

# Social Problem Construction and National Context: News Reporting on “Overweight” and “Obesity” in the United States and France

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*Drawing on analyses of American and French news reports on “overweight” and “obesity,” this article examines how national context—including position in a global field of nation states, as well as different national politics and culture—shapes the framing of social problems. As has been shown in previous research, news reports from France—the economically dominated but culturally dominant nation of the two—discuss the United States more often than vice versa, typically in a negative way. Our contribution is to highlight the flexibility of anti-American rhetoric, which provides powerful ammunition for a variety of social problem frames. Specifically, depending on elite interests, French news reports may invoke anti-American rhetoric to reject a given phenomenon as a veritable public problem, or they may use such rhetoric to drum up concern over an issue. We further show how diverse cultural factors shape news reporting. Despite earlier work showing that a group-based discrimination frame is more common in the United States than in France, we find that the U.S. news sample is no more likely to discuss weight-based discrimination than the French news sample. We attribute this to specific barriers to this particular framing, namely the widespread view that body size is a behavior, akin to smoking, rather than an ascribed characteristic, like race. This discussion points, more generally, to some of the mechanisms limiting the diffusion of frames across social problems. Keywords: social problems, obesity, overweight, news reporting, France.*

News media reporting draws our attention to some issues over others and informs our perceptions of social life, crucially shaping individual and collective action (Gamson 1992; Hilgaten and Bosk 1988). A large literature on social problem construction shows that social problems do not emerge on their own but are *socially constructed* by claims makers who have a stake in defining a given issue as an urgent problem, *frame* it in particular ways, and identify specific solutions (Armstrong 2003; Best 2001a, 2008; Gusfield 1981; Saguy 2003; Snow et al.

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1986; Spector and Kitsuse 1977). By “framing,” we mean the selection and emphasis of “some aspects of a perceived reality . . . in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition” (Entman 1993:52). Research on framing shows that different media frames imply not only different ways of understanding social problems but also different courses of action (see Best 2008; Gamson 1992; Gusfield 1981; Snow and Benford 1988; Spector and Kitsuse 1977; Tarrow 1992). On an even more basic level, given that a plethora of concerns compete for the public’s attention and resources, claims makers need to promote specific issues if they are to emerge as public priorities.

Cross-national comparisons of framing of the “same” issue allow sociologists to identify how factors that vary cross-nationally, such as national institutions and cultural traditions, can lead to distinct social problem constructions. Previous work examining how the issues of immigration and sexual harassment were defined differently in the United States and France, for instance, has identified several national-level factors that constrain news media framing, including position in a global field of nations states and national differences in politics, culture, and law (Benson and Saguy 2005). It is still unknown, however, the extent to which the patterns documented for these two specific cases hold true for other issues. Importantly, both immigration and sexual harassment are widely viewed as political-legal issues with implications for labor and group rights. In contrast, *body size* is overwhelmingly viewed as an aesthetic and, increasingly, as a *health* issue. While some claims makers frame body size as a *rights* issue, condemning weight-based discrimination, more often body size—and specifically *obesity*—is framed as a *behavior*, akin to smoking, which lends itself poorly to a group-based discrimination frame. This case thus invites a more nuanced account of how diverse cultural factors influence news reporting.

How the national news media frame body size has far-reaching implications for individual behavior and policy initiatives, which are highly gendered, classed, and racialized. For instance, discussions of the dangers of higher weight and the benefits of weight loss may encourage dieting, use of weight-loss medications, and/or weight-loss surgery, all of which are pursued more by women than by men (Bish et al. 2005; Santry, Gillen, and Lauderdale 2005). Further, minority groups and the poor are the most likely to be targeted and penalized when the state takes punitive approaches to obesity, by, for instance, imposing sin taxes on “junk food,” charging parents of very fat children with child abuse, or by continuing to allow health insurers to deny coverage or charge exorbitant rates to those weighing over a certain amount (Belkin 2001; Eaton 2007; Roberts 1998; Witt 1999). In other words, with respect to how body weight gets framed, the stakes are high.

The United States and France offer a fruitful case study for comparative research on news reporting on body size. Both are large Western industrialized democracies in which food scarcity is no longer widespread and thinness is both culturally prized and associated with higher socioeconomic status (Regnier 2006; Stearns 1997). While the United States is currently the largest economic and military power in the world, France is often regarded—by Americans as well as French (and others)—as *culturally* (Clark 1987; Lamont 1987) and, more specifically, *culinarily* superior (Abramson 2007; Fischler and Masson 2008). Indeed, it is arguably this sense of cultural superiority that makes French resentment of American hegemony especially acute. France is widely regarded as the most forceful and consistent voice of resistance to American hegemony among first world nations, expressing concerns about American cultural, political, and economic influence that other nations share less vocally (Benson and Saguy 2005).

As currently defined, France has the lowest rates of obesity in Europe and much lower rates than that of the United States (de Saint Pol 2010; Regnier 2005). Yet, there is some evidence that they are on the rise (de Saint Pol 2009b; Le Monde 2009). The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the French National Institute of Statistics and Economics (INSEE) define “overweight” as a body mass index (BMI) equal to or greater than 25 but less than 30 and “obesity” as having a BMI of 30 or more, in which BMI is measured as weight in

kilograms divided by height in meters squared (de Saint Pol 2009a; Flegal et al. 2010).<sup>1</sup> Based on these cut-off points, a woman of average height (5'4") is overweight at 146 pounds and obese at 175 pounds, while a man of average height (5'9") is overweight at 170 pounds and obese at 203 pounds. Different measures are used for children and teenagers under 18 years old, which adjust for age.

Based on the French national health survey, the prevalence of obesity among adults aged 18 to 65 years old rose from 5.3 percent in 1981 to 5.5 percent in 1992 and to 9.8 percent in 2003, among men, and from 5.3 to 6.2 to 10.2 percent, among women, over these years (de Saint Pol 2009a). A survey funded by Roche Pharmaceuticals suggests that the rate of obesity among French adults (aged 15 and older) has continued to increase: 8.2 percent in 1995, 9.6 percent in 2000, 12.4 percent in 2006, and 14.5 percent in 2009 (Roche 2009). Yet, these rates remain much lower than comparable figures in the United States, where the percentage of obesity among the adult U.S. population (18 years and older) was 13.4 percent in the early 1960s, climbing to 30.9 percent in the late 1990s (Flegal et al. 2002), and remaining constant between 1999 and 2008 (Flegal et al. 2010). In fact, the 2009 French rates were equivalent to the 1970s U.S. rates, before this issue had emerged as a social problem.

While there have been some concerns about increasing rates of childhood "overweight" in France (Huret 2004), the most recent estimates suggest stability or even reduction in the rates of overweight among French children. Using the international standard definitions proposed by the IOTF (Cole et al. 2000), a 2008 government report estimated that 19.9 percent of third graders (aged 8 to 9 years) were "overweight" and that 4.1 percent were "obese" in 2001–2002. This same report estimated these figures to be 19.7 percent and 3.7 percent, respectively, in 2004–2005 (Guignon, Fonteneau, and Guthman 2008). In May 2010, the Minister of Health and Sports announced that the rate of childhood overweight had *dropped* by 2 percent between 2000 and 2007 (La Parisienne 2010). Regardless, the French figures remain considerably lower than the corresponding U.S. figures; in 2007–2008, 35.5 percent of U.S. children aged 6 to 11 were in the 85<sup>th</sup> percentile of the CDC 2000 BMI-for-age percentiles (similar to what the French label "overweight"), including 19.6 percent in the 95th percentile (similar to what the French label "obese") (Flegal et al. 2001); these rates have been stable since 1999 (Ogden et al. 2010).

Drawing on an original sample of 369 news articles and opinion pieces on "overweight" or "obesity,"<sup>2</sup> published between 1995 and 2005 in *The New York Times*, *Newsweek*, *Le Monde*, or *L'Express*, this article seeks to identify the factors producing cross-national differences and similarities in social problem construction. Specifically, our goal is to expand and refine current understandings of *how* position in a global field of nation states—as well as varied components of national politics and culture—shape news media framing.

## Global Field Dynamics

Following Pierre Bourdieu, we conceptualize the journalistic field as one of many semi-autonomous fields of contemporary western societies, along with the political, economic, and social scientific fields, among others (Bourdieu 1993; DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Within a given nation, field boundaries are established through struggles for professional autonomy and, once established, tend to perpetuate specific cultural logics, although neighboring fields

1. Sometimes, the term "overweight" is used to refer to everyone with a BMI over 25, thus including "obesity" in the "overweight" category (World Health Organization 2003).

2. The terms *overweight* and *obesity* imply a medical frame. We use these terms here, not because we ascribe to a medical framing, but because we are examining the social construction of problems labeled as *overweight* and *obesity*. When, elsewhere in this article, we use the term *fat* to discuss bigger bodies, we do so in the spirit of the fat acceptance movement, where *fat* is treated as a neutral descriptor.

often challenge these boundaries. Specifically, the journalistic field is characterized by a “double dependency” on the political and economic fields (Champagne 2005). On one hand, journalists rely on politicians for official news and ruling governments often try to shape news reporting. On the other hand, news publications are financially dependent on advertising, constituting a potential encroachment of the economic field on the journalistic field.

This article specifically seeks to provide a more fine-grained understanding of how *global field dynamics*, as well as national culture and politics, shape news reporting. In the context of journalism, global field dynamics refer to “the position of the national media field within the global media field” (Bourdieu 1998:48). In other words, global journalistic field dynamics refer to the extent to which a national journalistic field is either dominated by or dominates foreign journalistic fields. This, in turn, largely depends on the given nation’s general political, economic, and cultural dominance, as well as its specific dominance in the given field.

The United States’ economic and political dominance in the world and its status as the biggest single exporter of television programs, films, music, and news (Herman and McChesney 1997; Sreberny-Mohammadi 2000) makes it economically dominant within the global journalistic field. Given this, global field theory leads us to expect the French news media to be more aware of U.S. news accounts of obesity (among other topics) than vice versa. Minimally, we would expect greater visibility of American policies, political actors, and icons in the French media than vice versa. Such visibility may further lead to *imitation* in which American media representations of obesity are echoed in France. Evoking this possibility, Bourdieu (1998) has commented on “the economic-technical, and especially, symbolic dominance of American television, which serves a good many [non-American] journalists as both a model and a source of ideas, formulas, and tactics” (p. 41). Similarly, in the realm of medicine and public health, French innovators have often turned to the United States for new ideas and legitimacy (Castel and Friedberg 2010; Pierru 2007).

Given, however, European resentment of American imperialism (e.g., Jenkins 1992) and widely held European attitudes that American culture is inferior to European, and especially French, culture (Markovits 2007), American models may be expected to provoke *backlash* (Benson and Saguy 2005; see also Boyle, Songora, and Foss 2001). Stated differently, a nation’s news media may respond negatively to a country that is economically dominant but culturally dominated, as the United States arguably is in relation to France. Indeed, French politicians and public intellectuals have been extremely hostile to anti-racist and feminist initiatives seeming to originate from the United States, arguing that they led to ghettos and a “war of the sexes” (Delphy 1993; Ezekiel 1995; Fassin 1999; Saguy 2003). Given this recent history, the French press may be wary of claims about weight-based discrimination, which could be seen as another case of American identity politics run amuck. Similarly anti-American rhetoric could be used to dismiss the “obesity epidemic” as an “American” problem, of little concern in a country like France, which is protected by its superior culinary traditions.

That said, could anti-American sentiment instead be used to *galvanize* concern about obesity? Indeed, there is some evidence that unease regarding American imperialism may be fueling French social anxieties about nutrition, which could, by extension, enflame French concerns about obesity. For instance, the French press has repeatedly lambasted the effects of “Europeanization, globalization,” and “immigrant cultures” on national cuisine (Abramson 2007:xviii). In 1999, José Bové grabbed French national and even international headlines when he vandalized a partially constructed McDonald’s restaurant in Millau in protest against *malbouf* (junk food, fast food, an unbalanced diet, or mindless eating) and foreign corporate interests in local food distribution (Abramson 2007:xviii). Such anxiety may *heighten* fear over a French “obesity epidemic,” perceived as spreading from the United States to France. Based on this narrative, French consumers would be both medically and socially *contaminated* by succumbing to the dangerous lure of fast food or eating habits from (inferior) “American” culture. This would suggest that backlash against the United States could serve to either dismiss the importance of, or intensify concern over, a social problem, depending on the *type* of

social problem and its specific political and cultural context. In the next section, we examine in greater detail how national politics and culture shapes social problem construction.

### National Culture and the Diffusion of Social Problem Frames

The extant literature suggests that diffusion of social problem claims is most likely among countries with a shared language, culture, and networks (Best 2001b). When people see their society as *similar* to the society where social problem claims originate, they are more likely to also frame the given issue as a public problem (Strang and Meyer 1993). Like many nations, the United States and France are similar in some ways and different in others. As two Western democracies, the United States and France could be said to have some shared culture. While these countries have different official languages, educated French people typically read and speak English, which facilitates the diffusion of American ideas in France, if not vice versa. Moreover, as Western democratic nations, the United States and France share a commitment to human rights, democratic participation, free press, and capitalism (albeit with varying degrees of state control). Important for the purposes of this article, Western democratic nations have some shared general understandings about how the government and civil society should address social problems.

Moreover, both the United States and Europe are wealthy countries where food scarcity is no longer the problem it once was and where thinness is both culturally prized and associated with higher socioeconomic status (Stearns 1997). In both of these nations, the dominant understanding of fat bodies is that they are ugly, immoral, and diseased (Sobal 1995; Stearns 1997). This stands in stark contrast to attitudes in regions of the world where food is scarce, and where young girls from elite families are “fattened up” for marriage (Popenoe 2005). Historically, when food supplies were scarce, body fat was valued in both countries as a sign of health and wealth and was eroticized in women (Sobal 1995; Stearns 1997). It was only when food became more plentiful during the agricultural and industrial revolutions and when the lower classes could afford to bulk up, that fatness was reframed by elites in wealthy nations as a sign of moral laxity (Aronowitz 2008; Fraser 1998; Sobal 1995; Stearns 1997).

Despite some general cultural similarities, there are also marked cultural *differences* between the United States and France (Lamont 1992; Lamont and Thévenot 2000), that would be expected to lead to differences in news media discussions of overweight/obesity. Historian Peter Stearns (1997) has argued that body size is less of a moral issue—and more of an aesthetic or fashion concern—in France compared to the United States. Further, Barry Glassner (2007) and others have contrasted an American “gospel of naught” (p. xi) that stresses the need to restrict sugar, salt, fat, calories, carbohydrates, preservatives, additives, etc. with a French emphasis on *pleasure* (Fischler and Masson 2008; Pollan 2008). While mealtime is relatively unstructured in the United States, there are strict rules about how, when, and what one eats in France, with the importance of cooking and good eating taught in public elementary schools (Abramson 2007).

More generally, previous comparative work finds that Americans are more likely than the French to endorse an individualistic ideology in which people are expected to “pull themselves up by their bootstraps” and are seen as responsible for their own destiny (Inkeles 1979; Lamont 1992, 2000; Lamont and Thévenot 2000), making them more likely to blame poverty or fatness on lack of willpower or self-discipline (Gilens 1999; Stearns 1997). In contrast, although individualism is on the rise in France, in general and in public health discourses specifically (Bergeron 2009), French public intellectuals and popular opinion still tends to attribute a greater role to social-structural factors, including disparities in wealth, in shaping individual trajectories (Lamont 1992, 2000; Lamont and Thévenot 2000). A greater focus on social inequalities is likely to spill over into discussions of obesity, making the French press more likely to evoke the contribution of social inequalities to obesity. In contrast, the stronger

cultural and legal tradition of denouncing group-based discrimination in the United States than in France (Banton 1994; Bleich 2003; Saguy 2000) may make discussions of “fat rights” and weight-based discrimination (Cooper 1998; Kirkland 2008; Saguy and Riley 2005; Solovay 2000; Wann 1999) more common in the United States than in France.

Moreover, previous work has shown that national institutional differences constitute obstacles to the spreading of claims (Best 2001b; Jenkins 2001). Specifically, France has a more centralized state than the United States (Badie and Birnbaum 1983; Dobbin 1994), which may lead to more (state-sponsored) policy initiatives and, subsequently, more news media discussions of such policies.

### Claims Makers and Social Networks

Powerful claims makers and shared networks among claims makers help “claims spread” (Best 2001b). The International Obesity Task Force (IOTF), a powerful lobbying group funded by Swiss pharmaceutical company Hoffman-La Roche (producer of the weight-loss drug Xenical®) and American pharmaceutical company Abbott Laboratories (makers of the weight-loss drug Meridia®) have played a leading role in drawing global attention to obesity as a public problem by funding obesity research and conferences and lobbying national and international agencies (Oliver 2005). Notably, the IOTF paid for a staffer to draft the World Health Organization (WHO) report that advocated lowering the cut-off for “overweight” from a BMI of about 28 to a BMI of 25, a move that was adopted and then copied by the National Institutes of Health Obesity Task Force (Bacon 2008). This caused 29 million Americans to become “overweight” overnight (Bacon 2008; Oliver 2005; Squires 1998). In France, Roche (in collaboration with researchers from Inserm and the Hotel-Dieu Hospital) sponsored—and has helped publicize the results of—a nationally representative French survey of the prevalence of overweight and obesity in 1997, 2000, 2003, 2006, and 2009, using WHO cutoff points (Roche 2009).

Concern over a given social problem is more likely to diffuse when there are multiple causal frames available and when it is possible to gloss over disagreements regarding these frames, so long as the issue itself is generally agreed to be a problem (Strang and Meyer 1993). This is certainly true in the case of obesity. Those on the political right frame higher body mass as the product of unhealthy *choices*, casting fat people (and ethnic groups with higher population weights) as morally deviant or even “villain” (see Gusfield 1981). Those on the political left blame social-structural factors including the food industry, car culture, urban planning, or the prohibitive cost of fresh fruits and vegetables for contributing to an “obesigenic” environment (see Brownell and Horgen 2003; Dalton 2004; Drewnowski and Barratt-Fornell 2004; Linn 2004; Nestle 2002; Tartamella, Herscher, and Woolston 2005). Others attribute body size to biological (including genetic) factors (Kolata 2007; Stunkard et al. 1990; Stunkard, Foch, and Hubrek 1986). The shared framing of higher body weight as *obesity*, that is as *medically pathological*, allows a wide range of social actors to gloss over different views of etiology and health policy. Diverse claims makers may disagree about *why* people are getting fatter and/or how to stop or reverse trends in “obesity,” while agreeing that higher body weights represent a pressing medical and public health problem.

The fat acceptance or fat rights movement, in contrast, rejects this fundamental assumption. Building on the civil rights, women’s rights, and gay rights movements, fat rights groups condemn “weight-based discrimination” and promote greater acceptance of a *diversity* of body sizes. Fat acceptance groups reclaim the word *fat* as a neutral or positive descriptor (Cooper 1998; Saguy and Riley 2005; Wann 1999), just as the civil rights movement reclaimed *black* and the gay rights movement reclaimed *queer*. Compared to these movements, the fat rights movement is relatively small. The largest national association, NAAFA (National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance), has about 2,000 members, mostly white middle class women in the highest 2 percent of body mass distribution (Saguy and Riley 2005). The fat acceptance

movement also includes blogs, listservs, and local groups. The International Size Acceptance Association (ISAA) has both an American and a French chapter, as well as chapters in other countries. Recently, social scientists and humanities scholars have formed “fat studies” groups to encourage research that critically examines body size as an axis of social inequality, taking inspiration from women’s studies, African American studies, Lesbian-Gay-Bi-Transsexual (LGBT) studies, and critical race theory (Rothblum and Solovay 2009). This is an international academic trend, but focused in the United States (Cooper 2009). At the time of this writing, however, health research represents the dominant academic approach to studying body size.

## Hypotheses

### *Global Field Dynamics*

Previous work shows that the construction of social problems does not occur in national isolation, but that the news media often respond (positively or negatively) to social problem frames common in other nations. The greater the centrality in the global field of nation states, the more a given nation is expected to influence media reporting abroad (Benson and Saguy 2005; Bourdieu 1998). At the end of the twentieth and beginning of the twenty-first century, the United States occupies an unmatched centrality in the global field of nation states. Given this, other nations—including France—would be expected to refer to the United States more than vice versa. This informs the first of three hypotheses related to the role of the United States in French news reporting and vice versa:

*Hypothesis 1.1: The French news sample will discuss the United States more than the American news sample will discuss France.*

Despite the fact that France possesses less *economic* capital than the United States, this former colonial power, which has a reputation for cultural sophistication and taste, arguably enjoys greater *cultural* capital than the United States. We expect this contrast to lead the French journalistic discussions of the United States to be largely *negative*. Indeed, others have noted that France has been “arguably Europe’s leader over the past fifteen years in most matters related to antipathy towards America” (Markovits 2007:2). Stated as a hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1.2: French news reports will portray the United States in mostly negative terms.*

In France, anti-American sentiment has been mobilized in the past to reject unpopular ideas—such as affirmative action or feminism—simply by labeling them “American” (Ezekiel 1995; Fassin 1999; Saguy 2003). For instance, French lawmakers and journalists delegitimized concerns about sexual harassment by associating them with “American excesses” of Puritanism, feminism, and litigiousness (Saguy 2003). While not a formal hypothesis, due to our limited sample of French news reports on weight-based discrimination, this literature suggests that the French news reports would be similarly dismissive of weight-based discrimination as an “American” problem.

The next two hypotheses relate to whether anti-American sentiment will be used to undermine the seriousness of or, alternatively, to emphasize the urgency of obesity. Given the comparatively low proportion of the French population with a BMI over 30, one could conceivably argue that obesity is *not* a French problem and that American “obesity crusaders” threaten French culinary pleasure (Abramson 2007; Fischler and Masson 2008; Regnier 2005). One might further argue that in France—where a chef and a baker (unsuccessfully) lobbied Pope John Paul II in 2002 to remove *gourmandise* (gluttony) from the list of the Seven Deadly Sins (Abramson 2007:xviii)—there would be strong opposition to moralizing food or eating. In other words, while we have seen a growing *number* of articles discussing obesity in the French media,

we may find that the *content* of news reporting dismisses the seriousness of this issue *in France*, even if it acknowledges it as a problem abroad. Stated as a hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1.3a: The French news sample will frame the medical and public health issue of the “obesity epidemic” as an American or foreign problem of little concern in France.*

Yet, a recent survey study among Europeans showed that the French (and especially elite French women) are both the leanest and—ironically—the most likely to consider themselves fat because their concept of ideal body weight is thinner than that of other Europeans (de Saint Pol 2009b; Le Monde 2009). Moreover, there is evidence that obesity often serves as a lightning rod for a host of French cultural anxieties concerning globalization and Americanization (Abramson 2007). In light of increasing rates of French obesity, these cultural concerns could incite worries about the “obesity epidemic” spreading from the United States to France, via “American” fast food or eating habits. In this sense, obesity would represent not only a health risk, but also a threat to France’s superior food culture. This leads to a competing hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 1.3b: The French news sample will frame the “obesity epidemic” as a serious problem that is spreading from the United States to France.*

If this hypothesis were borne out, it would highlight the *flexibility* of anti-American sentiment. Specifically, it would suggest that anti-American rhetoric can be used not only to discredit the importance of a social problem, as in the case of sexual harassment, but also to emphasize that a social problem requires urgent attention. In so doing, this finding would raise new questions about the conditions under which anti-American rhetoric will be used to either *dismiss* or *promote* a social problem in France.

### **National Culture and Politics**

A second set of hypotheses speaks to how each national press, while both portraying obesity as a serious social problem, may frame this issue as important for different reasons, due to national differences in culture and politics. Political Scientist James Morone (2003:4–5) argues that “visions of vice and virtue define the American community” and points to a strong emphasis on personal responsibility in the United States. Comparative research demonstrates a greater emphasis in the United States on personal blame and responsibility, as compared to France (Lamont and Thévenot 2000); Stearns (1997) specifically finds that Americans are more likely than the French to view fatness as personal moral failure. Based on this work, we expect that body size will be more often framed as a *personal choice* that requires *personal solutions* by the American—compared to French—news media. This leads to the first two of eight hypotheses that speak to how national politics and culture inform the framing of higher body weight:

*Hypothesis 2.1: The American news sample will be more likely than the French news sample to blame individuals for their weight.*

*Hypothesis 2.2: The American news sample will be more likely than the French news sample to discuss solutions for overweight/obesity that involve behavioral modification.*

In contrast, in Europe—and specifically in France—the tendency towards moralizing and ideologies of self-reliance are weaker (Lamont and Thévenot 2000; Morone 2003), while traditions of social solidarity have a stronger hold (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Given this, we expect French news reports to be more likely to emphasize factors that mitigate personal control, including biology and social-structural factors. Stated as hypotheses:

*Hypothesis 2.3: The French news sample will be more likely than the American news sample to discuss biological contributors to overweight/obesity.*

*Hypothesis 2.4: The French news sample will be more likely than the American news sample to discuss social-structural contributors to overweight/obesity.*

On the other hand, the Puritans also bequeathed America with an alternative tradition—the social gospel—that shifts the emphasis from sinner to the system. Poverty, hunger, segregation, racism, sexism, and despair are seen as pushing good people into corners, including crime, broken marriages, and addiction. “Social gospel solutions reverse the focus: rather than redeem the individual, reform the political system” (Morone 2003:14). In other words, there are also deep cultural and moral traditions in the United States that stress collective—and not just individual—responsibility, so that Hypothesis 2.4 may not be borne out.

A large literature has contrasted the centralized French state with the decentralized U.S. federal state (e.g., Badie and Birnbaum 1983; Dobbin 1994), characterizing the former as “strong” and the latter as “weak” (for a critique of this characterization, see Novak 2008). This work would lead us to expect to see more discussion in the French media of (state-sponsored) policy solutions. Stated as a hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2.5: The French news sample will be more likely than the American news to discuss policy solutions for overweight/obesity.*

In addition to general differences in United States and French culture, there are specific differences in these nations’ *food* cultures. Glassner (2007) argued that, in general, Americans believe that “the worth of a meal lies principally in what it lacks. The less sugar, salt, fat, calories, carbs, preservatives, additives, or other suspect stuff, the better the meal” (p. xi; see also Pollan 2008). While Americans fret about food, however, “the French view food as pleasure” (Glassner 2007:3). For instance, when one study asked 1,281 respondents from France, Japan, Belgium, and the United States what words they associated with chocolate cake, the French chose “celebration,” while the Americans chose “guilt.” Asked about heavy cream, the French chose “whipped,” while the Americans picked “unhealthy” (Glassner 2007:3, citing Brenner 1999).

While food is to be enjoyed, there are also strict rules in France about *how, when, and what* one eats (see Abramson 2007; Fischler and Masson 2008). For example, according to French tradition, one should eat with others rather than alone and at fixed mealtimes rather than between meals. Traditionally, lunch and dinner are comprised of four courses, including appetizer, main course, cheese with green salad, and dessert. Increasingly, people deviate from this structure—due to cost, lack of time, or interest in eating lighter or smaller meals—but such deviations are seen as precisely that: deviations from a *proper* meal. “There is a self-consciousness about making [such deviations or substitutions], as one is refusing what is traditional and expected” (Abramson 2007:106).

This food culture is taught in French schools, which begin at three years of age and, even before then, via state-run child-care programs. Primary schools break for lunch from about 11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. Children with two working parents take lunch at school (about 66 percent of school children), which follow the structure outlined above (though often skipping the cheese course). Since the 1980s, official statements from the Ministry of Education stress the importance of meals for teaching social and communication skills, principles for maintaining good health and understanding food safety, and learning to both understand and *appreciate* food. During the annual “Week of Taste” held every October since 1991, professional chefs give school children lessons about food, cooking, and eating. Restaurants also offer traditional meals at reduced prices to adults, as part of a state and corporate sponsored continuing education in food culture. According to one observer, the Week of Taste “manifests a democratic, universalistic idea. The cultivation of taste and the pleasure of eating well, like reading and mathematics, are a matter of education and should be accessible to all” (Abramson 2007: 109–110). Rather than counting calories, weighing portions, or cutting out entire food groups (e.g., fat or carbohydrates), eating well in France chiefly means eating a variety of fresh foods. This work informs the following hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2.6: The American news sample will be more likely than the French news sample to discuss low-fat, low-carbohydrate, or low-calorie diets.*

Other work has shown that, in the United States to a far greater degree than in France, group-based discrimination offers a lens through which a panoply of issues can be viewed (Saguy 2000). Since the civil rights movement, in the United States, the women’s movement, gay rights movement, and most recently the fat acceptance movement have framed their rights claims in terms of group-based discrimination. The civil rights movement enabled such claims both by facilitating the passage of statutes outlawing discrimination against specific protected classes and by legitimizing and popularizing the concept of group-based discrimination (Saguy 2003). In contrast, in France, discrimination laws are weak (Banton 1994; Bleich 2003; Saguy 2003). Moreover, the ideal of political universalism dictates that the state should recognize the rights of individuals *as individuals* and that group affiliation should be a private matter (Brubaker 1992; Noiriel 1992; Wiles 2007). Given this work, as well as research specifically showing the greater use of a discrimination frame in American compared to French news reports on sexual harassment and immigration (Benson and Saguy 2005), we would expect the U.S. news media to be more likely to apply a group-based discrimination frame to fat. Stated as a hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2.7: The American news sample will be more likely than the French news sample to discuss weight-based discrimination.*

On the other hand, the employment of the discrimination frame may depend on an understanding of fatness as an ascribed characteristic akin to race or sex. While fat acceptance activists indeed view fatness in this way, public health authorities typically view obesity as a health *behavior* similar to smoking. If “obesity” is framed as a behavior, rather than as a trait largely beyond individual control, the weight-based discrimination frame may have little if any resonance in the United States, despite greater political traditions of denouncing group-based discrimination. If this proves to be the case, this specific case may offer insights into when national and political traditions will *not* extend to new social problems, helping to refine theories of social problem construction within an international context.

A final hypothesis speaks to change over time. While the more decentralized U.S. federal state is often considered weaker than the centralized French state, it can be quite powerful and intrusive when morality is at stake (Morone 2003; see also Novak 2008). If efforts to “convert the sinners” fail, reformers will typically demand government intervention, creating a typical cycle in which an initial focus on individual reform is followed by calls for government intervention when individual reform fails (Morone 2003:10-11). This began to happen in 2000–2001, when obesity “burst onto the U.S. national policy agenda” (Kersh 2009). We therefore expect to see more discussion of policy solutions in the United States in the period beginning in January 2002 than in 1995 through 2001. This leads to our final hypothesis:

*Hypothesis 2.8: The American news sample will be more likely to discuss policy solutions for overweight/obesity after 2002.*

## Data and Methods

To address these questions, we draw on a sample of 369 news articles and opinion pieces over 300 words published in *The New York Times* ( $N = 174$ ), *Newsweek* ( $N = 87$ ), *Le Monde* ( $N = 86$ ), or *L’Express* ( $N = 22$ ) between 1995 and 2005 that had the words “obese/obesity” or “overweight” (or their French variants) in the heading or lead paragraphs. While limited to four news outlets over ten years, our sample allows us to examine—for the first time—how the elite U.S. and French news media are constructing fat bodies over time. It begins in

1995, the first year that a sizeable number of articles on this topic was published in France. Due to the large number of *New York Times* articles, we sampled every third of these articles, meaning that a greater proportion of the U.S. sample (half), compared to French sample (one quarter), are from a newsmagazine. To measure the extent to which this sampling strategy may bias the national differences we report, we ran separate analyses among only the newspapers and newsmagazines, respectively, finding that the general patterns hold up (tables available upon request).<sup>3</sup>

These publications have the methodological advantage of being available on Lexis-Nexis for the entire 1995 through 2005 time period and of maximizing cross-national comparability. *The New York Times* and *Le Monde* are comparable in their readership and reputation as leading national newspapers of record. Similarly, *Newsweek* and *L'Express* are comparable leading mainstream newsmagazines (Saguy 2002, 2003). The sample does not capture the full range of the news media, including women's magazines, the ethnic press, or political radical presses (see Rohlinger 2007), but this elite sample arguably includes publications that are particularly authoritative and most likely to be read by people in positions of power. How these publications frame social problems is thus likely to have influence over the lay public and policy makers.

Following several high-profile pronouncements from the CDC, the WHO, and the Surgeon General about the "obesity epidemic" at the end of 2001 (Schlesinger 2005), there is considerably more news reporting in the United States on overweight/obesity beginning in 2002. Because of this, our American sample is weighted towards the later time period. To assess whether reporting during the high volume years (2002–2005) was significantly different than the lower volume years (1995–2001), we ran additional analyses for all of the variables discussed by time period (see Table 2 for statistically significant trends over time).

### *Coding*

We use a mix of qualitative and quantitative analyses to both capture the *content* of news frames and to make systematic comparisons. Initial variables were developed based on previous work by the first author (Saguy and Almeling 2008), knowledge of the obesity literature, and reading a subsample of articles. Some additional variables were added or refined during the analyses, requiring additional coding.

We measure framing as the *proportion* of articles in each national sample that contain a given frame, thus adjusting for the greater *overall* amount of reporting in the United States compared to France. Each article was coded for over 200 variables, only a subset of which are analyzed here. In initial "practice" coding, three coders coded the same articles and discussed differences as a way of arriving at a shared agreement. Two coders coded 10 percent of the articles to test for intercoder reliability, which was very high. The coefficient of reliability (the ratio of coding agreements to the total number of coding decisions) was over .95 (Holsti 1969), and discrepancies were generally due to one person having missed a relevant phrase, rather than to conceptual disagreements about how the variables should be coded.

Below, we describe only the variables used in the current analysis. Unless explicitly stated, variables were coded as "1" when the aspect in question was mentioned by the journalist or a news source, and as "0" if it was not mentioned. Thus, all codes are independent of each other and articles could be coded "1" on multiple variables, including contradictory ones. Coders also analyzed the articles qualitatively by reading each article several times and creating theme sheets.

3. There were, nonetheless, some differences among the newspapers compared to the newsmagazines. The decline in discussions of weight-based discrimination is greater in *Newsweek* compared to *The New York Times*, and there is no decline in discussions of weight-based discrimination in *Le Monde*, suggesting that we may be overstating the decline in discussions of discrimination over time.

Articles were coded for whether they were standard articles or opinion pieces (i.e., editorials, op-ed, or letters to the editor). Opinion pieces offer a revealing window on issue framing since the editorial page’s purpose is to air competing frames (see also Lawrence 2004:60). While journalists themselves do not produce most op-ed pieces and letters to the editor, editors choose which to publish and their publication gives them a certain visibility and even cultural authority. Still, we replicated our analyses with a sample that excluded the opinion pieces and found quantitative results that were consistent with the full sample.

To measure the extent to which obesity was represented as a public health crisis, we coded articles for two variables: discussion of obesity/overweight as a health crisis or labeling overweight/obesity an epidemic. We coded articles for whether they mentioned *any* nation other than the home country, and we coded for French articles that mentioned the United States and vice versa. We further coded for whether such mentions were positive or negative.

To measure how the cause of and solution for obesity was framed, we coded articles for whether they suggested that body weight was determined by individual choices, such as those related to diet and exercise. For instance, the following article blames an *individual* for his weight gain, quoting him as saying “I was killing myself” (Feder 2005). We coded articles for whether or not they discussed individual behavior designed to lead to weight loss, such as exercise or dieting. At a greater level of specificity, we coded for whether articles mentioned *restricting* certain food groups or calories through low-fat, low-carbohydrate, or low-calorie diets, or, alternatively, discussed *adding* “healthy” foods to one’s diet.

We coded for discussion of social-structural factors, such as restaurant portions and food advertising, and for discussion of biological factors, including genetics and prenatal environment. The following provides evidence of blaming *social-structural* factors: “In many low-income minority neighborhoods, fried carryout is a cinch to find, but affordable fresh produce and nutritious food are not” (New York Times 2002). The following *Newsweek* excerpt evokes biological contributors to body size: “If food is scarce during the first trimester, the fetus develops a so-called thrifty phenotype. Its metabolism is set so that every available calorie sticks” (Begley and Underhill 1999).

We coded for discussion of policy solutions, discussion of weight-loss drugs, inpatient or “intensive outpatient” medical treatment, or weight-loss surgery. During analyses, we created a composite variable for “medical interventions,” which captured whether the article mentioned any of the following: weight-loss drugs, inpatient or “intensive outpatient” medical treatment, or weight-loss surgery. We coded articles for whether or not they discussed weight-based discrimination.

## Findings

As is shown in Table 1, both countries’ presses present fatness as a *health crisis* and characterize it as an epidemic. While there are a greater number of total articles reporting on obesity in the United States, a *higher proportion* of the French sample portray obesity as a crisis and as an epidemic (although the difference for the latter is not statistically significant at  $p < .05$ ), despite the fact that rates of obesity are relatively low in France. Thirty-one percent of the U.S. sample frame obesity as a health crisis and 22 percent label it an epidemic. In contrast, 61 percent of the French sample describe it as a health crisis and 32 percent call it an epidemic. For instance, a *New York Times* article writes: “More and more people, old and young, in countries rich and poor, are fat and growing fatter. If there are limits to obesity, our species seems not to know about them” (Grady 2003). Similarly, a *Le Monde* article opines: “One billion overweight adults on the planet, 300 million people who are clinically obese . . . The World Health Organization (WHO) talks of ‘the epidemic of the century’” (Amalou 2003a).

**Table 1 • Proportion of News Stories Evoking Specific Frames or Quoting Specific Sources**

	U.S. (N = 262)	FRANCE (N = 108)	Difference (FR-U.S.)
<i>Extent of problem</i>			
Health crisis	.31	.61	.31***
Epidemic	.22	.32	.10
<i>Discussion of other nation (France or United States)</i>			
Other nation discussed	.05	.47	.42***
Other nation discussed in <i>positive</i> terms only	.02	.07	.05*
Other nation discussed in <i>positive and negative</i> terms	.00	.03	.03**
Other nation discussed in <i>neither positive nor negative</i> terms	.03	.15	.12***
Other nation discussed in <i>negative</i> terms only	.01	.26	.25***
<i>Causes</i>			
Individual choices	.39	.46	.07
Social-structural	.27	.47	.21***
Biological	.15	.25	.10*
<i>Solutions</i>			
Individual	.56	.44	-.12*
Any Policy	.21	.44	.23***
Medical	.24	.19	-.05
<i>Dietary solutions</i>			
Low-fat diet	.12	.02	-.10***
Low-carb diet	.11	.00	-.11***
Low-cal diet	.10	.01	-.09***
Healthy foods	.05	.22	.17***
<i>Discrimination</i>			
Among articles mentioning biological factors	.26	.30	.04
Among articles not mentioning biological factors	.08	.12	.04
Difference in frequency between subsamples	-.18***	-.18	.00

\*\*\* $p < .001$  \*\* $p < .01$  \* $p < .05$  based on a Chi-Square Test (two-sided tests)

### **Representations of the United States in the French Press**

As predicted by Hypothesis 1.1, the French news media are more likely to discuss the United States than vice versa. Forty-seven percent of the French sample mention or focus on the United States,<sup>4</sup> while only 5 percent of the American articles mention or focus on France. Seven percent of French articles discuss the United States primarily in *positive* terms, such as by reporting favorably on government or commercial efforts to combat obesity. Three percent of the French sample include *both* positive and negative references to the United States, such as by reporting positively on fitness trends among the U.S. elite while negatively depicting the “obesity epidemic” among the masses. Fifteen percent include references that are *neither* positive nor negative. But, as predicted by Hypothesis 1.2, at 26 percent of the French sample, *negative* depictions of the United States are most common. For instance, one article in *L'Express* describes the United States as a land of excess, where “one can watch on television [. . .] a surgeon [. . .] filming his own liposuction, [. . . and find] advertisements for the most extravagant methods claiming to erase the unpleasant consequences of a national gluttony” (Faure 2004).

4. This raises the possibility that the similarities in news framing discussed above are due to the French focus on the United States. To test this, we reran all of the analyses in two different ways. First, we eliminated from the sample any article that focuses on another country. Second, we eliminated all articles that either focus on or mention another country. In both cases, the findings discussed above were consistent (tables available upon request).

However, qualitative analyses reveal that, counter to Hypothesis 1.3a, the French news media does *not* typically use negative images of the United States to dismiss the “obesity epidemic” as an *American* problem of little concern in France. Rather, consistent with counter-hypothesis 1.3b, the French news sample tends to frame the “obesity epidemic” as a serious threat that is spreading from the United States to France. For instance, one French article writes: “The epidemic of metabolic syndrome (associating obesity, excess in lipids, and arterial hypertension) encountered now in the United States is coming to France. We need to stop that” (Benkimoun 2004). Another writes, “Excess weight today affects 1 in 8 children in France, or twice as many as fifteen years ago. If nothing is done, 1 in 4 children will be obese in 2020, like in the United States, according to experts” (Huret 2004).

Many of the French news articles blame American fast food restaurants and processed snack foods for expanding French waistlines:

Unlike Americans, who do not (yet) hold industrial food manufacturers responsible for galloping rates of obesity [. . .], Europeans and especially the French show themselves to be very critical. The McDonald’s food chain, a symbol of “bad food” (*malbouffe*) [. . .] is at the center of these critiques on this side of the Atlantic. [. . .] Makers of soda, including especially Coca-Cola and PepsiCo, the latter which also owns Frito Lays, are also in the hot seat” (Amalou 2003b).

Unbridled capitalism and corporate greed is a common theme in French critiques of the United States. Obesity provides another opportunity to strike this cord. In other words, fear of fat Americans and their culture are used to *legitimate* rather than discredit “obesity” as a social problem. This finding underscores the versatility of anti-American rhetoric abroad, in that it can be used either to dismiss a social problem as irrelevant, as in the case of sexual harassment (Saguy 2003), *or* to argue that attention to it is urgently needed. It also raises further questions, which we discuss in the conclusion, about the conditions under which anti-American rhetoric will be used to *undermine* or, alternatively, to *emphasize* the urgency of a social problem.

### ***Whose Fault Is It and Who Should Fix It?***

Beyond the question of *whether* overweight is a social problem is the question of *how* the issue is framed. Who is blamed for the problem and who is held responsible for fixing it? Are social problem frames shaped by national culture and politics and if so, how? Hypothesis 2.1 predicted that American news publications would be more likely than French news to blame individuals for their weight. In fact, as shown in Table 1, French news reports are just as likely as American news reports to emphasize individual blame for body weight (46 compared to 39 percent, a difference that is not statistically significant). However, an emphasis on individual blame *dominates* U.S. news framing, while being more equally balanced by other frames in French news reporting. That is, while American articles are almost 50 percent more likely to mention individual compared to social-structural contributors to weight, the French articles mention social-structural factors as frequently as individual factors.

Moreover, consistent with Hypothesis 2.2, American articles are more likely than French articles to discuss *individual* weight loss *solutions* (e.g., dieting or exercising), at 56 compared to 44 percent, and consistent with Hypothesis 2.3 and 2.4, French articles are more likely than American articles to discuss both biological contributors to body weight (25 versus 15 percent) and structural contributors to body weight (47 versus 27 percent), respectively. There is no statistically significant difference in the propensity of each national sample to discuss medical interventions. The overall pattern is that, as expected, the American news media are more likely than their French counterparts to frame body size as a choice, rather than as influenced by forces beyond personal control.

The following *Newsweek* article discusses both biological and individual contributors to weight but ultimately emphasizes the importance of personal choices:

Fumento, a medical journalist associated with the American Enterprise Institute, argues that the ascription of obesity to genetic predisposition is usually almost entirely mistaken. Obesity is largely the responsibility of individuals' choices concerning diet and exercise. Americans are becoming fatter because they are becoming more slothful and self-indulgent" (Will 1997).

Similarly, a *Newsweek* article published eight years later writes: "You can't pick your parents, but you *can* pick what you eat and how often you exercise" (Barrett Ozols 2005, emphasis added). Such reporting is also common in the French sample. For instance, a *Le Monde* article mentions "genetic" and "endocrinological" factors only to dismiss them as irrelevant "95 percent" of the time: "Only 5 percent of cases can be attributed to genetic or endocrinological factors. In the remaining 95 percent, obesity is due to bad eating habits" (Mola 2004). Individual and—in the case of children—*parental* responsibility and fault is emphasized, especially in the United States.

The following *Le Monde* article blames unhealthy snacks and drinks *and* the middle and working class parents who let their children consume them while being sedentary: "[According to a Parisian pediatrician,] 'Among comfortable families, children, sometimes left to their own devices, eat chips and drink Sprite so as not to be bored in front of the TV. In more modest homes, parents offer children these products to please them'" (Amalou 2003a). Similarly, a *New York Times* editorial writes: "with more two-income families and single-parent households, more children eat at cheap fast-food outlets, where sugary drinks and high-calorie choices in enormous portions abound" (New York Times 2002). Cheap "junk" food is most likely to be demonized, consistent with arguments that moral crusades tend to target consumption patterns of the poor (Kersh and Morone 2002; Morone 2003). One *New York Times* article, however, bucks the trend by arguing that *expensive* high-caloric foods (and their elite consumers) should not get special treatment: "another penny or two of tax on fast food is really a tax on the poor [. . .] if potato chips are taxed, crème brûlée should be too. Anybody who buys Camembert can afford an extra nickel for a childhood obesity prevention program" (New York Times 2005).

Consistent with Hypothesis 2.5, the French press is more likely to discuss policy solutions (44 versus 21 percent). There is also some evidence that this reflects practice, in that the more centralized French state has taken somewhat quicker and more decisive political action in this arena. For instance, in 2005, the last year of our news sample, all automatic vending machines were removed from public schools by the start of the fall term (Abramson 2007). In the United States, where control of schools is more decentralized, such widespread changes have not yet been implemented.

In addition, as predicted by Hypothesis 2.6, the American news sample is more likely to discuss low-fat (12 versus 2 percent), low-carbohydrate (11 versus 0 percent), and low-calorie diets (10 versus 1 percent). In contrast, the French news sample is more likely to talk about *adding* "healthy" foods to the diet (22 versus 5 percent).

### *Limits of the Discrimination Frame*

Contrary to Hypothesis 2.7, American articles are *no more likely* than French articles to discuss weight-based discrimination. A slightly greater proportion of the French sample discusses weight-based discrimination (17 percent compared to 11 percent of the U.S. sample), but this difference is not statistically significant.<sup>5</sup>

5. That our sample selected for the terms "obesity" and "overweight" may bias it towards a medical slant. However, these terms are increasingly used to speak of heavier bodies even outside of a medical context. While fat acceptance activists have reclaimed the term "fat," it is still rarely used outside of those circles. It is possible that by sampling a wider range of words (e.g., fat, plus sized, etc.), we might have found proportionately more discussions of weight-based discrimination. However, we would expect this to affect the U.S. and French sample equally and therefore this is unlikely to affect the national comparison, which is our primary focus.

Why does the U.S. press rarely mention weight-based discrimination and why is it no more likely to do so than the French press, despite stronger political traditions of addressing group-based discrimination of various kinds? We maintain that one important reason that the group-based discrimination frame has little traction in the case of body size is that the latter is typically viewed as a *behavior*, like smoking, rather than as an *ascribed characteristic*, akin to race or sex. Indeed, as we have already seen, the U.S. news sample is significantly *less* likely than the French news sample to discuss biological contributors to body weight. Moreover, as is shown in the last three rows of Table 1, discussions of weight-based discrimination are significantly more common in news articles that frame body weight as biologically innate. Twenty-six percent of the small subsample of 38 American articles that mention biological contributors to body weight, compared to 8 percent of the larger subsample of 224 articles that do not, also discuss weight-based discrimination, a difference that is statistically significant at  $p < .001$ . Similarly, though the difference is slightly shy of statistical significance at  $p < .05$ , 30 percent of the French subsample of articles that discuss biological contributors to body weight ( $N = 27$ ), compared to 12 percent of the subsample that do not ( $N = 81$ ), also discuss weight-based discrimination.

A logistic regression further suggests that the framing of body size as a choice, rather than a biological trait, constitutes a barrier to perceiving weight-based discrimination. Including only French publications (with U.S. publication as the reference) as the independent variable, and discussion of discrimination as the dependent variable in the model, yields .47 as the coefficient for France (standard error of .33), which is not statistically significant. A Hosmer and Lemshow test and Omnibus test of coefficients both show that this model provides a poor fit, whereas a second model, that also includes discussion of biology as an independent variable, adequately fits the data. In this second model, the coefficient for the discussion of biology is 1.178 and statistically significant at  $p = .001$ , suggesting that discussion of biological contributors to body weight is associated with discussions of weight-based discrimination. In turn, in the second model, the size of the France coefficient shrinks from .47 to .36 (standard error of .33,  $p = .288$ ).

Providing an example of how discussions of biological determinants of weight and weight-based discrimination often go hand in hand, a *Newsweek* reader writes: “there is such misinformed prejudice against fat people that it’s vital they and the public understand the biochemical precursors of overweight and weight gain” (Newsweek 2004). An article from *Le Monde* quotes a professor of nutrition saying in one paragraph that people vary in their “genetic predisposition to gain weight” and then refers in the following paragraph to the “stigmatization of obese people.” In a third paragraph, the professor of nutrition critiques physicians as follows: “too many doctors judge on *moral* grounds, repeating: ‘eat less and it will be better’” (Blanchard 2004, emphasis added). A 2004 *New York Times* article quotes molecular geneticist Jeffrey Friedman: “Body weight, he says, is genetically determined, as tightly regulated as height. Genes control not only how much you eat but also the metabolic rate at which you burn food. When it comes to eating, free will is an illusion” (Kolata 2004).

The limited discussion of the fat rights movement in our American news sample does not prevent several French articles from portraying the fat rights movement as an example of American identity politics run amuck. While our sample of French articles discussing the fat acceptance movement in the United States is too small to make strong claims, our qualitative analyses suggest that these articles echo past French critiques of American political responses to claims of racism and sexism (Benson and Saguy 2005; Ezekiel 1995). For instance, one article reports that “the ‘fat is beautiful’ lobby, which demands equal treatment, is *becoming more radical*. Activists of the ‘Fat Task Force,’ attached to NAAFA [. . .] burn scales in public and boycott fat free products” (Richard 2002, emphasis added). Here, both the power and radical nature of the fat acceptance movement are magnified, as though through a distorted cross-national magic mirror (see Fassin 1999). Another French article (mis)represents fat acceptance groups as advocating “in the name of the liberty to choose one’s appearance” (Dumay 2004).

**Table 2 • Proportion of Sample Evoking Specific News Frames in 1995–2001 and in 2002–2005**

	United States			France		
	1995–2001 (N = 99)	2002–2005 (N = 163)	Difference (T2–T1)	1995–2001 (N = 32)	2002–2005 (N = 76)	Difference (T2–T1)
Health crisis	.17	.39	.22***	.41	.71	.30***
Epidemic	.12	.28	.16**	.13	.40	.27***
Any policy solution	.09	.28	.19***	.22	.53	.31***
Social structural	.20	.34	.14*	.31	.54	.23*
Biological cause	.18	.14	-.04	.44	.17	-.27***
Individual choices	.42	.39	-.03	.41	.49	.08
Individual solution	.57	.55	-.02	.50	.42	-.08
Medical intervention	.31	.20	-.11*	.25	.16	-.09
Discrimination	.17	.07	-.10*	.25	.13	-.12

\*\*\* $p < .001$  \*\* $p < .01$  \* $p < .05$  based on a Chi-Square Test (two-sided tests)

These groups, in fact, *challenge* the idea that body size is a choice, seeing it, instead, as largely determined by genetics (Saguy and Riley 2005).

### Trends over Time

As was discussed above, there was considerably more news reporting on overweight/obesity beginning at the end of 2001, following several high-profile pronouncements from the CDC, WHO, and the surgeon general (Schlesinger 2005), weighing our news sample towards this latter time period. We conducted a series of analyses to ascertain the extent to which news media reporting differed in 1995 through 2001, as compared to 2002 through 2005, and provide these results in Table 2. Specifically, given the increased politicization of obesity after 2001, we predicted that there would be proportionally more news media discussions of policy solutions in the United States during this latter time period.

As can be seen in Table 2, concern over obesity grows over the time period surveyed in both national samples. Not only do we see an increase in the number of articles being published on this topic, but the proportion of articles that discusses obesity as a health crisis or epidemic increases over time. American news discussion of obesity as a health crisis increases from 17 to 39 percent over the two time periods and discussions of obesity as an “epidemic” increase from 12 percent of the 1995–2001 sample to 28 percent of the 2002–2005 sample. Forty-one percent of the 1995–2001 and 71 percent of the 2002–2005 French sample frame obesity as a health crisis, while 13 percent of the earlier sample and 40 percent of the later sample label it an epidemic.

Supporting Hypothesis 2.8, the U.S. sample is more likely to discuss policy solutions after 2002 (28 versus 9 percent), when public attention to obesity and demands for government intervention are greater. This adds support to the argument that the anti-obesity crusade is following a familiar cycle of focusing first on individual reform and only later calling for government intervention (Morone 2003). Suggesting that this is not a purely American phenomenon, however, we note a similar pattern in the French news reports, where discussions of policy solutions increase from 22 percent of the 1995–2001 sample to 53 percent of the 2002–2005 sample. We see a similar, although not as dramatic, increase in news media discussions of social-structural contributors to overweight and obesity over time. The proportion of the American sample discussing this theme increases from 20 to 34 percent over the two time periods; in France, it increases from 31 to 54 percent.

In contrast, there is a small decrease in the proportion of the American sample that discusses biological contributors to body size (18 percent of the 1995–2001 sample and 14 percent of the 2002–2005 sample), but it is not statistically significant. We see a similar *and statistically*

*significant* trend in the French sample, where the proportion of the sample discussing biological contributors to body size decreases from 44 percent in 1995–2001 to 17 percent in 2002–2005. Likewise, the proportion of each news sample that discusses weight-based discrimination declines over time. Seventeen percent of the 1995–2001 American news sample mention weight-based discrimination but only 7 percent of the 2000–2005 sample does. The corresponding figures for the French news samples are 25 and 13 percent, respectively.

In other words, there seems to be some convergence over time in which American reporting is coming to resemble French reporting by focusing more on social-structural contributors to obesity and policy solutions, while French reporting is becoming more similar to American reporting in its *relative* lack of attention to biological determinants of weight and weight-based discrimination. We underscore that we are discussing *relative* and not *absolute* lack of attention to biological factors and weight-based discrimination. In absolute terms, discussion of biological contributors to body weight, as well as weight-based discrimination, has increased over time, as there has been an overall increase in news media discussions of overweight and obesity. However, *as a proportion of total number of articles on overweight/obesity*, discussions of biological factors and weight-based discrimination have stagnated or declined in both national presses.

There is no statistically significant change in the proportion of either national sample that discusses individual choices as contributing to overweight and obesity. Among the American articles, 42 percent of the 1995–2001 sample and 39 percent of the 2002–2005 sample evoke this theme; the corresponding figures for the French sample are 41 and 49 percent. Similarly, there is no statistically significant change over time in the proportion of either national sample discussing individual-level behavioral solutions. Such discussions make up 57 percent of the 1995–2001 and 55 percent of the 2002–2005 American sample and 50 percent of the 1995–2001 and 42 percent of the 2002–2005 French sample. In other words, individual responsibility is a constant theme in both national news samples.

There is no statistically significant change over time in the proportion of French articles discussing medical interventions; 25 percent of the 1995–2001 sample and 16 percent of the 2002–2005 sample discuss this theme. On the other side of the Atlantic, 31 percent of the 1995–2001 sample and 20 percent of the 2002–2005 sample discuss this theme, a change that is statistically significant. However, this change was entirely driven by greater discussions of weight-loss drugs in 1995–2001, a period marked by the highly publicized fen-phen scandal (when off-label use of weight-loss drugs fenfluramine and phentermine in combination led to heart-valve problems) and Federal Drug Administration (FDA) approval and release of weight-loss drugs Xenical and Meridia.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on quantitative and qualitative analyses of 370 news articles and opinion pieces published in the United States and France between 1995 and 2005 on the topic of overweight/obesity, this article shows how position in the global field of nation states and national culture and politics shape the framing of social problems. This article supports the hypothesis that greater *centrality* in the global field of nation states, as the United States currently enjoys with respect to France, is associated with greater *visibility* in foreign news reports. It further suggests that a journalistic field that is economically dominated but culturally dominant, as the French journalistic field is in relation to the U.S. journalistic field, is likely to define itself in *opposition* to the economically dominant but culturally inferior journalistic field.

Our original contribution is to highlight the flexibility of anti-American rhetoric, which can provide powerful ammunition for a variety of social problem frames. Specifically, French news reports may invoke anti-American rhetoric to *reject* a given phenomenon as a veritable public problem, or they may use such rhetoric to *drum up* concern over an issue. Thus, previous

work has shown that derogative discussions of sexual harassment in the United States have been used to discredit sexual harassment as an important issue in France (Fassin 1991; Saguy 2003). We found that similarly disparaging French reporting on the American fat rights movement likewise serves to discredit such initiatives in France, although this finding is based on a very small sample of French reporting on the American fat rights movement and should thus be interpreted with caution. In contrast, the articles in our French news sample typically do *not* belittle concerns about obesity in the United States to discredit such worries in France. Rather, they tend to exploit disgust about fat Americans and American fast food to elicit concern about an obesity epidemic spreading from the United States to France. In both cases, it is thus not so much that American models provoke backlash, but that evoking social anxieties about Americanization provides a language with which to *either* dismiss *or* emphasize the urgency of a social problem.

What factors predict whether anti-American rhetoric will be used to *reject* or, alternatively, to *stress* the importance of a social problem? We propose that this largely depends on the economic and cultural capital of the groups or individuals advancing a particular claim. Indeed, wealthy and educated white men, who both possess more economic and cultural capital than minorities and women, and who may feel threatened by affirmative action and feminism, have been able to frame these policies as American imports and *therefore* illegitimate in France (Ezekiel 1995; Fassin 1991; Saguy 2003). In contrast, powerful international economic interests and government agencies have invested considerable resources into stressing the urgency of the “obesity epidemic” as a global social problem. Moreover, in stark contrast to the cases of affirmative action and sexual harassment policies, the framing of heavier bodies as a medical and public health problem *does not threaten the class position of French elites*. On the contrary, in that the dominant classes tend to be thinner than the dominated (Regnier 2005), discussions of obesity as a social problem allows the former to symbolically mark themselves as further superior to the latter (Aronowitz 2008). In an international context, the obesity frame also allows the French to position themselves as better than (the relatively fatter) Americans. These class and national dynamics also shed light on why discussions of obesity tend to demonize (American/mass) fast food, rather than (French/elite) *fois gras* or cheese. This finding has relevance beyond the specific case of obesity.

We did not find that the particular ways that news outlets in the United States report on overweight/obesity were diffusing to France. While we found some convergence in the specific ways American and French news media are framing overweight over time, this was due as much to the American news evoking more traditionally “French” frames than vice versa. Specifically, American reporting is becoming more like French reporting through its increasing emphasis on social-structural factors and policy solutions, while French reporting is becoming more like American reporting in its dwindling attention to biological determinants of weight. These trends in news media reporting seem to reflect greater attention, in both countries, to obesity as a public health crisis, rather than simply a medical issue that concerns some individuals and their doctors.

Our findings confirm previous work suggesting that distinct national politics and culture lead presses to frame the “same” issue in different ways (Benson and Saguy 2005), while offering a more nuanced account of how diverse cultural factors shape news reporting. Expressing a stronger ideology of self-reliance, the U.S. sample was twice as likely to ascribe obesity to individual choices than to social-structural factors, whereas discussions of individual and social-structural factors were evenly balanced in the more collectivist France. Also, consistent with America’s stronger ideology of people pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, the American news sample was more likely than the French sample to discuss behavioral solutions for overweight. In contrast, in France, where there is less emphasis on self-determination and more stress on collective responsibility, discussions of biological and social-structural factors were more common. Finally, in France, known for its strong centralized state, the press was more likely to discuss policy solutions. However, discussions of policy solutions are increasing

over time in the United States, a reminder that the “weak” U.S. federal state can be strong indeed when morality is at stake (Morone 2003).

There is no reason to believe that social-structural factors are objectively more to blame for increasing body weights in France than in the United States. In fact, given the more extensive social safety net and lower levels of social inequality in France compared to the United States, the opposite is a distinct possibility. Rather, it seems that the French press is more likely to emphasize social-structural factors because such considerations are more accessible in French cultural repertoires (Lamont and Thévenot 2000). Similarly, there is no reason to believe that individual-level solutions would be more effective in the United States or that policy solutions would be more effective in France. Rather, this difference in attention probably echoes *general* patterns in how social problems are addressed differently in each nation, with the U.S. press focusing more on individual autonomy and the French press envisaging a larger role for the state. These findings suggest that the U.S. press would be more likely to emphasize individual autonomy and the French press social solidarity in reporting on other issues as well. News outlets in countries beyond the United States and France would be expected to frame body weight, as well as other issues, through the specific cultural lenses most accessible there.

This article explains how diverse cultural factors inform news framing. In addition to what has been discussed, we found that United States and French news reports on obesity are shaped by differences in food culture. Specifically, in the United States where “the worth of a meal lies principally in what it lacks” (Glassner 2007:xi), the news media were more likely to discuss low-fat, low-carbohydrate, or low-calorie diets. In contrast, in France, where more emphasis is put on enjoying food and what a meal includes, there was more discussion of eating more “healthy foods.” In bemoaning the decline of a French food culture in the wake of an American invasion of fast food, the focus is as much on a way of eating (i.e., slowly, over several courses, with others) as on particular foods consumed (Abramson 2007). Such national biases and concerns are likely to shape policy priorities as well as news reporting. For instance, we would expect U.S. policy initiatives to continue to focus on nutritional labels emphasizing what foods *lack* as much as or more than what they possess. In contrast, we would expect French policy makers to emphasize *French* culinary traditions, including the importance of pleasure, taste, mealtimes, meal structure, and sociability—as well as nutrition—for the health of the nation (Abramson 2007). Likewise, other nations would be expected to respond to a perceived obesity epidemic through specific national cultural lenses.

This study suggests, however, that established social problem frames do not *automatically* transfer to new social problems. Rather, the ability to evoke a social problem frame in a *new* context requires being able to present the new issue as sufficiently similar to other issues that have been framed in this way. An analysis of national culture and its internal contradictions sheds light on why established social problem framings sometimes *cannot* be extended to new social problems. In this case, the established U.S. political tradition of denouncing group-based discrimination has had little traction in the area of weight-based discrimination. Specifically, we found that the American sample *was no more likely* to discuss weight-based discrimination than the French sample. In fact, a somewhat smaller percentage of the United States sample, compared to the French, evoked this theme. We argue that it has been difficult to promote a discrimination frame to understand body size because the latter is chiefly framed as a behavior, akin to smoking, rather than as an ascribed trait, like race or sex. Indeed, the U.S. press is less likely than its French counterpart to frame body size as biologically determined.

Providing the first account of how the elite United States and French news media represent fat bodies over time, this article contributes to our understanding of how global field dynamics and national politics and culture shape news reporting. Future work should extend this research to other nations and to other social problems, so as to provide greater insight into the factors that shape news reporting. Given the important role the news media play in informing how social problems are articulated and what responses are deemed appropriate and legitimate, such work is of central importance.

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