

# Is obesity deviant behaviour?



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## Obesity and Deviant behavior

Society has labeled obesity as a deviant behavior and is one of the United States biggest health issues. According to the CDC more than one-third of U.S adults (35. 7%) are obese, (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2013). It is difficult to determine what is considered to be deviant because it depends on the place and time. It's based on how society's reaction on what is considered to be deviant or not. Society's view on body image depends on what society deems as acceptable at that time. Deviance takes many forms, but agreement remains elusive about which specific behaviors and conditions constitute deviance, (Clinard&Meier, 2011). During the Elizabethan era in the 16<sup>th</sup> century to the 19<sup>th</sup> century a woman with a voluptuous lower half, small waist and chest was considered the ideal body. Society viewed a rounded figure in relation to being wealthy enough to buy food. Once we approach the early 1900's to mid-1940's woman were expected to look thinner with larger breast. During this time, supermodels were everywhere with their thin and stick figure frames. Society has become more concerned with body image than ever before due to social media and television. People will judge, stare and whisper at the sight of someone is deemed overweight. Being overweight has become a stigma and considered deviant behavior based on society's reaction towards and overweight person. Society has a negative view on obesity and instead of figuring out ways to prevent the epidemic of obesity, they are placed in the deviant category.

The formula to calculate obesity or a person's body shape is called (BMI) body mass index or Quetelet index. The BMI was created by a Belgian

statistician named Adolphe Quetele who dividing a person's weight (in kilograms) by the square of his or her height (in inches) in 1830, (Wilson, 2014). The BMI has been altered since then, but maybe it should be reevaluated factoring in the average weight of male and female in different states.

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Apparently people located in the south are considered obese according to the BMI. Doctors use the BMI calculator to determine if a person's weight is normal, over or obese. A predetermined table that list weight and height in centimeters is set up based on what a person's weight should be based on their height. A person whose BMI is calculated from 18.5-24.9 is considered normal weight, 25-29.9 is deemed overweight and 30 or greater is obese.

Although environmental or biological factors may contribute to obesity, society has also contributed to the amount of obese Americans. Think about the amount of food, calorie intake, and super-size options available to the average person. The convenience of going through the drive thru and spending one dollar on a cheeseburger, instead of buying healthy foods at the grocery store and preparing a meal is what a lot of American do on a day to day. Society has also helped create other deviant groups like bulimia or anorexia because of the stigmatism that being skinner is better. The killing us softly video, points out various ways on how women are depicted based on their appearance, (Kilroy, 2010,). Jean Kilroy started her research by collecting different ads over the past couple of years and made some good arguments based on the advertisements she found. She began to connect

advertising with violence against woman and eating disorders. Based on her findings, she gathered information and made videos and spoke at colleges to make everyone aware of how advertisement can influence society. People are forever trying to fit into the norms that society sets, going to the extreme just be liked or accepted. Some may take a different approach and are considered a positive deviant because they lose weight by living a healthier life, which in turn removes the obese or anorexia label, (Calderon 2013).

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Environmental experiences are important for weight and obesity, although they account for much less variation than do the effects of genes, (Grilo & Pogue-Geile, 1991). Ever here the phrase, “ it runs in the family”? The FTO is known as a gene that runs in both side of the family that could contribute to obesity. Having this gene can increase the risk of being obese if you sit around and do nothing. But a person with or without the gene could engage in some form of physical activity every day, and is more likely to not become obese. People can be tested for this gene, but regardless of the outcome, a person should engage in regular physical activity, make healthier food choices and refrain from eating a second plate of food, especially if it being offered by an overweight relative.

What does our environment have to say about obesity? As I mentioned earlier, huge super-size portions or options, high calorie intake and lack of exercise can contribute to obesity. Most Americans are busy on the go and do not have time to prepare a meal or lunch to take to work. So the next

best things are finger foods that we could grab really quickly just to put something in our stomachs. Chips, cookies, fried foods sold at gas stations are packed with fat and calories. The convenience of technology has made many people lazy. Instead of going to the mall or grocery store to walk and search for items, we purchase them sitting down behind a computer.

Members of society have gotten comfortable with having the option of super sizing their fries or soda, in addition to restaurant serving enough food for two people. Some fast food restaurants suggest ordering a size up for a quarter more. By determining what environmental influences are contributing to weight gain can help figure out ways to make better choices.

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Since society has labeled obesity as deviant behavior, they also refer to overweight or obese people as lazy, disgusting, unattractive and bad. Weight is perceived as a symbol of conspicuous consumption — as an extension of material well-being, (Cooney, 1998). Failing to regulate weight is not related to obesity but the difficulty in losing it is the problem. Some people may be biologically programmed to be overweight which is not accepting to society norms. Should obese individuals be blamed for being overweight? Society tends to ridicule and discriminates against overweight people but are they truly to blame for their physical appearance?

According (Dejong, 1980), an article called "The Stigma of Obesity: The Consequences of Naive Assumptions Concerning the Causes of Physical Deviance". He conducted a study on 10 to 11 year-olds that were shown pictures of children and asked what they thought about the picture being

presented. One girl saw a picture of an overweight school aged girl and asked why she was overweight. She stated that if the girl has a reasonable explanation as to why she was fat then she would give her a positive evaluation. Many other girls were shown the same picture and gave the girl a less positive evaluation than the pictures of the girls at normal weight. This is a perfect example of how our younger generation views other overweight children. Obesity can lead to depression because of harsh comments from peers that can cause isolation and overeating. Overeating can lead to other health issues, the higher the weight the increased risk of developing a heart condition. Coronary heart disease, high blood pressure, stroke, a heart attack and sleep apnea are all health risks associated with obesity. Lifestyle habits usually start during childhood therefore parents can start by encouraging their children to be more physically active and selecting healthier foods for them to eat. Adults that are already overweight according to the

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BMI should also set a plan to eat healthier foods, include some form of physical activity and reduce portion size.

Weight and body image are subjective culturally, Asian culture prefers a leaner body shape, and African's associate a fuller body with wealth and living a good life. In America, an overweight woman is less likely to get married and might dissociate herself from society to avoid ridicule. In Africa, a woman who is overweight is considered beautiful and more likely to get married. In Nigeria, women are purposely force fed to gain weight so that

they attract a possible husband. Overweight women in Africa and Arab countries are more desirable and girls fed more than boys as adolescences to get them prepared. According to (Haworth, 2011), stretch marks are sexy and are a turn on for men in Mauritania, South Africa. There was once a time in America where society associated an overweight person with wealth, now statistic show that most overweight people live in low income areas.

Is there a possibility that the obesity epidemic is overrated? What if the BMI was reevaluated to fit the Americans of today? Would society still label obesity or overweight as deviant behavior? Fat does not necessarily mean disgusting or unhealthy, because society has attached it as a reflection of our psyche, this is what most believes. There are numerous advertisements on social media, billboards and newspapers about diet pills and weight loss surgery. The next commercial on T. V or billboard on the freeway is about a juicy cheeseburger, being eaten by a skinny celebrity, which confuses people. Advertisements are meant to be persuasive to benefit the company or corporations. Fast food restaurant advertising extremely low prices to feed a family, and the medical industry offering other alternatives to weight loss to

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make more money. There is a huge amount of focus on being the opposite of an overweight person because of what others think of you. No one wants to be stared at in a negative way or not receive a promotion or get a job because of their appearance. Society's assumptions have labeled obesity as deviant behavior instead of factual science. Even though obesity can lead to

health issues, this does not mean that every overweight person is unhealthy and every skinny person is free from health issues.

A person who constantly smokes cigarettes or drinks alcohol is considered addicted. A person who is overweight can also suffer from addiction because they may not have control over their addiction to sweets or carbs. You can ask anyone on what should be done to lose weight, and they would reply by saying, diet and exercise, of course. But it's easier said than done, especially for a person who is already obese. Does a person have control over what they eat or is biological or environmental factors? It's a combination of all three and there is no one in particular that could determine a person weight outcome. People have metabolic and hormonal issues that can contribute to over eating. Leptin for instance, is a hormone located in the brain that is associated with our appetite. Leptin tells the hypothalamus that we have enough fat, so we can eat less or stop eating, (Kollias, 2009). It would make sense for the Leptin to slow down or stop a person from over eating because the more fat you have, the more leptins are created. Apparently, that is not the case, if an overweight person has too many leptins, then the signals to the brain are blocked. If the signal never reaches the brain then a person does not know if they are full, the brain thinks you're starving yourself. Therefore, a person will continue to eat more, get fatter, and develop more leptins that cannot send a signal to the brain to stop eating. It is an ongoing cycle that contributes to a person getting fatter.

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Society does not help the situation with the discrimination and ridicule that an obese person has to endure because of the stigma.

What if obesity was a disease? Is it really their fault that they are obese?

There are only few studies from a behavioral perspective on obesity; we associate obesity with eating too much and not exercising but there should be other actors considered. People are built differently; some eat, exercise, rest and maintain a healthy weight while others try and still never lose. Why is it so difficult to lose weight? Brewis explores this question in her book, pointing to factors such as evolved biology, institutional structures in society and emerging cultural attitudes toward fat, (Nicodemo, 2011). Hormones in food, socioeconomics and genetics are all issues that need to be addressed to combat obesity in America. Metabolic disorders, unbalanced amount of leptin and thyroid issues, are things that a person cannot help, regardless if they diet or exercise. Obesity leads to many different forms of illness that increase a person's appetite.

Obesity impairs body function so it fits in the category for diseases. Deviance would no longer be associated with obesity if labeled as a disease. The medical community has labeled obesity as a health issue but if it was categorized as a disease, this would limit the stigmatism. Most doctors do not address a patient's weight because they are afraid of offending them. Labeling it a disease, can place more seriousness and obligation for a doctor to talk about their weight with the patient. Some overweight people might be in denial, but after they are offered treatment with better alternatives to losing weight, they might be receptive. It could also help change people's

perception about overweight individuals, and help them to understand that being overweight is not based on a person being lazy and overeating.

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Insurance companies would have to allow proper treatment for obesity.

Drugs, surgeries and counseling would be beneficial to improve their health and social life. Society would embrace and change their negative views on obesity and would treat it like any other disease. Although, others may not be so receptive to this idea and suggest that people have control over their weight. If research is conducted and people are made aware that obesity is a disease. Society may possibly change their views on associating obesity as a deviant behavior.

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