

The effects of being perceived as overweight on children's social relationships:

What do young people and teachers think about 'the overweight child'?

Submitted by Karen Hall to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of Doctor of Educational, Child and Community Psychology (D.Ed.Psy) in 2012.

I certify that all material in this dissertation which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other university.

Signed: *Karen Hall*

Student Number: 590035310

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Project Overview

Obesity is a stigmatised condition (Puhl & Heuer, 2009), which receives frequent sensationalist coverage in the popular mainstream media. For example, a recent article in the Independent Newspaper was titled "*UK fat alert: 26 million will be obese by 2030*" (Laurance, 2011). Obesity is also frequently the topic of television entertainment shows, such as, *The Biggest Loser* (Smith, 2011) and *Supersize vs. Superskinny* (Kay, 2011). Such programmes maintain the 'problem' of obesity in people's minds and reinforce society's predominate 'thin-ideal', the narrative that thin-is-good and fat-is-bad (Ahern, Bennett, Kelly, & Hetherington, 2011).

Within this context, childhood obesity rates are increasing (World Health Organisation [WHO], 2010). Research has shown that children also believe in the dominate 'thin-ideal' (Brown & Slaughter, 2011) and hold stigmatising views towards those who are overweight (Latner, Simmonds, Rosewall, & Stunkard, 2007; Latner, Stunkard, & Wilson, 2005). Presently, little is known about what it is like for a child to grow up in a society which devalues their body, although research has shown that children perceive being overweight to be a social problem (Rees, Oliver, Woodman, & Thomas, 2011).

The broad aim of this thesis is to learn more about the social problem of being overweight that may or may not affect children and young people. This is addressed through two separate but interlinked studies (Study One & Study Two), depicted in the diagram below (Figure 1).

Study One provides a current understanding of pupils' attitudes towards the overweight, as well as gaining a pupil's perspective on the prevalence and significance of weight-based unkindness in school. Study One is predominantly quantitative, with data being collected through a computerised survey. The survey is informed by focus group data.

Study Two explores children's and teachers' views of what it is like to be overweight and their experiences of weight-based unkindness. Data was gathered from pupils in the context of other types of unkindness, which provided a unique quality and texture to

pupil's experiences whilst also preventing undue attention being placed on any children who were overweight.

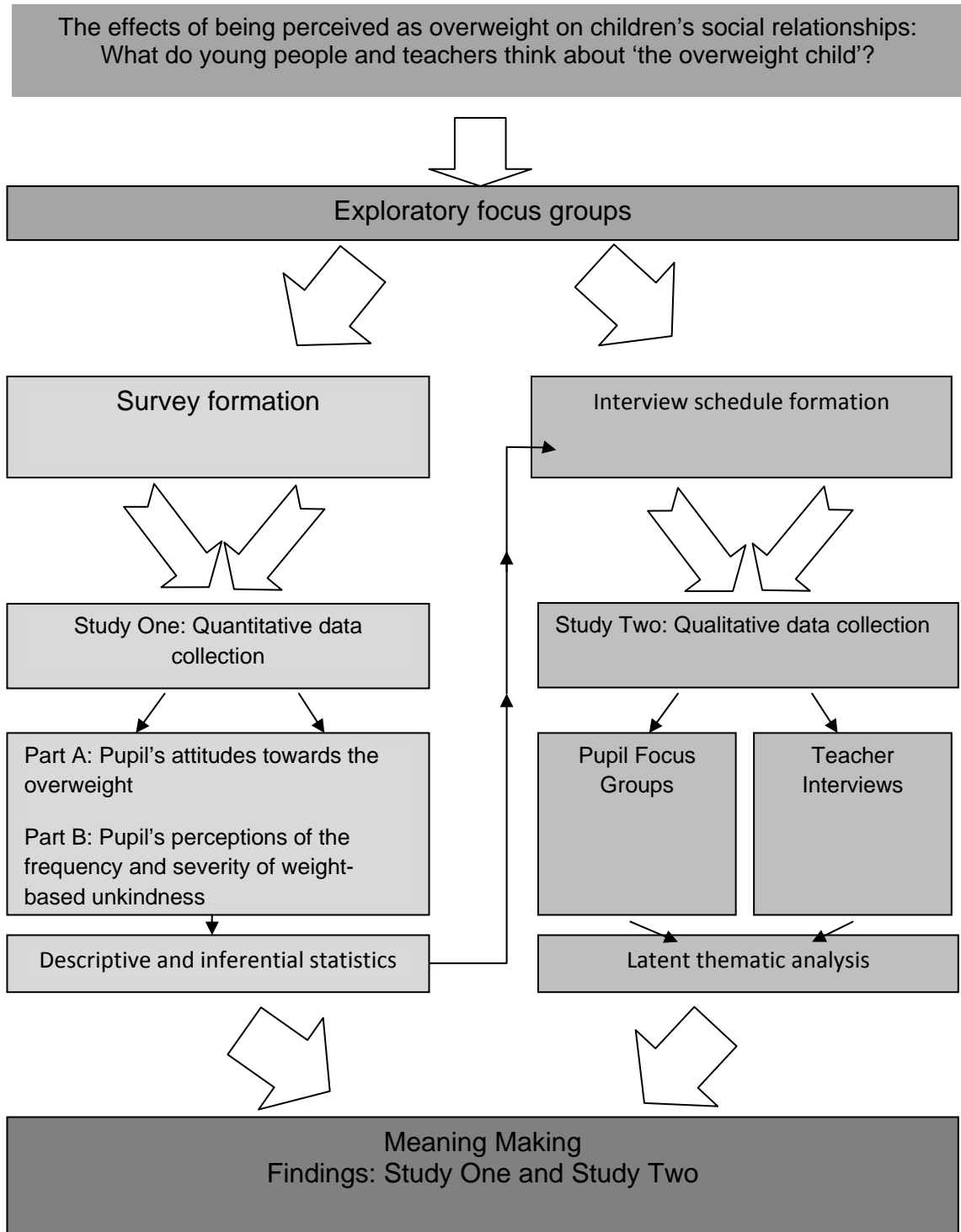


Figure 1: Diagram to show the processes and interactions of Study One and Study Two

Taken together, the results of Study One and Study Two indicate a complex interaction between the attitudes held towards people who are overweight and society's acceptance and reinforcement of these attitudes. The findings illustrate the interface between the two theories which have been used to separately explain weight-stigma: Attribution Theory and Social Consensus Theory. Study Two also explores the implication of being overweight on an individual level, though the application of The Identity Change Theory (Degher & Hughes, 1999).

It is hoped that this work will raise awareness of the possible psychological and social difficulties faced by overweight children and young people (CYP) among education professionals in general and educational psychologists (EPs) in particular.

Abstract

Study One

Study One aimed to provide a current understanding of pupils' attitudes towards people who are overweight and the prevalence and significance of weight-based unkindness in school. **Methods:** The study followed a mixed method, sequential qualitative and quantitative research design. Part One of the study used exploratory focus groups to ascertain that weight-based unkindness was a valid concern for children and young people, when compared against unkindness of other content. The focus group also ensured that the vignettes used in the survey (Part Two) were ecologically valid. Part Two included an existing measure of weight-stigma (attitude scale) and three sets of vignette-based questions to measure pupils' perceptions of the frequency and severity of different incidents of unkindness. Part Two, was administered to 214 participants via a computerised survey. **Results:** The majority of pupils (61%) judged the overweight characters to be the least accepted. Participants also perceived significantly greater hurt, anger, embarrassment and humour to follow episodes of weight-based unkindness.

Study Two

Study Two aimed to better understand why, how and what is 'different' about pupils' understanding of weight-based unkindness when compared to other types of unkindness. **Methods:** This study adopted an explorative approach to hear the lived experiences of six teachers and 29 children in two South West Primary Schools. Data was collected via semi-structured interviews, administered through focus groups (pupils) and paired interviews (teachers). Data was analysed using latent thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). **Results:** The study found that pupils used the language of personal choice to attribute personal responsibility to overweight CYP, whilst teachers attributed this blame to their parents. Teachers espoused acceptance for the overweight whilst their behaviours implicitly reinforced the 'thin-ideal'. Key findings are discussed from a theoretical perspective and their implication for supporting attitude change is highlighted.

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