Anti-Fat Prejudice: Is there discrimination towards obesity?

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Abstract

There are many known kinds of prejudice over African Americans and women. A prejudice that has been getting attention is the Anti-Fat Prejudice. The discrimination regarding overweight individuals was thought to be both implicit and explicit for this study. An online questionnaire was given along with a self-report. Cronbach’s Alpha was completed to filter out the conditions of friendliness and attractiveness. A Within Subjects ANOVA was done to see how competence was affected by weight. Next, a Pearson Product Moment Correlation was done between the questionnaire and the survey. Last, a Frequency Rating test was completed to show contradictions with the participant’s answers. An analysis of the data showed that there was an implicit and explicit discrimination towards obesity. This shows that there is an Anti-Fat prejudice afforded to people about obese individuals.
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When people think of prejudice, images of Martin Luther King Jr. giving his speech on equality or women fighting in combat may come to mind. The preconceived notions against Blacks, women, or the elderly have long been exposed. These, in one sense or another, all deal with the phenotypes expressed in people. That is, all these prejudices are mainly skin-deep. This does not deal out non-phenotypic stereotypes nor is there such a thing as a superior stereotype that should be addressed primarily. All stereotypes are obstructive towards the people that have to deal with them. The physiologies of overweight individuals are attracting negative attention. This type of prejudice is not new but the research behind it is fairly recent. Nevertheless, that does not give it grounds for dismissal. Prejudices towards obese individuals lead to discrimination. If prejudices are seen as okay then people will only worsen in behavior. This can be related to the behavior of people following the Broken Window Theory (Keizer, Lindenberg, and Steg, 2008). Prejudices are negative preconceived notions about a person or a race. Discrimination is taking those thoughts one step further and acting out against those individuals unfairly.

Even though there are numerous laws and policies enforced by the government discrimination still can happen at restaurants, on the street, at the movies, and, worst of all, the work force. The job market is supposed to be one of the places where discrimination should not have a chance of happening because everyone deserves equal opportunity and it is illegal. An organization or company cannot discriminate against applicants based on race, gender, or phenotypes, like elderly or obese individuals (unless of course the job has specific requirements, such as, a men’s bathroom attendant would need to be male). Unfortunately, there is evidence to show that it is happening in the work force. Research conducted by Agerström and Rooth (2011) found that hiring managers preferred normal weight applicants over obese applicants for an
Their study was concluded in separate parts. The first half of the study had applications sent out to hiring managers with photos of obese and normal-weight applicants. The second half was contacting the hiring managers that responded back and having them perform a questionnaire. The questionnaire was an implicit association test (IAT). This survey would gauge if the hiring managers had an automatic stereotype against obese individuals. That is, if they associated negativity with obesity. “In the present research…we have demonstrated that automatic obesity stereotypes predict real labor market discrimination,” (2011, p. 797). There was an obvious preference towards normal-weight applicants. This unwarranted prejudice has placed people who are overweight at a disadvantage. People have fixed notions about overweight individuals being less competent than normal-weight applicants that carry no concrete basis.

Other research points out that the media or the news could have this impact (McClure, Puhl & Heuer, 2011). The characters portrayed in television shows or cartoons show obese populace as lazy, sloppy, unintelligent, and constantly a target for ridicule. The substandard father from Family Guy is a perfect example of this poor portrayal. In each episode, he does not disappoint the audience with his acts of stupidity or unflattering eating habits. Media more often than not will choose to place obese individuals in a negative representation because it follows the weight-bias (McClure et al., 2001). Weight bias is the preference to think negatively about a person based solely on his or her weight. “News coverage of obesity has increased dramatically in recent years, and research shows that media content may contribute to negative public attitudes toward obese people,” (2011, p. 359). Viewers are not blind to the picture that the media is painting of obese individuals. People are seeing obese individuals in the most unflattering position which viewers understand to be the only point of view. Even cartoons take a hold of this prejudice and exploit it. Obese individuals are being blamed for their obesity because
of their poor lifestyle. The media coverage elicits a sense of victim blaming in the viewers. Why should they care about someone who does not care about themselves? This negative feedback has negative responses in obese individuals such as, depression, exercise avoidance, anxiety, and low self-esteem (McClure et al., 2011).

This type of prejudice is being encouraged by the media and happening at the work force, which sends the wrong type of message to the masses. The message is that it is okay to have a prejudice or act out discrimination towards overweight individuals. This kind of acceptance takes a toll on people who are obese, as mentioned previously, both mentally and physically. Brochu and Morrison (2007) mention the Antifat Attitudes Scale (AFAS) established by another study. This was a self-report questionnaire that involved statements like, “It is disgusting when a fat person wears a bathing suit at the beach.” The participants agreed with this statement 43% of the time (Brochu & Morrison, 2007). People, especially from Western cultures, value beauty in body image. One of the most revealing garments is bathing suits and as such should only be worn by slender men and women. People find obesity ‘disgusting’ and obese individuals are being ostracized by their peers because of it. They see others making a connection between disgust and their bodies.

There is clearly a weight-bias but is there a difference between genders? Brochu and Morrison (2007) completed a study that found there was a negative stereotype towards overweight individuals, women more so than men. They also found that males were more likely to negatively stereotype obese individuals than females. To confirm that there was a weight-bias, they had their participants perform an IAT which demonstrated normal-weight people were better than overweight individuals. This is similar to the study done by Agerström and Rooth. This study points out the pressure that is placed on feminine beauty. One aspect that the gender
of the overweight individual did not differ on was if people were willing to be socially interactive with them (Brochu & Morrison, 2007). It did not matter what gender it was, people rated decreased interest in social interaction with both females and males. One of the most important topics discussed in class was the degree to which humans are fundamentally social. This lack of interest amongst peers is disheartening. This is where prejudice fades into discrimination because others are treating people who are obese differently.

The way people think could be a contributor of constant ridicule and negative associations towards overweight individuals. One of the most common ways of thinking is that people get what they deserve. This type of ideology explains why people are so unwilling to show compassion towards obese people. The reason they are the way they are is their fault. Crandall (1994) did a study over symbolic racism with antifat attitudes instead of race. He found this type of thinking popular when participants were considering obesity. “Not only are antifat attitudes hypothesized to be an expression of a nonspecific rejection of deviance, but also a consequence of a sociopolitical value system,” (1994, p. 887). This failure to uphold to valued ideologies results in social rejection. People are trying to discourage behavior that is seen as defective. They humiliate and bully their victims to ‘correct’ the differences. The easiest way to do this is to socially isolate them from the rest of the group. Once this separation occurs, obese people will realize that it is because of their weight that they have been ostracized. This ideology in itself is flawed and cruel.

The beauty standard, which changes constantly, has developed a depressing trend that keeps getting thinner and thinner. Women face more problems from the consequences of weight gain than men because this beauty standard is stuck on females. The ideal of slim, petite females has transformed from an ‘ideal’ to the ‘standard’ which makes women think being 110lbs with
C-cups is totally plausible. Chrisler (2012) states in her article over gender differences in obesity, “Women who deviate from the standard are considered unattractive and unfeminine, and the farther they are from the ideal, the more harshly they are judged,” (2011, p. 610). Chrisler (2012) argues that this predicament is a feminist issue since it holds higher restrictions on women than men. Women should have the right to be comfortable with their bodies and not be held back in career options, every day activities, or relationships. Women should not be the only ones who have to combat with a beauty standard, whereas men can still be flexible in weight and muscle mass.

This thin body type is the only way to be beautiful or accepted into society. Prejudice has changed into discrimination with people being judged in the work force and for attraction. The stereotype the media has placed on obese individuals has poisoned the minds of the masses into thinking that all overweight individuals are unintelligent, sloppy, disgusting, and incompetent. Overweight females are at more risk than men for humiliation and isolation because of these unfeasible standards. People, frankly, are afraid of being fat and view it negatively because of all these outside forces.

Method

Participants

This study consisted of forty-seven participants, all ranging from eighteen to twenty-two in age. They were gathered online through emails and psychology classes. These participants completed an online questionnaire and self-report. There were 10% of men and 90% of women. The participants were 87% White, 2% Black, 4% Asian, and 2% Hispanic, 2% American, 2% Middle Eastern. These participants were all gathered from Hanover College via their Hanover email. Participants in certain psychology classes could receive extra credit from completing the study.
Materials

As mentioned previously, this study will be consisting of two measures that will be given online. These online measures provided two different sets of data that would be compared later in the study. The only information that the measure required of them was their answers, age, race, and gender. After they entered in their demographics and signed the Informed Consent form online, they could begin the measure. The questionnaire gauged the response people have towards overweight individuals indirectly. In order to do this, the researchers gave pictures of models ranging from slim to plus-size with both male and female models. There were eight pictures, four of males and four of females. The level of weight went from slim, normal, overweight, to obese. These photos were gathered via the internet. With each picture, the participant had to answer the five following questions: “How intelligent does this person seem?”, “How attractive is this person?”, “Would this person make a good leader or be able to hold a leader-like position?”, “Would you be friends with this person?”, and “How competent is this person?” The participants would rate their responses on a Likert scale of 1-5. One would be “not at all” while five would be “very much”. These five questions would remain the same throughout the questionnaire, while only the pictures changed. In order to mask the hypothesis, the participants would not be able to witness the gradual change in weight. The pictures would be out of order, for example an obese model may be the first and a slim model may be last. The photos that were selected were standardized in ethnicity and neat appearance. This method is similar to the study done by McClure, Puhl and Heuer (2011) where they used photos of obese individuals following the stereotype (eating junk food) and flattering (dressed neatly). The results from this study illustrated that subjects were less prejudicial towards the flattering images than towards the stereotypical images. This measure is meant to illuminate the prejudice people may or may not have towards obese individuals without being direct. The second survey will
serve as a self-report. Brochu and Morrison (2007) mention in their article how “[r]esearchers have conducted several studies to document the prevalence of explicit (i.e., self-reported) antifat prejudice,” (p. 683). It will be another online questionnaire set up with a Likert scale of 1-5. The questionnaire has ten questions that ask about obesity more directly. These questions will bring in the feelings of being overweight and thoughts towards overweight people. These were the questions that the researchers asked: “Would being overweight be as bad as having cancer?”, “Would you be happy with being overweight?”, “Would you be comfortable with an overweight person as an accountant?”, “Would you be okay with an overweight person looking after your children?”, “Would having an overweight surgeon or doctor be off-putting?”, “Do you view overweight individuals as lazy?”, “Does overweight individuals seem less intelligent?”, “Do you think obesity is a problem?”, “Do you find obese people attractive?”, and “Would obesity in men be worse than obesity in women?” These questions do not have to be given in a certain order.

Procedure

All participants, once gathered via email, had to enter in their demographics and sign an Informed Consent before the online measures. All forty-seven participants were asked to perform both measures. The first measure performed was the questionnaire gauging prejudice indirectly with the pictures of models ranging from slim to overweight. The second measure performed was the self-report that measured the prejudice directly with questions like: “Do you view overweight individuals as lazy?” This was organized to reduce the risk of the hypothesis being found out until the second measure. The questionnaire and self-report took around fifteen minutes to complete. The participants were debriefed after both surveys.
Results

The questionnaire needed to be analyzed in separate groups by the different weight classes among the men and women. To do this, Cronbach’s Alpha was applied to the results to show what conditions were most prevalent in the study. The conditions that were eliminated from this were: “How attractive is this person?” and “Would you be friends with this person?” After those parts of the survey were gone, the resulting Cronbach’s Alpha for all the left over conditions was 0.7 or higher. By order of Slim, Average, Plus-Size, and Obese with women before men here are the results of that: .80, .85, .78, .86, .83, .79, .86, and .78. After that the results of the Cronbach’s Alpha would be put into a Within Subjects Design to see how women’s weight classes varied from men’s weight classes. Figures 1-8 are the photos used for the questionnaire for slim, average, plus-size, and obese. Figures 1-2 are slim men and women. Figures 3-4 are average men and women. Figures 4-5 are plus-size men and women. Figures 7-8 are obese men and women.
The graph shows that for the first weight class of slim, women are rated to have more confidence than men but just barely. For average, there might be some flaw because the woman
is scored so much higher than the man. This is probably because the woman was older and
dressed more for work than the man we found for the average class. The weight class for plus-
size, the woman has a higher competence score than the male. This is reciprocated again in the
last weight class of obese (the woman has a higher competence rating than the man). For these
weight classes, the confidence is close together but the woman is always higher. The average
results have too much static going on and other third-party variables could interfere with the
conditions between weight class and competence. The way the within subjects ANOVA test was
analyzed was with a 2 (sex of target) by 4 (weight of target: slim, average, plus size, or obese).
The main effect of weight was significant, $F(3, 138) = 15.73, p < .001$. Another effect that was
significant was the main effect of sex, $F(3, 46) = 19.29, p < .001$. The effect of weight differed
by sex which is indicated by a significant sex by weight interaction, $F(3,138) = 19.97, p < .001$. 

![Chart showing competence by weight and sex](image-url)
Next was a Pearson’s Product Moment Correlation which was done between the questionnaire and the self-report survey. It did not reveal discrimination between men and women in the slim and average category mainly because there wasn’t any weight discrimination to be found there. For the plus size and obese categories, there was a discrimination. It was more evident for the women than for the men. People were more likely to label an overweight woman as lacking in competence over an overweight man much faster.

**Pearson's product-moment correlation**

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<th>f2</th>
<th>f3</th>
<th>f4</th>
<th>m1</th>
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<td>0.042</td>
<td>-0.389</td>
<td>-0.507</td>
<td>0.100</td>
<td>0.186</td>
<td>-0.042</td>
<td>-0.323</td>
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<td>0.777</td>
<td>0.00684</td>
<td>&lt;0.001</td>
<td>0.504</td>
<td>0.212</td>
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The data shows that it was significant for women who were plus size and women who were obese as well as for men who were obese. The correlations were higher than that of the men too, f4 (obese woman) being -0.507 and m4 (obese man) being -0.323. Cronbach’s alpha was done on the self-report to drop the question concerning if men and women were regarded differently based on their obesity. The resulting Cronbach’s Alpha was 0.75. There was also a frequency rating test done over the statistics of the self-report. This shows that there is a contradiction among people’s ratings. For the question concerning “Are obese people attractive?” 17% of the participants responded that obese people were attractive. Yet, when they got to the question “Is obesity a problem?” 87% of participants agreed that it was a problem. If some of these people agree that they are attractive then how is it still a problem? This was the data that was found about this survey.
Discussion

The researchers predicted that both measures, the questionnaire and the self-report, would produce some form of prejudice against people who were overweight. This was supported but more so from the questionnaire than the self-report. The questionnaire was used as an implicit measure whereas the self-report was explicit. The questionnaire would be able to pick up on discrimination with less difficulty because the participants were not aware of the stimuli being manipulated. The self-report was straightforward which placed the participants in position to mask the prejudice they felt. Obesity is a touchy subject so the participants may have been uncomfortable dealing with the statements listed on the self-report. This correlates with the previously mentioned studies stating that this prejudice is present. The results demonstrated some gender differences but mainly this prejudice is dispersed evenly throughout everyone.

The first measure, or questionnaire, was set up using eight photos which could have swayed the participants’ answers. The researchers standardized the photos to match up in ethnicity and neat appearance but there were still differences between the sets. The largest difference that was clearly illustrated based off of the data was the competence rating between the average-weight female and the average-weight male. The data clearly favors the female in competence. This may have happened because the female is wearing business attire and has a more business ready pose than the male. Researchers Fiske, Cuddy and Glick (2007) found that women are better at detecting warmth over competence. Since ninety percent of the participants were females this could explain the results being skewed towards females having more competence. Warmth and competence are closely linked together. The impressions that people create are largely based on the way the person is warm or competent (Fiske, Cuddy, & Glick, 2007).
Warmth is simply if someone aims to help rather than harm. Women generally are rated for being more warm than males because females are more nurturing stereotypically (Fiske et al., 2007). The gender of the participants could have favored the female photos because they were smiling verses half of the males that showed hints of aggression. Warmth and competence are judged in that order with warmth outranking competence (Fiske et al., 2007). Logically, it makes sense to focus on if someone wants to help verses harm rather than how competent they may be. When meeting someone for the first time, it is natural to seek out if it is friend or foe. The only female that was not showing explicit signs of warmth was the slim model. She was rated last in terms of competence. Another study performed by Word, Zanna, and Cooper (1974) completed a study that illustrated attitudes a person may have about another individual can be expressed his or her nonverbal behaviors and these behavior being replicated by this individual. The participants could have picked up on this warmth and reciprocated it by rating the photos higher in competence.

Wilson and Nisbett (1978) conducted several experiments illustrating the lack that their participants had on pinpointing the correct cause of their behavior because they underestimated the stimuli given. People are poor judges of their own character. One specific study that they conducted asked subjects to choose between two pairs of stockings that were identical, which only the researchers knew. The participants expressed a preference towards the pair on the right when there should not have been one. When asked if the preference was decided based off of presentation of the stocking, all participants disagreed (Wilson & Nisbett, 1978). The participants of this study may have not realized the true behavior of their actions or that they were being manipulated by the stimulus. Wilson and Nisbett (1978) wrote, “What matters for present purposes though, is not why the effect occurs but that it occurs and that subjects do not
report it or recognize it when it is pointed out to them,” (p. 124). The participants were not able to recognize that they were implicitly discriminating against overweight individuals. They also did not know why discrimination was more accessible for overweight women than for overweight men. Participants were able to state that they were not being discriminatory because they were not aware they were discriminating towards obesity.

Bargh, Chen, and Burrows (1996) organized studies similar to Wilson and Nisbett’s but in regards to attitudes using priming. They wanted to know if subjects could be manipulated by simply presenting them with a stimulus that stereotyped a group. For example, they did one experiment to test if subjects would be more aggressive if primed with Black faces verses White faces. The subjects (all White Males) did exhibit more aggression after being primed with the Black faces after they were told that they would have to retake the study (Bargh, Chen, & Burrows, 1996). Racist attitudes did not matter because subjects who were not racist were just as hostile as subjects who were extremely racist (Bargh et al., 1996). The participants of this study who were low in prejudice towards obesity could have the same reaction as those with extreme prejudicial views towards obesity. This means that the participants were not aware of the impact the stimulus had on their behavior or decisions on rating. This could explain why there were contradictions in results.

Thorndike (1920) had studies concerning something he referenced as the “halo” effect where subjects were easily tempted to rate others high in many categories. An example would be if they were rated high in physical qualities they would also be rated high in intelligence. There was a recorded .31 correlation between physique and intelligence (Thorndike, 1920). Participants in this study may have undergone such an effect. If participants rated people high in competence they would have been more likely to rate the person high in other categories such as leadership
and intelligence. This could be the reason why some subjects rated the figures in the study as being high in these similar characteristics.

Greenleaf, Starks, Gomez, Chambliss, and Martin (2004) selected college students to look at eight different silhouettes ranging from below average weight to obese for both female and male figures. Each participant had to define which category each silhouettes out of these eight terms: skinny, slim, thin, normal weight, overweight, large, fat, and obese. They also had to list three characteristic words for each of the eight weight classes (Greenleaf, Starks, Gomez, Chambliss, & Martin, 2004). The participants labelled stupid, unfriendly, and boring for the extreme categories: obese and skinny. This goes against the results that we gathered since the plus-size and obese models were credited for being more competent than the slim and average weight models. Although, for the Pearson correlations between both surveys it shows how it is possible why a prejudice was found. For the higher levels of weight, it was noted that discrimination increased.

Some things that should change would be the photos used for the study. In the future, to find more basic level photos of the four categories of weight and between genders. The photos for this study were not as standardized as they were meant to be resulting in some skewed data. Something that wasn’t measured but be a good condition is helping. It would be interesting to know if people would equally help the four categories of weight among men and women. This would be a tricky thing to measure without giving away the hypothesis of the study.

Complications that occurred were that the study was not diverse enough about sex. It wasn’t generalized for men’s perspectives about weight. Would discrimination be higher or would it decrease? Also, the strength of the second measure may have such a strong reactivity that it may effect what was being measured.
References


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