
THE WEIGHT OF STIGMA IN HIGHER EDUCATION: A DIAGNOSIS AMONG UNIVERSITY STUDENTS

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Abstract-- Weight discrimination is a form of social stigmatization that can affect the emotional well-being, self-esteem, and integration of students in higher education. The objective of this study was to identify the frequency with which higher education students experience situations of discrimination related to their body weight. A quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted with a sample of 71 students, selected using the formula for finite populations. The Spanish version of *the Stigmatizing Situations Inventory* was administered, and the data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS.

The results show that for seven of the ten items evaluated, more than 85% of the participants reported having experienced stigmatizing situations with low frequency, indicating that weight-based discrimination does not occur as a widespread phenomenon in the institutional context analyzed. However, specific cases were identified with a higher frequency of experiences in close family and social settings, particularly in direct comments about body weight, which demonstrates the persistence of body stigma as a selective phenomenon.

It is concluded that weight-based discrimination in the studied population does not constitute a dominant practice, but rather a present social experience that can affect certain students. The findings provide local empirical evidence that contributes to the understanding of body stigma in higher education and underscore the need to promote institutional strategies aimed at strengthening inclusion, respect for body diversity, and student well-being.

Keywords—social stigmatization, body discrimination, weight discrimination, body stigma, higher education, student well-being.

Abstract-- Weight discrimination constitutes a form of social stigmatization that may affect students' emotional well-being, self-esteem, and social integration in higher education. The aim of this study was to identify the frequency with which students in higher education experience situations of discrimination related to their body weight.

A quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional study was conducted with a sample of 71 students selected using the finite population formula. The Spanish version of the *Stigmatizing Situations Inventory* was administered, and data were analyzed using descriptive statistics in SPSS.

Results show that for seven of the ten evaluated items, more than 85% of participants reported experiencing stigmatizing situations at a low frequency, indicating that weight discrimination does not appear to be a widespread phenomenon within the analyzed institutional context. However, specific cases with a higher frequency of experiences were identified in close social and family environments, particularly regarding direct comments about body weight, which reflects the persistence of body stigma as a selective social phenomenon.

It is concluded that weight discrimination in the studied population is not a widespread practice, but it remains a present social reality that may affect certain students. The findings provide local empirical evidence that contributes to understanding body stigma in higher education and highlight the need to promote institutional strategies aimed at strengthening inclusion, respect for body diversity, and student well-being.

INTRODUCTION

Discrimination based on physical appearance is a persistent form of social inequality. Within this context, discrimination based on body weight has been identified as a specific form of stigmatization that can affect people's mental health, self-esteem, and social participation. International organizations note that excess weight represents not only a health challenge but also a social phenomenon associated with prejudices and discriminatory practices that influence quality of life (World Health Organization [WHO], 2022). In the Mexican context, recent data show that physical appearance continues to be one of the reported causes of discrimination, confirming the relevance of analyzing the phenomenon from a social and educational perspective (National Institute of Statistics and Geography [INEGI], 2023).

In Mexico, this issue is particularly significant due to the high prevalence of overweight and obesity, as well as its social dimension. Barquera et al. (2022) note that negative perceptions of the body are shaped by the social environment and can lead to stigmatization or differential treatment. Similarly, the National Program for Equality and Non-Discrimination acknowledges that physical appearance

remains one of the most frequent grounds for discrimination in the country, highlighting the need to generate empirical evidence in various contexts, including education (National Council to Prevent Discrimination, 2021; Official Gazette of the Federation, 2021).

Various studies have noted that body stigma can manifest in everyday interactions, negative social expectations, and comments about the body, influencing students' social integration (Tomiyama, 2021; Puhl & Lessard, 2021). However, in Mexican higher education, there are still few empirical studies that analyze this phenomenon using direct data from students, particularly in regional contexts in the northern part of the country.

From a public health perspective, mental health care requires structural interventions that strengthen institutional capacities and reduce gaps in care. An evaluation of the implementation of the Global Action Programme to Bridge the Mental Health Gap (mhGAP) in Chile showed that progressive training in primary care improves competencies for the detection, diagnosis, and treatment of common mental disorders, in addition to promoting the standardization of practices and integration into care networks (Sapag et al., 2021). These findings underscore that psychosocial issues should not be addressed solely at the individual level, but through organizational and policy strategies that strengthen the education and health systems as protective environments.

Within this framework, the present study aims to identify the frequency with which college students experience situations of discrimination related to their body weight, providing contextualized evidence that allows for an understanding of the phenomenon in the university setting.

DEVELOPMENT

Methodological Design

This study was conducted using a quantitative, descriptive, cross-sectional approach. This design allows for the analysis of the presence of a social phenomenon at a specific point in time, without intervening in the variables or observing their evolution over time, which is appropriate when seeking to identify the frequency of specific social experiences in a given population (Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2021).

The study aimed to identify the frequency with which college students experience weight-based discrimination, understood as a set of social practices involving

judgments, stereotypes, or differential treatment of people based on their physical appearance. Recent literature has indicated that weight stigma constitutes a form of social inequality that can affect mental health, social participation, and body image (Puhl & Lessard, 2021; Tomiyama, 2021; Agama-Sarabia et al., 2024).

From the perspective of social determinants, health inequity does not occur in isolation but accumulates over the course of a person's life, affecting educational, social, and economic opportunities. Butrón Riveros et al. (2023) emphasize that structural inequalities require comprehensive institutional responses that address the social factors that shape health and well-being. In this sense, weight stigma can be understood as a manifestation of inequality that operates within educational settings, reproducing symbolic and social barriers that limit students' full participation.

Likewise, international research has shown that body stigma stems not only from individual interactions but also from broader social constructs related to aesthetic norms and discourses on health, reinforcing the need to analyze it from a social and educational perspective (Rubino et al., 2020; de Sousa Bezerra de Menezes et al., 2021).

Population and sample

The population consisted of all higher education students, estimated at 3,298 students. To determine the sample size, the formula for a finite population was used, assuming a 90% confidence level, a 10% margin of error, and an estimated population proportion of 0.5, which allows for maximizing the variance of the phenomenon under study.

The formula used was:

$$n = \frac{N * Z^2 * p * q}{e^2 (N - 1) + Z^2 * p * q}$$

Substituting values:

$$n = \frac{3298 * 1.645^2 * (0.5) * (0.5)}{0.1^2 (3298 - 1) + 1.645^2 * (0.5)(0.5)} = 66 \text{ alumnos}$$

A sample size of 66 students was initially planned, but this was exceeded, with a total of 71 students participating.

The sampling was not stratified; however, an effort was made to include students from various degree programs in order to achieve a broad representation of the institutional context. This type of sampling, although non-probabilistic, is common in diagnostic studies in higher education when participation depends on access to the subjects and their voluntary willingness, especially in initial social research (INEGI, 2023; Hernández-Sampieri & Mendoza, 2021).

Data Collection Instrument

The Spanish version of the *Stigmatizing Situations Inventory*, an instrument designed to assess experiences of stigmatization related to body weight, was used to collect data. This instrument has been validated in a Spanish-speaking population and exhibits psychometric properties suitable for use in social and educational studies (Ortiz & Gómez Pérez, 2019).

The questionnaire assesses the frequency with which individuals experience stigmatizing situations in various social settings using a 10-point ordinal scale ranging from “Never” to “Daily.” The items used are presented in Table 1.

The dimensions considered include direct teasing, negative social expectations, psychological attributions, judgments about eating habits, structural difficulties (such as access to clothing), perception of social observation, medical stigma, family stigma, and comments from strangers.

The use of this type of instrument is relevant for analyzing body stigma from a multidimensional perspective, as the literature has indicated that weight-based discrimination manifests in various social settings—family, healthcare, community, and educational—and not solely in school interactions (Rubino et al., 2020; Vilugrón Aravena et al., 2023).

Table 1.

Items from the Stigmatizing Situations Inventory used in the study

(Rate your typical personal experience on a scale of 1 to 10: 1. Never 2. Once in a lifetime 3. Many times in a lifetime 4. Once a year 5. Several times a year 6. Once a month 7. Several times a month 8. Once a week 9. Quite a few times a week 10. Every day).

1. People make fun of me because of my weight.	
2. People have low expectations of me because of my weight.	
3. People think I have emotional problems because of my weight.	
4. People think I overeat or eat large amounts of food because of my weight	
5. I can't find clothes in my size.	
6. I feel like people are staring at me because of my weight.	
7. My doctor has recommended a diet, even though I visited him for a that isn't related to weight.	
8. I've had a doctor who links any of my health problems to my weight.	
9. I've been upset because a close family member has persistently told me to lose or gain weight.	
10. A stranger has suggested that I lose or gain weight.	

Note: The instrument assesses typical personal experiences using a frequency scale from 1 to 10, where 1 = Never and 10 = Every day.

Administration Procedure

The questionnaire was administered on Monday, November 4, 2024, between 12:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m., using the Google Forms platform.

Participation was voluntary and anonymous, ensuring confidentiality in the handling of information, in accordance with the ethical principles of social and educational research.

The data obtained were exported to a database and processed using SPSS software, employing descriptive statistics based on absolute and relative frequencies.

The use of descriptive analysis is appropriate in initial diagnostic studies, as it allows for the identification of general patterns of the phenomenon before proceeding to more complex explanatory models. Recent literature has noted that this type of approach constitutes a necessary phase for the

development of subsequent research with greater analytical scope (Tomiyama, 2021; Agama-Sarabia et al., 2024).

Results

The results show that most students report having experienced stigmatizing situations infrequently. For seven of the ten items assessed, more than 85% of participants indicated having had such experiences “never” or “only a few times in their lives,” suggesting that weight-based discrimination is not a dominant social practice within the institutional setting analyzed.

However, the data also reveal the existence of specific experiences that should not be overlooked. In particular, items related to the family and close social circles yielded responses at higher frequency levels. For items regarding comments from family members or suggestions from strangers about body weight, some cases were reported as occurring on a daily basis.

This finding aligns with recent research indicating that weight stigma tends to manifest more intensely in close relationships, where social norms regarding the body are conveyed with greater symbolic force (Puhl & Lessard, 2021).

Likewise, the results indicate that experiences of discrimination are not evenly distributed among the student population but affect a small group of students with greater intensity. This pattern has been identified in international studies, where body stigma operates as a selective phenomenon that impacts individuals differentially based on individual and contextual characteristics (Tomiyama, 2021).

Taken together, the data suggest that weight-based stigma in the analyzed university context does not present as a widespread phenomenon, but rather as a real social experience for certain students, implying the need to address it from a preventive and institutional perspective.

As shown in Table 2, most items show responses concentrated in the low-frequency categories, particularly in the “Never” and “Once in a lifetime” options. This pattern suggests that weight-based discrimination is not widespread among the studied population. However, some items show responses at higher frequency levels, especially those related to family comments and social perception of the body, which coincides with

Previous findings indicate that body stigma tends to manifest more intensely in close relationships.

Table 2.

Frequency distribution of responses to the Stigmatizing Situations Inventory

Questions	Items									
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. People make fun of me because of my weight.	29	16	17	4	3	0	1	0	1	0
2. People expect little from me because of my weight.	48	10	7	1	4	0	0	0	0	1
3. The people think that I have emotional emotional problems because of my weight.	41	12	9	3	2	0	1	2	1	0
4. People think I overeat or eat large amounts of food because of my weight	47	6	6	1	5	1	0	0	3	2
5. I can't find clothes in my size.	38	5	11	2	9	1	2	0	1	2
6. I feel like people stare at me because of my weight.	41	7	10	1	0	1	5	1	1	4
7. The doctor has recommended a diet, even though I visited him for a health problem unrelated to weight.	48	11	7	1	2	0	1	0	0	1
8. I've had a doctor who links any of my health problems to my weight.	52	6	7	0	4	0	1	0	0	1
9. I have been upset because a close relative has persistently told me to lose or gain weight.	21	16	17	3	7	1	4	0	0	2
10. A stranger has suggested that lose or gain weight.	26	15	21	2	4	1	0	0	0	2

Note: Response frequencies according to the instrument's scale (1 = Never; 10 = Daily). Prepared by the authors based on data obtained and processed in SPSS.

CONCLUSIONS

This study found that weight-based discrimination among college students is not a widespread phenomenon within the institutional context. The majority of

student body reported experiencing stigmatizing situations infrequently, suggesting that the university environment does not systematically reproduce overt practices of body discrimination.

However, the results show that weight-based stigma does occur in specific situations, primarily within the family and close social circles. This finding confirms that body discrimination does not operate exclusively within educational institutions but is linked to broader sociocultural constructs related to body image, health, and dominant aesthetic standards.

Furthermore, the identification of specific instances of recurring experiences indicates that, even though discrimination does not affect the majority of students, it can have significant impacts on those who experience it. Recent literature has noted that weight stigma acts as a psychosocial risk factor that can affect self-esteem, emotional well-being, and social participation (Tomiyama, 2021; Puhl & Lessard, 2021).

From an educational perspective, the findings underscore the importance of promoting institutional policies aimed at inclusion and respect for body diversity. In this regard, weight-based discrimination among college students is not a dominant issue, but it is a present phenomenon that requires preventive measures and ongoing analysis.

Although the university environment showed a low frequency of stigma, the persistence of comments within the family unit suggests that interventions should not be limited to the academic sphere. It is argued that stigma is a cross-contextual phenomenon in which the family acts as the primary transmitter of aesthetic norms, which aligns with the findings of Puhl & Lessard (2021) regarding the symbolic power of close relationships.

The low frequency reported by the majority (85%) could mask a “normalization” of microaggression. It is argued that, as it is not a dominant or generally violent practice, weight-based stigma risks being overlooked in student well-being policies, even though for the affected group it represents a critical psychosocial risk factor for their educational retention.

FUTURE WORK

The results obtained open up various lines of research that may contribute to a deeper understanding of weight-based discrimination in higher education. It is recommended to expand the sample size

and employ probabilistic designs to strengthen the external validity of the findings, as well as to develop longitudinal studies that allow for the analysis of how the phenomenon evolves throughout students' academic careers.

Likewise, it is pertinent to incorporate psychosocial variables such as self-esteem, emotional well-being, sense of institutional belonging, and support networks, which would allow for a shift from a descriptive analysis toward explanatory models of the phenomenon.

Similarly, it is suggested to complement the quantitative approach with qualitative methodologies that enable the exploration of students' subjective experiences, as well as to promote comparative studies among higher education institutions to identify common patterns and contextual particularities.

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Contributor to the preparation of Research	José Torres Medina
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Writing - Preparation of the original draft	Jesús Antonio Flores Zamorano
Writing - Review and editing	Anabell Cota Ramírez
Visualization	Jesús Antonio Flores Zamorano, Ernesto Alonso Álvarez Machado, Anabell Cota Ramírez, Viviana Nasheli Andrade Armenta, José Torres Medina
Supervision	Viviana Nasheli Andrade Armenta, José Torres Medina