the individual and society.

Undoubtedly, it is interesting therefore to determine whether and how this “war” is also conducted by the youngest members of today’s Polish society. So we have focused upon the question of whether and how preschool children stigmatise obesity.

The present study is concerned with the processes of the attribution of specified features depending on figure type. The range of attributed features included not only physical attractiveness, but also other attributes like intelligence, emotional state and interpersonal attractiveness – therefore, the features qualifying peers of various body types as partners in different types of social activities - during play, learning or social meeting. The authors aimed towards answering the question: *what features do six-year-olds attribute when assessing the figures of other children with different body weights?* It seems that now, when considerable emphasis is placed on getting and keeping a slim figure, the attitude towards the obese, but also towards those who are slim (or normal), is an important issue.

Method

For the body image task, we utilized a three-silhouette method, based on a method proposed by Tremblay et al. (Tremblay et al., 2011). While there are many methods used to estimate body size and satisfaction in adolescent and adult populations, silhouette drawings are often the only effective methods with children (Tremblay et al., 2011). In addition, test-retest reliability for the figure preference tasks for children aged as young as 8 years. Thus, a three silhouette scale constitutes an effective differential rating that is more appropriate for young children. The pictures were created to match the three weight status categories (under, normal and overweight). Two series of pictures were created – a boy and a girl. Such a procedure seems to be relevant because of the character of the test that was designed especially for the needs of children and adjusted to their level of cognitive development (Gardner and Brown, 2010; Tremblay et al., 2011; Yanover and Thompson, 2009). Also the choice between three categories is thought to be a safeguard against forced stigmatisation (which could happen when the choice only between the two opposite body shapes would be given).

In the first part of the test, the child was asked to indicate which among the three figures is:

- 1) the prettiest/the least pretty;
- 2) the wisest/the least wise;
- 3) the happiest/the least happy (*abehavioral factors*).

In the second part, the child was asked “Which one would/wouldn’t you...”:

- 1) most like to play with;
- 2) invite to a birthday party;
- 3) learn with (*behavioral factors*).

To measure children’s personal body attitudes, children were asked, “Which drawing would/wouldn’t you most like to look like (*ideal self and aversive self of personal body attitudes*), according to the method and categories used by Cramer and Steinwert (1998).

In the present study, satisfactory 2-week test-retest reliability coefficients were obtained and almost all of them reached an acceptable level of 0.7 (Smolak, 2004) on the sample of 54 children.

The procedure for the research involved testing of all options. First, the girl-subjects were asked to state their preferences to girl body shapes, and then boy-subjects – boy body shapes. The boy-subjects were presented with the body shapes in a reverse order. During the test, research assistants coded the child’s answers on a special table. 122 children (60% boys and 40% girls;

M = 5.7 years; range: 5.3–6.6 years) were individually interviewed by a female researcher of normal weight, and were weighed and measured in their preschools. The research was carried out in various kindergartens in Lublin, eastern Poland. Consent for research was obtained for all participants (children and parents) prior to their involvement in the investigation (according to APA ethical guidelines).

Results

The results obtained were statistically analysed by means of the Pearson chi² test, focusing on the analysis of the amount of positive and negative choices from abehavioral and behavioral factors in relation to a girl and a boy body shape as made by the tested children, as well as personal body attitudes adopted towards body shapes of the same sex as their own. The first step of the analysis was to verify the distribution of the number of positive and negative nominations from abehavioral and behavioral factors in relation to a girl and a boy body shape. All differences in the distribution of the nominations proved to be statistically significant (Tables 1–4).

Table 1. Positive nominations of behavioral and abehavioral factors – girl’s silhouette

Girl’s silhouette	Prettiest		Happiest		Wisest		To play with		To birthday party invite		To learn with	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Underweight	100	82	40	32.8	70	57.4	88	72.1	74	60.7	78	63.9
Normal	22	18	66	54.1	38	31.1	30	24.6	44	36.1	40	32.8
Overweight	0		16	13.1	14	11.5	4	3.3	4	3.3	4	3.3
Total	122	100	122	100	122	100	122	100	122	100	122	100

Chi²=84,815; s<0,001.

The positive answers relating to the girl body shapes in the category of abehavioral factors are presented in Table 1. Most often the “Underweight” shape was nominated as the “Prettiest” (82%), the same as in the case of the choice of the “Wisest” person (57.4%). However, this tendency was not repeated in the case of the “Happiest” person, where the “normal” shape was nominated most often (54.1%). In all the three areas, the “Overweight” shape had the smallest number of nominations, and it was never nominated in the category the “Prettiest” (0 nominations).

In the category of behavioral factors, the “Underweight” body shape received the largest number of nominations in the categories: “To play with” (72.1%), “To invite to a birthday party” (60.7%) and the best person “To learn with” (63.9%). Similarly to the previous situation, the “Overweight” shape was the least frequently selected option (3.3% in each category).

Table 2. Negative nominations of behavioral and abehavioral factors – girl’s silhouette

Girl’s silhouette	The least pretty		The least happy		The least wise		Not to play with		Not to birthday party invite		Not to learn with	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Underweight	8	6.6	10	8.2	28	23.0	4	3.3	10	8.2	6	4.9
Normal	16	13.1	18	14.8	20	16.4	6	4.9	14	11.5	22	18
Overweight	98	80.3	94	77.0	74	60.7	112	91.8	98	83	94	77
Total	122	100	122	100	122	100	122	100	122	100	122	100

Chi2=58,895; s<0,001.

When analysing the negative answers in the category of abehavioral factors (Table 2), it can be stated that in the first two cases, the “Underweight” body shape received the smallest number of nominations (“The least pretty” – 6.6%, “The least happy” – 8.2%). It should be emphasised, however, that an interesting phenomenon occurred here – the normal body shape was nominated as “The least wise” the smallest number of times (16.4%). The “Overweight” body shape was nominated most often here (“The least pretty” – 80.3%, “The least happy” – 77% and “The least wise” – 74%).

In the category of behavioral factors, the overweight body shape also received the greatest number of negative nominations: in the category “To play with” (91.8%), “To invite to a birthday party” (83%) and “To learn with” (77%). In each situation, the underweight body shape was the least frequently selected option (3.3%, 8.2% and 4.9%, respectively).

The analysis of the answers relating to the selection of boy body shapes in the category of abehavioral factors (Table 3) reveals that the underweight body shape was most often nominated as the “Prettiest” (75.4%). The normal body shape was nominated as the “Happiest” (45.9%), whilst in the category the “Wisest”, the normal and underweight body shapes received almost the same number of nominations (42.6% and 41%).

Table 3. Positive nominations of behavioral and abehavioral factors – boy’s silhouette

Boy’s silhouette	Prettiest		Happiest		Wisest		To play with		To birthday party invite		To learn with	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Underweight	92	75.4	46	37.7	52	42.6	70	57.4	56	45.9	52	42.6
Normal	30	24.6	56	45.9	50	41.0	52	42.6	60	49.2	62	50.8
Overweight	0		20	16.4	20	16.4	0		6	4.9	8	6.6
Total	122	100	122	100	122	100	122	100	122	100	122	100

Chi2=82,612; s<0,001.

In addition, the underweight body shape was nominated as the best partner “To play with” (57.4%), however, the normal body shape also had many nominations here (42.6%). In the two remaining categories: “To invite to a birthday party” and “To learn with”, the normal body shape was nominated most often (49.2% and 50.8%) and the underweight body shape was nominated only slightly less frequently (45.9% and 42.6%). In the behavioral factors (in fact, in the individual cases), the overweight body shape was the least selected option (0 answers, 4.9% and 6.6%).

Table 4. Negative nominations of behavioral and abehavioral factors – boy’s silhouette

Boy’s silhouette	The least pretty		The least happy		The least wise		Not to play with		Not to birthday party invite		Not to learn with	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Underweight	2	1.6	30	24.6	20	16.4	14	11.5	10	8.2	12	9.8
Normal	20	16.4	16	13.1	28	23.0	6	4.9	16	13.1	18	14.8
Overweight	100	82.0	76	62.3	74	60.7	102	83.6	96	78.7	92	75.4
Total	122	100	122	100	122	100	122	100	122	100	122	100

Chi2=35,702; s<0,001.

The analysis of the answers relating to the selection of the boy body shapes in the abehavioral factors category (Table 4) shows that the overweight body shape was the most frequently nominated option in all the three categories (82%, 62.3% and 60.7% respectively). The least frequently nominated body shape in the two categories “The least pretty” (1.6%) and “The least wise” (16.4%) was the underweight body shape. It is interesting that in the category: “The least

happy”, the normal body shape was the least nominated option (13.1%). In the categories of behavioral factors in all the three categories, the overweight body shape was nominated most frequently (83.6%, 78.7% and 75.4% respectively). The body shape that was nominated least frequently in the categories “To invite to a birthday party” (8.2%) and “To learn with” (9.8%) was the underweight body shape, whilst in the category “To play with” the normal body shape was nominated the least often (4.9%).

Table 5. Silhouettes’ nominations – Personal Body Attitudes: Self

Silhouette	Girl's choices				Boy's choices			
	Self ideal		Self aversive		Self ideal		Self aversive	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Underweight	32	66.7	2	4.2	44	59.5	2	2.7
Normal	16	33.3	8	16.7	28	37.8	8	10.8
Overweight	0		38	79.2	2	2.7	64	86.5
Total	48	100.0	48	100.0	74	100.0	74	100.0

When the selection of self-ideal was taken into account, the underweight body shape dominated the answers given by both the boys and the girls. Similarly, self-aversion was, in the majority of cases, associated with the obese body shape (Table 5).

Summary of the results:

1. In the presented study, the features of the slim body shape equal physical and interpersonal attractiveness, but only in the field of playing together. It is also the most desirable feature of the child’s own body shape. This entails that with regard to slim body shape, the positive attribution is not complete, meaning that the described outcomes are not an example of a typical “halo effect” (therefore, the phenomenon of attributing other positive traits to people who had already been assessed as positive in relation to other areas (like physical appearance) is not present here;
2. In the presented study, being overweight equals lacking physical and interpersonal attractiveness, so, obesity appears to elicit a very strong stigma. At the same time, it is the most undesirable feature of the child’s own body shape. This means that in the case of the obese body shape, complete negative attribution was performed;
3. The assessment made by the children under examination, is, however,

internally differentiated. The children seemed to separate the feeling of happiness from other behavioral categories, and did not link them to the slim body shape. The normal body shape was the most frequently selected option here, in relation to both girl and boy body shapes;

4. Negative attribution is less visible in relation to the boy body shape. This is demonstrated by the more frequent nominating of boy body shapes as the best partners to learn with or socialize with, whilst in the case of girl body shapes, this tendency is not visible. This implies that the most frequent type of attribution towards the boys was the attribution with the smaller share of behavioral factors – mainly when the emotional state or skills are taken into consideration, whilst, in relation to the girl body shape, the attribution process excludes only the emotional state.

Conclusions

Due to the importance of the currently-available results (especially those suggesting that body shape can form a basis for peer assessment and, consequently, rejection or even hostile behaviour) it seems necessary to undertake more attempts at investigating the problem in children of all age groups. Their number is still insufficient (compared to studies involving the adult population) – “similarly, we know little about the development of body image, particularly during the preschool and early elementary school years” (Smolak, 2004, p. 20). This situation likely stems in part from the difficulties associated with measuring body image in this population. Certainly, preschoolers cannot articulate their representations as adults can. Hence, the concrete reasoning style that tends to characterize this age group likely requires the presentation of visual stimuli in order to generate more meaningful data (Tremblay and Limbos, 2009).

The study showed that, currently, the strongest link exists between physical appearance and attributing good and bad qualities. Pretty people were, therefore, considered by children as “good” persons (of a good character), while ugly as “bad” (Dion et al., 1972; Langlois and Stephan, 1981). The pretty were labeled these positive traits and characteristics more often than unattractive people (Griffin and Langlois, 2006).

There is a group of tests that have proven that the issue of stigmatisation may be already present in very young children (for example, those of pre-school age). Peer sociometric assessments show that negative stereotypes and weight stigmatisation start early in life. It was found that young children can demonstrate negative stereotypes toward obesity (Cramer and Steinwert, 1989; Staffi-

eri, 1967; Brylinsky and Moore, 1994; Lerner and Korn 1972; Musher-Eizenman et al., 2003; Sigelman, et al., 1986; Tremblay et al., 2011).

Even young children were convinced that obese peers exhibited some negative characteristics or behaved worse (e.g. were more aggressive) in comparison to slim children (Salvy et al., 2007) and, as a result, constituted less attractive material for friendship (Bell and Morgan, 2000; Dion et al., 1972; Lerner and Lerner, 1977), which could produce inclinations towards discrimination (Puhl and Latner, 2007).

This work clearly demonstrates that, indeed, children with an obese body shape are regarded as less attractive, less wise, and less happy compared with their slim peers. They are also clearly rejected as partners in social interactions of various kinds, whether it is playing, learning, or socializing. This means that pre-school children already show inclinations towards stigmatising obese people. Good looks have therefore become equivalent to slim body shape. In this paper stigmatisation effects associated with obesity has been confirmed. This study investigates the direction of attractiveness stereotyping by comparing judgments of positive or negative attributes.

In particular, it needs to be stressed that, apart from stigmatising obese people with regard to physical attractiveness (slimmer is prettier, obese is the least attractive), they have also revealed tendencies to attribute to such people reduced intellectual skills (slimmer is smarter), as well as interpersonal attractiveness (they are better partners to play with), which can lead to formation of specific types of sociometric statuses depending on body shape type. It should be emphasised here that slim people have not been regarded, however, as constituting better learning companions, which can indicate that the analysed children exhibit incomplete attribution.

Another highly interesting fact is that the examined phenomenon was not observed in the field of attributing emotional states - the children did not relate appearance to success in life (no “slimmer is happier”, and “obese is the most miserable” attribution occurred). A possible explanation for these unexpected results is that, similar to older children and adults, not the actual weight predicts satisfaction with life with regard to preschool children.

An interesting phenomenon is that children with normal body shape were nominated as the best learning companions, which indicates that pre-school children have already started to separate the quality of peer appearance from their intellectual qualities. The children who participated in the study seem to have the most restricted view of accepting their own body sizes. This view has prevailed until now in thinking about older children (Rand and Wright, 2000),

who have already begun to appreciate the advantages of the appearance of silhouettes. However, consistent with previous research (Cramer and Steinwert, 1998; Musher-Eizenman et al., 2004; Wright and Bradbard, 1980), findings from the current study indicate that preschool children believe it is unacceptable to be fat. Hence, personal and social anti-fat attitudes may become problematic even in the group of preschoolers.

The present study has several strengths:

1. The quality, skill, and state attribution in children is *complex* – in their view, slim people are the best partners to play with, and they are the prettiest and the smartest, although not the happiest (Carver et al., 2003). This may indicate that the children involved in the study, when stigmatising obese people, are aware of the fact that a slim body shape may be hard-earned by exercise, self-discipline, etc., thus evaluating slim persons as attractive in the interpersonal way, while not necessarily being ones satisfied or happy with their lives.
2. The surveyed pre-school children showed traits of complete attribution as the reason behind rejecting people with an obese body shape. Nevertheless, in the case of quality attribution in slim-shaped persons, the attribution was incomplete. Among the abehavioral characteristics that determine attribution, appearance and intellect were the most dominant, while attributing emotional state needs to be excluded.
3. Pre-school children exhibit the *quality syndrome* principle, or *dispositional attribution*, at work. They are based on grouping different personality traits according to the principle of alleged correlation. In the investigated group, this meant that specific characteristics of people were perceived as mutually corresponding. In this situation, a particular trait is perceived as the most dominant, and the rest as those somehow related to it. Hence, finding a specific quality in an individual may result in us concluding that he or she exhibits traits connected with the former one. This was the case for the analysed children, who considered an “ugly” (because of obesity) person to be the least attractive when deciding whom to play with. This indicates that the mechanism of rejecting appearances was based on *abehavioral factors* (Coie and Dodge, 1988), among which physical appeal appeared to be the most decisive.

To sum up, it may be stated that the analysed children revealed that their social cognition processes might be significant elements in creating and maintaining stereotypes and prejudices. It should be borne in mind that categorisation in respect of groups of people entails forming the categories of in-groups and

out-groups, so it may result in discriminatory behaviour (such behaviour is, to a significant extent, present in society, and this research demonstrates why it is so permanent and widespread, despite the attempts to teach about anti-discriminatory behaviour and tolerance). It should be borne in mind that the judgments displayed by children about slim and obese people, false as they are, might provide “anchors” for further biased conclusions about these people or situations. Moreover, disadvantages associated with unattractiveness may be the primary manifestation of attractiveness-based stereotypes (Griffin and Langlois, 2006).

If we were to answer the question stated in the title of this article, that is whether the word “slim” means “attractive”, the answer is “yes”. However, as for the question of whether the slim person is “smart and happy” as well, the answer that might be provided is “not quite”. While the children analysed seek the company of slim people and they themselves would like to be like them (so, “slim is smart”), they already seem, at least partly, to realise that having a slim figure does not come down to a sense of having happiness or that it even causes its decrease (“but is not happy”).

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