

Obesity-related stigma linked to political views and welfare attitudes

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Views around obesity are closely tied up with political values and wider social attitudes, suggesting that tackling weight stigma may require tackling other forms of stigma, new research led by the University of

Bristol has found.

People with obesity experience widespread shaming and discrimination in everyday life. Obesity-related stigma is now recognized as a public health issue: it is linked to worse mental health, and people with obesity often report delaying or avoiding health care appointments due to stigmatizing interactions with doctors. However, what determines attitudes around obesity is not well understood.

The research, published in [Social Science & Medicine](#), has explored how attitudes to obesity are predicted by [demographic factors](#), a person's political values, and their views about people claiming welfare, who in the media are often associated with obesity.

Dr. Amanda Hughes, Research Fellow in Bristol's MRC Integrative Epidemiology Unit (MRC IEU) and lead author, said, "How we think about obesity is closely tied up with how we think about other political issues, and views about people claiming welfare, who are often associated with obesity in public and [political discourse](#)."

"Tackling weight stigma—and other kinds of stigma—may be more effective if we recognize these links, and acknowledge the political context in which [stigma](#) happens."

The study surveyed more than 2,000 British adults aged 18- to 97-years-old about weight-stigmatizing attitudes. The researchers considered demographics, socioeconomic factors, factors related to own weight and health, and beliefs about the causes and consequences of obesity.

The research investigated the role of core political values, and perceptions of welfare recipients, who are frequently linked with obesity in public and political discourse. Finally, the researchers assessed to what extent demographic and socioeconomic differences in weight-

stigmatizing attitudes are explained by factors like individual body mass index (BMI), values, and beliefs.

The research found that, after taking age and gender into account, weight-stigmatizing attitudes were linked with more authoritarian values, more right-wing attitudes on [economic issues](#), and more stigmatizing views about welfare recipients.

The study is the first to consider how distinct dimensions of political values contribute to [weight stigma](#), and the first to explore a link with welfare-stigmatizing attitudes using national survey data.

Consistent with previous studies, the study found that women were less weight-stigmatizing than men, and that people with a higher BMI, and people who were less satisfied with their own weight, were less weight-stigmatizing. People in late middle-age were less weight-stigmatizing than younger or older adults. Weight-stigmatizing attitudes rose with income, and were highest in intermediate categories of education and occupational social class.

The study also explored why some demographic and socioeconomic groups had more weight-stigmatizing views than others, and found that differences in people's own BMI, beliefs about causes of obesity, welfare-stigmatizing attitudes, and authoritarian values all contributed.

The researchers now plan to investigate if these patterns are specific to the U.K., or also apply in countries where the political narrative around [obesity](#) and other stigmatized groups has been different.

More information: Amanda M. Hughes et al, Weight stigma, welfare stigma, and political values: Evidence from a representative british survey, *Social Science & Medicine* (2023). [DOI: 10.1016/j.socscimed.2023.116172](#)

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