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CHAPTER 1



Weight Bias in Employment

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Appearance, especially weight, has a lot to do with advancing. I have been normal size and have advanced. But since I have been heavy no one wants me. I have a high IQ and my productivity is extremely high. But, no one cares.

—EMPLOYEE (quoted in Haskins & Ransford, 1999, p. 306).

Under no circumstance . . . is it advisable to go on record as having turned someone down for reasons of size. Never write down in any note the fact that you didn't hire someone because they were overweight. Use code words and phrases, such as "presented poor image," or "poorly dressed," or "sloppy appearance."

—LAWYER (quoted in Everett, 1990, p. 69)

In the past three decades, a growing body of literature has begun to document the marked discrimination that fat men and women face with regard to employment (Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Roehling, 1999, 2002; Solovay, 2000). This literature, which represents multiple disciplines, has reported both experimentally and anecdotally that fat people are less likely to be hired (Brink, 1988; Klesges et al., 1990; Larkin & Pines, 1979; Pingitore, Dugoni, Tindale, & Spring, 1994; Popovich et al., 1997), perceived as having numerous undesirable traits related to job performance (Jasper & Klassen, 1990a, 1990b; Klassen, Jasper & Harris, 1993; Rothblum, Miller, & Garbutt, 1988), more harshly disciplined on the job (Belizzi & Hasty, 1998, 2001; Belizzi & Norvell, 1991), assigned to inferior professional assignments (Belizzi & Hasty, 1998; Belizzi, Klassen, & Belonax, 1989), paid less than their nonfat cowork-

ers (Averett & Korenman, 1993; Loh, 1996; Maranto & Stenoien, 2000; Pagán & Dávila, 1997; Register & Williams, 1990; Saporta & Halpern, 2002; Sargent & Blanchflower, 1994; Sarlio-Lähteenkarova & Lahelma, 1999; Sarlio-Lähteenkarova, Silventoinen, & Lahelma, 2004), and even terminated for failure to lose weight at the employer's request (cited in Berton, 2001). The self-report of fat men and women themselves has also revealed a high frequency of employment-related discrimination (Rothblum, Brand, Miller, & Oetjen, 1990). In addition to these barriers, fat people have been perceived by employers as a liability when it comes to providing health care insurance (Paul & Townsend, 1995; Roehling, 2002) and even penalized through some companies' benefits programs for their weight status (Reese, 2000).

Recent court cases brought to trial under the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have highlighted both the ways in which particular employees have been discriminated against because of their weight (see Ziolkowski, 1994, for a review) and the significant societal assumptions about fatness that persist in the general society. These assumptions address a range of issues from stereotypes of fat persons to the causes of fatness to the putative moral implications of being fat for men and women. Not only are these assumptions widespread at the societal level (Kolata, 1992), they also have impacted some court decisions and the legal interpretation of antidiscrimination laws that might protect fat persons from the negative treatment they face on the job (Maranto & Stenoien, 2000; Taussig, 1994; Ziolkowski, 1994).

EVIDENCE FOR WEIGHT-RELATED BIAS IN HIRING

Studies that have been designed to have raters evaluate both fat and nonfat hypothetical job applicants on suitability for a job have consistently found that fat applicants are chosen less often, despite having similar or identical credentials to nonfat applicants. One recent study even showed that *nonfat* male job applicants who were shown in close proximity with fat women were evaluated more harshly than men in the presence of nonfat women (Hebl & Mannix, 2003), evidencing the magnitude of anti-fat bias in employment settings.

In one of the earliest and most often cited experimental studies in this area, Larkin and Pines (1979) showed that there was a strong negative stereotype of fat people. When assessed on work-related personality traits, fat applicants were rated as significantly less neat, active, productive, likely to take initiative, energetic, ambitious, attractive, and healthy than "normal weight" applicants. They were also seen as significantly

more likely to need prompting, lack self-discipline, and give up easily (Larkin & Pines, 1979).

Brink (1988) asked college students to evaluate hypothetical candidates' suitability for a position as a professor of psychology using sex, age, race, marital status, number of children and weight as independent variables. No discrimination was reported for any of the categories except weight; when the candidate was described as a man weighing 425 lbs. his suitability rating was significantly lower than when he was described as weighing 165 lbs. A separate group of students rated a worker described as weighing 365 lbs. as much less likely to be promoted than a worker described as weighing 165 lbs., despite the fact that, in this study, there were no differences between weight status in the ascription of *positive* personality traits to the workers, such as "hard-working," "intelligent," and "persistent" (Brink, 1988).

Jasper and Klassen (1990a) also asked students to rate hypothetical job applicants who varied by "body type" on (1) their desire to work with the person, (2) how effective they thought the person would be in selling them a product, and (3) how the target person's size affected their decision. Results showed that students were significantly less likely to report a desire to work with a fat person than a nonfat person. Students also reported that the nonfat target would be significantly more effective in selling them a product. Interestingly, male students reported significantly less desire to work with a fat woman, whereas there was no gender difference on desire in working with a fat man (Jasper & Klassen, 1990a). When asked about their decisions, students reported that body size had negatively impacted their impression of the target, their desire to work with the person, and how effective they estimated the target to be as a salesperson. Additionally, Popovich et al. (1997) reported from their studies that fat job applicants were specifically less likely to be hired for jobs perceived as being more active, especially by raters who scored higher on negative attitudes toward fat persons in general.

Studies that have utilized simulated job interviews to assess discrimination against fat persons have found similar results. Klesges et al. (1990) reported that, when levels of qualifications between applicants viewed on brief videotape clips were described as being equal, raters preferred "normal weight" applicants to fat applicants. Moreover, fat applicants were viewed as having poorer work habits; being less able to get along with others; having less self-control and discipline; being lonely, depressed, and anxious; and having an offensive appearance, regardless of their level of qualification. Whereas applicants described as being diabetic were viewed as more likely to have medically related absences, fat applicants were viewed as having more nonmedically related absences

(e.g., being late for work) and as being less conscientious (e.g., more likely to abuse company privileges).

Pingitore et al. (1994) found that applicants' body weight explained about 35% of the variance in the hiring decision, after controlling for facial attractiveness and qualifications. Fat applicants, especially women, were less likely to be recommended for hiring, especially by raters who were satisfied with their own bodies and for whom this was central to their self-concept. Polinko and Popovich (2001) also controlled for facial attractiveness, and although raters in this study did perceive applicants in the "overweight" condition as having more negative work-related attributes than those in the "average-weight" condition, this did not result in the fat applicants being less likely to be recommended to be hired (Polinko & Popovich, 2001).

Rothblum et al. (1988) asked college students to rate résumés of female job applicants. When résumés were accompanied by written information about the applicants' appearance (clothing, hair, height, and weight), fat applicants were rated more negatively than nonfat applicants on supervisory potential, self-discipline, professional appearance, personal hygiene, and ability to perform a physically strenuous job. However, when photos that had been matched for level of attractiveness were attached to the résumé, raters exhibited little negative stereotyping of the fat applicants, leading the authors to speculate that negative reactions to fat women may be attributable to the effects of obesity on perceived attractiveness.

NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF FAT EMPLOYEES AND DISPARATE DISCIPLINARY TREATMENT

A number of studies have dealt with the question of how fat employees, once hired, are perceived and evaluated in comparison with their nonfat counterparts. Results from a study by Klassen et al. (1993) showed that fat targets who displayed behavior that was consistent with the fat stereotype (e.g., "lazy") were judged more negatively than their nonfat counterparts. Specifically, harsher discipline was recommended, their behavior was seen as more likely to recur, and raters expressed the least desire to work with them. Although the presence of a discounting cue (explanation for behavior) did result in less harsh disciplinary recommendations and less of a tendency to believe the behavior would recur, it did not increase raters' desire to work with the fat employee.

Jasper and Klassen (1990b) also found that raters were significantly more eager to work with a person described as "normal weight" than an employee who was described as "obese." Moreover, raters who read a

description about a fat female employee were much less eager to work with her than those who read about a fat male employee. Fat employees were more likely to be rated as lazy and lacking in self-discipline. Additionally, fat men were most frequently cited as being "unkempt" and fat women as being "insecure."

Bellizzi and colleagues (Bellizzi & Hasty, 1998, 2001; Bellizzi et al., 1989; Bellizzi & Norvell, 1991) have used samples of actual sales managers recruited through mass mailings to assess treatment of hypothetical employees in "role play" scenarios. Bellizzi et al. (1989) showed that employees described as "extremely overweight" were more likely to be assigned by sales managers to undesirable sales territories or *no* territory within the manager's region and less likely to be assigned an important or desirable region. This discrimination was stronger than that exhibited against employees who were described as heavy smokers and was stronger for fat women than fat men. Bellizzi and Hasty (1998) likewise found that fat sales recruits were found to be significantly less fit for a more challenging sales assignment than nonfat recruits. Additionally, whereas only 24% of the managers indicated a preference for not placing the new recruit in *any* assignment, 40% of the fat recruits fell into this category while only 10% of the nonfat recruits did.

Finally, in three separate studies (Bellizzi & Hasty, 1998, 2001; Bellizzi & Norvell, 1991), this same group of researchers found disparate treatment of fat employees in response to unethical selling behavior. In two of these studies (Bellizzi & Hasty, 1998; Bellizzi & Norvell, 1991), both male and female employees who were described as "extremely overweight" or "obese" were disciplined more harshly for unethical conduct than their nonfat counterparts. Specifically, sales managers were more willing to endorse as appropriate responses termination and issuing written and verbal reprimands, and less willing to suggest counseling for fat sales employees. Managers also rated the fat salesperson as significantly less self-disciplined, ambitious, clean-cut, healthy, and serious, and more lazy, insecure, and untidy than the "normal weight" salesperson (Bellizzi & Norvell, 1991).

Interestingly, though Bellizzi and colleagues report that a general finding in the sales and marketing literature has been that saleswomen are less harshly disciplined than salesmen for unethical sales behavior, this effect seems to disappear when the saleswoman is fat (Bellizzi & Hasty, 2001). In the third and most recent study by Bellizzi and colleagues (Bellizzi & Hasty, 2001), the finding that salesmen are recommended harsher forms of reprimand is qualified by size. As the authors state, "the lenient treatment of women disappears in the case of obesity. Obese women were disciplined at about the same severity level as both obese and non-obese men" (p. 195).

EVIDENCE FOR INEQUITY IN PAY

In addition to having less chance of getting hired and facing more on-the-job discrimination, fat people have also been found in many studies to earn less than their nonfat counterparts, even after controlling for other relevant variables such as education and family socioeconomic status. Numerous studies using data from the United States' National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) and Britain's National Child Development Study (NCDS) have found a significant impact of weight on employees' earnings (Averett & Korenman, 1996; Cawley, 2000; Loh, 1993; Maranto & Stenoien, 2000; Pagán & Dávila, 1997; Register & Williams, 1990; Sargent & Blanchflower, 1994).

While controlling for conventional variables associated with disparity in income (e.g., years of education, ethnicity, geographic region) Register and Williams (1990) found that fat women (those in excess of 20% of standard weight for height) in their NLSY sample earned an average of 12% less than nonfat women, whereas this finding did not extend to fat men. Pagán and Dávila (1997) also reported an income disparity for fat women but not fat men.

Cawley (2000) estimated that white women who are "significantly overweight" (defined as being two standard deviations above the mean) are paid on average 7% less than women of mean weight. He proposes this wage difference is equal to that associated with roughly 3 years of prior work experience, 2 years of job tenure, or 1 year of education. This effect was not found for Hispanic or black women. Maranto and Stenoien (2000) also found the negative effect of weight on salaries to be highly significant for white women and only marginally significant for black women. White and black men, on the other hand, only experience wage penalties at the very highest weight levels (100% above standard for their height), with white men suffering a much larger penalty (19.6% lower wages) than black men (3.5% lower wages). In fact, white women in this sample were found to suffer a greater wage penalty for "mild obesity" (20% over standard weight for their height) than black men do for weight that is 100% over standard weight.

Sargent and Blanchflower (1994), found an inverse relationship between obesity at age 16 and earnings at age 23 for British women, using longitudinal data from the NCDS. The magnitude of weight was similar to that of other determinants of earnings, such as gender, job training, and union membership, and increased for women as weight increased. Even fatness at age 11 was associated with earning approximately 3.5% less at age 23 for females. What is perhaps most intriguing about this study's findings is that, even while controlling for non-weight-related variables, young women who were fat at age 16 suffered a wage

penalty at age 23 *whether or not they maintained their fatness during that time*. Averett and Korenman (1996) used data from the 1988 NLSY and controlled for family background. Women who were "obese" or "overweight" between ages 16 and 25 had, at ages 23–31, a lower family income, lower hourly wages (30+ age category only), a lower likelihood of being married, and lower spousal income (if married) than women in the recommended weight range.

Sarlio-Lähteenkarova and colleagues (Sarlio-Lähteenkarova & Lahelma, 1999; Sarlio-Lähteenkarova et al., 2004) have also found income differences by body weight in a large, representative sample of Finnish men and women. For women, "overweight" was associated with current unemployment and "obesity" with long-term unemployment as well as low household disposable income and individual incomes (Sarlio-Lähteenkarova & Lahelma, 1999). In contrast, among men only thinness was associated with unemployment and low income, whereas high body mass index (BMI) was not associated with adverse economic outcomes at all.

In more recent analyses of these data, Sarlio-Lähteenkarova et al. (2004) found that the income penalty for fat women was most apparent among more highly educated women, who were found to have income levels about 30% lower than their nonfat counterparts. Women in the lowest educational group did not differ in income according to body weight, and self-employed women showed a *positive* association between their body weight and income. This led the authors to suggest that highly qualified fat women might find better job options being self-employed instead of taking a salaried job.

Haskins and Ransford (1999) also found that the income penalties for fatness in women varied by occupational level. Their study surveyed the female employees of a large industrial organization in the aerospace industry and found that, whereas weight was an important and significant predictor of occupational attainment in the entire sample, it only significantly impacted wages for those women in entry-level professional and managerial strata. The authors speculated that this finding could reflect the fact that women may undergo the most intense "screening" at this occupational level, when they are, in theory, moving from lower-paying blue-collar positions into upper-level professional and managerial positions. This reasoning is further supported by the finding that thinness or ideal weight was especially related to high occupational status in the male-dominated cluster of professions (e.g., research scientist, senior engineer, physicist, etc.). "Perhaps," the authors conclude, "for women in positions typically dominated by males, there is a more careful screening of the 'rational' qualifications criteria as well as attractiveness characteristics such as weight" (Haskins & Ransford, 1999, p. 311).

Findings for the impact of being fat on men's wages have been inconsistent. Some studies found no effects for men, or even a wage *premium* associated with fatness in men (Maranto & Stenoien, 2000; McLean & Moon, 1980; Register & Williams, 1990). Others, however, have found a significant negative impact of fatness on men's wages. Loh (1993) found that fatness did not affect the wage levels of full-time workers, but did lower the rate of wage *growth* for men, but not women. Melamed (1994) also found a correlation between BMI and salaries for men, but not for women. Of interest here is that this correlation was curvilinear, so that, for men, wages were negatively impacted by being too fat or too thin (Melamed, 1994). Saporta and Halpern (2002) likewise found in a survey of lawyers that male lawyers were penalized for deviating in either direction from the "ideal" physique. Not surprisingly, women were only penalized for being *above* the "ideal" weight. Though the pay difference between fat and nonfat female lawyers did not reach statistical significance in this particular study, the authors speculated that this may be an artifact due to the fact that there were so few fat female lawyers in this sample.

THEORETICAL EXPLANATIONS AND SOCIOCULTURAL CONTEXTS

These findings document a significant impact on the work experiences of fat persons, especially women, due to anti-fat discrimination. Certainly, the fact that this discrimination is embedded in a much broader societal denigration of fatness is important to recognize. Fatness as a "social deviance" (Maddox, Back, & Leiderman, 1968) has been the focus of a large body of literature that has shown this negative bias to be pervasive (Puhl & Brownell, 2001); exhibited in children as young as preschool age (Cramer & Steinwert, 1998); reproduced in mass media (Greenberg, Eastin, Hofschire, Lachlan, & Brownell, 2003); deeply rooted in, connected to, and justified by conservative American values (Crandall, 1994; Crandall & Martinez, 1996; Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993) and of long-standing origin as represented in widely read cultural texts (Stunkard, LaFleur, & Wadden, 1998).

Despite the large amount of empirical evidence that fat people are discriminated against, much of the research on the well-established relationship between fatness and poverty in Western culture has hesitated to conclude that fat people become poor *because* of this level of discrimination (Sobal, 1991; Sobal & Stunkard, 1989). Instead, a popular hypothesis is that men and women become fat because they are poor and do not have access to nutritious food, safe ways of exercising, education about

energy exchange, and the like. However, as the literature reviewed here and elsewhere shows, the obverse is more likely true: people are fat and, because of multiple sources of discrimination, become poor. This argument seems especially compelling in the case of women, who have already been shown to suffer greater social and emotional consequences for fatness than men (Rothblum, 1992; Stake & Lauer, 1987), especially in the United States (Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1988).

A well-cited study by Gortmaker, Must, Perrin, Sobol, and Dietz (1993) showed that women who had been fat in adolescence (unlike those with other chronic conditions) completed fewer years of schooling, were less likely to be married, had lower household incomes, and higher rates of household poverty than women who had not been fat, regardless of their baseline socioeconomic status and aptitude-test scores. Furthermore, although fatness has not been shown to negatively impact the performance of high school students (Canning & Mayer, 1967), it *has* been shown to have a negative impact on rates of college acceptance and attendance (again, more so for females than for males; Canning & Mayer, 1966) and even on the willingness of parents to pay for their children's educational expenses (more so for fat daughters than for fat sons; Crandall, 1991, 1995). Interestingly, although all of these factors negatively impact the earning potential of fat women, Averett and Korenman (1996) found that between 50 and 95% of fat women's lower economic status can be explained by differences in marriage probabilities. That is, not only do fat women earn less money themselves but, in comparison with women whose weight falls within the recommended range, they are much more likely to marry men who earn less in their respective occupations.

LEGAL RECOURSE AND INTERVENTIONS FOR DISCRIMINATION

The question remains whether there are reasonable options for fat persons to redress the discrimination they face in the job market. Reviews of relevant case law have shown that discrimination suits brought under the Rehabilitation Act or the ADA have met with mixed results (Solovay, 2000; Taussig, 1994; Ziolkowski, 1994). Most of those who have won have only been able to do so by showing that they were "morbidly obese" (defined as being in excess of 100 lbs. or 100% over maximum recommended weight) and that this qualifies them as "disabled." A recent example was the case of Bonnie Cook, whose employment discrimination suit against the Rhode Island Department of Mental Health, Retardation and Hospitals was eventually heard before the First Circuit

U.S. Court of Appeals. In the first federal court decision to acknowledge obesity as a disability under federal law, the First Circuit awarded Ms. Cook monetary compensation and reinstatement in a job that she was deemed unsuitable for by the staff of the hospital. Legal scholars who have reviewed this case, however, have stated that the case was unique in that Ms. Cook met medical criteria for “morbid obesity,” and was able to provide clear evidence that her denial of employment was based solely on her weight (Taussig, 1994; Ziolkowski, 1994). Furthermore, there is heated controversy within the community of fat individuals about the ramifications of considering fatness a “disability” under any circumstances (Solovoy, 2000).

Neither judiciary nor legislative action at the federal level has yet provided protection to the vast majority of fat persons who do not qualify as “morbidly obese” but who still face marked discrimination in the job market (Solovoy, 2000). One state (Michigan) and a few municipalities (like San Francisco and Washington, DC) have specifically passed legislation that makes it illegal to discriminate against persons based on weight or physical appearance (Solovoy, 2000). Some have argued that a promising avenue for litigation is bringing a “disparate impact” suit under Title VII of the Civil Rights Act, since it has been shown that certain protected populations (e.g., women, the elderly, and ethnic minorities) have higher rates of fatness and therefore would suffer disproportionately from anti-fat discrimination (Paul & Townsend, 1995). Otherwise, the legal recourse available to people who face discrimination based on their weight remains limited, lengthy, and costly.

The other domain in which state and federal law will perhaps come into play is providing protection for fat persons whose employers coerce them into losing weight through built-in “incentives” in their health insurance plans and/or company wellness programs (Grossman, 2004; Reese, 2000; Zablocki, 1998). The passage of the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) in 1996 restricts employers from using health status as a basis for incentive or disincentive qualification but does not prohibit them from encouraging participants to enroll in wellness programs aimed at increasing “healthy lifestyle” changes (Reese, 2000). Prior to this, a team of researchers at Emory University who were evaluating the effectiveness of an employee program that gave monetary rewards for meeting certain health-related criteria reported that “the major place where people could lose points was in the things that were tough to change . . . measures such as achieving an ideal body fat ratio” (cited in Reese, 2000). Furthermore, after 3 years of following participants in this program, the researchers found no impact on behavior (Reese, 2000).

CONCLUSIONS

Clearly there is ample evidence of differential treatment in employment settings for fat people, especially fat women. That such discrimination continues to exist, despite legislation such as Title VII of the Civil Rights Act and the ADA designed to eradicate discrimination in the workplace, is cause for concern. Research on the stigma of weight has only begun to examine the psychosocial origins of weight-related stigma and how this information may serve to inform interventions (Puhl & Brownell, 2003). However, until such interventions are developed, empirically tested, and utilized, the real and present economic hardship faced by fat men and women needs to be addressed. Currently, it appears that creating laws and policies at a more local level may be most effective in combating weight discrimination. In addition, there is some evidence that the introduction of a company policy can have an impact on the disparate treatment of employees based on personal characteristics such as weight (Bellizzi & Hasty, 2001). More research examining the benefits of such small-scale interventions should continue until, on a broader level, federal policies can be developed and passed to protect all workers.

AUTHOR NOTE

This chapter was written while Esther Rothblum was on sabbatical at the Lesbian Health Research Center of the University of California at San Francisco, the Women’s Leadership Institute at Mills College, and the Beatrice M. Bain Center for Research on Women at the University of California at Berkeley.

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CHAPTER 2



Bias in Health Care Settings

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Whatever houses I may visit, I will come for the benefit of the sick,
 remaining free of all intentional injustice. . . .

—FROM THE HIPPOCRATIC OATH (Edelstein, 1943, p. 3)

The Hippocratic Oath, still taken by many medical students upon their graduation, is frequently summarized as, “First, do no harm.” This statement does not explicitly appear in the oath, but captures the essence of the pledge. The present chapter investigates whether physicians and other health care providers are free of injustice in caring for obese individuals, intentional or not. We first examine the attitudes of health care providers toward obese persons and then describe obese patients' perceptions of their providers' attitudes and practices. Next, we review objective findings that show that health care utilization, and possibly assessment and treatment practices, are related to patients' body weight. The chapter closes with recommendations for creating a health care environment that will provide optimal weight-related care for obese individuals.

ATTITUDES OF HEALTH CARE PROVIDERS TOWARD OBESE INDIVIDUALS

The first logical method of studying negative attitudes is simply to ask about them. In much of the research on this topic, respondents have rated their agreement or disagreement with statements about individuals