

UNIVERSITY OF SOUTHERN QUEENSLAND

BEYOND HOSTILE PREJUDICE AND BLAME:
THE WEIGHT OF PATERNALISTIC ANTI-FAT ATTITUDES AND
RELATED BELIEFS IN UNDERSTANDING SOCIAL REACTIONS TO
FAT PERSONS

A Dissertation submitted by
Michelle V. Parry, B.Sc. (Hons.)

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ABSTRACT

The “war on obesity” is a very salient topic in contemporary Westernised cultures, with increasing rates of obesity and associated health consequences receiving regular public attention and condemnation. As such it seems timely to re-examine social attitudes and beliefs about fat persons and fatness – the consequences of which may contribute to, and be as severe as, the health risks associated with fatness.

Previous anti-fat attitude and attribution research has focused on controllability beliefs as determinants of hostility towards fat persons (i.e., anger and hostile attitudes). The primary focus of the current investigation was to extend research on reactions to fat persons, by conceptualising and exploring paternalistic attitudes and related beliefs. Paternalistic anti-fat attitudes were defined as the degree to which an individual espouses that fat persons should be helped to lose weight in the interests of benefiting fat persons (e.g., in terms of happiness and health), regardless of the beliefs and wishes of fat persons. The conceptualisation of paternalistic anti-fat attitudes was based on Fiske et al.’s (1999; 2002) stereotype content model of prejudice toward social out-groups and bioethical definitions of paternalism. Paternalistic attitudes are described as subjectively positive as they are viewed as helpful and caring by the individual espousing the attitude, but are based on undesirable stereotypic beliefs, such as the assumption that the target is incompetent, inferior, needy, and weak.

Two samples of Australian adults were surveyed. For Study 1, the final sample consisted of 210 psychology students, who completed a web survey. The final sample for Study 2 consisted of 344 community participants, predominantly recruited from a regional centre. Study 2 participants completed a self-administered paper survey. Study 1 may be considered a pilot study, which enabled preliminary examination of original attitude and belief variables developed for this research, prior to re-examining the research aims in a more diverse community sample in Study 2. Study 2 replicated Study 1 with methodological improvements.

The current research has provided preliminary evidence that reactions to fat persons are both hostile and paternalistic; that is, fat persons are both disliked and disrespected. In both studies, approximately 40% of respondents agreed with statements designed to capture paternalistic attitudes, and unattractiveness (hostile)

attitudes. In contrast, low levels of negative evaluation and social distance (hostile) attitudes were reported. Participants reported greater paternalistic attitudes than negative evaluation or social distance (hostile) attitudes, but not unattractiveness (hostile) attitudes. Similarly, participants expressed significantly greater pity and sympathy than anger toward fat persons. Hostile and paternalistic reactions were positively correlated.

The current research differentiated between controllability beliefs (i.e., control over onset) and changeability beliefs (i.e., control over offset), as determinants of reactions to fat persons. Many participants endorsed beliefs that fat people are responsible for becoming fat (i.e., controllability beliefs), or fat persons can change their weight status (i.e., changeability beliefs), or both. These beliefs were positively correlated. The importance of examining both changeability and controllability beliefs was evident when these variables were used to predict anti-fat attitudes. For both studies, changeability beliefs predicted unique variance in unattractiveness (hostile) attitudes and paternalistic attitudes, in addition to the variance already explained by controllability beliefs.

In addition to paternalistic anti-fat attitudes and changeability beliefs, benefits beliefs (i.e., weight loss benefits fat persons) and desire to change beliefs (i.e., fat persons do not want to be fat and want to become non-fat) were also examined. The new beliefs measures (i.e., changeability, benefits, and desire to change beliefs) and controllability beliefs predicted substantial (mostly shared) variance in paternalistic attitudes. Changeability and benefits beliefs consistently predicted unique variance in paternalistic attitudes.

Although people might view paternalistic anti-fat attitudes as helpful in assisting fat persons to become healthier and happier, expression of such attitudes and related beliefs, and associated social pressure to lose weight, may actually contribute to fat persons being less healthy and less happy. Potential ways that paternalistic anti-fat attitudes and related beliefs may influence the physical and psychological health of fat persons, and people in general were proposed (e.g., unrealistic weight loss and unsustainable exercise goals; resorting to unhealthy weight control methods; feelings of inadequacy and inferiority as a result of unsolicited help and sympathy; negative physical and psychological consequences of weight reduction behaviour).

CERTIFICATION OF DISSERTATION

I certify that the ideas, experimental work, results, analyses, software, and conclusions reported in this dissertation are entirely my own effort, except where otherwise acknowledged. I also certify that the work is original and has not been previously submitted for any other award, except where otherwise acknowledged.

Michelle V. Parry

Date

ENDORSEMENT

Dr Nola Passmore (Supervisor)

Date

DEDICATION

I dedicate this work to my little sister,

Vivien Anne Dederer

(1977 – 2001)

*whose death led me to pursue this topic with a passion –
a topic that was already close to our hearts.*

*Although I cannot change what happened to you
or stop it happening to anyone else,
I hope that my contribution will be one small step toward
making the world more fat-friendly.*

*Toward the end, when I'd lost interest
and was ready to give up, you reminded me why I had to finish,
and gave me the incentive to do so.*

I love you and I miss you.

Thank you for all that you have given me.

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