

# Studies of differentiated weight levels and weight perceptions explored through the theoretical work of Pierre Bourdieu

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The prevalence of overweight and obesity has increased steadily in recent decades in Denmark and the western world (Due et al. 2006; WHO 2000). In 1987, about 25 percent of the adult Danish population was classified as overweight and 6 percent as obese. In 2010 the numbers had increased to 40 percent overweight and 12.5 percent obese (DIKE 1997; Bonke & Greve 2010). In 1995 about 10.9 percent of all Danish children were estimated to be overweight, whereas 2.3 percent were estimated to be obese. In 2002 these numbers had increased to 14.4 percent and 2.4 percent (Matthiessen et al. 2008). The increased weight levels appear in spite of the significant focus on the problem by politicians, media, and society as a whole. There is a myriad of information about healthy living and campaigns on weight gain prevention. We speak of and are subjected to health, healthy living, and weight status constantly.

On the individual level overweight and obesity can have significant effects on physical health, mental health (Wyatt et al. 2006; McElroy et al. 2004) as well as social well being – especially for children. Overweight and obese children more often suffer negative social and psychological ramifications caused by their weight levels (Janssen et al. 2004). On a societal level, the increased levels of population overweight and obesity have clear financial implications. Direct costs for health treatments related to weight as well as indirect costs due to lower productivity among the obese have increased (Stein & Colditz 2004).

An abundance of epidemiological studies have found a correlation between gender, socioeconomic status, and weight levels. Men as well as people with lower educational- and income levels are more likely to be overweight and obese (Sarlio-Lähteenkorva et al. 2006; Wang & Beydoun 2007). However, socio-cultural perspectives on lifestyles and body images have gained more and more attention in weight-related research in

the latter years. It is argued that economic capability or educational level as such do not shape weight outcomes. Instead, the interrelationship between class, taste, and the body should be investigated (Williams 1995) and attention should be on the overall lifestyle. That is lifestyles as a sociological concept focusing on the social practices and ways of living that reflect personal, group, and socioeconomic identities (Giddens 1991). According to the socio-cultural perspective there is a cultural relativity to body formation, preference, and perception. Values and preferences regarding the body are formed culturally and learned socially. Underlining the importance of lifestyle and socially formed understandings of the body, weight and health studies show that the way public campaigns and interventions are received differ between population groups. Not only are men and people of lower socioeconomic status more prone to overweight and obesity they are also less likely to change behavior and act on health campaigns (Miles et al. 2001; Politiken 2011). Overall there seem to be a tendency that health interventions speak mainly to people already living healthily (Mogensen & Enevoldsen 2011).

Hence, lifestyles, body perceptions, and body treatment differ between groups of society and these differentials are the outset of my studies. My focus is on the way social position intertwine with bodily perceptions and the results hereof. I use the theories of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and look at how social position is interlinked with weight and weight perception in a Danish context and explores it on the basis of quantitative studies.

## **Theoretical and methodological approach**

Different theorists and differing theoretical points of view have been employed in furthering the understanding of lifestyles as a potential health and weight

determinant. However, although called for by several researchers, the work of Bourdieu has less often been incorporated in weight related research (Carpiano 2005; Frohlich et al. 2001). In my PhD and further studies based hereon I employ the work of Bourdieu, his theories of social stratification and social space with his considerations of lifestyle, focusing especially on his concepts of habitus, field, and capital in a study of differentiated weight-levels and weight perceptions in the Danish population. The PhD is not intended to be and is not a comprehensive review of Bourdieu's theories. More so my work is an attempt to connect a theoretical standpoint with empirical studies on weight and body image. I draw on Bourdieu's more extensive theoretical framework concerning lifestyle to empirically further explanations of differentiated lifestyle choices, weight-levels, and weight perceptions. By drawing upon Bourdieu's theories as well as other sociological research on body image I am able to construct a Bourdieu-based conceptual model of lifestyle and capital possession and study its intersect with weight levels and weight perceptions thereby furthering epidemiological and public health research focused on socioeconomic status. The research is quantitative and I use different statistical estimation techniques to capture capital and social position and for studying the correlation between social position, lifestyles, and weight outcomes.

Bourdieu's larger focus is on the question of how individuals' routine practices are influenced by the external structure of their social world and how these practices, in turn, contribute to the maintenance of that structure (Jenkins 1992). According to Bourdieu (1990) internalization of the same structures and common schemes of perception and appreciation produce the same or similar sets of distinctive signs or tastes. Thus, the habitus ("a structured and structuring structure") is structured by an individual's class conditions and, in turn, structures social practices, and reproduce class differences (Cockerham et al. 1997). Lifestyles thereby become a system of classified and classifying practices involving differing tastes.

Therefore, within the field of consumption, the alignment between objective conditions and tastes suggests that individuals with different levels and distributions of resources - denoted capital by Bourdieu - have a tendency to value different types of food (Bourdieu

1984:183). Furthermore, the idea of the body and the importance of strength, health, and beauty tend to vary according to social position. Bodies are socially formed and the look of the body and the way people treat and relate to their body "reveal[s] the deepest disposition of the habitus" (Bourdieu 1984:190). As such lifestyles hold explanatory power regarding body formation and perceptions while control over and look of the body holds the potential to demonstrate and sustain class differences (Bourdieu 1978). These suppositions regarding tastes, values, and body formations are supported by other research that apply Bourdieu's theories on subjects such as health (Larsen et al. 2010; Jensen et al. 2007; Veenstra 2007; Gatrell et al. 2004) consumption patterns (Prieur & Rosenlund 2010; Jæger & Katz-Gerro 2010; Kraaykamp 2002; Øygard 2000) and sport activities (Pedersen & Benjaminsen 2006; Poulsen, 2004; Wilson, 2002). Bourdieu, himself, used an array of methods to examine and develop his theories - and was a strong advocate for empirical analyses. He set forward the notion of studying practice, behavior, and preferences through empirical analyses and used several different types of quantitative studies in his work advocating methodological polytheism (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992).

Thus, by contextualizing my research on weight within Bourdieu's theories of lifestyles and on the interplay between social conditions and preferences, values, and behavior I show how the weight of individuals are interlinked with their social position and level of resources. In the spirit of Bourdieu, I use empirical quantitative studies and methods to examine the problematic. I use data from the Danish GFK consumer-scan panel (GFKP) on 2019 Danish households including both adults and their children. The GFK-panel reports weekly food purchases, as well as the responses to an annual questionnaire with background information. Background information from 2007 has been merged with data from a survey posed to the panel in 2007 with questions on weight and weight-perception. I derive a specific social position for each individual in the data through an array of questions suitable for an empirical measurement of capital. That is of economic, cultural, and social capital as also empirically found by Bourdieu. I then employ these levels of capital possession along with background information in statistical ana-

lyses of the correlation between weight levels, weight perceptions, capital, and social position. I furthermore explore the connection between capital and different lifestyles questions related to health, food, exercise, and leisure.

**Results**

The empirical findings suggest a clear connection between capital possession – especially cultural capital – and weight level as well as focus on having a healthy lifestyle. Individuals with greater levels of capital have lower weight levels on average and are more concerned with health (Christensen 2010, 2011a). Figure 1 and 2 shows the probability for overweight and obesity for women and men dependent on their levels of cultural and economic capital, respectively. The figures illustrate the clear correlation between capital possessions and probabilities for overweight and obesity (Christensen 2011a). Capitals are measured on a scale from -1.5 to 1.5 with 0 being the average level of possession. Figure 1 shows how the probabilities of both overweight (the broken lines) and obesity (the solid lines) decrease as the level of cultural capital increases. The results are seen for both men (black lines) and women (grey lines). As seen in figure 2 the same holds true for women and their possessions of economic capital. The more economic capital women possess the lower the probability of overweight or obesity. However, for men higher levels of economic capital do correlate with increased probabilities for overweight and obesity.

Figure 1: Probability for overweight and obesity dependent on cultural capital, separately for women and men

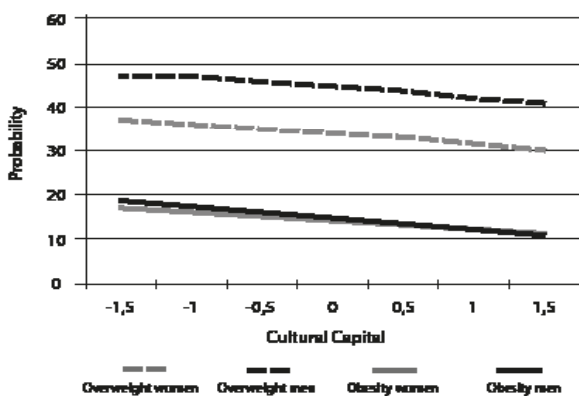
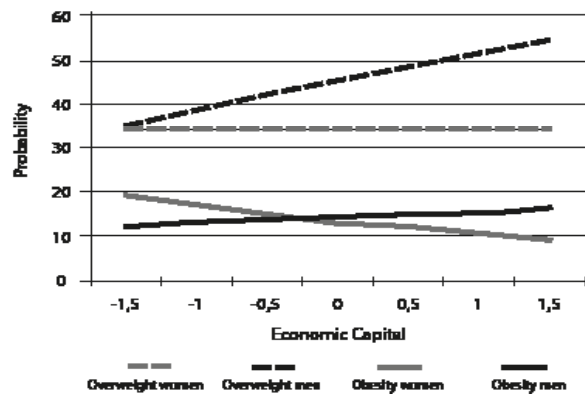


Figure 2: Probability for overweight and obesity dependent on economic capital, separately for women and men



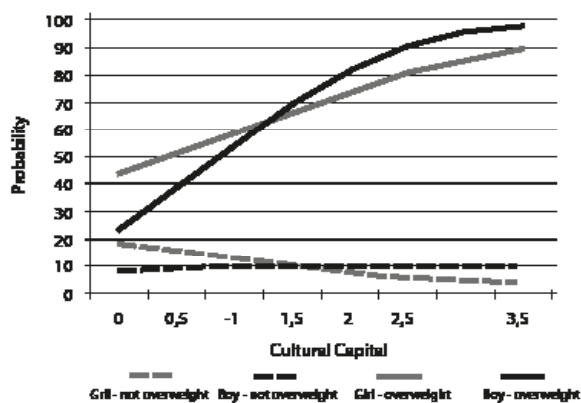
Findings presented in Christensen 2011b furthermore show clear differences in weight perceptions according to level of capital possession. Comparing actual weight levels with perceived weight level individuals with higher levels of capital more often rate their weight according to standardized BMI categories whereas individuals with lower levels of capital possession have a tendency to underestimate their own weight level. For instance, the more capital possessed the more likely overweight individuals are to also perceive themselves as overweight, whereas overweight individuals with lower levels of capital are less likely to perceive themselves as overweight.

*Children*

I furthermore look at the formation of differentiated body images developed within a family context and investigate child weight levels as well as parental perceptions of child weight level according to parental capital possession (Christensen 2011c). Again I find clear tendencies towards higher child weight levels the less capital the parents possess. Additionally, parents with higher levels of capital rate their children’s weight in accordance with standardized BMI levels (as established by Cole et al. 2000) whereas parents with lesser capital tend to underestimate their children’s actual weight levels when compared to standardized BMI categorizations. Figure 3 illustrates these results. Overweight children are more probable to be perceived as overweight the more cultural capital the parents’ possess. Whereas not overweight children are less probable

of being perceived as overweight the more cultural capital the parents' possess. For instance, the solid black line in the figure represents boys categorized as overweight according to their BMI. Among parents with a low level of cultural capital a relatively low percentage actually perceive their sons as overweight. The percentage clearly increases as the level of cultural capital increase. Similarly, the broken grey line represents girls that are not overweight according to their BMI. Here, we see that parents with less cultural capital are more likely to perceive their non-overweight daughter as being overweight compared to parents with higher levels of cultural capital.

Figure 3. Probability of perceiving a child as overweight or very overweight at different levels of cultural capital possession, separately for child gender and actual overweight



*Gender*

A second main finding of my research is the clear gender differences prevalent in weight levels, weight perceptions, and body images. The interconnectedness between male and female weight expectations and body images has been discussed by social theorists, sociologists, and psychologists. A strand of literature theorizes on the gendered schemes of domination. Theorists dealing with gendered power relations have underscored how the formation of bodies and body perceptions are a product of a practical construction where there is a socially constructed division between the sexes which appears to be natural and self-evident. In his book *Masculine Domination* (2001), Bourdieu addresses the role of gender. He argues that besides biological differences in the male and female body, socially constructed differences exist between the genders particularly regarding

the social division of labour (Bourdieu 2001:11). The body is socially differentiated and exists only relationally and, for example, adjectives like 'powerful' and 'large' are linked to males and masculinity while adjectives such as 'weak' and 'small' are linked to females and femininity – masculinity and femininity exist in their oppositions (Bourdieu 2001; Brownmiller, 1984). Accordingly, small or petite men might be viewed as somewhat feminine whereas larger, more robust women might be viewed as somewhat masculine.

Relevant to my research on weight and body image, Bourdieu argues that the bodily hexis, i.e. the physique of the body and the way it is carried and perceived, differs in men and women. To a much higher degree than men, women have a 'body for-others', which is subject to judgment and objectification and expected to be feminine or have certain aesthetics (Bourdieu 1978:839).

Although gendered body images are well theorized with previous literature establishing significant gender differences in body image and weight perceptions, empirical studies dealing with this subject across genders are very scarce (Yanover and Thompson, 2010). According to Connell (2005) most empirical research has tended to dichotomize the experiences of men and women studying gender in 'separate spheres'. Connell therefore emphasizes the importance of a relational approach to gender, acknowledging the role of the other gender in the constitution and formation of gender specifics while underscoring the role of the body in the constitution of gender, femininities, and masculinities. In my studies I therefore empirically examine the interception between gender and weight perception. Through my quantitative data I analyze how weight, weight perception, and gender interact in daily lives and in the formation of gendered weight practices, weight behaviors, and weight satisfactions. Thereby shedding light on gender differentiated weight-levels and weight-level perceptions, the interrelated dynamic between the two genders, and how bodies are affected by social processes and interactions.

The empirical findings of my research shows not only different weight levels among men and women, but more importantly it is clear that men and women are not rated on the same scale or expected to adhere to the same body standards, especially at lower weight-levels (Christensen 2011b).

The results show that there is a preference for a ‘smaller’ female body. While overweight individuals – women as well as men – tend to underestimate their own weight level as well as their overweight partners’ weight level when compared to standardized BMI levels, gender patterns differ greatly when looking at underweight and normal weight men and women. Underweight and normal weight men have a tendency to underestimate their own weight level, while men at the same time overestimate their underweight or normal weight female partner’s weight level. Likewise, women also overestimate their own weight level when belonging to the underweight and normal weight segments.

Additionally, parents have a tendency to overestimate the weight level of their daughters whereas they underestimate the weight level of their sons when compared to standardized BMI categories (Christensen 2011c). That is, parents start to categorize their daughters as overweight at a BMI that is lower than the BMI cut-of-point for overweight for their gender and age as established by Cole et al 2000, whereas parents do not start to categorize their sons as overweight until after their sons BMI have passed the cut-of-point for overweight for their gender and age.

Table 1 illustrates the results on weight perceptions for adults. For instance, the second column of the table shows how women start to perceive themselves as normal weight instead of underweight when they reach a BMI of 17.20, while they start to perceive themselves as somewhat overweight opposed to normal weight at a BMI of 24.70. Thus, women at the lower weight levels overestimate their own weight level. Contrary, as shown in column four men do not start to perceive themselves as normal weight until they reach a BMI of 19.15 and somewhat overweight until they reach a BMI of 26.55 clearly underestimating their own weight level when compared to standardized BMI categories. Both men and women underestimate their own and their partners weight level at higher weight levels.

Table 1. Estimates for self-perceived weight-level and weight perception of partner, by gender

	Women	Female partner	Men	Male partner
BMI	0.436 (0.02)***	-0.056 (0.05)	0.454 (0.05)***	-0.148 (0.03)***
Age	-0.003 (0.00)	0.033 (0.02)	0.006 (0.01)	0.027 (0.02)
Parenthood	0.029 (0.11)	-0.433 (0.28)	-0.044 (0.27)	0.000 (0.20)
Educational level	0.086 (0.04)**	-0.148 (0.08)*	-0.013 (0.08)	0.020 (0.06)
Income level	-0.023 (0.04)	0.061 (0.09)	0.138 (0.09)	0.086 (0.07)
Exercise	0.009 (0.03)	0.018 (0.07)	-0.121 (0.07)*	0.012 (0.05)
BMI of partner		0.219 (0.03)***		0.717 (0.04)***
Age of partner		-0.038 (0.02)*		-0.026 (0.02)*
Perceived weight		0.527 (0.21)**		1.159 (0.18)***
Cut underweight-normal weight	7.493 (0.51) BMI 17.20	2.515 (1.30) BMI 11.479	8.697 (1.237) BMI 19.15	13.287 (1.10) BMI 18.54
Cut normal weight-somewhat overweight	10.757 (0.56) BMI 24.70	4.949 (1.32) BMI 22.59	12.056 (1.41) BMI 26.55	18.493 (1.19) BMI 25.81
Cut somewhat overweight-overweight	13.284 (0.63) BMI 30.50	6.868 (1.37) BMI 31.35	14.518 (1.56) BMI 31.97	22.061 (1.30) BMI 30.79
Cut overweight-very overweight	15.621 (0.716) BMI 35.87	8.498 (1.51) BMI 38.79	16.708 (1.67) BMI 36.79	26.272 (1.49) BMI 36.66
No observations	859	151	160	828
Wald Chi <sup>2</sup> , Prob.> Chi <sup>2</sup>	1054.33, <0.000	106.53, <0.000	155.62, <0.000	784.94, <0.000
Pseudo R <sup>2</sup>	0.507	0.313	0.426	0.400

Significance level: \* at 10 per cent, \*\* at 5 per cent, \*\*\* at 1 per cent. Std. dev. in parentheses.

The research thereby underscores the importance of socially constructed gendered body images and their impact on perceptions and weight satisfactions. Weight preferences develop in a continuum and especially the expectations and ideals of the female body seem to work continuously and with a circular effect between men and women. Women have internalized certain weight and bodily expectations and participate in reproducing female body images, while also men judge the weight of women according to these slender ideals. Ideals that are also used when parents assess the weight level of their children.



## Conclusion

Drawing on Bourdieu's theories of lifestyle, I seek to provide an alternative approach to the understanding of differentiated population weight-levels, perceptions of weight, and body images in my studies. Instead of focusing only on socioeconomic status, the interrelationship between class, capital, taste, and the body is investigated and I focus on lifestyles, as theorized by Bourdieu, formed by the habitus connecting logics, preferences, values and behavior with objective conditions and background of the individual. By using the theories of Bourdieu I seek a fuller picture of the individual and the way lifestyles frame our actions, practice, and ways of thinking. Our actions are not just a result of the amount of money in our pocket or the educational degree on the wall but more so of our whole mindset and approach to life as theorized by Bourdieu through the terms of disposition, habitus, and position in social space.

Even though preferences for specific types of foods probably have changed since Bourdieu developed his schema it is my argument that the internal patterns of preferences still hold good as shown in Christensen 2011a and as supported by previous Scandinavian research (Prieur et al. 2008; Øygard 2000). The differences in class-favoured foods might not be between sausage and bouillabaisse as exemplified by Bourdieu (1984:187) but few would argue against the lifestyle differences between individuals choosing hamburgers and french fries as their favourite meal opposed to those choosing raw food or a hearty salad. As such, one could argue that although the exact food choices of today might not be the same as the ones Bourdieu detected class-differentiated nutritional values and tastes persist. Likewise, it is suggested that although preferences in food and leisure activities as well as the look of the body worked as a social distinguisher in Bourdieu's studies the emphasis on the body and on health has increased in recent decades. Resources regarding health have become increasingly important and a way to position and differentiate oneself in social space. Health resources and investments – or health capital to use Bourdieu's term – have become an extra source of power and advantage (cf. Larsen & Esmark 2010). Accordingly, food preferences, leisure activities, and health behaviour are increasingly used to distinguish one self

and is an integral part of the overall lifestyle. Health capital, the right behaviour regarding health, and the right look of the body has become a resource for power and a resource of power. This increased importance of capital – health capital – only underscores the significance of Bourdieu and of analysing weight related questions through a socially and class differentiated perspective.

Therefore, using Bourdieu's theoretical standpoint can not only help explain and understand weight differences, but can also be used to enhance understandings of experienced weight and body image. The aim of this study is therefore not only to investigate differentiated weight-levels but also to look at the formation of differentiated body images developed socially and influenced by gender dynamics and within a family context. I have tried to enable a better understanding of the transfer of conduct, values, and ultimately body formation from parents to children with gender as an inevitable dimension. The research underscores how men and women engage in a dynamic weight relationship and are influenced by their mutual interactions. Women as much as men are a part of socially, culturally, and historically developed body norms. When incorporating this broader understanding of how population weight levels are formed through lifestyles it enables an awareness of the way individuals react and act towards their body. When targeting the problem of population obesity my studies can hopefully help understanding why individuals react differently to the same messages and how they can be better targeted by incorporating their point of reference in the communications. Individuals that are happy with their body and weight or who have a lifestyle not emphasizing healthiness as defined by politicians and health care-workers will react differently to health campaigns and health information compared to individuals who have healthiness as a central aspect of their lifestyle.

The presented article is based on my previously published work on weight and weight perceptions using Bourdieu's theoretical framework. The studies and analyses are presented in Christensen 2010, 2011a, 2011b, and 2011c. In my studies I have used one approach to investigate the relationship between weight, weight perceptions, and lifestyles, however, the field would of course gain tremendously from further studies on the

subject matter. As of now the body and how we relate to it receives ever greater attention in research as well as the broader public. As such it is a subject that can never be fully explored and further research in the matter incorporating the theories of Bourdieu but using different methods would enhance our knowledge, greatly.

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### Abstract

Drawing on Bourdieu's theory of lifestyle connecting objective conditions with preferences, values, and behavior, my studies seeks to provide an extension to previous epidemiological and public health research focusing on socio-economic status in the study of weight levels and weight perceptions. I show how weight and weight perceptions are interlinked with social position and level of resources. I use Danish survey data from 2007 and statistical estimation techniques. The empirical findings suggest a connection between capital possession – especially cultural capital - and weight level, weight perception, as well as focus on having a healthy lifestyle. Parental capital possession also influences child weight levels and parental perceptions of child weight levels. The results demonstrate clear gender differences in weight levels, weight perceptions, and body images. The weight of females is assessed differently than the weight of males and the two genders are not expected to adhere to the same body standards.

### Keywords

Bourdieu, capital, lifestyles, weight, weight perception, gender, children, quantitative research

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