Coping Against Weight-Related Teasing among Adolescents Perceived to be Overweight or Obese in Urban Physical Education

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The purpose of this study was to examine coping against weight-related teasing among adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese in urban physical education. Forty-seven students perceived to be overweight or obese from a large urban school district were interviewed. Trustworthiness of data analysis was established by using a member-checking procedure, focus group interview, and peer debriefing throughout the research process. The results indicated that adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese used self-protection, compensation, confrontation, seeking social support, avoidance/psychological disengagement, losing weight and stress reduction strategies to cope against weight-related teasing. Adolescents used multiple strategies under different mechanisms to cope, and the strategies they chose were dependent on the situation.

Keywords: weight stigma; obesity; adolescents; coping

Due to their body weight and size, individuals who are overweight or obese are in general stigmatized as being stupid, unmotivated/lazy, bad, ugly, or physically unattractive (Cramer & Steinwert, 1998; Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Tiggemann & Wilson-Barrett, 1998). As a result, individuals perceived to be overweight or obese are often teased and targeted for rumors and lies (e.g., Janssen, Craig, Boyce, & Pickett, 2004; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002; Strauss & Pollack, 2003). The weight-related teasing can have an adverse effect on psychological well-being and emotional development of students (Morgan, Tanofsky-Kraft, Wilfley, & Yanovski, 2002; Puhl & Brownell, 2003). Weight-related stigma or teasing is related to low levels of self-esteem, low body satisfaction, low school performance, and high levels of depressive symptoms (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2003; Mellin, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Ireland, & Resnick, 2002; Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002).

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The literature has also reported that students perceived to be overweight or obese are teased in physical activity (Pierce & Wardle, 1997) and physical education (PE) settings (Bauer et al., 2004; Fox & Edmunds, 2000; Li & Rukavina, in press; Trout & Graber, 2009). For example, Fox and Edmunds (2000) reported that students perceived to be obese in PE in the United Kingdom often experienced name-calling or teasing by their peer. Bauer et al. (2004), in the United States, also reported that students perceived to be overweight or obese were teased because they displayed deficiency in their skills or ability and they perceived weight-related teasing as a major barrier for them to become fully engaged in PE. More recently, Li and Rukavina (in press) conducted semistructured interviews on 47 adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese from a large urban school district to investigate the nature, occurring contexts, and psychological implications of weight-related teasing in PE. The findings showed that majority of adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese experienced many different types of teasing, which occurred in many different contexts and situations in PE, such as locker rooms, “waiting around” time, and various instructional contexts. As a result of teasing, students perceived to be overweight or obese felt hurt, experienced discomfort, had heightened sensitivity to others comments, and exhibited learned helplessness in PE (Curtis, 2008; Li & Rukavina, in press; Trout & Graber, 2009).

As a result of teasing in physical activity settings, vulnerable individuals can withdraw from peer groups, internalize that being overweight is a disadvantage, avoid physical activity, and gravitate toward unhealthy means of coping (e.g., binge eating or television) and experience increased weight gain (Hayden-Wade, et al., 2005). Overtime these individuals can become resistant to physical activity interventions (Bosch, Stradmeijer, & Seidell, 2004).

Not every student perceived to be overweight or obese who is teased, however, experiences psychological and emotional problems. Based on the self-reported survey data (Faith et al., 2002; Mellin et al., 2002), coping mechanisms and other variables as well (i.e., family ties and social activities such as sports and club activities) can potentially mediate or moderate the adverse effects of weight stigmatization or teasing on individuals perceived to be overweight or obese.

According to theory of stress and coping, cognitive appraisal and coping are two critical mediators of stressful events and immediate and long-range outcomes (e.g., Folkman, Lazarus, Dunkel-Schetter, DeLongis, & Gruen, 1986). Cognitive appraisal is a process through which an individual makes judgments about whether a particular event is relevant to his or her well-being and in what ways if it does so. Cognitive appraisal consists of two components: Primary appraisal and secondary appraisal. In primary appraisal, one evaluates whether he or she has anything at stake in a given situation. In secondary appraisal, one makes judgments about what if anything he or she can do to overcome or prevent the possibility of harm or loss or to improve the possibility of mastery or benefit. Primary and secondary appraisals are adjacent to determine whether an individual perceives the person-environment transaction as significant for his or her well-being, and if so, in what ways such as primarily threatening or challenging (e.g., Folkman et al., 1986).

Coping generally refers to an individual’s effort to make adaptations to or reduce distress in response to stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Its major functions are to regulate stressful emotions and alter the person-environment transaction that causes the distress. Factors such as individual characteristics and social
environments play a key role in the ways an individual confronts, responds to, and resolves life events (e.g., Pierce, Sarason & Sarason, 1996). Coping has three key features. First, it is process-oriented, which focuses on how one thinks and does in a particular stressful event and how it changes as the stressful event unfolds. Second, coping is contextual, which means that particular person and situation variables converge to shape coping efforts. Third, no a priori assumption is made about what consists of good or bad coping. It simply refers to one’s efforts to manage demands from a stressful encounter (e.g., Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

Although several researchers have examined coping strategies among adults who are overweight or obese using a variety of methods (Myers & Rosen, 1999; Puhl & Brownell, 2006), few studies have been conducted to investigate how adolescents perceived to overweight or obese cope with weight-related teasing. In a study of high school girls, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, and Faibisch (1998) found that the most frequently used coping strategies were ignoring or attempting to ignore those experiences, feeling hurt, and getting mad and lashing out at other people. However, Neumark-Sztainer et al. (1998), which focused on adolescent girls, may be “incomplete” or not directly generalized to physical education environments (i.e., lack external validity) because the strategies were not context specific or some may be missing.

In PE settings, the nature of teasing and coping with teasing is different than those in the classroom. Students who are overweight and obese publicly display their body sizes and physical capabilities and many opportunities exist for social comparison. Although weight teasing has been reported in PE settings (Bauer et al., 2004; Curtis, 2008; Fox & Edmunds, 2000; Li & Rukavina, in press), no studies have investigated how students perceived to be overweight or obese cope with teasing in a physical activity/education context (Li & Rukavina, 2009). An understanding of the underlying coping mechanisms can provide a foundation for the development of interventions to improve the capability of students perceived to be overweight or obese to cope with weight-related teasing.

Puhl and Brownell (2003) has conceptualized a variety of coping strategies into ten coping mechanisms, including confirmation and self-acceptance of stereotypes, self-protection, compensation, personal attribution, negotiation of identity, confrontation, social activism, avoidance and psychological disengagement, communal coping, and losing weight. Even though these mechanisms have mainly been derived from the literature on coping among adult populations, they provided an initial conceptual model to guide the current study to investigate coping mechanisms among overweight or obese adolescents.

The purpose of this study, therefore, was to examine the coping mechanisms against weight-related teasing among adolescents perceived to overweight or obese in PE through a semistructured interview. We specifically examined an Urban PE setting as there has been an increased risk of obesity, physical inactivity and obesity-related illnesses for low social economic status and minority groups (Kimm & Obarzanek, 2002; Tershakovec, Kuppler, Zemel, & Stallings, 2002; Troiano, Flegal, Kuczynski, Campbell, & Johnson, 1995). The findings from this study are not only important to assist in selection and refinement of strategic components for future intervention programs, but also to equip physical educators, students perceived to be overweight or obese, and parents with practical and effective strategies to better cope against teasing.
Method

Qualitative research methods were employed to explore the coping mechanisms that adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese used to cope against weight-related teasing in school PE in an urban city school district in the Southern USA. The present study was part of a larger study, which examined weight-related teasing (Li & Rukavina, in press) and coping in PE among adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese.

Setting

Data were collected in an urban city school district in the Southern United States. This urban school district was selected for this study because low social economic status and minority groups are disproportionately affected by obesity (e.g., Ogden, Carroll, Curtin, McDowell, Tabak, & Flegal, 2006). This district serves more than 119,000 students in grades K-12 and has approximately 87% African American. Seventy-one percent of students in the district receive free or reduced lunch, and the high school graduation rate was only 61%. Finally, the 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey reported that 19.7% of high school students were overweight and 16.2% were obese (Eaton et al., 2008).

Participants

We employed a variety of recruitment methods to maximize the diversity of the sample and ensure sufficient numbers of overweight and obese participants. An initial pool of participants was recruited through the school district. Then we continued recruiting participants through city schools, distribution of flyers to weight loss clinics, community recreation summer camps and participant word of mouth. Recruitment was difficult due to sensitivity of the topic, which is consistent with studies that have examined the issues related to childhood obesity (e.g., O’Keefe & Coat, 2009; Trout & Graber, 2009). This study was approved by the school district, school principals and the institutional review board (IRB). As required by the University IRB, we obtained parental consent and child assent forms before conducting the study.

Forty-seven students (28 females and 19 males; 33 African Americans and 14 European Americans) participated in semistructured interviews. They were self-selecting volunteers and had body mass indexes larger than the 85th per age. All participants were enrolled in PE at the time of interviews or in the previous year. Their ages ranged from 11 to 19 year olds ($M = 14.86, SD = 1.97$). For the current study, only 30 participants (20 females and 10 males; 22 African Americans and 8 European Americans) who reported being teased in PE were included. To appreciate their participation, each participant was awarded $50 at the time of interview. Incentives were also provided for schools after data collection. These participants were first visually identified as being overweight or obese and then their height and weight were measured within 10 days of the interview. The demographic information, including age, grade, gender, and ethnicity, was obtained.
Data Collection

Each participant participated in a conversational style in-depth interview, which was guided by nine questions (Li & Rukavina, in press) and corresponding probes as well. Sample questions included: “Do others in physical education classes treat you in a hurtful or negative way?” “What do you call this negative treatment?” “How did this negative treatment affect you?” “How did you cope with that situation?” The interview questions were taken from Neumark-Sztainer et al. (1998) and then modified to fit the specific context and aims of the current study (Li & Rukavina, in press). Modifications included adding questions to explore the nature and context of teasing in PE and changing the context of coping questions to PE. In-depth interviews were considered as the most appropriate method since they afforded us insights into the ways and how students perceived to be overweight or obese coped against weight-related teasing, and it allowed us flexibility to examine any additional issues emerged during the interviews (Edmunds, 2005). The interviews were conducted in private locations of the participants’ choice, which included home, school, weight loss clinic or the first authors’ university office. The interviews lasted about 40 min on average.

To put students perceived to be overweight or obese at ease, the researchers engaged them in a casual conversation before the interview. During the conversation, we discussed everyday school events, such as asking participants to tell researchers a little about themselves and what things they like to do. We also discussed the nature of the study and highlighted the importance of providing a voice about how they coped against teasing in PE to researchers by indicating that their effective coping strategies can inform other adolescents who are overweight or obese on how to better cope with weight-related teasing. All participants were informed that they could withdraw from interviews without any repercussions at any time when they felt uncomfortable. All participations agreed to have their interviews taped with the digital audio recorder. The audio recordings were transcribed verbatim once all the interviews were completed. Upon the completion of the initial analysis, we conducted a focus group interview with six students who were available for the interview to provide a member check on the accuracy of the derived themes and to further explore the issues of coping in PE.

Data Coding and Analysis

For the purpose of identification throughout the project and data analysis, an ID and a pseudonym were assigned to each participant. An inductive analysis and constant comparison were used to analyze the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). First, the first two investigators read the transcripts carefully to be familiar with the data corpus. An initial coding template was developed to further analyze the data to ensure the agreements among researchers on the categories. Changes were made to the coding template and operational definitions based on the discussions among the researchers until a 100% agreement was obtained from both coders. Seven student interviews were then double-coded and a reliability coefficient of 0.93 was obtained. The inter-rater reliability was assessed using the formula: number of agreements/ (number of agreements + number of disagreement). Then both investigators independently coded the data using the template. Finally, the main themes were allowed to emerge from the data. Coping strategies reported by overweight or obese adolescent participants were coded based on the ten coping mechanisms identified in Puhl and
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Brownell (2003). For any coping strategies that could not be classified into any of the ten coping mechanisms, they were conceptually grouped and discussed. The frequency of the use of each of these coping mechanisms reported by participants was also tallied by counting the total number of students who reported the use of one of these coping mechanisms. For example, the frequency for using avoidance/psychological disengagement was 27, which meant that 27 participants reported the use of this coping mechanism.

Data Trustworthiness

A variety of well-established strategies were used to establish data trustworthiness (Patton, 2002). First, to ensure a good representation of perspectives from the population of interest, we collected data from a large number of participants. Second, throughout the research process, we conducted a peer debriefing with a colleague who has extensive qualitative research experience with adolescents in physical activity settings. The peer debriefing involved feedback and insights related to multiple aspects of research: the data collection procedure, coding development, formation of conceptual linkages, alternate interpretations, overall representations of the data, and procedure and content discussions that occurred during the focus group. Third, the member-check procedure was used, including checking the accuracy of the transcripts and an interpretative member-check of themes through a focus group interview. Transcripts were mailed to all the participants using the address provided by them at the time of interviews. However, we only received the transcripts back from ten participants (one third). The rest of mail was returned back to us as a result of an incorrect address. We asked them to check the accuracy of transcripts and return the transcripts back to us with any corrections. An examination of the returned transcripts only showed some typographical and grammar errors. Six adolescent participants based upon their availability were recruited for the focus group interview. During the two and a half hour focus group interview, the themes and categories were presented for participants to check the accuracy of our interpretation. We also encouraged them to make any further comments or clarifications. Finally, we searched the data for any negative instances throughout the analysis to provide alternative perspectives or refute themes that emerged. The derived coping mechanisms were also validated by an expert in weight stigma and coping. Comments and suggestions were incorporated into the revisions.

Findings and Discussions

Coping mechanisms used by adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese in the current study included: self-protection, compensation, confrontation, avoidance/psychological disengagement, losing weight, social support, and stress reduction. The most frequently used coping mechanisms were avoidance/psychological disengagement (27), social support (21), confrontation (18), stress reduction (13), self-protection (13), losing weight (8), and compensation (2). Under each of those coping mechanisms, a variety of strategies were used by adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese to cope against weight stigma or teasing. Further, adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese reported that they used multiple coping strategies in a given situation and the use of coping strategies were dependent on the context.
Avoidance and Psychological Disengagement

Avoidance and psychological disengagement is a mechanism that individuals perceived to be overweight or obese can use to cope with weight-related teasing (For a review, please see Li & Rukavina, 2009; Puhl & Brownell, 2003). They can avoid or walk away from a situation, ignore the situation with no response, or psychologically disengage themselves from this stressful event. In the current study, adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese reported that they simply avoided the teaser, ignored the teasing, or just walked away from the situation. They used a variety of words to describe avoidance, such as “don’t pay attention”, “ignore it”, “throw it over my shoulders”, “brush it off”, “look over them”, “forgetting about it”, “blowing them off”, or “let it go past my body”. One participant commented, “mostly just ignore them, you know, they’re just stupid, they don’t know what they’re talking about because they don’t really know me. So I mostly just ignored it.” In these situations, adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese did not let the teasing bother them and they focused on other things or “went about their business”.

In other situations, maladaptive coping strategies were used to psychologically disengage themselves from the teasing, including eating a lot, “stop talking to other people”, isolating themselves, injuring themselves, taking drugs, or even worse attempting a suicide. One participant commented that binge eating was used as an avoidance mechanism to make herself feel better.

Um, at first when I was smaller when people made me mad I’d go outside and walk around walk off my rage or my madness or whatever and then a while back like, I was bigger than what I am now I would just get mad go to my room, eat, go to sleep and I know that’s not good because when you sleep that’s not working out your fat or whatever, and so now I try not to eat I try to go back and walk off my rage or whatever.

Seeking Social Support

Social support theory from the stress and coping perspective hypothesizes that social support can act as a stress buffer through either the supportive actions of family, friends or others or the belief that support is available (Barrera, 1986; Lakey & Cohen, 2000; Lakey & Drew, 1997). It consists of three distinct types of support: perceived support, enacted support and social integration. Perceived support is defined as the subjective judgment that quality assistance with future stressors would be provided by family and friends if such actions are needed. This assistance may include listening to individuals perceived to be overweight or obese talking about teasing experience, expressing warmth and affection, providing advice or specific assistance, or simply spending time with the stressed person perceived to be overweight or obese. Enacted support refers to specific supportive actions taken by family and friends. Social integration refers to the number or range of different types of social relations (i.e., marital status, siblings). Each type is a distinct construct and there were weak correlations among these three types of social support.

Social support from family and friends can directly impact the coping behaviors of overweight or obese adolescents by reducing the negative effects of teasing or
indirectly provide resources or information for them to execute effective coping behaviors (e.g., Beehr & McGrath, 1992; Lakey & Cohen, 2000). In the current study, adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese sought social support from their parents/grandparents, sisters/brothers, friends, teachers/coaches, godmothers, or principals to cope against teasing. In some situations, they just want to talk about their experience and hurtful feelings to get emotions out. One adolescent perceived to be overweight reported,

Um, well I had one best friend that was the same as I was and so I just talk to her because I knew she wouldn’t talk about me behind my back, and we got each other’s confidence up…..

Talking to friends is one way to ease their mind about the stressful situation at school and increase their confidence.

In other situations, besides getting emotional support, adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese actively sought advice on how to deal with teasing. One adolescent perceived to be overweight stated, “I express myself to my teacher and my best friend and they like cheer me up and give me advice.” In a worse scenario, some adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese want school authorities, such as teachers/coaches and principals, to intervene the teasing or teaser. One adolescent perceived to be overweight reported,

Well, most of the time my principal or counselor will call me down and we’ll talk about it, they either call their parents up there, or put them in ISS, but my best friend, if I tell her about it, she’ll go over to the people that was talking about me and tell them.

**Confrontation**

Individuals perceived to be overweight or obese can use confrontation as a mechanism to cope with teasing. In the current study, one way that adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese confronted the teasers was by lashing back at the teaser. One student talked about “getting up into their face” when they were disrespected. Others students said they did not say something back until it “started getting on their nerves”. For example, they might say a couple words and walk off, or they may ask the teaser to stop. One student perceived to be overweight said, “I just most times when I’m in a bad mood I react in a bad way, but most of the time I’ll just be like ‘whatever, you ain’t got nothing nice to say, don’t say it at all’.”

On the other hand, students can engage in “checking” with the other teaser. Checking is a social game where individuals exchange insults in an effort to put the other person in a lower status position.

S: Well to be honest with you I talk about them back.

I: Ok, so you check them back?

S: Uh huh

I: What kind of things do you say?
S: I talk about their hair of their clothing or other things they have on.
I: Ok, um and what do they think about this?
S: They sometimes get mad or they’ll keep on talking about me.
I: Ok, so it, so you kind of go back and forth, checking back and forth.

One reason why students would hesitate to “check back” is that the interaction can escalate into many people watching and draw unnecessary attention to them or the interaction can lead to a physical fight.

Other students confronted the teaser by challenging themselves to physical activity or whatever physical act they were teasing about.

Like um, like one time we did a little relay racing and they was like I can not…. They had the skinny girl on their team. She couldn’t even run and messed everything up. I knew I could do it so I was like “why are you going to let her do it? She doesn’t even know how to run, I can run better than her” and they were like “No, you can’t” and I was like “Don’t tell me what I know how to do,” and I was mad . . . .

For those adolescents who are overweight or obese, but athletic, they set out to prove them wrong. One adolescent perceived to be overweight or obese commented,

I: You mentioned that you proved…
S: Yea, I proved them wrong.
I: What did you do?
S: Well, we were racing, and I beat him.
I: Oh really, anything else you did?
S: I just started laughing in his face. That was pretty much it.

**Stress Reduction**

According to the Transactional Model by Lazarus and Folkman (1984), stress can be perceived as occurring when external pressure exceeds one’s perceived ability to cope. Stress is not a direct response to a stressful event but rather the level of one’s resources to cope. A person’s ability to cope mediates the relation between stress and health outcomes.

Adding to the study of Neumark-Sztainer et al. (1998), data from the current study showed that adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese used a variety of stress reduction strategies to cope with teasing in PE. They “took time out” from stressful situations by focusing on interests or enjoyable activities. For example, adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese attempted to reduce stress by working on model cars, going shopping, going for a walk to make themselves feel better, and listening to music, etc... One adolescent commented,

Well to be honest I used to go and used to go to Wal-Mart and buy me little model cars and stuff, go in my room, sit in there and just put them together all at one time, it used to release stress off my mind and stuff like that, that’s just how I got into building cars and stuff.
This strategy allowed them to “be in the present” instead of thinking about the past or future. In addition, adolescents engaged in writing. Besides writing for enjoyment, it could be used as a means of identifying one’s emotions, processing and understanding them versus repressing or keeping their emotions “bottled up.” Various solutions to problems at school could be worked out by writing in a journal or writing poems. One adolescent perceived to be overweight described her poems.

I go home and talk to my mom about it or I write a poem and just leave it alone…..But when I write the poem I read it over to myself to let myself know that because you are this size doesn’t mean that you are more lesser than that person….I can’t say now ‘off the hat’ but one of my poems says “I not kidding about these words, think of my myself as a sweet, intelligent, sensitive, smart, determined, quiet, respectful,… young lady, most group ups say, I’m a young lady with a real woman’s heart, why do they think that? Why is this so?”

Self Protection

Self-protection has been used as a mechanism for individuals perceived to be overweight or obese to cope against weight-related teasing (For a review, please see Li & Rukavina, 2009; Puhl & Brownell, 2003). Self-protective strategies are used to protect and raise their self esteem. This includes strategies to make oneself feel good about their own personal characteristics, or attribute negative social outcomes as the teasers’ insecurity or prejudiced attitudes. In the current study, some students perceived to be overweight or obese saw teasing as the other person’s problem and did not attribute it to their self or lack of ability. One adolescent perceived to be overweight stated,

I just learned to ignore them and like “ok your talking about this you must feel really bad about yourself” and stuff like that. But otherwise I just ignore what people are trying to say or something or I just try to talk back to them, or whatever and say, “hey it’s not me, you have a problem with yourself, well that’s your problem not mine” but then they have to lash out at other people cause they don’t feel good about their self so that makes me really feel like ok, so maybe I need to do something about this and I try but it just makes me feel really bad.

Also, students perceived to be overweight and obese used other strategies to raise their self esteem, like positive self-talk. One adolescent perceived to be overweight said, “Um, just give yourself reassurance that you can do it and don’t worry about what they say cause it’s not important.” Another student discussed her positive self talk during a jump-roping activity, she said,

They jump roping, you know we have to jump rope and everything would just be bouncing so I would be too shy to do it in front of everybody so I wouldn’t do the jump rope, I would like just walk around of something because I was so ashamed because I was big and everybody was skinny, and I thought about it and I was like it don’t matter, it really doesn’t matter as long as I be here for myself, but you know how people is they talk about you, they be like “look at her stomach” or something like that, I didn’t care thought cause it’s me.
Or one can increase their self esteem by valuing the sports they are good at. One participant stated, “I do what I am good at. I play tennis. I like that, I swim also a lot. I’m kind of fast at that, which makes me feel good.”

**Losing Weight**

Losing weight can serve as another mechanism for individuals perceived to be overweight or obese to cope with weight-related teasing. In the current study, adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese adopted a number of different ways to reduce their weight to reduce the teasing, such as they tried not to overeat, went on a diet, or even received weight-loss surgery to lose weight. Others tried to do things that are healthy for them by eating right and exercising to become fit. One participant commented that he was changing his behavior.

Um, I’m exercising and I try to eat right and like just trying to exercise most of the time and not eat that much you know food. Um, just getting that exercise in, in my day like, just try to exercise more and do things that I know that are right for me, and things like that.

Some adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese were motivated to lose weight because they were tired of the negative comments.

Most times when they talk about me, I just come home and be like, well I don’t feel like eating today because I really want to lose a whole bunch of weight because I’m just tired of every day, people have something negative to say about me, about my weight.... I don’t eat before six, and I don’t eat as much as I used to. I like, less portions of what I eat. Like, most of the time when I wasn’t on a diet I would eat two burgers but now I eat one.

**Compensation**

To compensate for weight stigma, individuals perceived to be overweight or obese can do things to increase their likability or work hard to improve other’s perceptions of their abilities or skills. It has been reported that adults perceived to be overweight and obese coped with weight stigma by responding positively, being nice and refusing to hide and being visible (Myers & Rosen, 1999; Puhl & Brownell, 2006).

In the current study, two adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese tried to improve their peers’ perceptions of their abilities or skills by working hard to get better at sports or games. They talked about improving themselves so that they were different in the future and that others had different perceptions of them. To describe this effort they used words such as “try to do better”, “don’t give up”, “keep trying”, “work hard at it” or “push yourself”.

Other participants in this study compensated by being good natured, trying to fit or making a lot of jokes. One student had a sense of humor about his weight, which allowed him to make friends with others and diffuse any jokes toward him.

Um I’ve always been self conscious but I’ve always had a humor about it, like I know I’m overweight and I’m like the last four to five weeks of school, I’ve been going to the gym after school for thirty minutes and lifting weights and doing things like that so like and I has let everybody know that so even
if they had some funny thing to say about me about my weight either I could come back with a joke or I can tell them I’m going to the gym so I’m doing something about it.

However, one student said she had tried to make herself fit in and it made her situation worse. She decided to reverse her strategy and commented, “I tried to do everything to fit in and that made it worst but now I’m just me and people try to fit in with me instead of my trying to fit in with them.”

**Use of Coping Strategies**

Coping is an ongoing process used to deal with daily interactions and resultant emotions (e.g., Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). The individual’s coping efforts, or how an individual thinks and what she does during a stressful event changes as the stressful event unfolds. Further examination of data on coping mechanisms showed that adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese used multiple coping strategies under different mechanisms, not just one strategy to buffer teasing and/or make themselves feel better. No students reported that they used just one strategy to deal with the situation. If one strategy was not effective, a second strategy might be implemented. The effectiveness of the strategy was found through trial and error. For example, one girl used three different mechanisms to cope against teasing: avoidance and psychological disengagement, confrontation and self-acceptance.

I just learned to ignore them and like “ok you are talking about this. You must feel really bad about yourself” and stuff like that. But otherwise I just ignore what people are trying to say something or I just try to talk back to them, or whatever and say, “hey it’s not me, you have a problem with yourself, well that’s your problem not mine” but then they have to lash out at other people cause they don’t feel good about themselves so that makes me really feel like ok, so maybe I need to do something about this and I try but it just makes me feel really bad.

In another example, one adolescent boy perceived to be overweight had to use multiple strategies to deal with the teasers and when one strategy did not work he had to use another one. He initially tried confrontation, but when that did not work, he used avoidance and stress reduction. He said,

Sometimes the boys will start checking me, and I’ll tell them, and I’ll tell them to stop, but they don’t stop. So I just go away from them and leave it alone. I’ll just be quiet. Sometimes, when I’m quiet I’ll read. I’ll hide behind my book and cry and stuff like that.

In this instance, he used multiple mechanisms to deal with the negative interactions and then had to use other strategies to cope with the resultant feelings as a result of the interactions.

The use of coping strategies does not occur in a vacuum, it is contextual (e.g., Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Factors such as personal characteristics and physical and social environmental features converge to shape an individual’s coping efforts. Findings from the current study showed that the use
of a coping strategies or the choice to use one strategy as opposed to another one was dependent on the situation. Multiple reasons were reported for the strategy choice, including whether the boys wanted to fight, how confident the student was in themselves, who was teasing them, the setting that they were checked in, social skills, or how much they believed in themselves. One student described how he would interact or cope depended on whether their peers are “playing with him”,

Well when I just got sick of it I would just be like ignore it, and they won’t have anything else to say because they would just ignore it or either sometimes my classmates they will lash back but sometimes I know that they are playing with me and I know that I’m playing with them so it’s just like ok, and we’re just playing and sometimes they really mean it and I have to go back and lash out at them but sometimes I just ignore it because I know they are playing with me.

Also, the choice of strategy was dependent on if the teaser “pushed their buttons” or it affected them. Several individuals reported that there were limits on how much negative treatment they could take. One overweight girl said,

It doesn’t really bother me but sometimes it does cause I’ll be like ‘How can you tell me I can’t do this when you don’t even know’….But I’m not really out spoken so even though it don’t bother me too much I won’t worry about it and I will just do what I got to do. But if it really upsets me I’ll say something.

One true test of the effectiveness of a coping strategy was when it worked. One student described the effectiveness of just walking away and ignoring the teaser, “yes, people stopped doing it because they know I’m not paying attention anymore, like entertainment they make it and keep going but then they are like no.” If the teasers were not entertained by the reactions of students perceived to be overweight or obese, they found their “entertainment” with other students.

**General Discussion**

The purpose of the current study was to examine the coping mechanisms used by students perceived to be overweight or obese in PE to deal with weight-related teasing. Past studies on coping among adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1998) had only conceptualized their responses as strategies not categorized under coping mechanisms or the mental and emotional processes used to deal with either the negative social interaction or resultant psychological and emotional trauma. Analysis of coping mechanisms creates a theoretical base to further explore how adolescents are coping with teasing and why they choose to use particular strategies.

The findings from the current study have showed that adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese used self-protection, compensation, confrontation, seeking social support, avoidance/psychological disengagement, losing weight and stress reduction strategies to cope against weight-related teasing occurred in PE. However, there was no evidence that adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese used confirmation/self acceptance of stereotypes, communal coping, and social activism, negotiation of identity, or personal attribution to cope with weight-related teasing in PE. Also adding to the previous literature, our findings showed that adolescents
perceived to be overweight or obese used a variety of stress reduction strategies and sought social support to cope with weight-related teasing in PE.

Individual characteristics and social environments play a very important role in the ways a person confronts, responds to, and resolves life events (e.g., Pierce, Sarason & Sarason, 1996). The unique characteristics of adolescent population and social structures and environments of PE may provide some explanations for our findings. Adolescence is a transition period, where adolescents experience significant developmental changes when they begin to develop their own personal values and beliefs (e.g., Kellough & Kellough, 2008), and peer and friends’ support play a critical role in these developmental changes (e.g., La Greca & Bearman, 2000). This may explain why a variety of stress reduction and seeking social support strategies were used. For some coping strategies not being used by adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese in the current study, it is likely that the social structures do not exist in PE for adolescents to cope in these ways. Further, the uniqueness of PE environment may also constrain the use of these mechanisms.

Adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese in the current study sought social support from family members and friends. These supports can have a direct impact on the coping behaviors of adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese by buffering the negative effects of teasing or indirectly providing resources or information for them to execute effective coping behaviors (e.g., Beehr & McGrath, 1992; Lakey & Cohen, 2000). Future research should further investigate what kinds of support adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese received from family, friends, and school administrators or teachers and the effectiveness of those different types of supports on coping against teasing among adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese. Another area worthy of future research is to examine how individuals perceived to be overweight or obese develop their coping mechanisms/strategies as they age. Such evidence is a key to provide insights on the development and refinement of interventions on how individuals perceived to be overweight or obese cope against weight-related teasing.

Coping is process-oriented and contextual (e.g., Folkman et al., 1986; Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the current study, students perceived to be overweight and obese used multiple coping strategies under different mechanisms to cope with teasing and the use of these coping mechanisms was situation dependent. The use of multiple coping mechanisms or strategies may be due to the various nature of and degree of teasing in physical education settings. Adolescents perceived to be overweight and obese probably needed multiple coping strategies because they got teased in many different contexts and experienced a myriad of emotions as a result. It is unlikely that one strategy was sufficient to work in every situation and to cope with all their emotions.

The process-oriented and situational nature of coping has an important teaching implication. It is suggested that a variety of coping strategies should be taught to individuals perceived to be overweight or obese and when to use them so that they can have choice of strategies to deal with a variety of negative social interactions and resultant emotions in multiple settings. PE teachers need to be prepared to discuss with students perceived to be overweight or obese how to deal with getting teased in multiple situations and cope with the resultant emotions that arise. This involves helping students to develop the ability to calibrate themselves to the environment and read the cues and then select a particular strategy based upon when and where
they were teased (e.g., sitting on the bleachers, locker room, during activities), and to differentiate between strategies that are appropriate/effective (ignoring, walking away, seeking help, social support), and those that are ineffective (fighting, bullying) and unhealthy (drinking, binge eating). Having a multitude of effective coping strategies for specific situations can potentially help those students perceived to be overweight and obese not withdraw from interacting with their peers and become more engaged in physical education.

There were two limitations in the current study. First, the data were gathered on a convenience sample in an urban school district in the Southern United States, only including African-American and Caucasian populations. The nature of weight-related teasing (Van Den Berg, Neumark-Sztainer, Eisenberg, & Haines, 2008) and body image and perceptions of overweight is different among various racial/ethnic groups (Jones, Fries, & Danish, 2007; Lynch, Heil, Wagner, & Havens, 2007). Future research may investigate how these variables influence the way how individuals perceived to be overweight or obese cope with weight-related teasing. The second limitation was that adolescents perceived to be overweight or obese were only interviewed one time (except those that participated in the focus group). A single interview research design was used due to several constraining factors, such as the lack of access to participants, difficulty in scheduling interviews due to parents’ work schedule and students’ school schedules, school policies, dangerous nature of inner city neighborhoods, and the emotionally charged nature of weight-related teasing.

This descriptive study provides a foundation for further advancing this line of research. Coping mechanisms identified in the current study have great potential to facilitate the development of interventions to improve the ability of students perceived to be overweight or obese to cope with stigmatization. Future research should target on intervention components based on these most frequently used coping mechanisms: avoidance/psychological disengagement, social support, stress reduction, confrontation, and self-protection. Knowing which coping mechanisms or strategies are effective and how the effectiveness of those coping mechanisms or strategies varies among different populations has great potential to facilitate the selection and refinement of intervention components to target different populations. The richness of data on coping also lays a groundwork for developing and validating an instrument on coping against weight stigmatization or teasing in physical activity or education settings and then examining the effectiveness of copings for adolescent populations. It is suggested that a survey to measure weight-related teasing and coping for overweight or obese adolescent population based on the current study be developed and validated, and the effectiveness of those coping strategies be assessed by correlating them to health outcomes.

The evidence of widespread weight-related stigma and teasing in PE urges a call for educating and equipping students perceived to be overweight or obese with skills and strategies necessary for successfully handling those issues in PE so that students perceived to be overweight or obese can feel safe and be included in PE. The findings of this study will help in-service and preservice teachers understand how overweight or obese cope with weight-related teasing, and equip them with knowledge and skills to educate students perceived to be overweight or obese to better cope with teasing in PE.
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