

Adolescent Obesity: A Barrier to Mate Selection?

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Abstract:

The obesity epidemic is a barrier to the participation of adolescents in developmentally normative behaviors associated with mate selection, such as dating. Notably, the obesity stigma has important implications for the socio-emotional development of adolescents in the realms of intimacy and peer acceptance, as well as for their future chances of marriage and healthy relationships.

Keywords: Obesity; Dating; Social stigma

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The levels of adolescent obesity in the United States are growing to epidemic proportions. Ironically, one consequence of the social stigma associated with obesity may, in fact, be the reluctance on the part of researchers to consider questions surrounding the impact of adolescent obesity on dating and mate selection. In this piece, we summarize what is known about this topic, and highlight the need for much more research.

Obesity, marriage, and dating

While Americans are waiting longer to get married – the average age of first marriage is 27 years for women and 29 for men – in many ways young people begin the mate selection processes long before, around the onset of puberty. As such, the time between puberty and the formation of committed relationships, such as marriage, is one involving romantic and sexual relationship exploration and experimentation, a period which entails choosing shorter- or longer-term mates from pools of eligible partners [1,2]. For many young people in the United States, however, partner selection during adolescence may be complicated by the rapidly increasing incidence of obesity, as young people who are obese may experience multiple barriers to dating, including cultural stigmas, as well as evolutionary barriers associated with signals of overall health and/or pregnancy status. These signals are so important that, after testing, authors have definitively showed the existence of a clear negative impact of obesity on the marriage prospects of the obese [3].

While it is perhaps unsurprising that weight and obesity are linked to sexual attractiveness in the adult population, finding definitive proof of this fact in the population of adolescents has proven to be much more difficult [2]. The fact that 18.4 percent of U.S. adolescents, including 19.6 percent of boys and 17.1 percent of girls, were obese in 2010 testifies to the existence of obesity during the critical developmental period between puberty and adulthood in young people's lives and the need for further exploration of the topic at hand [4].

The limited research currently available on the relationship between adolescent obesity and dating indicates the existence of both gender and racial differences in the experiences of obese youths in the world of sex and romance. It is also true that, while empirical research involving nationally representative longitudinal data on adolescents living in the U.S. shows a negative relationship between obesity and (heterosexual) adolescents' chances of dating [5], it does not necessarily show the same negative relationship between obesity and adolescents' involvement in casual sexual encounters [5-7]. In the section that follows, we explore in detail the literature to date on how exactly obesity affects the prospects of adolescents in the dating pool.

Obesity and Dating in Detail

Both adolescent men and women prefer dating partners who are not seriously overweight, with men showing a greater aversion towards dating an overweight partner than women [8,9]. A recent study based on Add-Health data suggests, however, a racial difference in the chances of dating for non-Hispanic Black versus White females [6]. Whereas obese White females are less likely than their non-obese counterparts to date, have sexual intercourse, or experience other forms of sexual intimacy such as genital touching, there is no difference between obese and non-obese Black females' experiences with these activities. In fact, in follow-up work to the initial studies, authors have found that this result holds up under more rigorous statistical testing, with results obtained after the use of instrumental variables regressions, and controls for personality traits, as well as various other factors [10].

Research by [7] drawing on a 2003 sample from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health), finds that overweight adolescent girls and boys are less likely to initiate sex for the first time, and are also less likely to date [5]. Furthermore, this same study, in a parallel analysis drawing on a 1997 sample from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), found no relationship between adolescent girls' or boys' weight and their initiation of sexual intercourse, but there was a negative relationship between girls (but not boys) being overweight and dating [5]. Given that most youth initiate sexual intercourse with dating rather than non-intimate or casual sex partners [11], this study generally supports the idea that obesity is a barrier to adolescents' participation in romantic

relationships. In addition to romantic relationships, however, another area of concern is that of casual sex or “hooking up”. This is explored in the following section.

Casual sex and obesity

Given the popularity of casual sex, or “hooking up,” in today’s youth culture, it is also important to examine the relationship between obesity and young people’s experiences with this type of activity [12]. Furthermore, for some youth, hooking up serves as a gateway to longer-term dating relationships, notably when they develop an intimate psychological relationship with a partner following their initial casual sexual encounter [13,14]. For better or for worse, however, the most recent research on heterosexual adolescents suggests that obese adolescents are either as likely as their non-obese counterparts to engage in casual sex [2], or else they are even more likely to do so [15]. In particular, one study has showed that White adolescent females are more likely to have multiple partners, older partners, and are less likely to use condoms than their non-obese peers [6]. Overall, then, research suggests that obese adolescents are less likely to date, as well as less likely to transition to dating relationships with their casual sex partners than are non-obese youth [3]. The fact that obese heterosexual youth may find it easier to develop casual sexual versus longer-term dating relationships is very likely to be a concern for their overall relationship satisfaction. Obese youth’s engagement in the hookup culture may not be as viable a pathway to dating as it is for non-obese youth. Since adolescence is a critical period for young people to explore their mating preferences, as well as gain skills in psychological and emotional intimacy with potential romantic partners, obese adolescents’ achievement of developmental milestones in the realm of love and romance could thus be compromised [2]. In the section that follows, we discuss the most permanent of these milestones in detail, namely, that of marriage.

Marriage and obesity

Given that the mate selection processes during adolescence functions, in part, to prepare young people for the transition to adulthood and the selection of more permanent partners, it is important to identify the factors which may be contributing to obese adolescents’ reduced chances of dating and to acknowledge the implications of such factors for their chances of successful mating and achieving relationship permanency in adulthood. Current research shows, indeed, a negative relationship between obesity and women’s, but not men’s, entry into marriage, as well as a negative relationship between obesity and both women’s and men’s entry into cohabitation [16]. It is, therefore, perhaps unsurprising that obesity has also been found to lower both wages and self-esteem more for women, and particularly white women as compared to men [17]. While the posited factors for this relationship are many, it is clear that selection into marriage [18] and finding a suitable mate based on weight are two important variables at play [1]. At the earlier stage, namely dating, one may wonder which factors are most important in creating the link between obesity and relationships. To this end, in the next section, we focus our attention on the social stigma created by obesity.

The obesity stigma

We conclude with a brief exploration of one of the most important factors related to obese heterosexual adolescents’ lesser chances of dating. Specifically, obese adolescents may be less likely to date due to cultural factors, notably the stigma associated with obesity, but likely

also due to peer pressure to date normal to less-than-average weight partners. We briefly review the literature in this area, and discuss the implications not only for obese adolescents’ chances of marriage or relationship permanency in adulthood, but also for the future of marriage as an institution in a society where obesity is a common and growing public health concern.

According to a 2009 study, rising rates of weight discrimination among adults have occurred in the U.S. over the past ten years; and this trend is particularly targeted towards women [19,20]. As the obesity epidemic has grown, it appears that stigmatizing attitudes towards overweight individuals has increased as well. More specific to the current discussion, a review by Puhl and Latner shows that obese children’s physical and emotional health is negatively impacted through stigmatization by both adults and peers [21]. Perhaps the prevalence of obesity stigma among youth is one of the reasons why [7] surmise that peer pressure regarding the importance of physical attractiveness may serve as more of a barrier to young people’s participation in the public dating market than in more private forms of sexual exchange [5]. Indeed, an earlier study accessing adolescents’ attitudes toward dating overweight partners also concluded, from findings based on the Dating Overweight Partners Scale (DOPS), that especially men, but also women, were uncomfortable dating overweight partners [8].

Research suggests that the reports of obese youth dating status dissatisfaction is likely a direct result of stigma by peers, including boys’ greater vulnerability to overt victimization and girls’ to relational victimization [9]. Such mistreatment, also, may result in obese youths experiencing poor psychosocial outcomes [21], which may exacerbate the negative impact of stigma on peer relations, including relationships with potential dating partners. Again, however, it is critical to examine both gender and racial differences regarding the relationship between obesity and adolescent dating. Black adolescent men and women, for example, appear to be more accepting of overweight individuals, and more likely to consider them sexy and attractive compared to Whites [22] found that overweight Black female adolescents experience less rejection in the dating market compared to obese White women, as well as greater comfort with their bodies, in spite of the fact that both Black and White adolescents hold negative stereotypes about obesity [22].

Concluding Remarks

While the topic of obesity and dating has not been studied to a great extent to date, it is a critical area for current and future research. Given rising rates of obesity and other health issues, a clear need exists to identify factors which will help to address this physical problem which has important definitive effects on, among other things, adolescent socio-emotional development and long-term relationship happiness. In this piece, we have explored one avenue in which obesity may have an impact, namely, through its effect on mate selection, marriage prospects, and, ultimately, healthier relationships for individuals and thus society as a whole.

Notes

- There are many factors that are potentially responsible and have been put forward by various authors as reasons for this correlation between obesity and marriage. These include selection effects by obesity, which is the focus of the present piece, protection from bad health through marriage, social obligations of marriage to have

meals etc. which makes people gain weight, and the marriage market hypothesis. The ideas with the most support have been selection, social obligation, and the marriage market hypothesis, hence, we feel justified in our current focus [23].

- Perhaps the clearest link was established in a study of Taipei prostitutes, where Chang and Weng [24] found that the price of prostitutes was negatively related to their weight, as well as to the degree of sexually risky behaviors they were willing to undertake [24].
- To date, there has been very little research on the correlation between obesity and dating among homosexual adolescents, although a recent study involving over 300 MSM men in the Midwestern U.S. found that while non-obese adult men were as likely to have sex as obese men, they were significantly more likely to have unsafe and anal sex, perhaps due to their partner's (unfounded) belief that non-obese men were less likely to be infected with HIV/AIDS. Although our focus here is on heterosexual youth, there is a significant need for further research on the relationship between obesity, dating, and sex among youth with non-heterosexual preferences.

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