

Obesity and Perceived Interview Performance

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This study was undertaken to determine if a job applicant's weight negatively influences and interviewer's perception of that applicant. Two hundred and sixty subjects were randomly assigned to one of two conditions: (a) listening to a structured interview of two potential job applicants, one obese and one of average weight, or (b) watching the applicants' interviews. After listening to or watching the videotapes, subjects were given a questionnaire and asked to rate each applicant on ten characteristics, as well as choose which applicant they preferred overall. The results supported the hypothesis that when the applicants could be seen, the obese applicant was rated lower on a variety of positive traits when compared with an applicant of average weight.

Introduction

It has long been accepted that a person's physical characteristics, such as height, weight, and skin color, influence how others perceive that person. Many studies have shown that highly attractive persons are perceived as possessing desirable traits, whereas those not considered physically attractive are perceived less positively (Gillen, 1981). Dion, Berscheid, and Walster (1972) labeled this perception the "what is beautiful is good" stereotype. This stereotype has profound importance in the business world because of the role of subjective appraisals in making employment decisions (Morrow, McElroy, Stamper, & Wison, 1990)

Stereotypes are one of the reasons that Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 prohibits discrimination in hiring on the basis of race, color, religion, sex, or national origin. Other laws passed by Congress forbid discrimination against persons because of age, pregnancy, and disability. However, in all of the protection

granted to persons on the basis of physical appearance, no protection has been extended by the federal government to those who are considered physically unattractive. Because obesity is commonly associated with unattractiveness, it might logically follow that obese individuals are treated differently than are individuals of average weight. The results of past research strongly support this assumption and suggests that obesity per se is unattractive (Rothblum, Brand, Miller, & Oejten, 1990).

Obesity is a clinical term for body weight that is 15% or more above an individual's "ideal" weight. Obviously, determining an "ideal" weight for a person is problematic. Often it is simply the average weight for persons of that height and frame, with a range of weights being acceptable (Williams, 1985).

In the highly competitive job market, it is important to know which types of applicants employers view most favorably. In our society, the obese "are a strongly disliked group" (Crandall & Biernat, 1990, p. 227). DeJong (1980) notes the existence of studies (Cahnman, 1968; Mayer, 1968) that argue "that the obese are subject to a particularly severe degree of ridicule, humiliation, and discrimination" (p. 75). And these attitudes are evident from an early age.

In one study photographs of obese and average weight children were shown to children as young as five years old. A clear preference for the thinner children was evident (Lerner & Gellert, 1969). Other research has supported these findings. When shown drawings of children who were handicapped, amputees, disfigured, or obese, elementary school children preferred all but the obese drawings (Richardson, Goodman, Hastorf, & Dornbusch, 1961).

Davis, Shipp, and Pattishall (1965) asked children with juvenile diabetes if they would rather keep their disease or if it were possible trade for the less life threatening condition of obesity. Most of the children said they would not make the trade.

High school students reported a preference for the company of a handicapped classmate rather than that of an obese classmate (Matthews & Westie, 1966).

In 1982, Venes, Krupka, and Gerard asked students to rank, in order of preference, "various categories of persons as potential marital partners". Students said they would marry an embezzler, cocaine user, shoplifter, or blind person before they would marry an obese person.

Allon (1982) suggests that the stigma of obesity is associated with highly negative characteristics. Many studies have supported the idea of "anti-fat" attitudes. It is known, for example, that the obese are perceived to have less favorable personality attributions (Wells & Siegel, 1961; Strongman & Hart, 1968; Lerner, 1969) as well as less favorable behavioral attributions (Lerner & Korn). Raza and Carpenter (1987) reported that attractive persons are better liked and are perceived to possess other favorable characteristics, such as skill and intelligence, as compared with unattractive persons. Physically attractive persons are rated higher by teachers (Adams & Cohen, 1976a, 1976b; Clifford, 1975; Clifford & Walster, 1973) are more likely to receive help (Benson, Karabenick, & Lerner, 1976; West & Brown, 1975), can better elicit cooperation during conflicts (Signall, Page, & Brown, 1971), are found guilty of crimes less often, are seen as deserving of milder punishments (Efran, 1974), and receive more favorable judgements (Stephans & Tully, 1977) than less attractive persons. Furthermore, attractive job applicants are perceived to be more qualified than unattractive job applicants (Cash, Gillen, & Burns, 1977; Dipboye, Fromkin, & Wilback, 1975; Raza & Carpenter, 1987) and tend to be hired at a higher starting salary (Dipboye, Arvey, & Terpstra, 1977; Dipboye, Fromkin, Wilback, 1975). Klassen (1987) found that, among other things, the obese were seen as lazy, unhealthy, and insecure. Tiggemann and Rothblum (1988) expanded on this saying that obese people were found to be unhappier, less self-confident, more self-indulgent, less self-disciplined, and less attractive than average weight persons.

In a 1977 study, Dipboye, Arvey, and Terpstra found that when college students were presented with two equally qualified candidates in a simulated hiring decision, subjects preferred those candidates who were considered to be physically attractive. Kundtz and Volker (1992) obtained similar results using college students, and Cash, Gillen, and Burns (1977) found the same pattern of preference when using professional personnel consultants.

Larkin and Pines (1979) found that obese persons were less likely to be considered good employees. As a group they are "evaluated more negatively than are their more normal-weight counterparts" (Young & Powel, 1985, p. 241). Jasper and Klassen reported in their 1990 study that, given a choice, employees were

"significantly more eager to work with" a normal-weight person than an obese one (p. 522).

The research is clear in demonstrating that unattractive applicants are seen as less qualified for employment and that obesity is considered unattractive. This finding is alarming when coupled with the fact that one fifth of the U.S. population (26% of adult males and 26 % of adult females) is estimated to be obese (National Center for Health Statistics, 1992).

Discrimination on the basis of weight is nothing new. In her 1968 book, Overweight: Causes, Costs and Control, Jean Mayer cites several poignant examples. On July 27, 1953, a woman in Providence, Rhode Island was ordered by a federal judge to lose 35 pounds in ten weeks. The July 16, 1959 issue of the Boston Globe reported that a State Police commissioner in Connecticut ordered his troopers to lose weight if they wanted to be promoted. A Cincinnati policeman was fired for gaining 13 pounds (New York Herald Tribune, January 12, 1960). In 1963, the Boston Globe reported that an airman first class who was five feet nine inches, and weighed 225 pounds, was seen by his supervisors as 37 pounds overweight. He was told to "reduce or be discharged without his pension rights" (p. 86). James Phelan stated in the September 25, 1965 issue of the Saturday Evening Post that "there are no fat FBI agents" (p. 87). In 1957 all agents were directed to bring their weight within the set limits of an insurance chart. And in the September 19, 1965 issue of the Boston Globe, a new political organization, "Reform Party", was reported in Denmark. The group included in its platform a plan to tax fat people. "For every two pounds of overweight, citizens would hand over one hour's pay every month" (p. 87).

There is little doubt that the obese in our society suffer from blatant discrimination (DeJong, 1980). In addition to being treated in "demeaning and damaging ways, those who treat them badly are not subject to the same social sanctions that racists and sexists may be" (Crandall & Biernat, 1990, p. 230). There are no laws to prevent or even discourage it.

The recent passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) could bring new hope for protecting the rights of obese persons. Because perceived attitudes about the obese are mostly negative, the current study was designed to investigate if obesity among female applicants increased the likelihood of an applicant

being seen as less desirable on a variety of positive characteristics, as well as less qualified for employment.

Method

Subjects

Two hundred and sixty undergraduate students, 152 female, at a southeastern university served as subjects. Subjects' ages ranged from 18 to 31 years, with a mean age of 19.3 years. All subjects were taking introductory psychology and received extra credit for their research participation.

Procedure

A structured job interview was used to make two ten-minute videotapes using paid actors as "applicants." Both applicants were female and were 28 and 30 years old, respectively. One was 5'6" tall, medium frame, and weighed 240 pounds. The other was 5'5" tall, medium frame, and weighed 138 pounds. According to the Metropolitan life Table, the former could be considered obese, the latter, of average weight. Both applicants were coached on how to answer the questions during the interview in order to control for confounding variables due to content variation.

Two two-page booklets were developed for the experiment. Each booklet contained a one-page background information sheet on an applicant, consisting of the candidate's age, gender, education, and previous work experience. The second page was a 10-item questionnaire concerning the applicant. The questionnaire asked subjects to rate the applicant on the following ten characteristics: qualification for the position, likability, intelligence, interesting, self-confidence, supervisory performance, friendliness, professional appearance, expected success on the job, and overall strength of recommendation. Subjects rated the applicants on a five point Likert scale, with five indicating a strong recommendation, and one indicating a poor recommendation.

The experiment was conducted in a university classroom. All subjects were given the same instructions upon arrival and were told that they could discontinue the experiment at any time. Subjects were told that they would rate two candidates on their

potential for success in an entry-level managerial position.

There were two conditions in the experiment. In condition one, "listening," the subjects were instructed to first read the applicant's background information and then listen to that applicant's responses to the structured interview. Subjects were unable to see the applicant in this condition; they only heard the applicant's responses on tape. Subjects were then asked to complete the questionnaire regarding that applicant. After completing the questionnaire for applicant number one, the materials were collected by the experimenter. The materials concerning applicant number two were then distributed. Each packet was numbered to ensure that each subject's ratings of the two applicants were kept together, and the subject's responses kept anonymous. The instructions were the same for applicant number two.

In the second condition, "watching," the procedure was the same, except that the subjects viewed the videotaped interview before completing the questionnaire on the applicant. In order control for any order effect, half of the subjects viewed the average candidate first, whereas the other half of the subjects viewed the over-weight candidate first. After completing the questionnaire for applicant number two, the materials were collected. Subjects were given a blank card with their subject number on it. The final task included asking subjects to indicate their age and gender; subjects were also asked which of the two applicants they believed to be most qualified for an entry level managerial position.

Results

A 2 X 2 (conditions: listening & watching X weight: average & obese) repeated measures analysis of variance was used to analyze the data. The dependent measure was a composite score representing the sum of the ratings on each of the ten variables. As shown in Table 1, a significant main effect for weight of the applicant was found. The obese applicant received lower rating than did the average-weight applicant, $F(1, 574) = 14.00, p < .01$. Results revealed a significant interaction effect between condition (listening or watching) and weight (average or obese), $F(1, 575) = 11.99, p < .01$. No effect was found for the order in which the

applicants were presented, $F(1, 575) = .52, p = .230$.

Table 1
ANOVA Source Table for Applicant Ratings by Condition

<u>Source of Variation</u>	<u>DF</u>	<u>MS</u>	<u>F</u>	<u>P-value</u>
Condition	1	55.86	1.44	.230
Weight	1	543.44	14.00	.001
Condition by Weight	1	465.21	11.99	.001
Error	576	38.81		

As can be seen in Table 2, although the average-weight applicant received slightly higher ratings than the obese applicant in the listening condition, this difference was not statistically

Table 2
Mean Ratings of Applicants

<u>Applicant Weight</u>	<u>Condition</u>	
	<u>Listening</u>	<u>Watching</u>
Average	34.74 ^a (5.65)	37.17 ^b (6.15)
Obese	34.60 ^a (6.27)	33.42 ^a (6.70)

Note: Means sharing the same superscript are not significantly different from each other. Numbers in parentheses are standard deviations.

significant. However, the rating difference in the watching condition in favor of the average-weight applicant was significant. The data presented in Table 2 were analyzed using a t-test.

As shown in Table 3, the normal weight applicant was chosen

Table 3
Applicant Hiring Decisions

<u>Applicant Weight</u>	<u>Condition</u>	
	<u>Listening Percentage</u>	<u>Watching Percentage</u>
Average	51.46	21.60
Obese	48.44	78.40

Chi Square = 28.27, $p < .001$.

much more often in the watching condition when the subjects were forced to make an overall choice. In the listening condition, each candidate was chosen at about the same rate. No significant effect was found regarding the gender of the subject, Chi square = 0.00 $p = .988$.

Discussion

The hypothesis that an obese female job applicant would be viewed as less desirable on a variety of positive characteristics, as well as chosen less often for employment than an average-weight individual was supported. The results indicated that the average-weight female received higher ratings than did the obese female when the subjects could view the applicants. This is especially powerful when one considers that the average-weight and obese applicants received similar ratings when the applicants' answers could only be heard. When the applicants could not be seen, neither one stood out; when the applicants could be seen, the average-weight applicant was the overwhelming choice.

This finding is consistent with the results shown in Table 3.

Both applicants were chosen at an equal rate in the listening condition when the subjects were told they could "hire" only one person. In the watching condition, the average-weight applicant was chosen at a rate of almost four to one.

The results of this study demonstrate that people are influenced by an individual's physical characteristics, and that they use this knowledge to evaluate others on inherent traits. No mention was made to the subjects regarding either applicant's weight. Subjects in the watching condition were able to decide for themselves how desirable each applicant appeared. The obese applicant was apparently evaluated negatively because of the physical unattractiveness associated with excess weight.

These results suggest that it is likely that obese people in today's society face a challenge in obtaining employment. This challenge has been recognized by some state legislators. The state of Maryland has passed legislation recognizing obesity as a handicap, thus making discrimination on the basis of weight illegal. This issue has also received some attention in the courts. The September/October 1992 issue of Issues in Human Resources reported that in July of that year, the California Court of Appeals ruled that weight did constitute a perceived disability. The plaintiff needed only to show that weight was the factor on which the denial of employment was based. The ramifications of this decision in the area of employee selection are obvious; human resource personnel now must take care to ensure that they are not discriminating against obese persons.

The present study indicates that obese females are at a disadvantage in the selection process, even if the measures used are as valid as the structured interview. Further research is needed to determine how much of an effect an individual's weight has on their ability not only to be selected into an organization, but also to have the opportunity to be promoted, trained, or given an increase in salary. One would hope that individuals making these decisions would shun the "what is beautiful is good" philosophy. They should be aware of the likelihood of discriminating against an individual based on his/her weight. The data provided by this study suggests the need for protection under the law against discrimination on the basis of a person's weight.

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