BRIEF REPORT

"Obese people" vs "Fat people": Impact of group label on weight bias

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ABSTRACT. OBJECTIVE: *The present study examined whether the terms "obese people" vs "fat people" impact evaluations of a target group.* **METHOD:** *Participants answered a number of questions about obese people (N=300) or fat people (N=125), including how favorable their attitudes are toward the target group, how disgusted they are with the target group, and how similar they are to the target group.* **RESULTS:** *Compared to fat people, obese people were rated as less favorable and as more disgusting. In addition, participants saw themselves as being less similar to obese people than to fat people, and as less likely to become an obese person than a fat person.* **CONCLUSION:** *Overall, the term "obese people" evokes stronger negative evaluations than the term "fat people." Researchers investigating weight bias should be aware that the specific terms used to refer to overweight and obese people can impact study outcomes and interpretations.*

(Eating Weight Disord. 15: e195-e198, 2010).

INTRODUCTION

Bias and discrimination against overweight and obese people are widespread (1). Anti-fat attitudes are observed among men and women, among children and adults, among thin people and obese people, and even among health-care professionals (2-4). Importantly, weight-bias can have negative psychological consequences (e.g., increased depression) and behavioral consequences (e.g., decreased motivation to exercise) for the stigmatized individuals (5, 6). A notable feature of weight bias is the collection of terms used to refer to people who are overweight or obese, which can range from the descriptive to the pejorative. The implications of these various terms are at present not well understood, and this is an important methodological issue for research on weight bias. The present study seeks to fill this gap in the literature by asking what impact group label has on people's perceptions of heavy-weight individuals.

Research from a variety of domains has shown that how a target individual or group is labeled can impact people's perceptions of that target. For example, one study showed that an individual described as a consumer of mental health services elicited less negative responses than an individual described as a person with severe mental illness (7). Similarly, a recent poll on CBSnews.com (although not a scientific study) found that support for homosexuals in the military depended on how the question was phrased: 59% supported having homosexuals in the military compared to 70% who supported having gay men and lesbians in the military (8). Another study found that pairing mixed-race faces with either a stereotypically Asian name (e.g., Tan Tze Siong) or a stereotypically European name (e.g., Andrew Brown) altered people's perceptions of the target individual's appearance (9). Finally, one study examined the impact of body weight descriptors on people's evaluation of a personal advertisement and found that targets described as obese were rated as less attractive and as fatter than were targets described as full-figured or targets with objective height and weight information provided (10).

There is thus accumulating evidence that the specific label assigned to a social group can impact people's perceptions of that group. Research assessing people's attitudes towards obesity has employed a variety of terms to describe the target group, but the implications of these different labels are not yet known. For example, there are two self-report scales that are frequently used to assess attitudes towards obese people: one (the Anti-Fat Attitudes scale [11]) relies mostly on the term "fat" (e.g., "I really don't like fat people very much"), whereas the second (the Attitudes Toward Obese

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People scale [12]) refers exclusively to obesity (e.g., "Severely obese people are usually untidy"). Researchers also sometimes alter the terminology used in existing scales. For example, one study reported that, in pilot testing, their participants found the term "fat" offensive so the researchers changed the wording of the Anti-Fat Attitudes scale to reflect "overweight" instead of "fat" (13). In addition to these self-report measures, studies assessing implicit attitudes towards obese people have also varied in their use of the terms "fat" or "obese" to refer to the target group (3, 4).

In order for researchers to improve on current measurement of weight bias, it is important to understand the impact that different terms have on perceptions of heavy-weight individuals. Based on research from other domains, it is conceivable that the choice of terms used to refer to the target group could either underestimate or overestimate the presence of weight bias. The present study sought to address this issue by examining the impact of using the term "obese people" vs "fat people" on judgments of a target group.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were 425 undergraduate students (220 men; 205 women) at a private university in the northeastern United States who took part in exchange for course credit. Their mean age was 19.3 years (SD=1.55) and their mean body mass index (BMI; kg/m^2) was 23.6 (SD=3.80).

Materials and procedure

Participants took part in an online survey that was part of a larger study. Participants first read an information sheet and provided their consent to take part in this study, and were then asked to answer the following questions about a variety of social groups (e.g., women, African Americans), including heavy-weight individuals: 1) "How favorable is your attitude toward ..." (1= Very unfavorable, 9= Very favorable); 2) "How much do you believe that being a member of this group is under the individual's personal control?" (1= Not at all under personal control, 9= Completely under personal control); 3) "How disgusted are you with ..." (1= Not at all disgusted, 9= Extremely disgusted); 4) "How much pity do you feel toward ..." (1= No pity at all, 9= Extreme pity); 5) "How similar are you to..." (1= Not at all similar, 9= Extremely similar); and 6) "How likely are you to become a member of this social group?" (1= Not at all likely; 9= Extremely likely). As only the ratings of heavy-weight targets are pertinent to this study, ratings of the other social groups will not be discussed. One group of participants (N=300) answered the questions with respect to "obese people," and another group (N=125) answered the questions with respect to "fat people." Participants also reported their height, weight, sex, and age. This study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board.

RESULTS

Data were analyzed using Multivariate Analysis of Variance, with group label (obese people vs fat people) and participant sex as between-subjects factors, and the six questions as dependent variables. Results revealed an overall significant main effect of group label, $F(6,411)=2.47$, $p=0.02$. Compared to fat people, obese people were rated as less favorable and as more disgusting (see Table 1). In addition, participants saw themselves as being less similar to obese people than to fat people, and as

TABLE 1
Mean (SD) ratings of target groups as a function of group label and participant sex.

	Obese people		Fat people			
	Women	Men	Women	Men	Obese people vs Fat people	Women vs Men
Favorable	4.10 (1.64)	4.18 (1.58)	4.58 (1.41)	4.50 (1.63)	p=0.02, d= –0.25	p=1.0, d= –0.03
Control	6.19 (1.65)	6.36 (1.91)	6.07 (1.60)	6.13 (1.87)	p=0.37, d=0.09	p=0.55, d= –0.07
Disgust	4.07 (2.07)	4.49 (2.36)	3.71 (2.04)	3.81 (2.30)	p=0.03, d=0.23	p=0.28, d= –0.14
Pity	4.64 (2.14)	4.03 (2.12)	4.95 (1.97)	3.88 (2.23)	p=0.72, d= –0.01	p<0.001, d=0.35
Similar	2.65 (1.79)	2.48 (1.65)	3.47 (2.11)	2.79 (1.91)	p=0.004, d= –0.30	p=0.03, d=0.16
Become	2.36 (1.57)	2.38 (1.63)	2.87 (1.58)	2.93 (1.98)	p=0.003, d= –0.32	p=0.84, d= –0.03

p-values were obtained from the univariate tests that are provided as part of the multivariate analysis of variance.

less likely to become an obese person than a fat person. There were no differences in judgments of control or pity as a function of the group label. There was also an overall significant main effect of participant sex, $F(6,411)=3.65$, $p=0.002$, which was due to women reporting more pity towards the targets than did men (4.79 vs 3.96), and women rating themselves as more similar to the targets than did men (3.06 vs 2.64). There was no group-label by participant-sex interaction. Controlling for participant BMI had no impact on the results.

DISCUSSION

The present study examined whether the specific label applied to heavy-weight individuals influences the judgments that people make of that target group. Using the term "obese people" resulted in more negative judgments (less favorable, more disgusting) than did the term "fat people." Furthermore, the term "obese people" also seems to conjure an image of a group that is more foreign (less similar, less likely to become) than the term "fat people." This latter finding is consistent with other work showing that one's mental image of a target can be influenced by the label associated with that target. For example, perceptions of the race of a target's face varied based on the name attached to the face (9), and individuals described as "obese" were seen as being fatter than individuals described as "full-figured" (10). Interestingly, that latter study did not find any difference in mean ratings of fatness for targets described as "obese" compared to targets described as "fat." A somewhat surprising finding from the present study was that perceptions of control were not influenced by the specific term used to refer to the target group. Given that beliefs about personal control over body weight (and obesity) have been strongly implicated in weight bias (11, 14), one would have expected that favorability ratings would shift in concert with perceptions of control. This finding does, however, fit with other research showing that changes in control beliefs do not necessarily result in changes in people's evaluations of obese individuals (15, 16). Furthermore, there is recent evidence that disgust plays an important role in judgments of obese individuals (17, 18). Thus, obese people might be rated more negatively than fat people in part because they are also seen as being more disgusting. Indeed, when controlling for disgust ratings, the effect of group label on favorability ratings was no longer significant ($p=0.19$).

The present study also found that, compared to men, women reported more pity for heavy-weight targets, and saw themselves as being more like the heavy-weight targets. There were, however, no sex differences in ratings of favorability, disgust, perceptions of control, or likelihood of becoming like the target. Most importantly, there was no interaction between sex and group label, indicating that group label impacted men and women in a similar way. Previous research on weight bias has also shown inconsistent effects of sex. Most studies find no sex differences in weight bias (e.g., 4), although some studies have found that men demonstrate stronger weight bias on explicit measures (e.g., 19) and others have found that women demonstrate stronger weight bias on implicit measures (e.g., 3).

Overall, the findings of the present study indicate that the specific terms used to label heavy-weight individuals can potentially magnify or diminish the expression of negative attitudes toward those individuals. These findings are consistent with research on other social groups indicating that person perception is influenced by the specific label attached to the target (8, 9). The findings of the present study also dovetail with other research indicating that obese people dislike being referred to as obese (20, 21), and in some cases prefer to be called fat instead (21). Thus, certain terms used to refer to excess weight (e.g., obese) are seen as more derogatory than others (e.g., fat) from the target's perspective and also elicit more negative judgments from perceivers. For future research on weight bias, investigators should aim to identify the terminology that is most appropriate for their particular research question, assess the impact of the terminology used in established measures of anti-fat attitudes, and be cognizant of the fact that the specific terms used can impact study outcomes and interpretations.

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