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Metaphors that Communicate Weight-Based Stigma in Political News: A Case Study of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie

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Metaphors that Communicate Weight-Based Stigma in Political News:

A Case Study of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie

Métaphores qui véhiculent le stigma du poids au sein de la presse politique:

Une étude de cas du gouverneur du New Jersey Chris Christie

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Abstract

Introduction: News media use metaphors to describe politics (Landau & Keefer, 2014) and obesity (Barry, Brescoll, Brownell, & Schlesinger, 2009). Weight-based stigma is prevalent in U.S. news media (Heuer, McClure, & Puhl, 2011). Media coverage of politicians' body size may contain metaphors that stigmatize weight. Metaphors reflect and shape how people think about important issues like politics or obesity (Landau et al., 2009; 2010; Landau & Keefer, 2014).

Objective: This study uses stigma communication theory (Smith, 2007) to examine stigmatizing metaphors used in media coverage of a United States politician, and candidate for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination, New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie, Republican.

Method: We coded $N = 240$ articles, from January 2011 to December 2014, that referenced Christie's weight. Considering both the articles and the comments in response to them, we identified $N = 246$ weight references that utilized metaphors and coded these using categories derived from the stigma communication theory framework.

Results: Our coding of these weight references, from journalists and comments posted by the public, demonstrated that metaphors accomplish all four functions of stigma communication: they *mark*, *label*, *assign personal responsibility*, and *link to peril* the stigmatized person.

Conclusion: Our findings demonstrate not only that news media use metaphors to describe a politician's weight, but also show how these metaphors—alone and together—function to constitute stigma communication messages. These messages can affect public opinions toward politics and obesity.

Keywords: communication; politics; stigma; obesity, weight; news media; online news; political communication

Abstract

Introduction: Les médias utilisent des métaphores pour décrire la politique (Landau & Keefer, 2014) et l'obésité (Barry, Brescoll, Brownell, & Schlesinger, 2009). La stigmatisation à l'égard du poids est prévalente dans la presse américaine (Heur, McClure, & Puhl, 2011). La couverture médiatique de la silhouette des politiciens peut contenir des métaphores qui stigmatisent le poids. Ces métaphores reflètent et façonnent la manière dont les gens conçoivent la politique ou l'obésité (Landau et al., 2009; 2010; Landau & Keefer, 2014).

Objectif: Cette étude utilise la théorie de la communication du stigma (Smith, 2007) pour examiner les métaphores utilisées dans la couverture médiatique d'un politicien américain, candidat à la nomination présidentielle républicaine de 2016, soit Chris Christie, le gouverneur du New Jersey.

Méthodologie: Nous avons analysé 240 articles de presse publiés entre janvier 2011 et décembre 2014 qui faisaient référence au poids de Christie. Partant de ces articles et des réponses qui leur ont été adressées, nous avons identifié 246 références métaphoriques au poids et les avons classifiées à partir des catégories issues de la théorie de la communication du stigma.

Résultats: Notre classification des références au poids à partir des articles des journalistes et des commentaires du public publiés en ligne montre que les métaphores identifiées correspondent aux quatre fonctions de la communication du stigma : elles marquent, étiquettent, attribuent une responsabilité personnelle, et mettent en péril la personne stigmatisée.

Conclusion: Nos résultats suggèrent non seulement que les médias utilisent des métaphores pour décrire le poids d'un homme politique, mais aussi que ces métaphores - utilisées seules ou en combinaison - constituent des messages de communication du stigma. Ces messages peuvent influencer l'opinion publique envers la politique et l'obésité.

Les mots clés: Communication; politique; stigma; obésité; poids; journaux électroniques; communication politique.

DRAFT

Metaphors that Communicate Weight-Based Stigma in Political News:
A Case Study of New Jersey Governor Chris Christie

The “obesity epidemic” is a well-known metaphor used to describe the rise in obesity rates in the Western world (Barry, Brescoll, Brownell, & Schlesinger, 2009, p. 8). Other metaphors treat obesity as a sin, a disability, or the result of an addiction (Barry et al., 2009). Metaphors help people to communicatively grapple with an abstract construct by linking it with something concrete, e.g., explaining political election cycles as “races” (Landau & Keefer, 2014). Metaphors are commonly used in political discourse (Charteris-Black, 2011; Gidengil & Everitt, 1999; Samuels, 2015), and metaphoric framing of political issues affects perceptions of policies related to those issues (Landau & Keefer, 2014; Landau, Sullivan, & Greenberg, 2009; Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011). Metaphors can stigmatize a health issue (Chopra & Doody; Sontag, 2001) like obesity, because they can achieve the four functions of stigma communication messages: they can mark, label, assign personal responsibility, and link to social peril those who are stigmatized (Smith, 2007). News media are powerful propagators of weight-based stigma through the use of metaphors and other linguistic devices that create a stigmatizing frame (Puhl, Peterson, DePierre, & Luedicke, 2013), and affect support for weight-related policies (Brochu, Pearl, Puhl, & Brownell, 2014). Heuer, McClure, and Puhl (2011) specifically argue that negative coverage of a political candidate’s body size reflects and spreads obesity stigma.

In this case study, we examine weight-based stigma in online news media content written by both journalists and commenters on stories. Our analysis focuses on the use of metaphor to convey weight-based stigma about Republican New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, who sought—but did not receive—the Republican nomination for president in the 2016 U.S. national election. Understanding how metaphors operate in this context to spread obesity stigma provides

theoretical and practical insights. Theoretically, it establishes how metaphors can be used to achieve the functions of stigma communication and suggests how such communication reflects sociopsychological processes underlying weight-based stigmatization. Practically, it demonstrates how news media perpetuate obesity stigma through their linguistic choices which ultimately help to shape public understandings of stigmatized people and groups.

Metaphor

According to conceptual metaphor theory (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Landau & Keefer, 2014), a metaphor operates by linking a target with a source and then linking aspects of the source with aspects of the target. The target is the abstract concept that people are attempting to understand. The source is the concrete concept that people already understand. When aspects of the source are linked to the target in systematic ways, conceptual mapping has occurred. Conceptual mapping refers to the constellation of linkages made between the source and target, which help the audience to better understand the abstract target in terms of the concrete source's characteristics (Landau & Keefer, 2014). This type of conceptual mapping frames the target in certain ways (Burgers, 2016; Landau & Keefer, 2014) to highlight some aspects of the target while obscuring others (Landau et al., 2009).

People communicate through metaphors, because they think metaphorically (Gibbs, 1994; Landau & Keefer, 2014). Metaphors are inherently communicative, because their meaning is generated through social interaction (Burgers, 2016; Steen, Reijnerse, & Burgers, 2014). This parallels the conceptualization of stigma as a communicative process (Smith, 2007). Cisneros (2008) argues that metaphors “participate in creating fundamental understandings of texts and the rhetorical contexts in which they are situated” (p. 570). In other words, metaphors are not only contained within language or messages, but they actively work to create meaning and help

shape our understanding of both the message and its context. Indeed, recent social scientific research suggests that there is bi-directional causality with respect to metaphor and communication. That is, our “metaphor-enriched cognition” shapes our communication even as our use of metaphor in communication shapes our cognitions (Landau, Meier, & Keefer, 2010, p. 1046).

Using metaphor, in both cognition and communication, allows people to generate a more concrete understanding of abstract concepts, such as sociopolitical issues (Landau & Keefer, 2014). This concrete understanding, then, reflects the conceptual linkage between the source and target, which frames the target in certain ways. For example, Cisneros (2008) analyzed U.S. news discourse about immigration to discover a common metaphoric frame: “immigrant as pollutant” (p. 570). Similarly, Landau et al. (2009) studied framing of immigration in the United States. They found that when the United States was framed metaphorically as a body, compared to a literal description, audiences had harsher attitudes toward immigrants entering the country. Landau and colleagues (2009) explained that the metaphor of a body calls to mind people’s concerns with protecting their own bodies from infection or contamination, and thus likens immigration to those threats to one’s physical body. This metaphoric framing casts immigration as a threat, whereas the literal or basic description of immigration generates no such associations.

Metaphors are pervasive in political discourse—in editorials, news stories, political speeches and ads, political cartoons and in stump speeches on the campaign trail (Charteris-Black, 2011; Gidengil & Everitt, 1999; Samuels, 2015). And metaphoric framing used to describe public policy can affect public perceptions and endorsement of those policies (Thibodeau & Boroditsky, 2011). For example, Thibodeau and Boroditsky (2011) studied how participants thought about crime in a city. The researchers manipulated messages so that crime

was metaphorically framed as either a “beast” that was “preying upon” the city or as a “disease” that was “plaguing” the city. When exposed to the “beast” metaphor, participants favored policies that “controlled” crime (e.g., increased policing, harsher penalties). In contrast, when exposed to the “plague” metaphor, participants favored policies that “treated” crime (e.g., identifying the cause, improving economic conditions).

Metaphors can also have a significant impact on how people think about body size and obesity (Anderson, Bresnahan, & DeAngelis, 2014; Barry et al., 2009). Barry et al. (2009) explored the effects of obesity metaphors on the public’s perception of various obesity-related policies. For example, Barry and colleagues found that support for food labeling was more likely among those who believed the “addiction” or “toxic food environment” metaphors best explained obesity, whereas it was lower among those who believed the “sin” metaphor for obesity. Anderson et al. (2014) studied the association between body satisfaction and the metaphors people use to describe their bodies. Some metaphors were positive, e.g., “My body is like a bamboo tree; it grows quick and very strong,” whereas others were negative, e.g., “In a world of swans, I am the chubby ugly duckling” (p. 733). The researchers coded these metaphors from positive to negative, and found that body satisfaction decreased as metaphors about the body became increasingly negative. Metaphors clearly have significant power to influence perceptions and intentions; we argue that they may also specifically contribute to the communication of stigma.

Stigma

Stigma can be enacted linguistically through metaphors. Although stigma is maladaptive in modern society (Smith & Hughes, 2014), people enact stigma because it gives them a certain amount of social power, since stigma separates the stigmatizer from the stigmatized person or

group in a hierarchical way that places the stigmatizer in control (Link & Phelan, 2015). Stigma is a “spoiled identity, being disqualified from full social acceptance by others, a personal mark of disgrace, and a contaminated social identity” (Goffman, 1963, p. 2). Sontag (2001) argues that stigmatization of illness or disease can happen through metaphors. On the other hand, Chopra and Doody (2007) argue that metaphors are most often applied to conditions that are already stigmatized. In both cases, metaphor contributes to the stigmatization of a negative health condition. In a study of metaphor and stigma in British media, Musolff (2015) analyzed the language used to describe debates over immigration in blogs, online news sources, and mainstream newspapers. These sources routinely used dehumanizing, stigmatizing metaphors for immigrants, such as “parasites, leeches, or bloodsuckers” (Musolff, 2015, p. 41). News media convey stigma, particularly weight-based stigma, in non-metaphorical ways as well.

News Media and Weight-Based Stigma

Previous research has established the prevalence of weight-based stigma in news media (Barry, Jarlenski, Grob, Schlesinger, & Gollust, 2011; Heuer et al., 2011; McClure, Puhl, & Heuer, 2011; Puhl et al., 2013; Rich & Evans, 2005). Stories in news media outlets tend to convey weight-based stigma through blaming overweight individuals for their weight status, downplaying societal influences on weight, and using stereotypical or negative portrayals of overweight people—including dehumanizing images (Rich & Evans, 2005). In a content analysis of 18 national and regional U.S. news sources between 2000 and 2009, Barry et al. (2011) found that these sources typically framed obesity as an individual problem whose solution is individual behavior change. Although Barry et al. (2011) did not use a stigma framework, these findings reflect a common theme in weight-based stigma: blaming the individual for his/her weight status.

In addition to stigmatizing content from the news stories, the video and still images that accompany these stories also convey stigma. Heuer et al. (2011) did a visual content analysis of online news stories and found that the images used to accompany stories about obesity were overwhelmingly stigmatizing. Heuer and colleagues classified the images as stigmatizing because the images were cropped so that the individuals were shown without heads, with an emphasis on the abdomen, and were often shown in contexts where they were not fully clothed, not wearing professional clothing, and/or not exercising. In another study of online news, Puhl et al. (2013) content analyzed video reports and discovered that 65% of overweight/obese adults and 77% of overweight/obese youth were portrayed in stigmatizing ways, similar to those observed in the Heuer et al. (2011) study.

Previous experimental studies demonstrate that stigmatizing portrayals of overweight people have negative effects on audiences, e.g., attitudes and political beliefs. McClure et al. (2011) observed that, compared to participants exposed to non-stigmatizing images of overweight people, participants who were exposed to stigmatizing images of overweight people had more negative attitudes toward overweight people. Bresnahan, Zhuang, Zhu, Anderson, and Nelson (2016) found that exposure to weight-based stigma messages about a politician's weight, combined with a belief that weight is under an individual's control, produced significantly lower perceptions of political competence when compared with messages that stressed competence, reduced stigma, or presented a health-based stigma. Thus, previous research suggests that news sources perpetuate weight-based stigma and that exposure to weight-based stigma has negative sociocognitive effects. However, many of these studies lack a theoretical perspective that can provide a comprehensive explanation for how these news stories communicate stigma.

Stigma Communication

Smith (2007) created the theory of stigma communication to explain how stigma is transmitted through communication with others. Smith's (2007) theory situates stigma as a communicative construct, meaning that it arises from and spreads through communication. Stigma communication messages have four functions: they mark, label, assign personal responsibility, and link social peril to the stigmatized person or group. These messages then produce cognitive and emotional reactions, as well as psychological and communicative message effects¹. Briefly, the cognitive reactions include accessing and activating relevant social attitudes and stereotypes; the emotional reactions include experiencing disgust, anger, and fear directed toward the stigmatized person or group; the effects of the message include developing stigma attitudes, wishing to isolate and remove the stigmatized group, and sharing the stigma message with one's social network (Smith, 2007).

Marking. The first function of a stigma communication message is to "mark" the stigmatized person or group with some visible image that evokes disgust (Smith, 2007). Since stigma results from a "mark of disgrace" (Goffman, 1963, p. 2), the description of physical appearance that evokes disgust can easily distinguish people, and therefore stigmatize them. Hence, political news coverage focusing on physical appearance, when it distinguishes and disgraces people based on that appearance, may become stigmatizing (Heuer et al., 2011). Additionally, body size can easily become stigmatized through linguistic marking, because body size is easily visible. Although large bodies do not always evoke disgust, Anderson and Bresnahan (2013) observed disgust reactions such as "repulsive" or "yuck" (p. 609) from participants exposed to images of men and women with large bodies. Thus, one method of conveying weight-based stigma in news messages would be through labeling large bodies in a negative way that evokes disgust.

Labeling. The second function of a stigma communication message is to create a negative “label” for the stigmatized person or group (Smith, 2007). Labels are a powerful and concise way to categorize people (Hogg & Reid, 2006). Beukeboom (2014) refers to labels as a form of linguistic bias that often reflects widely held prejudice. Labels can be dehumanizing, since they reduce an individual’s personhood to a particular characteristic shared with other people possessing a similar condition. Metaphors, especially for health issues, can function as stigmatizing labels (Chopra & Doody, 2007; Sontag, 2001). For example, a person with diabetes may be stigmatized by being called “a diabetic,” or a person with disabilities may be called “disabled.” Foroni and Rothbart (2011) observed that using labels about body size affected audience perceptions about ingrouping and outgrouping with respect to weight: audiences downplayed differences between people in the same weight category and exaggerated differences between different categories. Weight-based stigma in news media may be conveyed through messages that use labels like “fat” or “obese, which reduce the stigmatized person or group to only one characteristic: weight.

Assigning personal responsibility. The third function of a stigma communication message is to assign personal responsibility for the stigmatized condition to the stigmatized person or group (Smith, 2007). Some metaphors about obesity, such as describing it as a “sin” or an “addiction” place the responsibility for this condition on the individual (Barry et al., 2009), and thus stigmatize it. Puhl and Brownell (2003) argue that the psychosocial origins of obesity stigma can be explained by the ways that people make attributions about obesity, drawing on beliefs about the controllability of weight status and blaming the individual for it. Personal responsibility in weight-based stigma messages often operates in two ways. First, the stigmatized person is assigned personal responsibility for their current weight status (Campos, Saguy,

Ernsberger, Oliver, & Gaesser, 2006). Second, they are assigned personal responsibility for ridding themselves of this stigmatizing feature, i.e., they are responsible for changing their weight (Rich & Evans, 2005).

Messages about personal responsibility for weight status can also become politicized (Gard, 2010). Similar to their stance on other issues, political conservatives in the United States frame the issue of obesity as one that originates from individual behaviors (like food consumption) and should be addressed at the individual level. Conversely, similar to their stance on other issues, political liberals in the United States frame the issue of obesity as an issue of individual overconsumption driven by structural forces that emphasize individual consumerism over public health and safety (Gard, 2010). In either case, by assigning personal responsibility for one's stigmatized condition through evaluating personal choices and linking them to the stigmatized condition, the audience is more likely to experience sociocognitive effects such as "victim blaming" and lacking empathy toward the stigmatized person or group (Bresnahan, Silk, & Zhuang, 2013). Thus, weight-based stigma in news media may be conveyed through messages that, through negatively evaluating personal choices, assign personal responsibility for one's weight status.

Linking with peril. The fourth and final function of stigma communication messages is to link the stigmatized group with physical or social peril. When a stigmatized person or group is linked to peril through communication, such a message conveys "threats to physical safety of others and evoke fear" (Smith, 2007, p. 471). In other words, when exposed to stigmatizing messages that link a stigmatized group with peril, the audience's sociocognitive responses include fear and stigmatizing attitudes that drive a desire to isolate and remove the stigmatized group (Smith, 2007). Metaphors can function to convey threats, as seen in Thibodeau and

Boroditsky's (2011) study that used metaphors like a "preying beast" or a "plaguing disease" to describe a city's crime problem. Weight-based stigma messages consistently link obesity with physical and social peril, and often do so with political undertones. Obesity is linked to physical health concerns and growing health care costs (Campos et al., 2006). In addition, obesity is linked to social/moral peril through claims that rising obesity rates signal "increasing moral laxity" among the population (Campos et al., 2006, p. 58). These links have political undertones in both neoliberal (LeBesco, 2010) and neoconservative (Rich & Evans, 2005) rhetoric in the United States that links obesity to not only moral perils, but also to perils involving national health and security. Thus, weight-based stigma in news media may be conveyed through messages that link overweight or obese people to physical or social peril.

Study Rationale

Metaphors reflect and affect attitudes toward their targets (Landau et al., 2009; 2010; Landau & Keefer, 2014). Metaphors can also serve all four functions of stigma communication messages: marking, labeling, assigning personal responsibility, and linking with social peril (Smith, 2007). When describing politics, previous research has established the news media often use metaphors (Gidengil & Everitt, 1999), which can sometimes be stigmatizing (Heuer et al., 2011). When describing weight, news media often stigmatize obesity (Barry et al., 2011; Heuer et al., 2011; McClure et al., 2011; Rich & Evans, 2005), sometimes through metaphors (Barry et al., 2009; Puhl et al., 2013). Heuer et al. (2011) argue that negative news media messages about a politician's weight spread obesity stigma, however, they did not examine the use of metaphor to perpetuate this stigma. Thus, to determine how metaphors operate in news media to convey weight-based stigma about a political candidate, we conducted a case study examining the online

news stories (and comments) that mentioned or focused on the weight of a well-known, overweight, U.S. politician: New Jersey Governor Chris Christie.

Case studies provide an opportunity to develop rich, deep interpretations of focused events (Sjoberg, Williams, Vaughan, & Sjoberg, 1991). The study of language, and particularly metaphor, requires in-depth understanding of a particular phenomenon (Crisp, Heywood, & Steen, 2002). Obese political candidates often experience ridicule and stigmatization that could deter them from continuing to run for political office (Roehling et al., 2014). Christie is a good focus for a case study about political news coverage that stigmatizes obesity. First, Christie was in the national spotlight when he ran in the Republican presidential primary in 2016. Second, he is a prominent, outspoken politician who has received a lot of media attention (Bump, 2015). Third, Christie has a large body, and therefore is subject to weight-based stigma (Bresnahan, Zhuang, Anderson, Zhu, & Viken, 2016). Thus, our case study of media coverage of Christie considered how such coverage stigmatizes obesity through the use of metaphor. Specifically, our case study was guided by this research question:

RQ: How do weight-based metaphors reflect the functions of stigma communication?

Method

Articles that dealt with Christie's weight were gathered through Google Alert on the topic "Chris Christie and weight" between January 2011 and December 2014. News stories about Christie were obtained from conservative, liberal, and nonpartisan news sites, including, for example, *Washington Times*, *Christian Science Monitor*, *American Thinker*, *Washington Wire*, *Fox News*, *ABC News*, *The Wire*, *Politico*, *NPR*, and *CNN*. This sampling process produced $N = 319$ news articles from 110 online news sites. Of these, only $N = 240$ dealt primarily with Chris

Christie and his weight. Within these stories, there were $N = 1490$ references to Christie's weight. Coders then identified metaphors within these references.

Two coders identified 246 metaphors posted by either journalists or members of the public (intercoder alpha of .93). Then, two co-authors used Smith's (2007) functions of stigma communication messages (marking, labeling, assigning personal responsibility, and linking to social peril) to analyze the metaphors. Specifically, the coders looked at each metaphor and asked: "which function does this serve?"² Discrepancies in coding were resolved via discussions among the authors.

Results

Metaphors that Mark

Christie was often described by metaphors that marked, or called attention to, his large body or parts of his body. For example, Christie is called a "fat stone," "pork butt," "fat butt," and a "large bucket of guts." Still other metaphors are used to highlight Christie's size: "a parade size float being hoisted by a helicopter," "he could roll the blacktop out on the road," a "massive punching bag," and "he is big enough to block out the sun." Another article explained that he was "too fat to *run* for president, so he can waddle." In all of these cases, the metaphor functions produce, in the readers' mind, a mark upon Christie's physical body that evokes disgust.

Commenters often used so-called 'fat jokes' to articulate metaphors that marked Christie's body size. Some examples included: "You want [Christie] on your side, except in a canoe;" "His cereal bowl is so big it needs a lifeguard;" or "Put parking cones near him when he dances." Each of these 'fat jokes' uses metaphors to link trite ideas about large bodies (the source) to disparage Christie (the target). Similar to metaphors about other health-related issues

(Chopra & Doody, 2007; Sontag, 2001), these metaphors diminish him from a complex human being in politics to a one-dimensional character in a quotidian humorous discourse.

One final metaphor served to mark Christie's body. One commenter referred to Christie's body shape as "Rubenesque." This term references the nude paintings of female bodies from the Baroque painter Peter Paul Rubens, and hence is typically used in reference to large, *female* bodies (Sweet, 2014). Thus, the use of this metaphor to describe Christie feminizes him, marking him as "other" not only in terms of his weight not fitting within the bounds of "normal," but also outside the boundaries of appropriate masculinity and modesty. Anderson and Bresnahan (2013) also found that weight-based stigma communication can mark people due to physical transgressions of both weight and gender norms.

Metaphors that Label

Journalists and commenters also used metaphors to label Christie based on his weight. Like other popular discourses that label obesity as a disability (Barry et al., 2009), one journalist labeled Christie as "handicapped by his weight." Writers also used metaphors to label Christie as a variety of large-bodied, real-life and fictional archetypes. For example, Christie was described as an "extra big oompa loompa," "the mascot of the fat slobs," "a big-ass lineman," and the "emperor with no clothes." Finally, he was described as a "jolly fat Santa," which invokes a common stereotype about fat people, e.g., that all fat people should be jolly (Degher & Hughes, 1999).

Animals and food were the source of additional metaphors that labeled Christie. Animal labels were commonly used as metaphors to describe Christie; he is called "an elephant" who will "accept peanuts for his services," "a pufferfish," "a fat cat," a "big fat rhino," and a "pig with an apple in his mouth." One commenter referred to Christie as a "baby seal" that will be

“clubbed to death.” Christie was also described with metaphors that labelled Christie as types of high-calorie foods such as “Christie cream,” “Kris Krispy,” “CC Kreme,” and “Crisco Kid Chris Crispy Creme Christie.” In addition to labeling Christie as a type of food, journalists and commenters often evoked food when using metaphors that assigned personal responsibility for his weight to Christie.

Metaphors that Assign Personal Responsibility

To assign personal responsibility through metaphor, journalists and commenters used the obesity as sin metaphor. Journalists used the sin metaphor for obesity (Barry et al., 2009) when they described him as a “glutton for punishment.” Although this colloquialism can be used outside of weight stigma, when it is linked with Christie’s large body through a conceptual metaphor (Landau & Keefer, 2014), it becomes a stigmatizing metaphor about weight through context (Cisneros, 2008). In another example of using metaphor to assign personal responsibility, in response to Christie’s attempt to lose weight (thereby embodying personal responsibility for his weight), a commenter retorted: “He needs a band around his mouth--not his stomach.”

Writers often evoked the metaphor of a relationship, either emotional or addictive/animalistic, to assign personal responsibility to Christie for his weight. References to food often drew on the metaphor of an *emotional relationship* between Christie and the food he consumed. For example, commenters explained that Christie “spends time with the fridge” and was “dreaming of Twinkies and fried chicken.” Some journalists described him as the “donut eating” politician who is always “thinking of donuts.” Other journalists evoked the relationship metaphor when they wrote that Christie was “worried about a Velveeta shortage.” In a final case, a journalist described Christie as having “chicken bones in the closet.” This is a reference to the colloquialism of hiding a “skeleton in the closet” meaning that someone is intentionally keeping

information in a personal and private place, due to its embarrassing nature. It also suggests that Christie has eaten an excessive amount of chicken his personal home. In this case, the writer is claiming that Christie has secrets, and is using the “chicken bones” metaphor to evoke the shame and embarrassment associated with obesity.

In other cases, writers created a metaphor of an *addictive relationship* to assign personal responsibility to Christie for his weight. For example, commenters suggested that Christie would not be able to control his desire for certain types of food, “Christie would monopolize the buffet,” and “do not let this guy near a Burger King!!!” Public commenters also described his eating habits by saying that he often has the “urge to have a donut” and that he “scarfed down a jelly donut on Letterman.” In other cases, commenters described exaggerated amounts of food consumption that indicate an unhealthy or addictive relationship with food. One commenter said “Chris Christie ate his 15,659 calorie double cheeseburger with gnocchi and a shake;” another evoked a typical ‘fat joke’ style and said, “Christie could eat all the terrorists and still have room for dessert.” Sometimes, the addiction to food seemed to overtake Christie in animalistic forms, such as when one commenter described Christie as a “pig who eats a bucket of hog slop,” or when a journalist explained that Christie (like a cow) “grazes” to satisfy his “growling stomach.”

Metaphors that Link to Peril

Metaphors that linked Christie to peril suggested threats that Christie could pose to other individuals or society. Journalists and commenters used the metaphor of a weapon to describe Christie’s body. His body was often described as dangerous, or capable of inflicting harm. For example, Christie was described as able to “pulverize a floor,” “crush his opponents,” “crush the press,” “tackle [the writer],” “threaten to sit on you,” or “break a bridge.” One commenter described Christie as a “threat to buffets.” In other cases, Christie’s body was seen as posing a

threat to himself. For example, Christie was described as a “ticking time bomb” or “a heart attack waiting to happen.” One commenter explained that Christie was “sinking like a fat stone.” In another case, Christie is described as dangerous and willing to “throw people under the bus.” As a politician, a very heavy Christie is described as “throwing his weight around,” suggesting that he uses intimidation tactics against potential opponents. In each of these cases, Christie’s body was framed as a negative asset for his political career, either because it posed a threat or because it was not capable of normal functioning.

Christie also poses peril through metaphorical descriptions of dangerous mythical creatures such as a “big monster,” a “fat nightmare,” a “bridge troll,” or an “angry, bellicose behemoth.” Discourse linking fat bodies to monsters has historic and contemporary antecedents. Farrell (2011), in her book *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, explains that the discourse of fat bodies as monstrous can be traced back, at least, to the women’s suffrage movement, when anti-suffragists classified suffragettes as fat, “primitive monsters” that were disrupting the “racial and gender order of civilization” (p. 108). Daufin (2014) suggested that, in contemporary popular discourse, fat bodies are seen as monstrous or horrific, because they have seemingly ‘gone wild’ and beyond the bounds of ‘normal’ bodies. Similarly, Christie’s body is associated with very negative, dangerous creatures that are beyond the realm of reality, almost suggesting that Christie’s obesity has strayed beyond the bounds of normal human possibilities. Peril metaphors suggest that obese people are abnormal and pose a social threat to others; thus, they become the objects of public scorn and ridicule.

Discussion

This study documented how journalists and commenters on online news sites used metaphors about Christie’s weight to accomplish each of the four functions of stigma

communication messages: marking, labeling, assigning personal responsibility, and linking to social peril (Smith, 2007). This illustrates that, not only do news coverage and public comments stigmatize Christie for his body size, but that they use metaphors to accomplish this goal. These findings are consistent with previous research that established the use of metaphor in news reporting on politics (Charteris-Black, 2011; Gidengil & Everitt, 1999; Samuels, 2015) and obesity stigma in news media (Barry et al., 2011; Heuer et al., 2011; McClure et al., 2011; Rich & Evans, 2005), and the use of metaphor to convey that stigma (Barry et al., 2009; Puhl et al., 2013). However, the novelty of this study is how it uses a theoretical framework to bring together these areas of research and illustrate just how metaphors are used in ways that function to communicate weight-based stigma.

Metaphors are a powerful way to convey stigma about a target (Sontag, 2001), because they create conceptual maps that link the target (in this case, Christie) with sources (Landau & Keefer, 2014), and thus frame the target in particular ways that affect perceptions of that target (Landau et al., 2009). However, previous research has not linked stigma communication message functions with metaphors to examine just how metaphors communicate stigma. In the current study, we observed that metaphors served all four functions of stigma communication. Given that both metaphoric (Landau et al., 2010) and stigmatizing language (Smith, 2007) arise from social interactions, the use of these metaphors to stigmatize Christie's weight in particular ways reflects the underlying attitudes and beliefs of both the journalists and the commenters in these online news stories (Landau et al., 2009; 2010; Landau & Keefer, 2014). In this case, we are observing both how the "metaphor-enriched cognition" (Landau et al., 2010, p. 1046) of journalists and commenters is filled with metaphors that stigmatize weight, and how those cognitions are then shaping the messages that they share. Those messages, then, frame the issue

of this politician's weight (Landau & Keefer, 2014) so that stigmatizing weight-based metaphors become further entrenched in public discourse about weight and find their way into the web of metaphoric cognitions among readers.

Metaphors that Communicate Stigma

Weight-based metaphors functioned to communicate stigma in four key ways. First, journalists and commenters used metaphors to mark Christie's body and body size. This linguistic marking was accomplished through calling attention to parts of his body, to his body as a whole, or using 'fat jokes' that draw attention to the body. One common way to mark the body as large was to compare his body to large, non-human objects like a parade float, a steamroller, a punching bag, or an object large enough to block out the sun. These types of comparisons function to dehumanize Christie by linking him metaphorically (Landau & Keefer, 2014) with objects that are non-human. Thus, the metaphor meets Smith's (2007) criteria for this function to call attention to the visible differences of the person being stigmatized and to evoke disgust. In addition, the metaphor, through conceptual mapping (Landau & Keefer), links Christie to inanimate objects, thereby stigmatizing *and* dehumanizing him.

Second, journalists and commenters used metaphors to label Christie's body as malfunctioning or disabled. This labeling is similar to other obesity stigma which treats obesity as a disability (Barry et al., 2009). This metaphor adds a layer of labeling to the issue. Whereas previous research has suggested that simply calling a person 'fat' or 'overweight' serves a labeling function that constitutes weight-based stigma (Anderson & Bresnahan, 2013), in this case, we observe that the metaphor accomplishes weight-based stigma by drawing upon stigma about disability (Barry et al., 2009). That is, the metaphor draws upon the audience's stereotypes (Beukeboom, 2014; Hogg & Ried, 2006) about disability as well as obesity in order to give

meaning to Christie's body size, and in so doing, creates a double-stigma toward him.

Additionally, Christie was labeled as an animal or food product through metaphors. Anderson et al. (2014) also observed that people used animals and food as metaphors to label their own bodies, but did not use a stigma communication framework to determine whether such labels were stigmatizing. Metaphors, again through their link to the concrete objects (Landau & Keefer, 2014), serve the labeling function by dehumanizing Christie according to the essential characteristics of the non-human source objects.

Third, journalists and commenters used metaphors to assign personal responsibility for his weight to Christie. The metaphor of a relationship was used to assign personal responsibility for weight. The concept of a relationship, at least for Western readers, connotes continued, personal choice, and thus conveys that Christie continually chooses to be overweight through excessive food consumption. Writers described Christie's relationship with food as both emotional and addictive. In both iterations, Christie is portrayed as succumbing to overwhelming desire, almost behaving according to instinct—like an animal. In this way, the constellation of metaphors used to stigmatize Christie intersect, so that the ways that metaphors label Christie (as animalistic, subhuman) spill over into the ways that metaphors explain his personal responsibility for his stigmatized condition (as a weak-willed person continually choosing an abusive relationship). By using the framework of stigma communication theory to establish *how* metaphors function to communicate stigma, we are able to see the ways that different types of metaphors work together to generate weight-based stigma about Christie.

Fourth, journalists and commenters used metaphors to link Christie with peril, by casting his body as a weapon or a monster. This metaphoric presentation is unique from other studies on obesity stigma, where the negative effects of obesity are more commonly framed in terms of a

disease or disability (Barry et al., 2009). In contrast, in this sample, we observed that Christie's body was made to appear as a weapon that could inflict damage upon himself or others. Perhaps this weapon metaphor owes itself to the political context of these stories; political metaphors often draw upon conflict and war metaphors and speak to the ways that opponents may threaten or damage one another (Landau & Keefer, 2014). This again illustrates how metaphors can, in very few symbolically-packed words, take meaning from one context and connect it to another through conceptual maps (Landau & Keefer, 2014). This also illustrates the underlying cognitive states of the writers, who were potentially blending contemporary war/conflict-type metaphors about obesity as a disease that attacks the body (Barry et al., 2009) and about politics as a war/conflict (Landau & Keefer, 2014) to illustrate how obesity operates in the political arena. The weapon metaphor boldly linked Christie's body size to peril, and thus communicated stigma.

Future Directions and Limitations

Metaphors have the possibility of persuading readers to adopt new attitudes, but they may also serve to re-inforce pre-existing attitudes. Metaphors are clearly powerful vehicles for expressing opposition and for shaping public opinion (Thibodeau, 2016). Landau and Keefer (2014) concluded that "exposure to a metaphoric framing can bias people's attitudes toward abstract issues by leading them to base their attitudes on knowledge of irrelevant yet familiar concrete concepts, without due consideration of the unique attributes of target issues" (p. 16). Future studies should examine the effects of exposure to the types of metaphor-based stigma messages observed in this study. In particular, future researchers could consider how pre-existing attitudes toward obesity influence audience's perceptions of the meanings of the metaphors used to stigmatize. In addition, one could examine how the combined metaphors (such as disability or sin) function to create what we called a "double-stigma." Future research could examine such

questions as: When more than one stigmatized condition is combined metaphorically, do the stigmas (and their effects) combine additively or multiplicatively? How does this combination of stigmas in a metaphor affect perceptions of each stigmatized group—as well as those who belong to both groups? In what ways do cognitions about metaphors conveying combined stigmas differ from those that regarding metaphors that portray a single stigmatized condition?

Although the current study did not directly examine effects, given the ways that metaphors served the functions of stigma communication, it is possible that these stigmatizing metaphors produced similar effects that typical stigma communication does: anger, disgust, fear, and a desire to isolate and remove the target of stigma (Smith, 2007). Future studies could expose participants to the types of metaphor-based stigma observed in this study to test for cognitive and emotional responses to those messages. Experimental studies could determine whether metaphorical language has stronger influences on those message responses than non-metaphorical language. In addition, future studies could examine the extent to which exposure to such messaging drives stigma attitudes, intentions to isolate and remove stigmatized people, and intentions to share stigma messages. Specifically, in an online news context, future researchers could examine how stigmatizing messages spread through social media sites like Facebook or Twitter, and how opinion leaders may drive that phenomenon.

In this study, we observed that a great deal of attention has been paid to Christie's appearance, specifically, his weight. This may be due to increasing media attention to, and stigmatization of, obesity in the United States (Heuer et al., 2011). Future research should examine media treatment of other obese politicians both within the United States and in other countries. Especially interesting would be comparative studies of media treatment of large-bodied politicians in countries with varying levels of affluence, where the social meaning of a

large body may differ, e.g., a large body is a sign of health and prosperity (Mahmud & Crittenden, 2007). Additionally, media attention to Christie increased, and likely peaked, during his bid for the 2016 Republican presidential nomination. As Christie's political career shifts, future research should examine whether news media outlets continue to portray Christie negatively. It would be interesting to discover whether descriptions have become more or less stigmatizing since his bid for the presidency, and also to look generally at whether mentions of his weight increased or decreased after he dropped out of the race.

This study, like any study, has limitations. One limitation of this study is that it is only concerned with online news sources, and therefore cannot account for the discourse present on news channels or daily news programs. On televised newscasts, similar stories and discourse may be presented multiple days in a row, or even multiple times in one day or one newscast. This repetition may increase the chances for weight-based metaphors to appear, and they may have a greater impact on audiences. It is possible that members of the public drawn to political news sites already had strong stigma toward obesity and dislike for Christie, and the comments they found posted there reinforced their pre-existing opinions. Because we did not gather data from readers or commenters, we cannot know how their prior attitudes affected their information-seeking or interpretation of the content.

In conclusion, this study identified specific patterns in the use of metaphor to stigmatize a politician based on his weight. Our findings not only speak to the prevalence of weight-stigmatizing metaphors in news media coverage of political candidates, but also to the ways that these metaphors operate as part of complex messages that constitute stigma communication. Stigmatizing communication has many negative effects on the person stigmatized (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011), as well as on the general discourse surrounding the stigmatized issue—in this

case, body size. These findings show the journalistic practice of using unflattering weight descriptions and metaphors, which encourages and strengthens obesity stigma; these practices need to change.

DRAFT

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¹ Since message reactions and effects are not the focus of this study, we only provide detailed explanations of the stigma communication message functions.

² Some metaphors did not evoke any stigma functions. For example, he was described as a “god of republican and libertarian politics,” or an “Iron Man or Thor.” Such positive metaphors accounted for less than 2% of the metaphors in the sample, and are not presented in the results.