Kaleidoscope: A Graduate Journal of Qualitative Communication Research

Volume 11 Article 4

2012

Struggling with the Freshman Fifteen: College Students' Recollections of Parents' Memorable Messages about Weight

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Struggling with the Freshman Fifteen: College Students' Recollections of Parents' Memorable Messages about Weight

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Considering the college years are a critical time in one's life for changes in diet and exercise behavior, and an increase in weight gain (Anderson, Shapiro, & Lundgren, 2003), this study explores the significant and impactful communication between college students and their parents during this transitional period. Using open-ended responses to an online questionnaire, we analyzed the memorable messages (Knapp, Stohl, & Reardon, 1981) that 222 college students received from their parents about overweight and obesity. Students' responses demonstrate that not only is weight a difficult topic to talk about, it is also a difficult issue for people to manage on an individual basis. Students gave examples of messages and conversations referencing their own and their parents' struggles with weight, and their responses illustrate the complex nature of these important communication episodes.

Keywords: Memorable Messages; Weight; Overweight; Obesity, Parent; Young Adult Children

Considering about two-thirds of the U. S. population is overweight and about one-third is obese (Ogden, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2012), issues of overweight and obesity are at the forefront of much of today's research and policy (see McKinnon, et al., 2009; Wang & Beydoun, 2007). One approach to understanding the "obesity epidemic" centers on identifying critical periods in an individual's life in which weight gain happens most frequently, and the transition from high school to college has been identified as one of these critical periods (Anderson, Shapiro, & Lundgren, 2003). Greater attention should be paid to college-aged youths and changes in their weight and weight-related behaviors because "this period of emerging adulthood may be an important, yet overlooked, age for establishing long-term health behavior patterns" (Nelson, Story, Larson, Neumark-Sztainer, & Lytle, 2008, p. 2205).

Whether college students gain weight, and to what extent, varies across studies; one study reports that 25% of college freshman gain at least five pounds in their first semester (Anderson et al., 2003), while another finds

Charee M. Thompson and Sarah T. Zaitchik are both Ph.D. students at the University of Texas at Austin. They would like to thank Dr. Sally Planalp for her early thoughts and guidance on this project, and the editors of *Kaleidoscope* for their thoughtful suggestions in preparing this piece for print.

that percentage to be as high as 82% (Lloyd-Richardson, Bailey, Fava, & Wing, 2009). Lloyd-Richardson et al. (2009) found over 70% of college freshman gain an average of 7.7 pounds by the end of the first year, and many students continue to gain weight into their sophomore year. It is important to note, however, that some studies find that a majority of students do not gain any weight, and for many, weight stabilizes after the first semester (e.g., Anderson et al., 2003).

These questions—whether students gain weight and to what degree—are important, but they do not consider *how* students attempt to manage their weight. While many jokingly refer to weight gain during this period as the "Freshman 15," it can be a remarkably distressing experience (Delinsky & Wilson, 2008), and research suggests the context in which college students may struggle to maintain their weight or reach their weight-related goals is complex. In addition to being a unique period of increased autonomy and decision-making, college students also develop a sense of self-identity during this transition (Nelson et al., 2008). Of course, part of this identity development involves coming to terms with who one is and wants to be health-wise, which includes managing motivations for a certain appearance (Furia, Lee, Strother, & Huang, 2009) and establishing health behaviors that may endure over the lifetime (Nelson et al., 2008).

Moreover, this transition period is marked by many changes in diet and exercise behavior: namely, decreases in physical activity (and conversely, increases in sedentary behavior), declines in quality-food intake, and increases in high-fat food and alcohol consumption (for a review, see Nelson et al., 2008). First-year college students engage in more dietary restraint and restrained eating independent of weight gain (Delinsky & Wilson, 2008). Though the majority of college students do not gain the "Freshman 15" (Anderson et al., 2003; Delinsky & Wilson, 2008), many feel they are more overweight than they actually are (Delinsky & Wilson, 2008).

While the majority of weight-related literature focuses on the impact of the media (e.g., Campo & Mastin, 2007; Shugart, 2011), recent research has noted the importance of focusing on the social, more relational aspects of college students' weight-related experiences (Stice, Maxfield, & Wells, 2003). College students report family members being one of the most important sources of nutrition knowledge (Davy, Benes, & Driskell, 2006), and young adults who receive confirming health communication (e.g., listening, acknowledging feelings) from a family member report a greater desire to eat healthy foods and feel that physical activity is important in preventing future health problems (Baiocchi-Wagner & Talley, 2012). Specifically, parents can influence their children's weight-related behaviors and attitudes through direct communication to the child and indirect behavior modeling (Haines, Neumark-Sztainer, Hannan, & Robinson-O'Brien, 2008). Concerning direct communication, when fathers communicate in a way college students perceive to stress parental power

and control, male and female students reports engaging in more maladaptive eating (e.g., fasting, vomiting, worrying about weight; Miller-Day & Marks, 2006). Also, perceiving mothers as supportive is a protective factor against psychosocial risk (e.g., self-esteem, socialization, and educational success) in both normal and obese older adolescents (Valtolina & Marta, 1998). Concerning indirect influence, children are astutely aware of their parents' weight behaviors and attitudes; during interviews, Haworth-Hoeppner's (2000) participants discussed how their parents always seemed to be on a diet. One woman even attributed her anorexia to her mother's constant dieting (Haworth-Hoeppner, 2000, p. 221).

Ultimately, while a large body of literature has explored the links between parental communication and student weight behaviors and attitudes, our exploration reveals that scholars still know very little about what parents actually *say* to their college-aged children about weight. We were interested in exploring the qualitative—rather than the quantitative—experience of managing one's weight during this critical period and what communication, if any, happens between parents and their college-aged children. We utilize Knapp, Stohl, and Reardon's (1991) memorable messages as a framework for exploring the impactful messages college students recall receiving from parents.

Memorable Messages

Memorable messages are those interpersonal messages that "are reported to be remembered for a long time and to have a profound impact on a person's life" (Knapp et al., 1981, p. 27). Memorable messages have several features that also make them "memorable." First, memorable messages often come from someone who is older and of higher status (Knapp et al., 1981), which we identify as parents in this study. As aforementioned, parents are considered to have the strongest influence on children's eating behaviors and proclivity to gain weight.

Second, memorable messages are "often brief oral injunctions that prescribe rules of conduct for solving a personal problem" (Knapp et al., 1981, p. 36). Knapp et al. (1981) found that most memorable messages are rule-based and prescribe behavior to achieve or avoid some outcome. Citing Shimanoff (1980), they define a rule as "a followable prescription that indicates what behavior is obligated, preferred, or prohibited in certain contexts" (p. 28). In the context of weight, we might expect parents' messages to their children to prescribe behaviors to avoid being overweight and obese. These would be more explicit directives, such as "Exercise more" and "You should eat smaller portions," for example. Also, we may expect that parents' messages will reveal their attitudes toward overweight and obesity that imply a rule. For example, if a parent tells their child, "Obese people have health problems," the child may perceive this message to be a warning, and the implied rule or injunction would be, "If you do not want to have health problems, do not become obese."

Last, memorable messages are particularly salient when their content reflects the issues one is facing at the time in their life. Individuals are also more receptive to these messages "during life crises involving one's self-concept or relationships with others" (Knapp et al., 1981, p. 35). We believe that memorable messages about weight from parents are particularly salient to young adults in college who are adjusting to a new environment while learning to manage their weight. We were interested not only in whether these messages were prominent, but also in the possible impact students say they have.

This study uses memorable messages as a framework because memorable messages are a powerful heuristic tool for understanding beliefs on individual, relational, and societal levels. As Knapp et al. state, "Memorable messages are a rich source of information about ourselves, our society, and our ways of communication" (1981, p. 40). By asking young adults what their parents say about overweight and obesity, we gain insight into how they communicate about the issue and the implications of talk about this health issue.

From our review of the literature, we found little qualitative research concerning the specific communication between parents and children during the critical period of transitioning to college (though Haworth-Hoeppner, 2000, is a notable exception). Thus, we wanted to know how parents talk about overweight and obesity generally, and also more specifically with regard to their own weight and their college-aged children's weight. To better understand the weight-related communication in this important relationship during this critical time, we proposed the following research questions:

RQ1: What do college students report their parents say about overweight/obesity in general?

RQ2: What do college students report their parents say about parents' own weight?

RQ3: What do college students report their parents say to them about their weight?

Method

Participants and Procedures

For this study, we recruited 222 participants from communication courses at a large southwestern university and offered them extra credit for completing an online questionnaire.[1] At the onset of the study, participants were asked to choose one parent with whom they have had the most conversations about weight. They were also offered the option of answering questions about a primary caregiver if a parent was not an appropriate choice (e.g., they were raised by a grandparent). Within the survey, college students were first asked to report demographic information, including their current body

weight characteristics (e.g., height and weight). Students were then asked to answer a series of open-ended questions concerning how their parent (or other parental figure) talks about weight issues. Specifically, the survey told students, "We are interested in memorable messages your parent has said to you about these issues in general." First, "What, if anything, does your parent say to you about overweight/obesity?" Then, students were prompted to think about how their parent talks about their own weight and body type. Students were prompted to then "give as many examples of what your parent has said about his/her own weight and body type." Last, students were asked to report what messages their parent had said to them regarding the adult child's weight. Since the data were collected using an online questionnaire, we gave each of the students pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

Coding and Thematic Analysis

Our first cycle of coding included establishing units of analysis and identifying the major ideas and themes that emerged organically, with as many or as few themes reflected in the data. Since our data came from multiple students responding to a survey, and the study was an exploratory investigation to gather major themes from memorable messages about weight, overweight, and obesity from parents to college students, we used structural coding (MacQueen, McLellan-Lemal, Bartholow, & Milstein, 2008; Namey, Guest, Thairu, & Johnson, 2008). This involved identifying the major themes that existed broadly in parents' reported talk about weight with college students. Structural coding is best used when the data is framed and driven by a specific topic and research questions, as was our inquiry, without imposing a specific direction for the themes.

Having established major themes in our first cycle of coding, the second cycle established more specific subthemes and also allowed us to prioritize which themes were the most salient to the students themselves. It was also at this point that we began applying the theoretical lens of memorable messages (Knapp et al., 1981). We conducted a thematic analysis as defined by Auerbach and Silverstein (2003) and Boyatzis (1998), wherein iconic statements and morals from participant recollections and stories are discerned during data collection and initial analysis. These emergent pieces of data are sorted and organized into themes. The subsequent steps of analysis included articulating overarching threads from the themes that created coherent narratives of talk surrounding weight. A theme (Rubin & Rubin, 1995) is a unit of analysis which captures and unifies the basis of the experience (in this case the experience of receiving a memorable message from a parent about weight) into a meaningful whole (DeSantis & Ugarriza, 2000). Thematic analysis allowed us to identify common elements from the highly personal and individualized experience of parent-child talk about weight to contribute to the larger conversation in the field.

Results

Parents' Memorable Messages about Weight

Research question one asked, "What do college students report their parents say about overweight/obesity in general?" Some college students reported their parent does not talk about weight because weight is not a significant problem for their family. Melanie explained, "[My parent says] nothing. No one in my immediate family has weight issues." John said that weight has never been a topic of discussion, yet there was an awareness of overweight issues in the family: "We never really talked about it. Most of my family is pretty slim. I guess we all recognize it's a problem in society though." Even students who reported their parent never discussed weight, overweight, or obesity acknowledged that these are significant issues which are relevant in the family culture.

For college students whose parents do talk about weight, many indicated a general disapproval of overweight/obesity. Some "just feel sorry for those poor people," like Jessica's parent. Other parents, such as Rachel's, had less sympathetic viewpoints on the issue: "When I was little...my mom and I would wait in the car and play the 'fat people game.' This entailed pointing at all the fat people and talking about them." Rachel also reported that as a child "it was really funny," but over the years the "fat people game" became less amusing to her, especially "now that obesity is such a huge problem" in our society.

More specifically, parents' memorable messages were characterized by some common themes, including the use of rule-based messages and discussions of control. Of the messages about weight, about half were rule-based. Of these, some were to engage (e.g., "do this"), some were to avoid (e.g., "don't do this"), and some were a mix of both. Some of these prescriptive messages were strictly to engage, like this memorable message reported by Kim: "[My parents say] watch your weight and what you eat since diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol run in the family." She also reported; "My mom tells me to eat healthy and take pride in my body." Other messages included directives to work out, make healthy decisions about what and how to eat, continue to give effort and attention to weight management, and enjoy the body and health the student currently has.

Ruled-based memorable messages based on avoidance indicated what the student should not do. These messages were often preventative, warning that weight is harder to take off and metabolism slows down as you age. Kevin recalled a memorable message about what not to do: "You don't have to eat all of the food on your plate, [especially] at a restaurant." Eduardo was told, "Don't let your body fall that far apart" because he had gained the "freshman 15." Some messages included prescriptions for what to do as well as what not to do. These messages often included a checklist of behavioral

directives, such as the one Jen received: "Don't eat too much. Exercise. Be healthy. Drink water." Sean received a similar message: "Stop eating sweets and eat more veggies. Start working out again like you used to work out, and stop losing control over your eating." Parents gave behavioral directives to their college-aged children that included behaviors to enact, as well as to avoid, in order to manage weight and prevent becoming overweight/obese.

A majority of messages from parents indicated an internal locus of control in regards to weight and health. Ruby said, "[My father] will tell me if he thinks I have lost or gained weight. He will also regularly ask me if I have gone to the gym or what I ate that day to control my weight." This same parent indicated "that [being overweight] is unhealthy and we should try our best to eat healthy and work out for our own health benefit." Though not common, some parents gave messages that indicated an external locus of control. When asked what his parent has said about overweight and obesity, Bryan reported that his mother said, "It was out of the control of the individual. Obesity is a sickness." While most messages indicated that the college student had control of his or her weight, some messages from parents were contradictory. Olivia said that her mother told her "[being overweight/obese] shows that something is wrong with someone psychologically. You should strive to be your best physically. It's up to you." Her mother also said, "I have wide hips, so you having wide hips. It is my fault," indicating that Olivia's weight and appearance are both her responsibility, yet also a result of genetics. Overall, these findings suggest that, when speaking more generally about overweight and obesity, most parents are sending the message that weight and appearance is something individuals can and should control, and that their child can manage his or her weight if they follow parents' advice. At the same time, parents' comments suggest that for some individuals in society, weight is not something they can manage, generally due to mental health reasons. This is captured in Laurie's description of her father: "He has a lot of emotional issues and his relationship with food is his way of coping."

When addressing our first research question, "What do college students report their parents say about overweight/obesity in general?", we found that many students recalled at least one memorable message from their parent about weight, and that most of these messages indicated a negative attitude towards overweight. Those who did not recall any memorable messages said this is because weight is not a problem within their family. Messages tended to focus on either health or appearance, and many included rule-based directives to engage in or avoid certain health behaviors.

Parents' Memorable Messages about Their Own Weight

Research question two asked, "What do college students report their parents say about parents' own weight?" Reponses indicate that college students report being acutely aware of their parents' struggles with weight.

Students reported that parents reflected on what weight management was like when they were their child's age, and how it is more difficult to manage or lose weight at their current age. As described below, parents cited lack of time, stress, work, and age as obstacles to maintaining their desired weight.

College students in this study reported that their parents make them privy to their struggles with weight control. Judy's mother "constantly talks about how unhappy she is with her body. She is a petite woman who is carrying extra weight, so she says she feels weighed down." As with many other similar accounts, parents shared in detail what they dislike about their own appearance. Judy said her mother "talks about how she hates her flabby arms, especially her triceps. Also, she can't stand her 'turkey chin' as she calls it." Weight loss and management appear to be long-running themes in family conversation, as Judy recalled: "I just can remember her never really liking her body."

College students reported in detail their parents' complaints about their own bodies. Interestingly, like many students in this study, Arthur reported that his father says nothing about weight, yet when he elaborated, Arthur did report his father saying he is "comfortable with his [own] weight" and that "he loves to eat and enjoy himself, so he chooses to do so" without focusing on diets or regimented eating plans. Thus, even though some college students believe their parent says nothing about weight, parents actually do talk about it; it seems that college students felt they were being asked to recall only the negative comments their parents have made. Few college students reported parents being happy or satisfied with their own weight or appearance. A far more common theme was reflected in the report from Sophie, whose parent said, "I can't believe I let myself get back here. None of my clothes fit anymore. I'm just not happy with the way I look." Further, Jared described:

> My mom thinks she is in good shape and looks really good. She thinks she looks 20 years younger than she actually is. But she is underweight and has no muscle. She thinks she looks good, but the main reason she is skinny is because she doesn't eat much. I don't know if this is because she just genuinely isn't hungry much or if because she is afraid of gaining weight.

As these recollections suggest, not only do students seem to be acutely aware of their parents' struggles with body satisfaction and weight management—some even said their parent is "obsessed" with his or her own weight—they are also concerned about their parents' beliefs and behaviors.

Another common theme in parents' messages was their admonishment to their college-aged children to appreciate the metabolism and good health of youth. Kelly was told by her mother, "When I was your age I could eat anything and it didn't matter, but one day your metabolism will change in your late thirties and you won't be able to eat the same anymore." The

implicit message is that Kelly's weight and appearance is easier to manage at her younger age. Often these messages are complimentary to the student, with a sense of envy. About her mother, Beth recalled, "She wishes she was young again with my body." There is a sense of wistfulness in such messages, encouraging college students to enjoy the short-lived peak of health that youth offers. Parents also offered advice to actively build positive health habits in order to avoid a similar fate of gaining weight with age; about his father, Mike reported, "He insists that I exercise everyday and eat right because he was healthy when he was young." The advice ranges from general habits like getting exercise to more specific suggestions. Mike relayed one such advice episode: "Sometimes when we go out to eat and he orders dessert he doesn't want me to." The reason is "because I am young and athletic and need to stay fit and not [be] an old guy like him."

College students reported that parents often attribute their struggles with weight to factors outside of their control, such as their age, work, stress, and injury. Dave said, "My mother talks about how she needs to work out more often, but always complains about the lack of time." The competing demands of career and family leave parents little extra time to devote to good health practices such as exercise and nutrition. The multiple competing demands that parents face can leave them feeling exhausted and overwhelmed, and negative opinions about their own appearance can bring them down. Jacob recalled his mother admitting that stress and depression are behind her weight loss: "My depression [is] making me lose a lot of weight. I'm just not that hungry. I haven't eaten all day because I've been so busy." Abby indicated that her mother "blames my brother (aka giving birth)" for her weight gain. "She is concerned about it but doesn't really make an effort to do anything," perhaps due to lack of time and energy as with so many other parents.

In addressing our second research question, we explored what parents said about their own weight to their college-aged children, as reported by students. Students reported that they were very much aware of their parents' struggles with weight, and a common memorable message from parents to students included warnings to enjoy and protect their current physique, as age and other life events like having children and a career make keeping fit more difficult.

Parents' Memorable Messages about Adult Children's Weight

Research question three asked, "What do college students report their parents say to them about their weight?" Parent's messages conveyed a general disapproval of overweight. College students were highly sensitive to their parents' messages about students' own weight, perhaps because many college students experience fluctuations in their weight and appearance. Students described their parents' comments coming from a variety of motivations, including concern for students' health, care, and disapproval. Students described

feeling tremendous pressure to gain their parents' approval, and a crushing sense of hurt when they are unable to maintain an acceptable weight.

College students were highly sensitive to their parents' comments about their weight. When her mother saw her in a bathing suit, Diane recalled: "[My mother] pointed out that I could exercise more." Diane also said, "[I] got really upset and told her that she was going to give me a complex about my body if she continued to make comments like that." The suggestion from her mother that implied she was not a desirable weight was enough for her to explicitly threaten an unhappy, insecure relationship with her own body. Threats of such serious outcomes are not unreasonable. Diane shared that her sister is struggling with "underweight issues right now." Being confronted with the negative outcomes of body dissatisfaction led Diane's mother to "recognize that body image issues are a very real thing," and as a result she has begun to give more encouraging messages to both daughters about their health behaviors.

As we have previously mentioned, research indicates many college students experience fluctuations in their weight, inviting communication about health, weight, and appearance with their parents. Many college students reported memorable messages from their parents about recent weight changes, whether they gained or lost weight. For example, Tim said, "My mom told me that I am putting on weight since I started college. She says that I look more muscular and fit." Here, the idea of weight gain here is a positive one. Some inquiries about weight gain while at college are not as positive, as with Alli: "My mom will ask when I come home from college if I have gained or lost weight or if I have weighed myself lately. When she points out slight weight gain I am saddened, but I know it is because she is concerned for my health." Messages about weight changes were often seen as a hint that the student should return to their former weight and are believed by students to generally come from a place of concern.

Since many memorable messages had a negative connotation, children feel that they cannot please their parents. Students feel their parents are disappointed or disapproving of them when they hear inquiries about and prompts to change their weight. Some students even feel they must go to extremes in order to achieve their weight goal in order to win their parents' approval, such as Lizzy:

> My dad will definitely let me know when I'm gaining weight. It makes me feel extremely self-conscious and aware of how I look. I have to work so hard in school to garner just a little bit of praise from him, but all I have to do is drop ten pounds and he is constantly telling me how nice and slim I look and how proud he is of me. It makes me want to go to the extremes to lose weight.

Dawn's mother believed that Dawn would be happier with herself if she lost five pounds, when in fact Dawn believed that it is her mother who is unhappy with Dawn's weight. Dawn said, "She thinks I would be happier

if I lost 5 pounds, even though I think SHE would be happier if I lost five pounds." Many students described an element of pressure to live up to parents' ideals.

Linda also described pressure to lose the exact same five-pound discrepancy between her weight and what her mother would like her to weigh. She went on to describe how "Once when I was sick, I lost 7 pounds in a week and I was complaining to her because I kept feeling like I was going to faint, and she was like 'Oh, but that's good you lost weight!' That wasn't the intention of my complaint." Children described feeling pressured by parents to lose or manage their weight, with parents seeming to be more concerned about students' weight than about their feelings or overall health.

Messages about weight from parents evoked a variety of emotions from college students. Anne described the myriad of responses she has had to memorable messages from her parent: "'Are you eating?' doesn't really bother me. 'Do you have an eating disorder?' makes me feel angry and upset. 'You are way too thin' makes me feel annoyed. 'You look healthy' makes me feel happy.'" Messages that conveyed disapproval or a desire for change left her feeling unhappy, angry, and agitated, while messages of acceptance and approval left her feeling positive. When Lisa's father asked about her weight change, she understood it as an act of love: "It made me feel like he cared about me and was concerned and I appreciated them saying something." Messages about weight are not inherently upsetting, but when they are communicated in a manner that children perceive as negative or critical rather than supportive, they can be deeply hurtful.

College students reported parents' passive-aggressive approaches to communicating about weight that were often unpleasant for the student. Kelly explained a memorable message from her father: "He tends to get his thoughts across by being manipulative or passive aggressive. He used to guilt me about not accompanying him to the gym through his tone of voice when responding." While his words were not hurtful, his tone implied judgment. She continued, "I felt like he thought I was getting overweight, which made me embarrassed and angry." Such indirect approaches to conveying attitudes about weight and appearance were rarely reported as pleasant.

Alli reported feeling "super-self-conscious" as a result of her mother's messages about her weight. She described her frustration at her mother's emphasis on appearance and weight while she was going through an emotionally rocky time: "I feel angry and upset because I don't believe my weight influences how I feel, I believe how I feel influences my weight." Her mother asked her, "Don't you want to stay in shape for as long as possible?" To Alli, this was another way of saying that she is less talented than slimmer friends, and Allie felt "everyone is thinking I'm fat." Regardless of what her mother's intentions were behind this message, it made Alli "feel like shit..." about herself. Messages about weight have the potential to build someone up or tear him or her down.

Research question three asked what college-aged children report their parents say about the student's weight. Students reported that parents were vocal about students' fluctuations in weight, and students often had strong emotional reactions to those messages. Students indicated that the perceived motivation behind the message played a large role in whether comments about weight were considered constructive or critical.

Discussion

This study sought to explore the memorable messages from parents to their college-aged children about weight, overweight, and obesity. We asked college students to report the memorable messages they have received from a parent about overweight and obesity in general, about the parent's weight, and about their own weight. College students gave examples of messages and conversations referencing their own and their parents' struggles with weight, and their responses illustrate the complex nature (i.e., emotions, interpretations of compliments versus criticism) of these important communication episodes. We draw two general conclusions about the memorable messages in this study: first, parents' messages reflect larger cultural attitudes about weight; second, college students report parents' messages are particularly salient and influential.

First, parents' messages reflect the generally negative views of the overweight and obese in society. A great deal of research on narratives of weight examines cultural artifacts, such as television shows (e.g., Shugart, 2011) and magazines (e.g., Campo & Mastin, 2007). This study contributes to the literature by showing that attitudes about weight are also reflected in more micro-level interactions—here, communication between college students and their parents. Specifically, memorable messages from parents reflect the stigma associated with being overweight that is prevalent in society at large and frequently cited in the literature (e.g., Feldman, Feldman, & Goodman, 1988; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988). Several studies have demonstrated that people associate the following negative attributions with people who are perceived to be overweight: laziness, poor self-esteem, lower attractiveness, and less intellectual competence (see Allon, 1982; DeJong, 1980; Harris, 1990; Hebl & Heatherton, 1998). Blaine, DiBlasi, and Connor (2002) reasoned that this stigmatization is a kind of cultural punishment for violating social norms of weight and appearance. As a result, we (society) cruelly make fun of the obese, exclude them from public functions, and avoid being near them (Bordo, 1993). In this study, Rachel's description of the "fat people game" she once played with her mother exemplifies the "disgust" (Bordo, 1993, p. 202) we as a society feel toward those who are perceived to overweight or obese.

Interestingly, while parents' messages more often than not reflected the belief that weight was in the control of the individual, some attributed their own weight issues to causes that were outside of their own control, such as

age, having children, and a lack of exercise (due to the large amount of time spent at one's place of employment). Where parents attribute the cause of overweight and obesity is important; if parents are the primary sources of their children's eating beliefs and behaviors (Birch & Fisher, 1995; Gable & Lutz, 2000), they may be teaching their children to attribute their weight—now and into the future—to internal or external causes. Those who attribute weight to external causes tend to lose less weight and have more trouble maintaining weight loss than those who see their weight as internal (Elfhag & Rossner, 2005; Jeffrey, 1974). At the same time, attributing weight to internal causes can put too much pressure on individuals to manage their weight, especially when their weight may not be as controllable due to other health issues. Indeed, research has shown that pressure from parents to lose weight, as an indication that weight is an individual's responsibility and/or controllable, is linked with adolescents' negative emotions and resistant behaviors (Lessard, Greenberger, & Chen, 2010). In this study, some parents' views of control were contradictory (both internal and external), pointing to the complex nature of ascribing responsibility for one's weight management.

At the same time, parents' attributions of locus of control are interesting because they are paradigmatic of our societal beliefs that being overweight and obese are both a responsibility of the individual (Campo & Mastin, 2007), as well as a symptom of that person's "emotional dysfunction" (Shugart, 2011). Maintaining a socially acceptable weight (i.e., neither too thin nor too overweight; Bordo, 1993) is both the cause and effect of an individual's desires to "overcome all physical obstacles, push oneself to an extreme in pursuit of one's goals," as well as to experience the "thrill of being in total charge of the shape of one's body" (Bordo, 1993, p. 152). In this study, parents' memorable messages suggest that their children can and should take control of their bodies as a means to reach a physical ideal. Moreover, when parents such as Bryan's say that obesity is a "sickness," they are suggesting that being overweight or obese is "the physical manifestation of emotional pain or confusion … and overconsumption of food has been used to 'fill the hole' left by unaddressed emotional needs" (Shugart, 2011, p. 40). Advice for achieving or maintaining a healthy weight and a fit physique given by mainstream magazines exemplifies these two beliefs: of the 60 strategies identified in a content analysis by Campo and Mastin (2007), 83.3% were individually-focused, with a majority suggesting behavior changes (e.g., don't skip meals, drink more water), and some advising changes in the person (e.g., self-acceptance, professional counseling/therapy). Perhaps not surprising, then, is the fact that parents' memorable messages appeared with roughly the same frequencies in our study; a great deal of parents' messages were rule-based and focused on individual control.

While parents' messages give students directives to be an appropriate weight—by taking control and simply avoiding the "bad" (food) and doing the "good" (restraint, exercise) health behaviors—their communication

hints at an imminent and inevitable weight gain. Parents tell their college-aged children to enjoy their youth and metabolism, and to take preventative measures now so as to not be overweight when they are older. Parents' lamentations about their weight gain and body appearance bring to mind Bordo's (1993) astute observation that as a society "we work on keeping our bodies as smooth and muscular and elastic at forty as they were at eighteen" (p. 153).

In this study, it is clear that parents often shared their struggles with weight with their college-aged children, and that children were also sensitive about their weight. Parents' talk about their own weight illustrates how individuals struggle with weight-related issues throughout their life. Also, considering most students who participated in our study had average body mass index (BMI), college students' interpretations seem to suggest individuals of all weights experience some degree of (or are at least aware of) pressure to fit an ideal, as well as insecurity and disappointment with their bodies. Together, it seems that being a weight that is "just right" is difficult for parents and their children to attain, let alone agree upon a definition. Our findings are similar to extant research that suggests individuals are more likely to blame themselves for failure when it occurs in an area that has social disapproval, such as overweight (Jeffery, French, & Schmid, 1990). Some parents' messages point to our society's endless pursuit of the body ideal; their warnings and complaints represent our preoccupation with "correcting" our bodies, and their messages relay the feelings of "defeat, worthlessness, and loss of hope" that accompany failure to do so (Bordo, 1993, p. 202). As Bordo (1993) explains, in our impulse-driven, instantly-gratified consumer culture "self-management … becomes more elusive as it becomes more pressing" (p. 202).

Moreover, when asked to report what their parent has said about overweight or obesity, some college students reported nothing and said it was because "it is not a problem in our family." This is interesting for two reasons. First, some college students reported that their parent says nothing, but then proceeded to give examples of what their parent does say about weight. Often, these examples were positive in nature (e.g., compliments), suggesting that individuals assume communication about weight is *negative* communication about weight. This is consistent with previous literature highlighting the prevalence and normative nature of "fat talk" (typically talking negatively about one's body; Nichter, 2000), which both men and women report hearing more than self-accepting or positive talk (Payne, Martz, Tompkins, Petroff, & Farrow, 2011). Second, what is often not present in the data is just as interesting as what is, for we considered the reported absence of communication in families about weight to have implications on an individual, relational, and societal level. If people are only talking about overweight and obesity when it is an issue, then they may not consider themselves to be at risk for myriad of health, economic, psychological, and social consequences of being overweight or obese (see Wang, Beydoun,

Liang, Caballero, & Kumanyika, 2008, for a review) until it is too late. And, even though overweight or obesity are not issues in some of these families *now,* scholars argue that even normal-weight individuals are at risk of gaining weight if they do not take the preventative measures and consciously manage their weight (Peters, Wyatt, Donahoo, & Hill, 2002).

Limitations and Future Directions

Because college is a time of transition for young adults in many ways, including fluctuations in health behaviors and weight, parents are an important source of information and validation. Memorable messages offered a useful framework for unpacking these complex communication episodes between college students and their parents and reflect attitudes towards weight at many levels, including the personal and societal. Further, parents' messages and students' interpretations demonstrate that not only is weight a difficult topic to talk about, but it is also a difficult issue for people to manage on an individual basis. Recollections demonstrate the powerful impact this dyadic communication has and highlights that what is said, as well as how it is communicated, matters. Many college students received messages from their parents showing concern because the child had gained weight while in college, but other students responded to these similar messages as criticisms. For some, having their mothers tell them that they had gained five pounds was devastating; however, others interpreted a comment about weight gain to come from a place of love and support.

While this study provides insight into the memorable messages college students recall from their parents, it faces several limitations. First, due to the exploratory nature of the data, we cannot make claims or draw inferences as to how these messages impact college students' weight-related attitudes or behaviors. Thus, a possible next step for research is to more systematically analyze the impact of memorable messages from parents by including those consequences mentioned by the college students in this study. Are certain memorable messages related to disordered eating? Self-esteem? Perceptions of body image? Also, because we focused on children's recollections and interpretations only for this particular project, it would be interesting for a future study to explore the possibly consistent and divergent nature of both parents' and students' perceptions of each other's memorable messages.

Further, while the purpose of this study was to understand the content and meaning attributed to parents' memorable messages, an important next step is to contextualize these interactions and provide nuance by considering important factors that influence these interactions. While outside the scope of this study, it is important to understand possible gender differences in the memorable messages received from parents, as research does suggest that men and women experience weight-related issues differently (e.g., Furia et al., 2009; Stice et al., 2003). Future research should explore how parents differentially communicate to their daughters versus their sons about weight

and weight-related issues, as well as investigate the influence of other important weight-related factors (weight of parent, race of the parents and children, family socioeconomic status), as these factors are important to discussions of weight as well (see Bordo, 1993; Shugart, 2011).

Conclusion

This study sought to identify the memorable messages college students recall receiving from their parents about weight. Results indicated that parents are an important source of approval and criticism for students, and many memorable messages surrounding this complex and sensitive topic could be contradictory and emotionally upsetting. At the same time, students often reported feeling their parent had the best intentions when making comments about their weight. Also, many students recognize that their parents also struggle with weight-related issues, including body dissatisfaction, diet, and exercise. It is important for us to pursue further research into the talk about weight, overweight, and obesity in families, as parents and children have the ability to influence each other's weight-related beliefs and behaviors.

Notes

1 Sixty-eight percent of the sample was female and 32% was male. On average, students were 21.32 years of age. The most frequently reported ethnicity was Caucasian (68%), followed by Hispanic (14.8%), Asian American (7.7%), African America (5.4%), and other (3.6%; students could write in their preferred identification). Institutional Review Board approval from the University of Texas at Austin Office of Research Support was obtained before surveying participants.

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