VOICES UNHEARD: UNDERSTANDING THE STIGMA EXPERIENCES OF OBESE WOMEN AND THEIR COPING STRATEGIES

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Abstracts: This study analyses the complex and widespread problem of obesity, specifically examining the definition, prevalence, and worldwide differences in obesity, as well as the social stigma attached to it. Obesity, characterized by a body mass index (BMI) of 30 or above, is an escalating public health issue associated with chronic conditions like diabetes and cardiovascular diseases. The societal bias against obesity gives rise to different types of stigmas, including as public, personal, and structural stigma, which have profound psychological and social effects on those who are obese. Women who are obese, specifically, experience prejudice and marginalization from society, which has a negative impact on their mental well-being, leading to feelings of anxiety, despair, and decreased self-worth. The study highlights the significance of comprehending the influence of stigma on the physical and mental health of individuals who are fat, and investigates the techniques they use to handle this stigma. These solutions encompass psychological factors like resilience, self-acceptance, cognitive-behavioural procedures, and social support systems. In addition, the study emphasizes the importance of family, friends, and support groups, as well as community resources and peer support networks, in offering crucial emotional and practical help. The study conducts a thematic analysis of current literature to consolidate significant discoveries regarding the stigma experiences and coping mechanisms of obese women. It provides valuable insights into the repeating themes and patterns that shape their life. The study closes by highlighting the imperative to magnify the perspectives of individuals who are obese, foster inclusivity, and tackle societal prejudices in order to mitigate the detrimental consequences of stigma.

1. INTRODUCTION
A. Background
1. Definition and prevalence of obesity

Obesity is a medical disorder characterized by the excessive buildup of body fat, which can have negative effects on health. Obesity is usually determined by evaluating the body mass index (BMI), with a BMI of 30 or more indicating obesity (Tauqeer et al., 2018). The global incidence of this phenomenon has consistently increased, indicating a multifaceted interaction between genetic, environmental, and cultural influences. Obesity rates differ greatly worldwide, with variations observed among different locations and populations. These variations are driven by cultural norms, socioeconomic level, and the availability of healthcare and nutrition. The World Health Organization (2021) states that the high occurrence of obesity presents significant public health obstacles, closely associated with an elevated susceptibility to chronic conditions including diabetes, cardiovascular illnesses, and specific types of cancer (Sinha & Haque, 2022). This increasing pattern highlights the need for extensive public health approaches focused on preventing, intervening early, and ensuring fair access to healthcare in order to reduce the negative impacts of health problems related to obesity.

2. Overview of stigma associated with obesity

The stigma surrounding obesity entails a widespread collection of unfavorable preconceptions, biases, and discriminatory attitudes targeted at individuals primarily due to their body weight. These societal prejudices can appear in numerous forms, leading to social exclusion, prejudiced treatment, and systemic inequality in different contexts (Ansari et al.; 2020, Diedrichs & Puhl; 2016). Obese individuals frequently encounter difficulties in obtaining healthcare services, employment prospects, and educational progress due to widespread misunderstandings about their health, personality, and ability. Study influence of obesity stigma on both the psychological well-being of individuals, leading to feelings of shame

and low self-esteem, as well as the perpetuation of inequities in healthcare delivery and public policy (Brown et al.;2022, Westbury et al.; 2023, Tomiyama et al.; 2018). The perpetuation of stigma surrounding obesity is fueled by media depictions, cultural expectations, and personal encounters. This emphasizes the pressing necessity for initiatives aimed at reducing stigma and implementing inclusive public health measures that foster empathy, education, and fair treatment for persons impacted by obesity.

B. Significance of the Study
1. Impact of stigma on obese individuals' health and well-being

The need of examining the influence of stigma on the physical and mental well-being of those who are obese cannot be emphasized enough. The social disapproval linked to obesity has a significant impact on both the physical and emotional well-being, resulting in many adverse consequences (Tomiyama et al., 2018). Research repeatedly shows that obese individuals have a higher chance of experiencing psychological discomfort, such as increased levels of anxiety and depression. Additionally, obese individuals suffer from noticeably reduced self-esteem and a lower overall quality of life in comparison to those who are not obese (Talen & Mann ;2023, Haregu et al.; 2020). The psychological effects are intensified by the societal and structural obstacles caused by stigma, which can worsen health inequalities and restrict access to essential healthcare and support services.

2. Importance of exploring coping strategies in managing stigma

Gaining insight into the strategies and mechanisms employed by individuals who are obese to negotiate and manage the social stigma associated with their condition is crucial for developing interventions and support systems that are impactful and successful. Coping methods are essential in assisting individuals in effectively handling the psychological and emotional weight of stigma. Utilizing effective coping mechanisms can strengthen resilience, promote self-acceptance, and enhance general well-being. Examining these techniques offers vital knowledge on how individuals cope with social disapproval and contributes to the creation of focused assistance initiatives and policies that cater to the psychological and practical requirements of those impacted (Salimzadeh et al., 2021). Therefore, studying coping techniques not only enhances our overall

comprehension of obesity stigma but also provides direction for attempts to reduce its harmful impact on individuals' lives.

C. Objectives of the Review

1. Synthesize existing literature on stigma experiences among obese women

The aim of synthesizing the existing literature on stigma experiences among obese women is to create a thorough compilation and analysis of current study findings in order to further our comprehension of this crucial matter. This study aims to consolidate data from several studies, offering a comprehensive overview of the unique effects of stigma on women who are obese. The review seeks to analyze the literature in order to reveal recurring themes and patterns in the lives of these women, as well as to find differences across various contexts and communities. This approach will also identify notable deficiencies in the existing knowledge base, such as insufficiently studied population groups or neglected dimensions of social stigma, thus directing future research endeavors and informing the development of more impactful interventions.

2. Analyze coping mechanisms employed by obese women to address stigma

This review will not only investigate the experiences of stigma, but also analyze the coping strategies utilized by obese women to mitigate the adverse effects of stigma. This investigation will examine various coping mechanisms, encompassing psychological techniques such as resilience enhancement and cognitive reframing, social support systems such as familial and peer networks, and advocacy initiatives targeted at addressing societal prejudices. The review will examine how obese women employ coping mechanisms to negotiate and manage stigma, offering significant insights into their adaptive strategies and identifying effective techniques for aiding those affected. This extensive investigation will aid in the creation of focused assistance initiatives and strategies aimed at improving the welfare of obesity women and reducing the negative impact of social stigma.

2. METHODOLOGY
A. Literature Search Strategy
1. Database selection and search terms

In order to conduct a full and exhaustive assessment of the research, a well-defined approach for searching the literature will be utilized. This approach involves utilizing well-known electronic resources such as PubMed, PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. The selection of these databases is based on their comprehensive inclusion of health, psychology, and social sciences literature, which is essential for examining the various dimensions of stigma and coping mechanisms associated with obesity. The search will be conducted using a curated list of specific key terms, such as "obesity stigma," "stigma towards obese women," "coping strategies," "psychological effects," and related variations. These phrases have been formulated to encompass a wide array of pertinent research while also guaranteeing precision in relation to the subject matter.

2. Inclusion and exclusion criteria for selecting studies

The inclusion and exclusion criteria will be strictly enforced to select the papers that are most relevant to the review. In order to be included, the studies must explicitly focus on the experiences of stigma and the ways used to cope with it among adult women who are obese. This emphasis guarantees that the evaluation catches findings that are specifically relevant to the target group. Furthermore, only scholarly works that have undergone peer review and were published in English between 2010 and the present will be taken into account. The purpose of this chronological and linguistic constraint is to ensure that the literature is up-to-date and reflects the most recent and rigorous study findings. The review intends to gather a comprehensive and current collection of evidence that adheres to these criteria. This evidence will provide a precise and reliable knowledge of the experiences of stigma and the coping strategies used by obese women.

B. Data Extraction and Synthesis
1. Process of reviewing and extracting data from selected studies

The selected studies will be thoroughly reviewed and data will be extracted in an organized manner to ensure a thorough knowledge of the stigma experiences and coping methods among obese women. At first,

each study will be thoroughly examined to discover and extract relevant information. This encompasses essential components such as the study's goals, the research methodologies utilized, the attributes of the study subjects, the precise metrics employed to evaluate stigma, and the comprehensive results pertaining to both experiences of stigma and strategies for dealing with it. The objective is to collect a comprehensive dataset that accurately represents the various ways in which obese women experience and cope with stigma, serving as a solid foundation for subsequent study.

2. Synthesis methods: Thematic analysis

After extracting the data, the findings will be synthesized using thematic analysis, which is a qualitative research method that finds and organizes recurring themes found in the gathered studies. Thematic analysis is categorizing the data into themes and patterns that arise from the research, providing a systematic framework for interpreting and incorporating the different findings (Lochmiller ; 2021, Vaismoradi & Snelgrove; 2019). The technique, as described by Lochmiller (2021) enables a detailed examination of similarities and variations in experiences of stigma and methods of dealing with it. By categorizing the data thematically, the review will present a logical and thorough account that emphasizes important observations and enhances our comprehension of how obese women manage and react to social disapproval.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

I) Stigma Experiences of Obese Women
 A. Types of Stigmas Encountered
1. Public stigma in societal contexts

Obese women frequently encounter various forms of stigma that deeply impact their lives and well-being. Public stigma in societal contexts is a major concern, as it involves pervasive negative stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination that occur in everyday social interactions, media portrayals, and public spaces (Hyers et al., 2023). This type of stigma is reflected in the widespread societal attitudes that label obese individuals as lazy or lacking self-discipline, which can manifest in overtly

discriminatory behavior and marginalization in social settings (Fulton & Srinivasan, 2021, Nath; 2019). Such public biases often lead to social exclusion, reduced opportunities, and a hostile environment that exacerbates the difficulties faced by obese women.

2. Self-stigma and internalized perceptions

In addition to the public stigma they experience, obese women also grapple with self-stigma, which is the internalization of societal negative attitudes and beliefs about their own obesity. Self-stigma involves absorbing and accepting the prejudiced views of others, resulting in profound feelings of shame, guilt, and diminished self-worth (Fulton & Srinivasan, 2021). This internalized stigma can have severe psychological effects, undermining an individual's self-esteem and contributing to mental health issues such as anxiety and depression. The internal struggle with self-perception and societal judgment can further isolate individuals and affect their overall quality of life (Guarneri et al., 2019).

3. Structural stigma in healthcare and institutional settings

Moreover, structural stigma represents a more insidious form of bias embedded within institutional systems. This type of stigma includes systemic barriers and biases within healthcare systems, workplaces, and educational institutions that perpetuate inequalities and limit access to resources for obese individuals (Arora et al., 2019). Structural stigma manifests in policies and practices that disadvantage obese people, such as inadequate healthcare provisions, workplace discrimination, and educational inequalities. These systemic issues contribute to ongoing disparities and hinder the ability of obese women to access necessary support and opportunities, reinforcing the negative impacts of both public and self-stigma on their daily lives.

B. Impact of Stigma on Health and Well-being
1. Psychological effects: anxiety, depression, low self-esteem

The psychological impact of the social disapproval linked to obesity is deep and complex, frequently resulting in considerable distress among those affected. Obese women often suffer from elevated levels of anxiety and depression due to the direct impact of societal stigma. Consistent

exposure to unfavorable stereotypes and discriminatory attitudes can create widespread sentiments of uneasiness and fear, leading to long-lasting worry. This worry is intensified by feelings of incompetence and the internal absorption of unfavorable societal messages (Hatzenbuehler et al., 2009). Moreover, the stigma surrounding obesity frequently results in reduced self-esteem, as individuals struggle with a detrimental self-perception and internalized feelings of guilt associated with their body weight (Täuber et al.; 2018, Tomiyama et al.; 2018). The psychological effects have a significant impact on both mental health and overall well-being, as well as daily functioning.

2. Social consequences: isolation, discrimination, reduced quality of life

In addition to causing psychological discomfort, the social repercussions of obesity stigma are equally detrimental. Obese women often experience social isolation since they tend to avoid social contacts out of fear of being judged or rejected. This disengagement might intensify emotions of alone and estrangement, thereby affecting mental well-being (Fulton & Srinivasan, 2021). Interpersonal discrimination in different contexts, such as social, professional, and academic settings, can lead to explicit or implicit prejudices that undermine opportunities and impede personal and professional development. Furthermore, the stigma associated with obesity might restrict individuals' ability to secure employment and pursue education, since they may encounter bias and discrimination during job applications or academic endeavors. This can result in a reduced number of professional options and worse educational achievements (Campos-Vázquez & Ortega, 2020). The combined social outcomes of prejudice, isolation, and limited chances have a detrimental impact on several parts of life, leading to a diminished overall quality of life.

II) Coping Strategies Utilized by Obese Women
 A. Psychological Coping Mechanisms
 1. Resilience and self-acceptance strategies

Coping with the stigma associated with obesity requires obese women to employ a variety of strategies to navigate and mitigate its impact

on their lives. Psychological coping mechanisms play a crucial role in this process, with resilience and self-acceptance strategies emerging as foundational approaches. Resilience involves the ability to adapt positively in the face of adversity, allowing individuals to maintain a sense of emotional strength and well-being despite the challenges posed by stigma. For obese women, cultivating resilience often involves developing a resilient mindset that focuses on their strengths and capabilities rather than internalizing societal biases (Puhl & Brownell; 2003, Puhl & Moss-Racusin; 2021). Similarly, self-acceptance strategies involve embracing one's body and identity without succumbing to societal pressures or negative self-perceptions, fostering a more positive self-image and improved self-esteem.

2. Cognitive-behavioral techniques: reframing and self-empowerment

Additionally, cognitive-behavioral techniques such as reframing and self-empowerment are effective tools used by obese women to manage and cope with stigma. Reframing involves consciously challenging and changing negative thought patterns related to one's weight and appearance, allowing individuals to reinterpret situations in more positive and empowering ways (Myre et al., 2023). This cognitive restructuring helps to reduce the emotional impact of stigma and enhances psychological resilience. Self-empowerment strategies focus on promoting assertiveness, self-advocacy, and proactive behavior in addressing discriminatory attitudes and behaviors. By empowering themselves through education, advocacy, and community engagement, obese women can assert their rights, challenge stigma, and advocate for inclusive environments that promote acceptance and respect (Gailey; 2014, Arora et al.; 2019). These psychological coping mechanisms not only help obese women navigate the challenges of stigma but also foster personal growth, resilience, and a more positive outlook on their lives despite societal pressures.

B. Social Support Systems
1. Role of family, friends, and support groups

Social support systems play a pivotal role in helping obese women cope with the stigma associated with their weight. The support of family, friends, and support groups provides a crucial buffer against the negative impacts of stigma, offering emotional sustenance and practical assistance. Family members and close friends often serve as the primary sources of emotional support, offering understanding, acceptance, and encouragement. This support can bolster self-esteem and foster a sense of belonging, helping to counteract the isolation and self-doubt that stigma can engender. Additionally, support groups specifically tailored for obese individuals provide a safe space for sharing experiences and coping strategies, enabling members to feel understood and validated. These groups facilitate mutual support, where participants can exchange advice, offer empathy, and reinforce each other's efforts to build resilience and self-acceptance (Guthrie & Kunkel, 2023).

2. Community resources and peer support networks

Beyond immediate social circles, community resources and peer support networks play a significant role in supporting obese women. Community resources such as local health centers, counseling services, and wellness programs provide access to professional help and information that can aid in managing both the physical and emotional aspects of obesity. These resources often offer workshops, therapy sessions, and educational materials that address self-care, nutrition, and mental health, empowering individuals to take proactive steps towards their well-being. Peer support networks, which may be facilitated through online platforms or community organizations, connect obese women with others who share similar experiences (Gailey, 2014). These networks extend the reach of social support, allowing individuals to build broader connections, share resources, and participate in collective advocacy efforts. By engaging with community resources and peer networks, obese women can access a wider array of support options, enhancing their ability to cope with stigma and promoting a more inclusive and supportive environment.

4. CONCLUSIONS

This study offers new insights into the numerous experiences of stigma among obese women, emphasizing the significant influence of society attitudes on their overall well-being. The findings highlight the intricate nature of stigma, where unfavourable attitudes, prejudice, and societal isolation interweave, profoundly influencing the lives of these women. Equally significant are the coping mechanisms utilized, which not only enhance resilience but also contribute to the general well-being of the individuals impacted. These measures, encompassing emotional, psychological, and behavioural aspects, are essential in reducing the negative impact of stigma and fostering a more optimistic and empowered perspective on life. To combat stigma, it is crucial to magnify the voices of those who are obese, making sure that their experiences and viewpoints are central to the wider society conversation. By providing individuals with a medium to express their narratives, researcher may cultivate enhanced comprehension, compassion, and ultimately, a society that embraces diversity. Furthermore, in order to effectively reduce societal biases, it is necessary for individuals to work together to actively question and destroy the misconceptions that contribute to the perpetuation of stigma. By advocating for inclusivity and equity, we are actively working towards creating a society that recognizes and appreciates the worth and dignity of every person, irrespective of their physical dimensions or appearance.

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