

Race and gender affect response to weight stigma

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A new study from the UConn Rudd Center found that Hispanic women were the most likely to engage in disordered eating behavior as a result of experiencing stigma about their weight. Credit: Shutterstock

A new study by researchers at the Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity at UConn has found that although people of all races and genders are stigmatized for being overweight, there are differences in how particular groups – Asian, black, and Hispanic, and white men and women – respond to that stigma. The study is published today in the *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*.

"We found differences both by gender and race," says Mary Himmelstein, a UConn Rudd Center postdoctoral fellow and the study's lead author. "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."

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 well-being, 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 was known about differences in weight stigma or strategies for coping with weight stigma across gender and racial groups.

The new study highlights the importance of race and gender in people's experiences of weight stigma, their tendency to blame themselves for this stigma, and the coping strategies they use. The findings hold 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](#).

Asian men and women, the study found, 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."

More information: Mary S. Himmelstein et al. Intersectionality: An Understudied Framework for Addressing Weight Stigma, *American Journal of Preventive Medicine* (2017). [DOI: 10.1016/j.amepre.2017.04.003](#)

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