Obese women may never escape stigma

Obese women may never escape the stigma of obesity even after they have lost weight, according to researchers. The study by the University of Hawaii, the University of Manchester, and Monash University, Melbourne, Australia examined whether anti-fat prejudice against women persisted even after they had lost significant weight and were now thin. The researchers asked young men and women to read vignettes describing a woman who had either lost 70 pounds or had remained weight stable, and who was either currently obese or currently thin. Participants were then asked their opinions about this woman on a number of attributes.

The team found that participants in the study - published in the journal Obesity - expressed greater bias against obese people even after reading about women who had lost weight than after reading about women who had remained weight stable, regardless of whether the weight-stable woman was thin or obese.

"We were surprised to find that currently thin women were viewed differently depending on their weight history," said Dr Janet Latner, study lead at the University of Hawaii.

"Those who had been obese in the past were perceived as less attractive than those who had always been thin, despite having identical height and weight." One of the more disturbing findings from the study, the researchers said, was that negative attitudes towards obese people increase when participants are told that body weight is easily controllable.

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The findings, say the authors, demonstrate that residual obesity stigma persists against individuals who have ever been obese, even when they have lost substantial amounts of weight. Obesity stigma is so powerful and enduring that it appears to even outlast the obesity itself.