

Obesity: discrimination and stigma in literature

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The Merriam-Webster dictionary offers this definition: "obesity: a condition characterized by the excessive accumulation and storage of fat in the body" (Webster Online Dictionary). The Center for Disease Control and Prevention defines obesity further: "...obesity ranges are determined by using weight and height to calculate a number called the "body mass index" (BMI). BMI is used because, for most people, it correlates with their amount of body fat. An adult who has a BMI between 25 and 29.9 is considered overweight, while an adult who has a BMI of 30 or higher is considered obese" (Center for Disease Control). Table 1 presents quantitative information on obesity, based on one's height, weight range, and BMI. Figure 1: Summarizes obesity. The prevalence of excess weight is increasing rapidly across the country, and today close to 65% of the adult population is overweight and obese. Comparing the period 1976-1980 with 1999-2000, the prevalence of overweight has increased by 40% (from 46.0% to 64.5%) and the prevalence of obesity has risen by 110% (from 14.5% to 30.5%) (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden). Studies also show that the weights of children, and those in their teens, are also increasing. More than 10% of 2-to 5-yr-olds and 15% of 6-to 19-yr-olds are overweight (BMI \geq 95th percentile for age and gender) (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden). These percentages suggest that the number of overweight children in the United States has almost doubled, while the number of overweight adolescents has reached the "near-tripled" mark, over the last two decades (U. S. Department of Health and Human Services). Although it has been said that some segments of the society or population are more likely to be overweight or obese than others, people of all ages, races, ethnicities, socioeconomic levels, and geographic levels and

geographic areas are experiencing a significant increase in weight (U. S. Department of Health and human Services). United States is not the only country subjected to this increase in weight; international data indicates that it is, perhaps, a global health problem. The prevalence of obesity is rising in other developed and affluent countries and is now in existence in less affluent countries (Popkin). It is easy to come to a conclusion that more and more people are being identified as overweight or obesity, based on these statistics. But, why is there an increase in weight? Does obesity have a cause? Overweight and obesity result from the interaction of many factors, including genetic, metabolic, behavioral, and environmental influences. Changes in our eating habits and activity levels are said to have the increase in weight in our society, but the specific details of these complex behavior changes and calorie intake are not well understood. (Harnack, Jeffery, Boutelle). The usual cause of weight increase is related to sedentary activities such as, television watching and videogame playing. Television watching and videogame playing have increased; exercise equipment, health clubs, and recreational facilities have increased as well. Television viewing has been identified as a factor associated with greater weight in children and adults, but it is unclear whether this "sedentary activities-weight increase" relationship is a result of an increase in food consumption or a decrease in physical activity (Jeffery, Utter). In summation, it appears that the time spent on leisure activities has not changed significantly. Americans are becoming increasingly overweight. Yet even as more Americans are becoming overweight, in our society, "thin is in, and fat is regarded as a stigma" (Langford). Stigma is defined as "1. a) a scar left by a hot iron, b) a mark of

shame or discredit: Stain, c) an identifying mark or characteristic: specifically: a specific diagnostic sign of a disease" (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary). In whatever way the word stigma is defined, social stigmatization stems from societal values on body type. This stigmatization causes weight-based discrimination. Fat people are most of the time looked down upon because of their physical appearance; they are " often ostracized at social functions, find discrimination in the job market, and are somehow viewed as inferior or of lesser character due to a " lack of willpower"" (Langford). Studies have been directed to finding out how serious is the stigma attached to obesity in the United States. In an investigation, 650 boys and girls (10 and 11 years of age) were shown six black-and-white drawings of a child with no physical handicap, a child with crutches and a brace on one leg, a child sitting in a wheel-chair with a blanket covering both legs, a child with one hand missing, a child with a disfigured mouth, and an obese child. In agreement, the children paid more attention to the drawing of the " normal child", while ignoring the drawing of the obese child (Richardson, S. N., et al.). This shows that even young children have negative attitudes towards a person of a larger proportion. More examples like this are evident: from teachers weighing children in front of a class and exposing their weights, to physicians suggesting dangerous weight-loss measures to obese patients, to Dr. Kenneth Walker, who implied that obese people should be confined in prison facilities for the sake of their own lives and for the benefit of the nation (Solovay, 2000). In *The Invisible Woman* by W. Charisse Goodman, the author speaks on the view and prejudice of heavy women in America. In the beginning of the book, the author's introduction, she

describes some of her experiences as a former obese woman. At age four, she “ discovered that anytime [she] moved [her] body, people would laugh at [her] and that even if [she] sat still and quietly read a book they would point and laugh (Introduction X). Goodman added that “ when it was time to choose team-mates for a game, or dates for a dance, [she] was invisible; but when someone needed a cheap laugh or a quick ego boost at [her] expense, people saw [her] all right. ” Laura Rhodes, a thirteen-year-old from Wales, England, was constantly bullied by her classmates. As a result, she committed suicide. She left a note that said: “ I got fatter and fatter and sadder and sadder. Everyone got meaner and meaner...I wasn't too stubborn to ask for help, I did ask, but they did not pay any attention" (The Times, 2004). Recently, Domonique Ramirez, a seventeen-year-old beauty queen, was told to ““ get off the tacos”” after she showed up for a bikini photo shoot looking larger than the usual, which, as a result, made the pictures ““ unusable””; she was stripped of her crown. This case was taken to the court, and justice was served when the jury ruled the pageant officials guilty; Ramirez won back her crown (Hindustan Times). While magazines, newspapers, and various articles display extreme examples of the result of stigmatization related to being overweight “ reels out of control" (Rex-Lear), novels, poems, proses, and other literature works, are doing the same as authors release their attitudes and feelings toward weight bias. Poetry is a form of literary art known for its aesthetic, rhythm-like qualities, and metrical patterns. Most of the time poetry is used to evoke love, hatred, comedy, and other emotional responses. In this case, poets used their talent of rhythm to display their thoughts and personal experiences on obesity discrimination, as

seen in the following poem, titled Caged from allpoetry. com: Roll up! Roll up! Come see the incredible! The phenomenal! The disgusting Fatorama! For is that not what I am? Just a spectacle. Standing with eyes ever lowered, the floor cannot show disgust, nor can it reflect, unlike every pair of eyes that stares back, ridiculing. Trust me, I am human. Without a single thought of compassion, I am the opportunity for each and everyone to let loose all of their putrid hate that you can no longer in today's world release on race, religion, sex, age. I am your easy target. ' Tough love' they spit, as they smirk, their righteous indignation and presumption because we all know by now, only the obese are imperfect and hateful and subject to open season by all. I cannot open this cage. If only I could shed it all for one single moment of feeling human, to become one of them, where I would go unnoticed, but for the difference by which I would stand out, I would treat everyone with dignity. The author of this poem is " caged" in his fat body. He realizes that the world looks at him with disgust: " the floor cannot show disgust...unlike every pair of eyes that stares back ridiculing. " The author sees himself as the world's " punching bag". He believes that the society releases all its hatred on him because of his detrimental physical appearance; in other words, as mentioned in the poem, he is an " easy target. " The author cannot escape the body that he is in. He wishes to lose weight, just once, to feel like a normal person, " to become one of them [sic]. " He wants a body that is less noticeable; however, he wishes that if people notice him, they do so because of his dignity toward everyone, and not because of his body size. The next poem (from the same website as the previous), titled A day in the life of a ' fatty,' exudes a sense of anger toward our obese-stigmatized world:

Boy I'm depressed I don't fit into the dress Atkins doesn't work, And Slimfast is a fucking jerk It's driving me insane, of how they're all the same The pressure put on by those fucking dicks to be the clone of a motherfucking stick Ok, so you may of guessed, I'm rather large Large? I'm the size of a fucking barge! And you know what? I couldn't give a shit! Cos no matter what they say, I am beautiful Even if the dress won't fit Apparently, this author isn't content with the fact that most clothes in clothing stores are made, mostly, for small-sized women: "...I'm depressed...I don't fit into the dress. " The author has tried to shed his or her extra skin by enrolling in weight-loss programs (Atkins, Slimfast); unfortunately, they never work as advertised. The author is fed-up with the pressures to look normal ' to look skinny. The last two stanzas of the poem portray the author's confidence. The author loves his or her " jiggly parts" despite what people say. Obesity discrimination is evident in media, as better explained in Weight Bias: " Fat is funny. So goes the adage in the entertainment world. But fat in and of itself is just fat. Fat people experience the same range of emotions and demonstrate the same variety of personality quirks and foibles as any other human being, yet the cast majority of representations in the entertainment media are one-dimensional, with the person's size being the only characteristic that is shown or highlighted. And Hollywood continues to perpetuate the myth of fat people as dumb, lazy, and slovenly, as if all these characteristics are inherently part of being fat" (Brownell, Puhl et al.). Discriminatory attitudes can be seen in some of the television shows often watched by many. In an episode of Family Guy called He's Too Sexy for His Fat, Chris experienced the always-present negative stigmas of obese

persons. The episode begins at a grocery store, where a police officer accused Chris of stealing hams; Chris was actually reading comic books at the comic book section of the grocery store. Of course, Chris denied the accusation. After the police officer lifted Chris's shirt (in search of the hams), grabbed his stomach and nipples, he yelled: " you are not a shoplifter, you are just a fat kid...sorry about that fatty-fat-fatty...hey Tom, he's just a fat kid; aren't ya fatty? You're just a big'ole fat kid...here's some chocolate fatso. " Why couldn't Chris be accused of stealing something that isn't food? The creators of Family Guy are aware of the society's belief that fat people love food. Chris was offered a chocolate bar— what we see here is another societal discriminatory attitude: fat people love chocolate. The police officer bullied Chris by calling him derogatory terms such as: fatty-fat-fatty and fatso— terms used often to poke fun at an obese person; why not simply, obese. More and more media-produced products display a similar view of overweight persons, in the name of comedy In the comedy movie " Phat Girlz", the viewers are presented the story of Jazmin Biltmore (Mo'Nique), a rather large woman who, although she toils away at a department store by day, desperately wants to start her own line of plus-sized fashion. She's also looking for a man, but all the likely candidates are too interested in " skinny bitches" (emphasis hers) to show her any love. Everything changes when Jazmin wins a trip to Palm Springs via a diet pill sweepstake; she, along with her best-friend Stacy (Kendra C. Johnson) and her annoying cousin Mia (Joyful Drake), are swept off to a life of luxury. There, Jazmin meets buff Nigerian doctor Tunde (Jimmy Jean-Louis), who sees something in her that evidently escaped all the shallow American men who turned their noses up

at her. He finds her size attractive, much to Mia's shock and Jazmin's initial distrust.