

## Classifying Obesity as a Disease Alters Perceptions

Van Leeuwen, Hunt, and Park (2015) explored the stigmatism and perceptions of obesity and noted that perceived discrimination not only promoted weight-gain in clinically obese individuals, but also promoted a host of negative psychological effects including: depression, poor body-image, poor self-esteem, and anxiety. The perception of discrimination (against overweight/overfat) could also lead to self-defeat and lead individuals to feel incapable of making positive contributions thereby encouraging reliance [on an external entity instead of taking initiative to solve the issues] (van Leeuwen et al., 2015).

The attribution perspective (AP) lends clues on how stigmatization is driven. AP examines the perceivers' beliefs concerning various positive/negative outcomes (van Leeuwen et al., 2015). People who are perceived as responsible for their actions ("they get what they earn/deserve") tend to become stigmatized; perceptions such as "obese persons are responsible for their lack of exercise or overeating" further drive stigmatization, the "blame mindset", and "persecution" (van Leeuwen et al., 2015). Individuals who are perceived to have had "control" over their situation (implying such individuals "failed") evoke far less sympathy/pity from society and higher levels of disgust/anger (van Leeuwen et al., 2015).

It is important to better understand how labels such as "disease" are perceived and whether categorizing obesity as a "disease" is indeed a benefit. Labeling one third of the U.S. population as "diseased" can have negative impacts in the psychological domain that perhaps have not been explored fully. To counter stigmatism and negative perceptions, programs could be initiated to promote solidarity, awareness, inclusiveness, and public sympathy--create the "slant" that "obesity as a disease" is everyone's problem.

## Reference

van Leeuwen, F., Hunt, D. F., & Park, J. H. (2015). Is obesity stigma based on perceptions of appearance or character? Theory, evidence, and directions for further study. *Evolutionary Psychology, 13*(3), 1-8.