

# Awareness of and Attitudes Toward Anti-Weight Stigma Movements



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## Abstract

A survey of adults ( $n = 706$ ) found low levels of awareness of two social movements aimed at decreasing weight stigma: the Fat Acceptance Movement and Health at Every Size movement. For HAES, providing a brief story of an overweight person who endorses HAES improved perceptions of the movement.

## Introduction

- Overweight individuals are often stigmatized, and stereotyped as lazy, dirty or immoral (Lewis et al., 1997), as well as pressured to diet and exercise to lose weight (Gard & Wright, 2005).
- For most people, diets are ineffective in the long-term (Puhl and Heuer, 2010); and weight cycling can lead to harmful health consequences (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011).
- Two social movements have emerged to combat weight stigma: the Fat Acceptance Movement (FAM) and the Health at Every Size Movement (HAES).
- Previous research has indicated that a supportive community of fellow overweight people may help motivate individuals to exercise and make healthier choices (Lewis et al. 2010).

The present study examined whether individuals were aware of the FAM or HAES movements as well as attitudes toward these movements. Additionally, an experiment built into the survey examined whether providing a short story about an overweight person who held FAM or HAES beliefs influenced ratings of the movement.

## Method

### Participants

- 706 U.S. adults were recruited through Amazon Mechanical Turk.
- 48% of participants had Body Mass Indices falling into CDC-defined healthy range; 28% in the overweight range, 21% in the obese range, and 4% in the underweight range.

### Procedure

- Participants were randomly assigned to read one vignette in a two (gender of vignette target: Laura or John) by three (movement: FAM, HAES, or control) between-subjects design.
- After rating the target, participants were provided with a brief informational paragraph describing the movement matched to their vignette. Control participants were randomly assigned to one of the two movements.

### Measures

- After reading a description of one of the movements, participants were asked if they had heard of the movement in question (*yes, no, not sure*).
- Participants then rated the movement on a 1-5 scale ranging from *It's definitely a bad idea* to *It's definitely a good idea*.
- Participants were able to write open ended opinions on the movements.
- Participants rated their agreement with several statements based on claims of the movements. They also rated the target of the vignette on several traits, such as "Intelligent" and "Tolerant," which were grouped into warmth and competence subscales (Fiske et al., 2002).

### Sample Vignette (HAES)

John is a forty year-old man. He has worked an office job for the same company for the last ten years. John has been heavy all of his life. His doctor says he is at the lower end of obese. John can't fit comfortably in an airline seat, and his stomach makes it difficult to pull all the way up to the table in some restaurants. He has heard people making comments about his size, calling him fat.

Though John is large, he knows he does his best to live a healthy lifestyle. He exercises regularly and generally chooses healthy foods. His blood pressure and cholesterol are not high, and his heart is healthy. John is happy with his health, and believes that health, not size, is most important.

### Sample Vignette (FAM)

Laura is a forty year-old woman. She has worked an office job for the same company for the last ten years. Laura has been heavy all of her life. Her doctor says she is in the obese weight range. Laura can't fit comfortably in an airline seat, and her stomach sometimes makes it difficult to pull all the way up to the table in restaurants. She has overheard people making comments about her size, calling her fat.

Laura feels that her size shouldn't matter in terms of how she is treated, and her health is her own business. She wants people to know that she's just as human as anyone else, with thoughts, feelings, goals, and dreams. She does not think being fat means she deserves to be mocked and insulted.

### Informational Paragraph (HAES)

The Health at Every Size movement is a social movement that emphasizes a focus on health, rather than size. It emerged from research showing that dieting is ineffective: practically everyone regains the weight, and can enter into 'Weight cycling' (losing and gaining weight in cycles) which is more unhealthy than not dieting in the first place. Doctors and experts agree that most dieting and weight loss programs can produce no more than an average of 10% weight loss. This can lead to increases in heart health, but might not change a person's outward appearance.

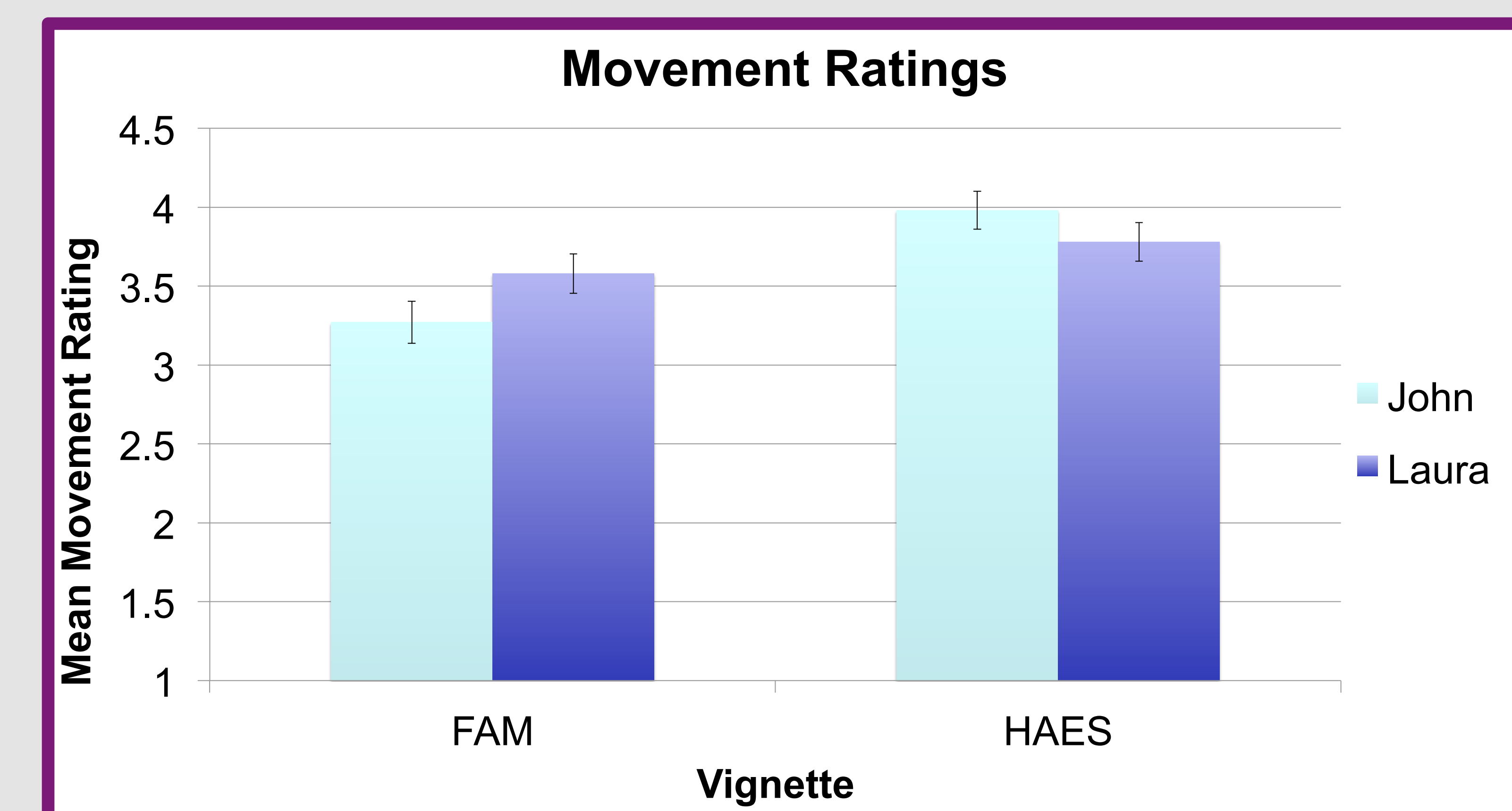
The Health at Every Size movement encourages everyone (thin and fat) to focus on their behavior instead- to trust their bodily cues of hunger, to exercise for fun and health rather than weight, and make sure they are living a healthy lifestyle, regardless of their weight and size.

### Informational Paragraph (FAM)

The Fat Acceptance Movement (FAM) is a social movement centralized on reducing the stigma towards weight and obesity. The FAM is a broad and many faceted movement. Some members focus on legal protections in the workplace. Others argue for more (and less insulting) representation in the media. But the overall message of the Fat Acceptance Movement is that fat individuals are people, who do not deserve to be insulted for their size, appearance, or health; that they are human beings with the same rights as anyone else.

## Results

- Overall, participants were more likely to be aware of FAM (28%) than HAES, 16%,  $\chi^2(2) = 16.88, p < .001$ .
- In the control condition ratings for FAM and HAES did not significantly differ,  $F(1, 234) = 0.47, p = .49, \eta_p^2 = .002$
- A 2 (target gender: John, Laura) x 2 (vignette type: FAM, HAES) was conducted with movement rating as the DV.
  - There was a significant effect of vignette type,  $F(1, 460) = 13.01, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .03$ .
  - This effect was qualified by a significant interaction between vignette type and target gender,  $F(1, 460) = 4.35, p = .04, \eta_p^2 = .009$ .
- The majority of open-ended opinions were positive for both movements. However, HAES received significantly more positive opinions,  $\chi^2(6) = 13.86, p = .03$ .
- Women showed stronger agreement with the propositions of these movements than men  $F(1, 683) = 43.31, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .060$ , and participants in the HAES condition had stronger agreement than the FAM condition,  $F(2, 683) = 3.82, p = .02, \eta_p^2 = .01$ .
- Targets in the HAES condition were rated as warmer  $F(2, 687) = 27.07, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .07$ , Laura was rated as warmer,  $F(1, 687) = 4.73, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .007$ , and women rated their targets as warmer  $F(1, 687) = 14.45, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .02$ .
- HAES targets were seen as more competent,  $F(2, 687) = 45.02, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .116$ , and women assigned higher competence ratings  $F(1, 687) = 13.63, p < .001, \eta_p^2 = .019$ . There was also a significant interaction between vignette type and target gender,  $F(2, 687) = 3.70, p = .03, \eta_p^2 = .011$ . John was rated as more competent only in the HAES condition, but for Laura, Control < FAM < HAES in competence.



## Conclusion

- Awareness of both HAES and FAM is relatively low. These movements may need to reach more people to produce effective change.
- These data suggest that while FAM is more familiar, it is not perceived or rated more positively than HAES.
- In the control condition, ratings between the movements did not differ. In the experimental condition, HAES was rated more highly.
- This implies that personal narratives may be more effective than sharing facts alone.
- Additionally, the difference between HAES and FAM ratings was stronger for a male target (John).
- Further studies could investigate how to boost awareness, as well as how to present these movements in the most positive or convincing light.