

Familial Relationships and Attitudes toward the Obese

By

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As one study investigated, (Dominy, et al. 2000) children's perception of parental acceptance plays a significant role in the development of eating disorders and the formation of a poor self-image in general. In fact, underlying the significance of the parent-child relationship in eating disorder development is an insufficient level of parental affection and acceptance. The study further demonstrated that obese individuals often report feelings of rejection and disapproval from their parents and feel that they are not truly loved for themselves. Regardless of whether this feeling of rejection is real or imagined, individuals who experience themselves as rejected have lower levels of self-esteem and self-adequacy, and most relevant to the current study, are more judgmental or prejudiced toward others in general. This supports the idea that the formation of prejudice toward others, at least in those who experienced themselves as rejected by their parents, originates in those who experienced prejudice at home. Whether the person being rejected is the self or another member of the family, exposure to and awareness of negative judgments pertaining to weight may provide the perfect environment for prejudice toward the obese to grow within a family.

Values and beliefs about eating and exercise, as well as attitudes about obesity itself, are learned through parental modeling and explicit expression of feelings (Sobal & Stunkard, 1989). Sobal and Stunkard (1989) found that the eating behaviors of parents are one of the best predictors of how their children will eat. A study that measured the amount of physical exercise undertaken by obese children and compared it to the amount of physical exercise their parents

undertook, found that parents' physical activity levels and patterns are related to, and significantly influence, children's activity (1989). An obese parent may openly criticize her obese son for being too fat. This parent is teaching her son that it is acceptable to criticize others for being fat. The internal conflict created for the son in this example, is likely to produce a strong tendency to develop and maintain negative attitudes and perceptions of the obese, further exemplifying the power of parental influence on attitudes and perceptions (Teachman et al. 2003).

Particularly in the instance of racial prejudice, hostile attitudes that are modeled by parents are often learned in children. Towles-Schwen and Fazio (2001) found that there is a correlation between racial attitudes in children, and children's perceptions of their parents' attitudes concerning racial prejudice. Their study assessed the frequency and nature of childhood experiences with racial minorities and found less prejudiced attitudes in participants whose parents were not prejudiced. Specifically, this study asked college students to report on their parent's attitudes about minorities. They were also asked to describe childhood experiences that involved exposure to minorities and exposure to prejudiced remarks. Finally, participants were asked to describe their current attitudes about minorities. The study found that current prejudiced reactions in adulthood were linked to negative childhood experiences; specifically, exposure to parents' overt racial prejudice. It seems that parents' hostile attitudes toward racial minorities have a direct impact on the development of similar ideals in children. These ideals tend to persist into adulthood. This suggests that perhaps prejudice, in any form, is a learned bias.

Additional findings regarding the ways parental attitudes impact the development of similar attitudes in children, come from studies about prejudice toward homosexuals. Exposure to parents' negative comments about homosexuality, whether they concern a celebrity, stranger

or family member, seems to aid in the development of homosexuality prejudice among children, particularly boys (Bozett & Sussman, 1989). Research findings indicate that once it is discovered that a family member is gay, the family is likely to define itself as defective. Studies have shown that gay or lesbian family members, existing within the social environment of the family, stigmatize their families once they disclose their homosexuality (1989). Non-homosexual family members feel shame about their affiliation with the homosexual family member. This shame leads to hostility or prejudice toward the homosexual family member. With regard to homosexuality prejudice, Bozett and Sussman (1989) assert that the maintenance of homosexuality prejudice outside of family experiences is extremely common. Boys and men, who typically have a more difficult time accepting the homosexuality of a family member, tend to maintain homosexuality prejudice outside their family experiences.

Perhaps the primary connection between obesity prejudice and homosexuality prejudice is the similar collective attitude of families in which obesity or homosexuality occurs. The current study hypothesizes that obesity prejudice basically works the same way homosexuality prejudice does. Shame may be felt by family members because of the obese family member's overweight condition. Shameful feelings may lead to hostile attitudes which, in turn, could lead to generalized prejudice toward obese people.

In examining how family experience with obesity impacts attitudes toward and perceptions of the obese, it seems necessary to explore the dynamics of the relationship between the obese family member and other members of the family. Specifically, an exploration of how different levels of intimacy in relationships with obese family members affect attitudes toward the obese might be an important component in understanding the origin of obesity prejudice. It seems logical to assume that the closer the relationship is between an obese family member and

another member of the family, the less likely the family member is to be prejudiced toward obese people. The warm feelings the family member feels toward the obese family member may become generalized to the obese population. On the other hand, if a family member and an obese family member do not share a close or intimate relationship, it could be assumed that the reverse might happen, causing the family member to generalize negative feelings about the obese to others.