Introduction

Obesity has reached epidemic proportions globally (World Health Organisation, 2013).

Evidence suggests that there has been a shift in the social norm of what is regarded as overweight or obese, and these cognitive distortions are affecting an individual’s perception of their own body shape (Burke et al., 2010).

These cognitive distortions may be influenced by:

- Social environment: simply having a close friend or relative who is obese raises the risk of obesity by over a third (Christakis & Fowler, 2007).
- Media images: media reports tend to use images of severe obesity when reporting about obesity (Patterson & Hilton, 2013), leading to inaccurate comparisons.

Low socioeconomic status (SES) is also associated with weight misperception (Park, 2011).

It has already been established that overweight people tend to underestimate their own weight (Maximova et al., 2008; Burke et al., 2010), and both overweight parents and children tend to underestimate their own weight, and the weight of each other (Dumus, 2011).

However no studies have investigated how people view the weight of others within the general population.

Aims

- The aim of this study is to investigate people’s perceptions regarding what they consider to be underweight, healthy weight, overweight and obese in others.

- It will also assess if underestimation of weight status in others is more prevalent in overweight participants with low SES.

Method

Design: A 2x2 between subjects design using the online survey company SurveyGizmo, including a self report questionnaire.

Participants: N = 114

Measures and Materials: BMI was calculated by the NHS BMI Healthy Weight calculator with details of age, gender and self reported height and weight

SES was measured by the number of years in formal education

Stunkard Figure Rating Scale (SFRS; Stunkard et al., 1983) was used to measure Participants’ ratings of silhouette weight categories

Data Analysis

ANOVA of underestimation of silhouettes

IV1 – SESGroup (low, high). IV2 – BMIGroup (Overweight, Not overweight). DV – Total number of body silhouettes UNDERESTIMATED

ANOVA of overestimation of silhouettes.

IV1 – SESGroup (low, high). IV2 – BMIGroup (Overweight, Not overweight). DV – Total number of body silhouettes OVERESTIMATED

Multiple Hierarchical Regression

Predictor variables: BMI and SES. Outcome variable: Total number of body silhouettes UNDERESTIMATED

Results

There was a significant main effect of BMI Group on underestimation of silhouettes, F(1,110) = 7.98, p<.01, and underestimation was higher in overweight participants.

Results (cont.)

A strong significant positive correlation was identified between BMI and the number of silhouettes underestimated, and BMI was also a strong significant predictor of the number of silhouettes underestimated.

Discussion

- These results support the hypothesis that those who are overweight are more likely to underestimate the weight of others, and this provides further evidence that inaccurate perceptions may have developed (Burke et al., 2010).
- This may suggest that overweight and obesity is now becoming normalised, where individuals have reduced recognition of excess weight in themselves and in others.
- Consequently overweight individuals and families may fail to recognise that their weight is a problem.
- If an individual does not perceive that they are susceptible to a health threat they will not engage in a health behaviour or a public health campaign (Health Belief Model; Becker & Rosenstock, 1984).
- Therefore it may be necessary to target and improve perceptions of body weight in an effort to reduce and prevent obesity.

References


