

## The Relationship between Obesity, Employment Discrimination, and Employment-Related Victimization

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This study examined whether obese persons report more types of employment discrimination and employment-related victimization than do nonobese persons. This question has never been answered directly using obese and nonobese persons in naturalistic settings. The subjects were recruited through the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). They were assigned to one of three weight level groups: average (no more than 19% above ideal weight as defined by 1983 Metropolitan Life Height and Weight Tables), obese (20 to 49% above ideal weight), or very obese (50% or more above ideal average weight). Very obese subjects reported more types of employment discrimination, school victimization, attempts to conceal weight, and lower self-confidence than did nonobese subjects. Women reported more attempts to conceal their weight and lower self-confidence because of their weight than did men. Since permanent weight loss is not possible for most obese persons, the results of this study suggest that societal attitudes toward obese persons, particularly toward women, need to change in order to eliminate the employment-related discrimination and victimization experienced by the obese. © 1990 Academic Press, Inc.

Status characteristic theory predicts that easily observable characteristics which have status in U.S. society, such as gender, race, and physical attractiveness, influence how target persons are evaluated and treated (Umberson & Hughes, 1987). Umberson and Hughes (1987) have demonstrated that physical attractiveness operates as a diffuse status characteristic. As such, attractiveness is related to a wide variety of positive expectations of social skills and other abilities. These positive expectations may serve as self-fulfilling prophecies, causing target individuals to fulfill positive expectations of them. Raza and Carpenter (1987) have proposed a model of hiring decisions in which physical attractiveness

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influences applicant likability, which in turn affects perceptions of the applicant's intelligence, skill, employability, and hirability. Thus, it appears that physical attractiveness, an easily observed status characteristic (Umberson & Hughes, 1987), triggers a chain of expectations in which attractive persons are better liked and are perceived to possess other favorable characteristics, such as skill and intelligence (Raza & Carpenter, 1987), than are unattractive persons.

Research examining the relationship between attractiveness and favorable employment outcomes has obtained results consistent with these predictions. Dipboye, Arvey, and Terpstra (1977) found that college student subjects preferred physically attractive "candidates" to equally qualified physically unattractive candidates in simulated hiring decisions. Similar results were obtained by Cash, Gillen, and Burns (1977) using professional personnel consultants and by Gilmore, Beehr, and Love (1986) using both professional and college student interviewers. Attractive candidates are also rated more favorably on employment-related dimensions than are unattractive candidates. Dipboye et al. (1977) found attractive candidates were rated as more competent, friendly, experienced, decisive, informed, motivated, and logical than were unattractive candidates. Gilmore et al. (1986) found that attractive applicants received more positive expected performance and "personality for job" ratings than did unattractive applicants. Thus, previous research in simulated employment contexts supports Umberson and Hughes's (1987) predictions that physical attractiveness, as a diffuse status characteristic, carries with it a host of favorable expectations, and also is consistent with Raza and Carpenter's (1987) model which predicts that physical attractiveness is one factor which influences employment outcomes.

However, previous research on attractiveness and employment may have confounded "applicant" body weight with attractiveness, since body weight was one dimension on which judgments of physical attractiveness were based (e.g., Dipboye et al., 1977). Indeed, the results of other research strongly suggest that obesity per se is unattractive. Horvath (1979, 1981) and Fallon and Rozin (1985) have used line drawings to obtain ratings of physical attractiveness based solely on the size of different body components. This method provides ratings which are free from the possible confounds of race or facial attractiveness. In the three studies, they concluded that waist width was negatively related to attractiveness ratings, particularly for females. Rothblum, Miller, and Garbutt (1988) provide further evidence that obesity is viewed as unattractive. When these authors asked college students to rate photographs of obese and nonobese women on a 9-point scale (1 = very unattractive, 9 = very attractive), none of the obese women received an attractiveness rating higher than 4.4, with a mean rating of 3.7. Nonobese targets, on the other hand, received a mean attractiveness rating of 6.5. Finally,

Silverstein, Perdue, Peterson, and Kelly (1986) found that the standard for physical attractiveness represented in the mass media has become progressively slimmer over the last 30 years, particularly for women. Thus, slenderness is apparently *sine qua non* for attractiveness in U.S. society, especially for women.

Taken together, the research demonstrating that attractive persons are preferred to unattractive persons and that obesity is negatively related to judgments of attractiveness suggests that nonobese persons would be preferred to and rated more favorably than obese persons. Indeed, research by Larkin and Pines (1979) supports this statement. In their studies, obese persons were viewed as less competent, productive, industrious, organized, decisive, active, successful, conscientious, aggressive, and ambitious than nonobese persons. Obese persons were also seen as less likely to take the initiative or persevere at work, more mentally lazy, and lacking in self-discipline, relative to nonobese persons. Based on these negative stereotypes alone, one would predict that obese persons are viewed as less desirable employees than are nonobese persons. Previous analog research indicates that obese persons are indeed at a disadvantage, relative to nonobese persons, in simulated employment settings.

Benson, Severs, Tatgenhorst, and Loddengaard (1980) asked 70 public health administrators to assess a female college student's chances of getting into graduate school and finding employment in their field. The subjects received a cover letter and resume along with either a photograph of an obese female, a nonobese female, or no photograph. Subjects who received a photograph of an obese female were less likely to respond to the request for information relative to those subjects who received a photograph of a nonobese female or no photograph. Forecasts were significantly more pessimistic about obese females than about nonobese females or females whose weight was unknown with regard to the student being able to get into graduate school or find employment in health administration.

Rothblum et al. (1988) asked college students to rate resumes of female job applicants. The resumes were accompanied by a picture of an obese or nonobese woman, judged to be roughly equivalent in attractiveness, or by written descriptions of obese or nonobese women whose attractiveness was not described. When subjects received written descriptions of women, the obese woman was rated significantly more negatively on supervisory potential.

Thus, previous research on attractiveness (e.g., Umberson & Hughes, 1987), attractiveness and employment (e.g., Dipboye et al., 1977; Raza & Carpenter, 1987), attractiveness and obesity (e.g., Horvath, 1979, 1981), and obesity and employment (e.g., Benson et al., 1980; Larkin & Pines, 1979; Rothblum et al., 1988) indicates that physical attractiveness

is related to a variety of positive outcomes, including employment outcomes, that the obese are seen as unattractive, that obese persons are viewed more negatively than are nonobese persons, and that obese persons are at a disadvantage in simulated employment settings relative to nonobese persons. Taken together, previous research suggests that obese persons will experience employment-related discrimination because of their weight.

One limitation of much of the previous research in these areas is that they have primarily studied college students' responses to hypothetical situations, including hypothetical employment situations. The purpose of the present study was to investigate whether obese persons themselves report actually experiencing discrimination on a variety of factors directly related to employment. This question has never been answered directly using obese and nonobese persons in naturalistic settings.

Furthermore, because of the negative social consequences of obesity, obese persons may not be able to achieve the quality of education, social skills, or self-confidence that would result in high-status jobs. There are numerous studies which indicate that the obese are less likely to be accepted to elite colleges (Canning & Mayer, 1966, 1967), are not chosen as friends by peers (Matthews & Westie, 1966), and participate in fewer high school organizations (Bullen, Monello, Cohen, & Mayer, 1963) than do the nonobese. Thus, the present study asked obese and nonobese subjects about negative weight-related experiences in school and college, about their attempts to hide or conceal their weight (e.g., using a telephone rather than appearing in person) to avoid discrimination, and about the effects of weight on personal self-confidence. These negative weight-related experiences will be referred to as victimization.

The present study had two hypotheses. First, it was predicted that obese persons would report more employment discrimination and employment-related victimization than would nonobese persons. Second, because weight is more important to judgments of women's attractiveness than men's (e.g., Horvath, 1979, 1981; Silverstein et al., 1986), obese women were expected to report more weight-related employment discrimination than would obese men.

## METHOD

### *Subjects*

The subjects were 453 women and men recruited through the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). Two questionnaires were mailed to each of the 1198 NAAFA members. The purpose of the study was explained in a cover letter in which the member was asked to complete one questionnaire regardless of whether she or he was obese or nonobese. Each member was also asked to give the second ques-

TABLE I  
Weight and Percentage over Ideal Weight

	Very obese		Obese		Average	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Weight in pounds						
Women	289.37	57.62	185.56	19.48	135.34	17.23
Men	314.78	59.24	209.13	20.85	167.15	17.26
Percentage over ideal weight						
Women	111.89	39.72	35.03	7.76	.81	10.80
Men	97.00	37.26	31.73	9.89	5.08	9.94

*Note.* *SD*, standard deviation.

tionnaire to a family member or a friend from a similar background who was thinner (or if the member was thin, heavier) than herself or himself. This procedure was used to recruit both obese and nonobese subjects. Of 2396 questionnaires distributed, 453 were completed and returned: A return rate of 18.9% (in fact, this is more likely a return rate of 37.8% since most of the questionnaires seemed to come from NAAFA members and few NAAFA members in fact distributed the second questionnaire to anyone). Of the 453 questionnaires returned, 8 could not be used due to incomplete information. Of the 445 questionnaires used for analyses, 367 had been completed by women (mean age 40.03) and 78 had been completed by men (mean age 39.51). This gender distribution of 82% women and 18% men corresponds closely to the gender distribution of NAAFA, which has 78% female and 22% male members.

Subjects were assigned to one of three weight level groups (average, obese, or very obese) on the basis of their self-reported height and weight. Ideal weight was defined as the midpoint of the medium frame weight range according to 1983 Metropolitan Life Height and Weight Tables. Using this definition of ideal weight as a reference point, subjects were assigned to one of three weight groups as follows: average (no more than 19% above ideal weight), obese (20 to 49% above ideal weight), or very obese (50% or more above ideal weight). Mean self-reported weight information for the women and men in the sample is summarized in Table 1. Previous research indicates that self-reported weight corresponds closely to actual weight (Rzewnicki & Forgays, 1987; Schachter, 1982, Stunkard & Albaum, 1981).

Subject age, marital status, education, and household income were compared by separate 2 (gender) by 3 (weight level) analyses of variance. There were no significant main effects for weight level on any of the demographic variables. On average, most of the subjects in the study had college educations and reported household incomes in the \$20,000

to \$30,000 per year range. There was a significant gender by weight level interaction for age ( $F(2, 434) = 3.93, p < .05$ ). Post hoc comparisons indicated that the very obese men were significantly older than the very obese women.

There were significant main effects for gender on marital status,  $F(1, 429) = 12.49, p < .001$ ; education,  $F(1, 437) = 6.77, p < .01$ ; and household income,  $F(1, 431) = 6.94, p < .01$ . The men in the study were significantly more likely to be married, to have completed higher levels of education, and to report higher household incomes than the women in the study. There were no gender by weight level interactions on these variables.

### *Materials*

A 66-item questionnaire titled "NAAFA Survey on Employment Discrimination" was constructed for this study and consisted of four major sections. One section requested demographic information (gender, age, education, marital status, income, and geographic region in which the subject resides). A second section asked subjects to indicate weight information (current height and weight, age at which the subject became obese, dieting history during the past year, weight when subject started her or his first full-time job, and two Likert scale questions regarding self-perception of weight).

A third section asked subjects for employment information. First, subjects were asked how many years they had been in the labor force. Second, subjects reported the type of job they held on a 6-point rating system from 1 (unskilled employee) to 6 (higher executive, major professional). Using subject-reported job title and U.S. Census Bureau job categories, the second and fourth authors assigned each job title to one of the six categories described above. Interrater agreement was .93. To check the validity of the subject-assigned rating, a correlation between the experimenter-assigned job category rating and the subject-assigned rating was computed,  $r = .67, p < .001$ . As an additional validity measure, a difference score was calculated for each subject between the experimenter-assigned job category rating and the subject-assigned rating. There were no significant differences between these two ratings as measured by a 2 (gender) by 3 (weight level) ANOVA.

Third, subjects were asked to indicate their annual salary. To minimize the effects of outliers, log transformations on current yearly salary in thousands of dollars were performed. Fourth, subjects indicated satisfaction with their current salary on a 7-point scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 7 = very satisfied). Fifth, subjects reported how they felt their salary compared with those of persons holding jobs similar to their own on a 7-point scale (1 = my salary is much less, 7 = my salary is much more).

Sixth, subjects reported how qualified they felt for their current job

on a 7-point scale (1 = very under-qualified, 7 = very over-qualified). Finally, subjects reported how satisfied they felt with their current job on a 7-point scale (1 = very dissatisfied, 7 = very satisfied).

The final section asked the subjects to indicate whether she or he had ever experienced weight-related discrimination in areas related to employment. Each subarea lists several different types of employment or employment-related discrimination, and each item was scored as follows: a "1" was assigned if the subject did not report that type of discrimination or victimization or a "2" was assigned if the subject did report that type of discrimination or victimization. As such, each subject reported the number of different types of discrimination and victimization she or he had experienced, rather than the frequency each type of discrimination or victimization had occurred. The items in each discrimination and victimization subarea are provided below.

*Employment.* Subjects were asked to report whether they had experienced any of eight types of employment discrimination because of weight: not being hired for a job, denied promotions or raises, denied benefits (such as health or life insurance), demoted, fired or pressured to resign, lost clients or customers, questioned about weight or urged to lose weight, or other weight-related employment discrimination. Scores could range from 8 (low) to 16 (high) levels of discrimination.

*School victimization.* Subjects indicated whether they had experienced any of four types of weight-related school victimization during junior high, senior high, or college years, respectively; told anti-fat jokes or was the object of weight-related tricks or anti-fat jokes, given nicknames or called negative names, threatened with violence or physically assaulted, or other weight-related victimization. Scores could range from 10 (low) to 20 (high) levels of school victimization.

*Concealment of weight.* Subjects were asked to report whether they had ever concealed their weight (e.g., using a telephone rather than appearing in person) in order to avoid any of five types of weight victimization: public harassment or intimidation, employment discrimination, housing discrimination, medical discrimination, or other weight-related discrimination or victimization. Scores could range from 5 (low) to 10 (high) levels of weight concealment.

*Self-confidence.* Subjects indicated whether their weight had ever interfered with their personal self-confidence in any of seven areas: applying for a job, going to a job interview, asking for a raise or promotion, getting to know co-workers, clients, or customers, continuing education, going to a physician or nurse, or other area in which weight had interfered with personal self-confidence. These items were reverse scored so that high scores indicated *greater* self-confidence in these areas. Scores could range from 7 (low) to 14 (high) levels of self-confidence.

## RESULTS

Employment information, discrimination, and victimization measures and weight information were analyzed using separate 2 (gender) by 3 (weight level) analyses of variance. In cases where the ANOVA resulted in a significant main effect or interaction, post hoc comparisons were conducted.

*Employment Information*

There was a significant main effect for gender,  $F(1, 425) = 5.22, p < .03$ , on number of years in the labor force, with men reporting more years in the labor force than did women. There was no main effect for weight level and no gender by weight level interaction on this variable. However, there were no significant main effects for gender or weight level and no interaction on number of years in current job.

On type of job there was a significant main effect for gender,  $F(1, 337) = 6.58, p < .02$ , with men reporting job types of higher levels than did women. There was a main effect for gender on salary,  $F(1, 345) = 19.27, p < .0001$ , with men reporting higher salaries than did women. There were no significant effects on satisfaction with current salary. Similarly, there were no significant effects on subject reports of how they felt their salary compared with those of persons holding jobs similar to their own.

There was a significant main effect for weight level,  $F(2, 358) = 3.06, p < .05$ , on how qualified subjects felt for their jobs. Post hoc comparisons revealed that the very obese group ( $M = 5.07$ ) felt significantly more qualified for their jobs than did the average weight group ( $M = 4.47$ ), while the obese group ( $M = 4.68$ ) did not differ significantly from either the average weight or very obese groups.

There was a main effect for weight level,  $F(2, 359) = 4.35, p < .02$ , on how satisfied subjects felt with their jobs. Post hoc comparisons indicated that the obese group ( $M = 5.12$ ) felt significantly more satisfied with their jobs than did the very obese group ( $M = 4.16$ ). The average weight group ( $M = 4.50$ ) did not differ significantly from either the obese or very obese group.

*Employment information covariates.* Several variables may have confounded the results on which there were main effects for gender. Because age, number of years in the labor force, and education level may have influenced job prestige, these variables were used as covariates in an analysis of job prestige. When these covariates were used, the main effect for gender disappeared. As in the unadjusted analysis, there were no significant main effects of weight level on job prestige nor was there a gender by weight level interaction.

Similarly, age, number of years in the labor force, education level,

TABLE 2  
Mean Number of Types of Discrimination Reported by Gender and Weight Level

	Very obese		Obese		Average	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SE</i>
Employment						
Women	10.28	.08	9.00	.23	8.13	.21
Men	10.11	.23	8.27	.37	8.23	.28
Total	10.19 <sup>a</sup>	.12	8.63 <sup>b</sup>	.22	8.18 <sup>b</sup>	.17
School victimization						
Women	13.28	.14	12.26	.36	10.49	.33
Men	12.84	.37	11.20	.58	10.81	.44
Total	13.06 <sup>a</sup>	.20	11.73 <sup>b</sup>	.34	10.65 <sup>c</sup>	.28
Concealment of weight						
Women	6.16	.07	5.54	.18	5.09	.16
Men	5.76	.18	5.00	.28	5.08	.22
Total	5.96 <sup>a</sup>	.10	5.27 <sup>b</sup>	.17	5.08 <sup>b</sup>	.13
Self-confidence						
Women	3.31	.12	4.13	.31	6.34	.28
Men	4.92	.32	6.67	.50	6.77	.38
Total	4.11 <sup>a</sup>	.17	5.40 <sup>b</sup>	.29	6.55 <sup>c</sup>	.24

Note. *SE*, standard error. Means with different superscripts differ significantly at  $p < .0001$ .

and job prestige may have confounded the yearly salary results. When these covariates were used the significant main effect for gender remained,  $F(1, 248) = 6.18, p < .02$ . As in the unadjusted analysis, there were no significant main effects for weight level nor was there an interaction on yearly salary.

#### Discrimination Measures

Cell means for all discrimination measures are presented in Table 2. There was a main effect for weight level on employment discrimination,  $F(2, 439) = 51.30, p < .0001$ . Post hoc comparisons indicated that the very obese group reported that they had experienced more types of weight-related employment discrimination than did either the average weight or obese groups. The average weight and obese groups did not differ significantly from each other.

There was a main effect for weight level on school victimization,  $F(2, 439) = 25.96, p < .0001$ . Post hoc comparisons revealed that the very obese group reported that they had experienced more school victimization than either the obese or average weight groups. The obese group reported significantly more school victimization than the average weight group.

There was a main effect for weight level on concealment of weight,  $F(2, 439) = 16.39, p < .0001$ . Post hoc comparisons indicated that the very obese group attempted to conceal their weight in order to avoid potential problems significantly more than did either the obese or average weight groups. The obese and average weight groups did not differ significantly from each other. There was a significant main effect for gender,  $F(1, 439) = 4.09, p < .05$ , with women reporting more attempts to conceal their weight than did men. There was no gender by weight level interaction.

There was a main effect for weight level on personal self-confidence,  $F(2, 439) = 36.04, p < .0001$ . Post hoc comparisons indicated that the obese group reported lower self-confidence because of weight in the areas listed than did the average weight group, and the very obese group reported lower self-confidence than either the obese or average weight groups. There was a significant main effect for gender,  $F(1, 439) = 30.48, p < .0001$ , with women reporting lower self-confidence because of weight than did men. There was a significant gender by weight level interaction,  $F(2, 439) = 4.14, p < .02$ . As with the employment-related analyses, several variables may have confounded the discrimination and victimization results. For this reason, all discrimination and victimization measures were also analyzed using age, number of years in the labor force, education level, and job prestige as covariates. The pattern of results obtained in the covariate analyses of the discrimination and victimization measures was identical to the unadjusted analyses. The only difference was the elimination of the main effect for gender on concealment of weight in the covariate analysis.

## DISCUSSION

The hypothesis that very obese persons would report more employment discrimination and employment-related victimization than would nonobese persons was supported. Relative to average weight or obese persons, the very obese group reported that they had experienced significantly more types of weight-related discrimination in the workplace. Written comments by very obese persons indicated that they had been questioned about their weight or urged to lose weight, either by co-workers or supervisors. Comments made by a few of the very obese persons indicated that they had been hired contingent upon weight loss or that their continued employment was contingent upon weight loss. One woman who had worked 30–40 hr per week for a major retailer while attending college said:

[The] personnel officer told me I could not continue to work there unless I wore their apparel. They did not carry my size, so I bought two of each of their largest size clothing and altered the clothing. When I was approached again, I showed

[the personnel officer] their labels inside the clothing. It was never mentioned again.

Very obese subjects reported on-the-job discrimination in other areas: for example, they reported that they had been denied promotions or raises because of their weight. Twenty-six percent of the very obese subjects said that they had been denied benefits (e.g., health insurance) because of their weight. Seventeen percent of the very obese subjects said that they had been fired or pressured to resign because of their weight.

The finding that very obese persons reported that they are discriminated against more often in naturalistic employment settings is consistent with status characteristic theory predictions as well as the results of laboratory studies (e.g., Larkin & Pines, 1979; Rothblum et al. 1988). However, the results of this study suggest that there may be some "critical level" of obesity required for discrimination to occur. On average, the subjects in the very obese group were approximately 100% above "desirable" weight, according to Metropolitan Life height and weight tables for 1983, while subjects in the obese group were approximately 33% above average weight. Since the obese group did not differ significantly from the average weight group in reported job discrimination, it appears that at some point between 33% above average weight and 100% above average weight obese persons are at greater risk for the types of employment discrimination examined in this study, possibly because judgments of physical attractiveness are especially influenced at some point within this weight range. Future research is needed to address more specifically the components of physical attractiveness and how much variation is permitted within these components (e.g., body weight) before judgments of attractiveness are affected.

Although very obese subjects reported more weight-related employment discrimination, they did not have significantly lower salaries or job prestige than did average weight or obese subjects. This suggests that obesity per se does not preclude an individual from obtaining a desirable job or salary, although it may be much more difficult than for a similarly qualified average weight person. As one very obese woman, presently holding a high-prestige job and earning over \$40,000 per year, stated:

I just wanted to add that on the surface of this survey I appear to be very successful—graduate education, high salary profession position. However, this was achieved with more sweat and tears than for most "normal" sized individuals. What is not shown is two years of unemployment, living off savings and family, a job in which I wasn't paid for three months, and two instances of job discrimination in an effort to gain employment. Even my current job was taken out of desperation and not enthusiasm. Although my field does not require an "attrac-

live" appearance, it still counts in obtaining more desirable positions. Being fat and female definitely makes it difficult to reach my goals in a tough job market.

Very obese persons did not differ significantly from either average weight or obese persons in how satisfied they were with their current salaries or in how they thought their salaries compared with those of persons holding similar jobs. This is not surprising, since there were no significant differences in salary among the three weight level groups.

There were main effects for weight level on all employment-related victimization measures (school victimization, concealment of weight, and self-confidence). The very obese group reported significantly more types of school victimization than did either the obese or average weight group, and the obese group reported significantly more types of victimization than did the average weight group. Examples of school victimization included negative weight-related nicknames or exclusion from sports or social gatherings by other peers and accounted for most of the school victimization. However, subjects also related instances of victimization by teachers, saying that they had been humiliated by teachers in front of other students, had received lower grades from teachers, or had been refused letters of recommendation because of their weight.

Very obese subjects were significantly more likely than obese or average weight subjects to report that they had attempted to conceal their weight. Most frequently, very obese subjects made such attempts to avoid public harassment or intimidation, but also to avoid employment discrimination. Some subjects reported that they had chosen specific jobs (e.g., telephone sales) so that their weight would not be a factor in employment.

The very obese group reported lower self-confidence because of weight than did either the obese or average weight group; the obese subjects reported lower self-confidence than did the average weight group. When applying for a job and going for a job interview were the most commonly cited areas in which a subject's weight had negatively affected self-confidence.

Subject's written comments regarding reduced self-confidence because of weight and attempts to conceal weight overlapped considerably: most examples of attempts to conceal weight were related to areas in which subjects also reported low self-confidence because of weight. For example, a subject who reported low self-confidence when applying for a job or going for a job interview might also report attempts to conceal her or his weight by lying about weight on a job application.

From the results of this study, it is clear that obese persons, particularly the very obese, are victimized because of their weight in weight-conscious U.S. society. Further, it is likely that the forms of victimization examined in this study are interrelated, (i.e., school victimization may

affect self-esteem and reduced self-confidence may lead to attempts to conceal weight). Given these circumstances, it is remarkable that the very obese subjects did not differ significantly from nonobese subjects in education, salary, or job prestige.

The preponderance of women in the membership of NAAFA and also in this study probably reflects women's greater concern with weight. Women exceed men in rates of obesity in the general population (Dwyer, Feldman, & Mayer, 1970; Rothblum, 1989) and women also experience greater concern and unhappiness with their weight than do men (Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1988; Wooley, Wooley, & Dyrenforth, 1979). Negative consequences of obesity were greater for women than for men in two of the victimization measures: attempts to conceal weight and reduced self-confidence because of weight. Thus, it appears that the negative consequences of obesity have the greatest impact on women's self-perceptions.

The greatest weakness with this study is also its greatest strength: it is based entirely on self-reported discrimination and victimization by a self-selected population. This is a strength in that it is the first study to ask obese and nonobese persons directly about their weight-related discrimination and victimization experiences. This is also a weakness because NAAFA members may not be representative of the U.S. population: they may have an increased sensitivity to weight-related oppression in U.S. society or they may have experienced higher levels of discrimination than most obese persons, thus their reports may overestimate weight discrimination. It is also possible that very obese persons are attributing employment failures (e.g., being fired) to others' negative attitudes toward obesity, thus allowing very obese persons to retain positive assessments of their own abilities (see Zuckerman, 1979, for a review of the self-serving attributional bias literature). On the other hand, there is a \$35.00 per year membership fee, so persons in lower socioeconomic groups may be less likely to be members of this organization. As reflected in the demographics of this sample, this study is based on reports from well-educated, middle-class persons. It may be the case that discrimination is lower among middle-class persons, since their above-average educational levels may provide some insulation against discrimination.

This study addressed the number of types of discrimination experienced rather than the frequency of discrimination. It may be that repeated experience with discrimination is as important or more important than the number of different types of discrimination experienced.

It has been estimated (Agras, 1987) that one-fifth of the U.S. population is obese (i.e., at least 20% above "desirable" weight according to life insurance height and weight tables), and are therefore at risk for the types of discrimination and victimization examined in this study. If this

estimate is accurate, obese persons constitute a fairly sizable minority. However, obese persons differ from other minority and/or oppressed groups in at least one important way. Whereas no one would argue that a person was responsible for her or his own race or gender, most people believe that a person's weight is within that person's control. This belief is evident in some of the negative stereotypes of obese persons; e.g., lazy, lacking in self-discipline (Harris, Harris, & Bochner, 1982; Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1988) as well in the plethora of quick weight-loss methods and advertisements. Despite these widely held beliefs, previous research and reviews of research (e.g., Allon, 1982; Brownell, 1982; Dubbert & Wilson, 1983; Foreyt, Goodrick, & Gotto, 1981; Leon, 1976; Wooley & Wooley, 1979; Wooley et al. 1979) indicates that safe and permanent weight loss is not possible for most obese persons. Controlled studies of weight reduction indicate a drop-out rate of 10–20%; for those who remain in treatment, weight loss is approximately 11 lb during treatment and this weight loss does not change much 1 year after treatment (Brownell, 1982). The longer the follow-up, the more weight participants are found to regain; the 5-year failure rate of diets is 98–99% (Allon, 1982). Thus, body weight may be an enduring quality, much like race or gender.

In summary, it appears that obese persons, particularly those who are 50% or more above ideal weight, experience more weight-related employment discrimination and social victimization than do nonobese weight persons. Women appear to be particularly affected by the negative social consequences of obesity in that they are more likely than men to attempt to conceal their weight and have lower self-confidence because of their weight. These findings and the evidence that body weight may be an enduring quality indicate that the general public as well as employers need to be educated about the implications of their negative attitudes on obesity.

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