Weight Bias has dramatically increased over the last 20 years and is as prevalent as bias based on race and gender. The media is a primary source of weight bias according to a review of weight-related content within newspapers, popular press books, television, and movies. Bias is perpetuated through messages identifying obesity as a health problem that is a function of failed personal responsibility which dieting can remediate. Media images of fat people are often stereotypic or dehumanizing. A past examination of introductory psychology textbooks revealed the need for the HAES paradigm. Our project provides an updated analysis of weight-related content in contemporary introductory psychology texts.

Methods

We conducted a content analysis on 21 introductory psychology textbooks published between 2012 and 2017. Interrater reliability ranged from .88 to 1.00 across content categories. Disagreements emerged, the four lab members discussed the content until reaching a consensus as to how to categorize it.

Table 1 indicates that the weight-related content in introductory psychology textbooks has increased over time, with “obesity” indexed in all but two of the textbooks examined.

Obesity and eating disorders appeared in the same chapter in 42.86% of the texts and had equivalent headings in 53.81% of the cases. Obesity appeared as a subheading beneath Eating Disorders in 14.29% of the cases. Two of the textbooks contained statements implying that obesity is an eating disorder.

The terms “obesity epidemic” and “war on obesity” appeared in 42.86% and 9.52% of the texts respectively. The financial costs of obesity were invoked in 28.57% of the texts while 33.33% of the texts described obesity as a “social disease.” The Social Psychology chapter of 28.57% of the texts mentioned weight bias while 38.10% of the texts mentioned weight bias in chapters other than those on Social Psychology.

Visual Content

The bar graph depicts the percentage of 36 photographs of fat people across texts that fell into each category. Females represented 66.67% of all persons depicted.

BMI charts (defined as those that provide a means of calculating one’s own BMI) appeared in 28.57% of the texts while BMI tables (defined as those that simply listed the name of each weight category and the BMI range associated with it) appeared in 14.29% of the texts.

Of the remaining 14 figures related to weight, 57.14% depicted increasing rates of obesity over time, and 14.30% depicted obesity rates by state.

The Social Psychology chapter of 28.57% of the texts mentioned weight bias while 38.10% of the texts mentioned weight bias in chapters other than those on Social Psychology.

Table 1. Percentage of Selected Terms by Subject Index and Table of Contents Headings Across Textbooks

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Index</th>
<th>Table of Contents Heading Across Textbooks</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>2017</th>
<th>2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Term</td>
<td>Table of Contents Heading Across Textbooks</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>2000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obesity</td>
<td>Table of Contents Heading Across Textbooks</td>
<td>90.48%</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>42.86%</td>
<td>20%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overweight</td>
<td>Table of Contents Heading Across Textbooks</td>
<td>14.29%</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>4.76%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fat</td>
<td>Table of Contents Heading Across Textbooks</td>
<td>23.81%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>4.76%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Categorization</td>
<td>Table of Contents Heading Across Textbooks</td>
<td>71.43%</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>9.52%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

We examined the figures within these chapters, categorizing them according to their theme.

Discussion and Conclusions

The coverage of weight-related content in introductory Psychology books has increased over the last two decades in concert with the American’s declaration of a “war on obesity.” In fact, many texts invoked this inflammatory terminology. Nearly half used the term “obesity epidemic.” This framing "bestows negative judgments on higher-weight individuals by promoting the view that they are ‘unhealthy and thus a burden to society’” (Tykla et al., 2014). Many texts cited the societal costs of obesity, portraying fat people as “irresponsible citizens who pose a threat to societal well-being and for whom weight harming is justified” (Walters & Gerber, 2016).

Many texts presented “obesity” as a social contagion, one with a heading, “The Perils of Connection,” that implied that people who socialize with fat people are at risk of becoming fat themselves. Furthermore, a number of texts conflated “obesity” with eating disorders, erroneously imposing psychopathology on fat people. Images of fat people were more often stigmatizing and dehumanizing, further fomenting weight bias.

As in previous content analyses of psychology textbooks, only a small number mentioned weight bias and no text presented an alternative weight-inclusive model of health. The one text that mentioned the fat acceptance movement did so in an overtly disparaging manner.

The results speak to the need to integrate fat pedagogy into introductory Psychology textbooks. This would entail inclusion of the HAES paradigm, along with data illustrating obesity paradoxes, i.e., BMI is a poor predictor of health and that people can be both fit and fat. Fat pedagogy would also increase coverage of weight bias, presenting this as a system of oppression akin to, and intersecting with, oppression based on other diverse identities.

Finally, texts could present more information on the fat acceptance movement and do so in a more balanced way. The impact of weight-related content in these textbooks should not be underestimated as APA reports that 1.5 million undergraduates complete an Introductory Psychology course yearly, underscoring the need to present accurate information about weight and health in ways that do not perpetuate bias.