"Fattertainment"
Obesity in the Media

By Chelsea A. Heuer, MPH

Why is "Fattertainment" Okay?

There's the *The Biggest Loser* on NBC, *More to Love* on FOX, and don't forget Oxygen's *Dance Your Ass Off*. Even with such provocative titles, these are some of the more innocuous examples. It seems that everywhere you turn these days, whether it be reality shows, movies, YouTube, television ads or news reports, an obese person is being ridiculed.

Movies like T*he Nutty Professor*, *Norbit* and *Shallow Hal*, where actors dress up in fat suits and engage in clichéd slapstick (like getting stuck in small spaces because of their girth), have earned millions of dollars at the box office by mocking the obese. This phenomenon even earned the unwelcome label – "fattertainment" – media that is both immensely popular and a breeding ground for obesity stereotypes.

Interestingly, very few people have called foul on our culture's fascination with fat humor. The question is, *why*? In a world where there are very few remaining social groups to laugh at, why is it okay to make fun of obese people?

Researchers have attempted to document this trend commonly referred to as "weight bias in the media." Studies have analyzed primetime television shows and movies and found that overweight female characters are often teased and insulted by male characters, which is followed by audience laughter. Obese characters are shown overindulging in junk food and are less likely than thinner characters to be involved in romantic relation-ships. "Fat Monica" on the hit show *Friends* is a prime example. When Monica is thin, she's portrayed as attractive and lovable. But, when dressed in a fat suit, "Fat Monica" is portrayed as pathetic and not able to stop eating.

Even children's programs and movies communicate negative messages about being overweight. Studies show that overweight cartoon characters are typically depicted as unattractive, unintelligent, unhappy and cruel. In 40 percent of children's movies, at least one obese character is disliked, and in over half of children's movies, an obese character is shown thinking about or eating food.

Think about Harry Potter's cousin, Dudley, a character who is portrayed as dim-witted, greedy, mean `and fat. Research also shows that grade-school children learn to make fun of overweight peers from watching television and playing video games.

Why is Weight Bias so Common?

In addition to documenting weight bias in different forms of media, research also provides clues as to "*why*." Why is weight bias in the media so common and socially accepted? Studies show that Americans feel that obese people are responsible for their condition, which they believe is caused by laziness and gluttony. These beliefs are rooted in traditional American values that people are in control of what happens to them and they get what they deserve. In other words, blame for the obesity epidemic is placed squarely on the shoulders of those who are obese, which lays the groundwork for prejudice

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against obese people. Because obese people are perceived to be responsible for the obesity epidemic, society feels they deserve what they get, including laughter and humiliation.

News coverage of obesity provides a clear example of this American ideology. The news media takes a victim-blaming approach, attributing America's weight problems to poor choices and laziness. Headlines in the past few years have blamed obese people for rising fuel prices, global warming and causing weight gain in their friends.

These reproachful messages are accentuated by the scores of "headless" obese people in the news. We've all seen them – news photographs and video footage of unknowing obese people walking down the street with their heads cut out of the shot. These images are so common, they have become a cultural phenomenon. One satirical headline found on the Web reads, "Study: Obesity linked to headlessness," and discusses a new research finding that headlessness may be a significant contributor to excessive weight gain.

In fact, actual research has examined portrayals of obese individuals on five major news Web sites and found that 60 percent of obese people in news photographs are shown as "headless." The same study found that 72 percent of news images portraying obese people were stigmatizing. News images that isolate body parts or place unnecessary emphasis on weight are demeaning and dehumanizing to obese people, reducing them from whole individuals to symbols of the obesity epidemic.

What is the Impact of "Fattertainment" on Society?

Unfortunately, fat humor and "fattertainment" have an equally unfavorable impact on public perceptions about obese people. Many Americans may somehow feel that making fun of obese people is not only justifiable, but also beneficial, because it provides motivation to lose weight. Research, however, tells us that this isn't true. Weight bias is damaging to obese people in many ways. Studies show that obese people who experience weight bias may become depressed, anxious and have low self-esteem.

Weight bias also creates barriers for obese people that actually reduce motivation to lose weight. For example, some research has found that obese people who reported being victims of weight prejudice had a harder time losing weight than obese people who didn't experience weight prejudice. Researchers have even found evidence that some of the health problems associated with obesity may actually result from stigmatizing experiences, rather than just excess body weight itself.

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While it's promising to see more obese Americans represented on television, it's imperative that these representations be free from stereotypes and ridicule. Think about hours of TV air time that are devoted to weight-loss competitions, like *Celebrity Fit Club* on Vh1. It's interesting that for the few shows on television that feature obese Americans, the entire cast is trying desperately to become thin. It's also no coincidence that titles like *The Biggest Loser* are full of double meaning.

How Can We Stop this?

So if it's not okay to make fun of obese people, what can we do to stop it?

1. First, be sensitive to offensive comments about weight and recognize that fat humor is harmful.

2. Second, seek out entertainment options that challenge weight-based stereotypes and feature obese people in regular, non-stereotypical roles like the Style Network's "Ruby," Dena on "Samantha Who," Hurley on "Lost,"and Ellenor Frutt on "The Practice."

3. Third, look critically at news sources and recognize the bias that often emerges in news reports about obesity.

4. Finally, speak out against weight bias – help others around you understand the importance of treating all people, regardless of body size, with dignity and respect.

About the Author:

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OAC
Obesity Action Coalition

ABOUT THE **OBESITY ACTION COALITION (OAC)**

The Obesity Action Coalition (OAC) is a National non-profit organization dedicated to giving a voice to individuals affected by obesity and helping them along their journey toward better health. Our core focuses are to elevate the conversation of weight and its impact on health, improve access to obesity care, provide science-based education on obesity and its treatments, and fight to eliminate weight bias and discrimination.

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The OAC knows that the journey with weight can be challenging but we also know that great things happen when we learn, connect and engage. That is why the OAC Community exists. Our Community is designed to provide quality education, ongoing support programs, an opportunity to connect, and a place to take action on important issues.

Through the OAC Community, you can get access to:

Weight & Health Education • Community Blogs • Community Discussion Forum • Ongoing Support • Meaningful Connections **AND MUCH MORE**

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