



ASA NEWS

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Where One Lives Matters in the Relationship Between Obesity and Life Satisfaction

WASHINGTON, DC, May 27, 2014 — A new study suggests that how one compares weight-wise with others in his or her community plays a key role in determining how satisfied the person is with his or her life.

“The most interesting finding for us was that, in U.S. counties where obesity is particularly prevalent, being obese has very little negative effect on one’s life satisfaction,” said study co-author Philip M. Pendergast, a doctoral student in sociology at the University of Colorado-Boulder. “In addition, we found that being ‘normal weight’ has little benefit in counties where obesity is especially common. This illustrates the importance of looking like the people around you when it comes to satisfaction with life.”

Titled, “Obesity (Sometimes) Matters: The Importance of Context in the Relationship between Obesity and Life Satisfaction,” the study, which appears in the June issue of the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*, focuses on a sample of more than 1.3 million people from across the United States. As part of their study, Pendergast and co-author Tim Wadsworth, an associate professor in the department of sociology at the University of Colorado-Boulder, evaluated people’s life satisfaction in the context of the county in which they lived and then compared their findings across counties with varying rates of obesity.

“Where obesity is more common, there is less difference among obese, severely obese, and non-obese individuals’ life satisfaction, but where obesity is less common, the difference in life satisfaction between the obese (including the severely obese) and non-obese is greater,” said Pendergast. “In that light, obesity in and of itself, does not appear to be the main reason obese individuals tend to be less satisfied with their lives than their non-obese peers. Instead, it appears to be society’s response to or stigmatization of those that are different from what is seen as ‘normal’ that drives this relationship.”

According to the researchers, before accounting for where people live, severely obese men and women have 29 percent and 43 percent lower odds, respectively, than their non-obese counterparts of reporting that they are “very satisfied” with their lives. However, the story is very different among people in counties where obesity is common. Among men, about 79 percent of the gap in the probability of severely obese and non-obese individuals reporting that they are “very satisfied” with their lives is eliminated if one moves from a county in the 5th percentile for obesity in the U.S. (with an obesity rate of 24 percent) to a county in the 95th percentile (with a rate of 46 percent). In the same scenario among women, the gap is reduced by about 60 percent.

“Although women generally pay a higher emotional cost for being obese, the role of context in moderating the relationship between obesity status and life satisfaction appears to be similar for men and women,” Pendergast said.

Why do women typically pay a higher cost?

“Think about the advertising we see on television or in magazines — we are bombarded by images of thin women, and we are told that is the ideal,” said Pendergast, who noted that the study offers a potential explanation for the exponential increase in obesity in the United States over the past 30 years.

“Our findings demonstrate that where obesity is most prevalent, the difference in life satisfaction between the obese and non-obese is smaller for women and almost non-existent for men,” he said. “The same relationship is likely to exist over time and, as such, the emotional cost and advantage of obesity and non-

obesity, respectively, may be decreasing as the prevalence of obesity increases. If this is the case, then some of the motivation for remaining thin is lessening over time, perhaps offering further insight into why obesity prevalence has increased so dramatically in recent years.”

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About the American Sociological Association and the *Journal of Health and Social Behavior*

The American Sociological Association (www.asanet.org), founded in 1905, is a non-profit membership association dedicated to serving sociologists in their work, advancing sociology as a science and profession, and promoting the contributions to and use of sociology by society. The *Journal of Health and Social Behavior* is a quarterly, peer-reviewed journal of the ASA.

The research article described above is available by request for members of the media. For a copy of the full study, contact Daniel Fowler, ASA's Media Relations and Public Affairs Officer, at (202) 527-7885 or pubinfo@asanet.org.