

Weight Discrimination and Weight Discrimination Training among Fitness Professionals

Scan for more information!



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Introduction

Fitness spaces aim to promote health, yet weight discrimination - the unequal treatment of individuals based on body size - is widespread (Panza et al., 2018). If fitness professionals hold these biases, how inclusive can the industry really be? This research project investigated the prevalence of weight stigma in the fitness industry and evaluated the availability and effectiveness of training programmes for fitness professionals.



Why this Research?

1

84% of plus-size and underweight gym users report feeling judged negatively by other gym members or staff (Hughes, n.d.), impacting engagement with and experiences of gyms, exercise groups, and outdoor activities.

2

Studies (Zuest et. al (2023) and Lee et. al (2024)) suggest that fitness professionals play a key role in perpetuating weight discrimination in fitness settings.

Aim: Improve weight inclusivity in gyms by reducing weight stigma

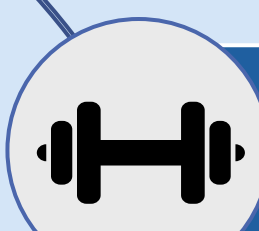
3

Better training in weight discrimination could reduce bias among fitness professionals and improve relationships with gym-goers, but no such training currently exists.

4

By developing training resources, the research has potential to inform policy, education and professional development within the fitness industry.

Research Objectives



To assess the prevalence and forms of weight discrimination among UK fitness professionals.



To identify and analyse existing training programs for UK fitness professionals on weight discrimination.



To evaluate gaps in training and propose recommendations for developing targeted training materials.

Methodology

Fitness professional training landscape mapping

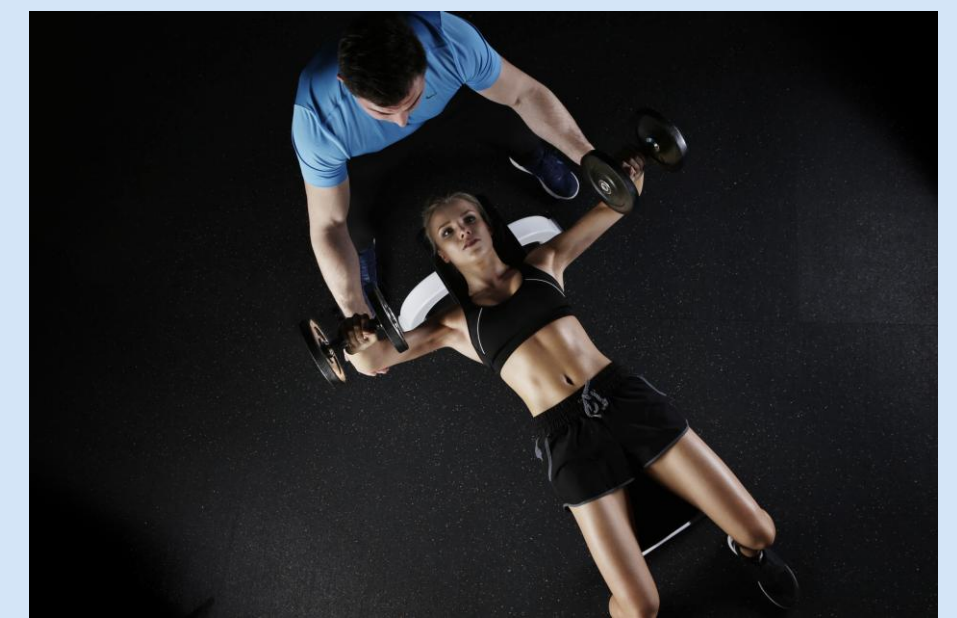
Internet deep dive and review of training pathways and qualification requirements for UK fitness professionals

Academic Literature Scoping

- Key word literature searching
- Systematic review of study methods
- Evidence synthesis
- Identification of key thinkers

Participant Data Collection (Interviews)

Interviews with 15 fitness professionals (5 self-defined as 'weight neutral'), exploring perceptions of weight discrimination



Findings

Weight Discrimination Training Provision

Landscape mapping revealed that UK fitness professionals receive little formal training on weight stigma, with exposure only through optional, self-funded CPD courses or specialist training provided by boutique gyms. Interview participants' confidence in weight inclusive training is shaped by experiences of training with diverse client body types, rather than formal education.

Weight Discrimination in Practice

Literature scoping revealed weight bias is common in fitness spaces (Panza et al., 2018) and is likely to perpetuate gender and socioeconomic inequalities. Certain groups appear more prone to holding these biases, for example differences by gender and personal familiarity with obesity (Zaroubi, Samaan and Alberga, 2021). Interview participants reported witnessing weight stigma and noted societal pressure to maintain a certain appearance as a fitness professional. However, many participants suggested that perceived judgment, rather than overt discrimination, may create barriers to gym access.

Need/ Appetite for Weight Discrimination Training

The prevalence of weight discrimination in fitness spaces highlights a need for training. However, interview participants suggested that engagement would likely be low unless training is mandatory. Schneider et al. (2024) found that educational and reflective interventions produced small reductions in explicit weight bias, especially regarding beliefs about weight controllability and personal blame, but no interventions demonstrated significant, long-lasting changes in implicit weight bias.

Conclusions

Weight bias is widespread in fitness spaces, yet UK fitness professionals receive little formal training. While there is a clear need for weight discrimination training, uptake is likely to remain low unless it is mandatory.

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