

# Stereotypes of Obese Female Job Applicants

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*This experiment was conducted (1) to examine stereotypes about obese and non-obese female job applicants, and (2) to isolate the effects of obesity from the effects of physical attractiveness in these judgments. College students ( $n = 104$ ) rated applicants for two different positions. The applicants' résumés either were accompanied by pictures of obese and nonobese targets who were matched in attractiveness or by written descriptions of obese and nonobese targets whose attractiveness was not described. A pretest confirmed that students who read these descriptions perceived nonobese targets as significantly more attractive than obese targets. Results showed that when attractiveness was controlled (i.e., the students saw pictures), students exhibited little negative stereotyping of obese applicants. In contrast, students who had to infer the target's attractiveness from a written description rated obese applicants more negatively than nonobese applicants. These results, which occurred on one of the two résumés used, suggest that obese individuals sometimes are evaluated negatively, and that this is due to the physical unattractiveness associated with increased weight.*

In our society, obese individuals are stigmatized and subjected to social rejection and discrimination because of their weight. Children as young as five years show a preference for photographs of average or thin children (Lerner & Gellert, 1969), and elementary school children prefer drawings of children who are handicapped, amputees, or disfigured to drawings of obese children (Richardson, Goodman, Hastorf, & Dornbusch, 1961). Adults have similar negative perceptions of obese children, even when the adults are themselves obese or members of groups that are at high risk for being obese (e.g., individuals of lower socioeconomic status) (Maddox, Back, & Liederman, 1968). Physicians

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*International Journal of Eating Disorders*, Vol. 7, No. 2, 277-283 (1988)

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CCC 0276-3476/88/020277-07\$04.00

rate obese adults as awkward, weak-willed, and ugly (Maddox & Liederman, 1969). Even landlords are less likely to rent to the obese (Karris, 1977).

There is a correlation between obesity and social class. A survey of a representative sample of residents of midtown Manhattan (Moore, Stunkard, & Srole, 1962) showed that 30% of lower-class women were obese, compared with 4% of upper-class women. The figures for men were 33% and 21%, respectively. Although genetic and nutritional factors could account for this relationship, several studies indicate evidence for a downward social drift phenomenon among the obese. Obese women in the midtown Manhattan study were more likely than nonobese women to have a lower socioeconomic status than their parents, whereas nonobese women were likely to have a higher socioeconomic status than their parents (Goldblatt, Moore, & Stunkard, 1965). Such a relationship was not evident for men.

Canning and Mayer (1966) found that obese students, particularly obese female students, were less likely than nonobese students to be accepted to outstanding colleges than the nonobese. Because obese applicants in this study did not differ from the nonobese on academic performance in high school, I.Q., S.A.T. scores, days absent from school, involvement in school activities, motivation to attend high-ranking colleges, and parental socioeconomic status, these results suggest that their obesity may have been a factor in the fate of their application.

Given prevailing negative attitudes about obesity, the tendency for the obese to be screened out of good colleges, to earn less than their parents, and to remain in lower socioeconomic income brackets, it is possible that obese people might face discrimination in the workplace as well. Surprisingly, there has been no research on attitudes toward the obese in the workplace.

The present research investigated attitudes about obese and nonobese job applicants. We examined stereotypes about obese people that seemed particularly relevant to employment (e.g., stereotypes about laziness, lack of self-discipline, and poor personal hygiene at work). Because stereotypes about obese people are largely negative, we predicted that job résumés should be rated more negatively when the applicants are depicted as obese than when they are nonobese.

A second purpose of this experiment was to try to disentangle the effects of obesity from the effects of attractiveness on interpersonal perception. In this culture, being thin is virtually a prerequisite for being perceived as physically attractive. Results of a number of studies indicate that observers do perceive overweight people as less physically attractive (Lerner & Gellert, 1969; Beck, Ward-Hall, & McLean, 1976; Lavrakas, 1976). Moreover, results of a large number of studies indicate that people have stereotyped expectations about the characteristics of attractive and unattractive people, and that their stereotypes about unattractive people are predominately negative (see Adams, 1977; Berscheid & Walster, 1974 for reviews). Taken together, this research suggests that negative reactions to obese people may be partly attributable to negative stereotypes about unattractive people in general.

We addressed this issue in the present study by presenting information about target persons in two ways. Some observers saw pictures of obese and nonobese target persons who were matched in physical attractiveness. Other

observers received only a written description of the targets. Because no mention was made of the targets' attractiveness, subjects in the latter condition were free to draw their own conclusions about the targets' attractiveness. We predicted that if differences in perceived attractiveness underlie negative reactions to obese people, there should be less negative stereotyping of obese people when attractiveness is controlled (i.e., when subjects see the targets) than when attractiveness is uncontrolled (i.e., when subjects read descriptions).

We examined stereotypes about obese people by having college students read résumés that were attributed to obese or nonobese female job applicants who were shown in pictures or verbally described. This study included only female targets because obese women are viewed more negatively and are more disadvantaged economically than are obese men (Goldblatt, Moore, & Stunkard, 1965; Canning & Mayer, 1966), because women are more likely than men to be obese (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1979), and because many believe that physical attractiveness is more important in how people react to women than to men (Bar-Tal & Saxe, 1976).

## METHOD

### Subjects

Subjects were 104 students who were enrolled in an introductory psychology course and who received extra credit for their participation.

### Target Weight Manipulation

#### Photographs.

Portrait-style photographs of three obese and three nonobese women were selected from a pool of color slides of college students. In the pretest, groups of at least 25 college students rated the physical attractiveness of each stimulus person on a 9-point scale (1 = very unattractive; 9 = very attractive). Three slides of females who were visibly obese were selected and matched with three slides of nonobese females whose attractiveness ratings were similar to those received by the obese females. The means for the three obese/nonobese matched pairs were 3.0/3.0, 4.4/4.3, and 3.4/3.3. It should be noted that all of these women were rated as relatively low in physical attractiveness. This is because none of the visibly obese women received a rating higher than 4.4. This is not surprising in light of previous research showing that obesity depresses ratings of perceived attractiveness.

In a second pretest, the three sets of matched slides were shown to an introductory social psychology class of 44 students. These were asked to guess each woman's weight. Mean weights thus obtained were 150 lbs., 158 lbs., and 152 lbs. for the obese slides (constituting weights of at least 20% above normal weight for females of average build and height) and 121 lbs., 126 lbs., and 111 lbs. for the nonobese slides (constituting weights of within 10% of normal weight for females of average build and height).

### Written Descriptions.

We wrote descriptions to correspond with each of the stimulus slides described above. Each description included the target's name, which had been assigned randomly, her weight, and a brief description of her appearance. The target's weight was always the average estimate students in the pretest had made about the corresponding target slide.

We conducted a final pretest to discover if people do assume that obese people are less physically attractive than normal weight people. Undergraduate college students ( $n = 9$ ) read the six written descriptions described above and rated the physical attractiveness of each woman on a 9-point scale (1 = extremely unattractive, 9 = extremely attractive). Results showed that the overweight targets were perceived as less attractive ( $m = 3.7$ ,  $sd = 1.0$ ) than the normal weight targets ( $m = 6.5$ ,  $sd = 0.7$ ),  $t(8) = 7.2$ ,  $p < .001$ .

### Job Résumés.

We developed two résumés which were based on actual résumés submitted by graduating college seniors. All identifying information was altered to maintain confidentiality. One résumé (sales résumé) had as its job objective "a challenging position within the field of sales." The résumé listed work experience in several active jobs and skiing and sailing as hobbies. The other résumé (people résumé) had as its job objective "a business position that involves working with people" and listed several prior jobs that were food-related, such as waitress, kitchen helper, and gourmet cooking as a hobby. Thus, one résumé was related to activity and athletics; the other to cooking the food.

### Procedure

Students, who participated in groups of approximately 25, were told that the experiment concerned their impressions of job applicants. Each group evaluated an obese and nonobese woman from one of the three obese/nonobese pairs (selected at random) described above. Students in the written description conditions were asked to read the information provided about each person and then to evaluate her on the attached rating form. Those who saw slides of the targets viewed each target's slide, while the experimenter gave the person's name (the same name used in the corresponding written description) and asked students to evaluate the person on the rating form that had been provided to them. The rating forms asked students to indicate the likelihood (from 0% to 100%) that each of the characteristics shown in Table 1 would describe the target. In all conditions, we systematically varied the order in which students rated obese and nonobese targets and which résumé was associated with the obese and nonobese targets.

### Results

We performed separate multivariate analyses of variance on evaluations of the targets paired with the sales résumé and of targets paired with the people résumé. In these analyses, between subjects factors were target weight (obese

versus nonobese), weight information medium (pictures versus written descriptions), and which of the three obese/nonobese target pairs students evaluated. Results for the sales résumé revealed a significant main effect for the targets' weight,  $F(12,61) = 2.21, p < .02$ , and a significant interaction between target weight and weight information medium,  $F(12, 61) = 2.55, p < .01$ . We performed simple effects univariate  $F$ -tests on items for which there was a significant univariate interaction between target weight and the information medium variable. The results of this procedure, which are summarized in Table 1, showed that in the written description, obese targets were evaluated more negatively than nonobese targets on supervisory potential, self-discipline, professional appearance, personal hygiene, and ability to perform a physically strenuous job,  $F(1,72) \geq 4.84, p \leq .05$ . In contrast, although students who saw pictures of the targets rated obese targets negatively on self-discipline, they evaluated obese targets more *positively* than nonobese targets on supervi-

Table 1. Mean Ratings of Obese and Nonobese Targets on Sales Résumé.

Likelihood Ratings	Weight Information Medium			
	Photographs		Written Descriptions	
	Target Weight Obese	Target Weight Nonobese	Target Weight Obese	Target Weight Nonobese
Give good recommendation?	76.8	74.7	74.5	81.2
Like as a co-worker? <sup>1</sup>	72.4	67.2	68.3	72.9
Be a good supervisor? <sup>1</sup>	78.0 <sub>a</sub>	66.4 <sub>b</sub>	67.5 <sub>a</sub>	76.5 <sub>b</sub>
Be good to supervise?	76.0	71.7	73.2	73.3
Self-confident?	77.4	79.9	77.8	86.1
Lazy?	29.2	19.8	29.0	23.2
Lacks self-discipline? <sup>2</sup>	32.2 <sub>a</sub>	18.1 <sub>b</sub>	34.0 <sub>a</sub>	22.7 <sub>b</sub>
Friendly and outgoing?	72.0	69.9	68.4	73.0
Good sense of humor?	65.0	56.4	60.3	60.8
Professional appearance? <sup>1</sup>	75.5 <sub>a</sub>	61.1 <sub>b</sub>	67.3 <sub>a</sub>	77.8 <sub>b</sub>
Good personal hygiene? <sup>1</sup>	73.3	63.5	55.5 <sub>a</sub>	80.5 <sub>b</sub>
Could do physically strenuous job? <sup>1</sup>	54.2	55.7	42.1 <sub>a</sub>	64.0 <sub>b</sub>

Note: For each weight information medium condition, means for obese and nonobese targets that differ significantly have different subscripts.

<sup>1</sup>The univariate interaction between target weight and weight information medium was significant for this rating, all  $F(1,72) \geq 3.94, p \leq .05$ .

<sup>2</sup>The univariate main effect for target weight was significant for this rating,  $F(1,72) = 7.15, p < .01$ .

sory potential and professional appearance,  $ps(1,72) \geq 4.12$ ,  $ps \leq .05$ . Which of the three obese/nonobese pairs students rated did not significantly alter these effects for target weight (all  $ps > .10$ ). Finally, results of the people résumé revealed no significant weight effects.

### Discussion

This experiment examined two major hypotheses (1) that obesity has negative effects on reactions to a job applicant, and (2) that negative reactions to obese people result, in part, from the role of body weight in perceived attractiveness. Consistent with the first hypothesis, there was stereotyping of obese applicants in this experiment. However, students exhibited stereotyping of obese applicants on only one of the two résumés we used.

There were a number of potentially important differences between the résumés that might explain why students stereotyped the applicant for "a challenging position within the field of sales," but not the applicant for "a business position that involves working with people." Students may have perceived the latter position as one in which a jovial, good-natured personality is an asset. Stereotypes about the "jolly" nature of obese people may have overcome whatever negative perceptions students may have had about an obese woman's suitability for a people-oriented job.

Another possibility is that the people résumé stated that the applicant had food-related hobbies and work experience. We included this information because we wanted to insure that the targets' weight would be salient for at least one résumé. However, if this information had an effect, it may have been to render target weight so salient that students were reluctant to appear to be discriminating against an overweight person.

There are undoubtedly other possible explanations for why the results for the two résumés differed. In any case, the fact that stereotyping depended upon which résumé students evaluated is consistent with previous research showing that stereotyping is affected by the amount and type of information provided about the target (Locksley, Borgida, Brekke, & Hepburn, 1980).

These results also provided some support for the hypothesis that stereotypes about physical attractiveness may partially explain negative perceptions of obese people. In the conditions in which students saw slides of the targets, they exhibited very little negative stereotyping of obese applicants for the sales position. In fact, ratings of the obese woman's supervisory potential and professional appearance were significantly more positive than were ratings of the nonobese woman. In contrast, students who had to infer the applicant's attractiveness from a written description rated an obese applicant more negatively than a nonobese applicant. This suggests that negative reactions to obese women may be attributable to the effects of obesity on perceived attractiveness.

The problem faced by obese people (or anyone who is considered to be unattractive) is that they are likely to be competing with people who are more physically attractive than they are. Even though this experiment suggests that all things being equal, obesity may not engender negative evaluations, the association of thinness with beauty practically guarantees that all things rarely will be equal for obese women.

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