

*Two studies explored reactions to the overweight by isolating the effects of weight from other characteristics of the job applicant. The first study, which established the existence of a stereotype, shows that the overweight are viewed consistently more negatively than others on variables considered important for successful job performance. The second study experimentally investigated occupational discrimination in a simulated hiring setting. Overweight applicants were less highly recommended than average-weight persons despite objectively identical performances. The findings are discussed in the context of current research on cognitive processes.*

## **No Fat Persons Need Apply**

### **EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES OF THE OVERWEIGHT STEREOTYPE AND HIRING PREFERENCE**

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**T**he term *social stereotype* refers to a pattern of traits we assign to other people, often on the basis of highly visible and distinctive characteristics, such as race or sex. Stereotypes are usually simple overgeneralizations that are widely accepted, but often inaccurate. For example, it is simply not true

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that all women are dependent and conforming. Anecdotal reports and casual observation suggest the existence of a stereotype of the overweight—a widely shared view of the obese as having personality traits and behaviors that distinguish them from the normal weight. However, aside from the well-documented unattractiveness of the overweight (e.g., Kalisch, 1972; Mayer, 1969; Lerner and Gellert, 1969; Dibiase and Hjelle, 1968; Staffieri, 1967; Richardson et al., 1961), the nature of such an overweight stereotype remains empirically vague. Obese persons have been depicted as lazy, greedy, and selfish; but they are also recognized as fun loving, generous, and trustworthy (Galper and Weiss, 1975).<sup>1</sup> Study I reported below set out to learn if and how the overweight are perceived as different from normal or underweight persons, i.e., to ascertain the existence of a *work-related* overweight stereotype.

Although the existence and characterization of an overweight stereotype is of interest in its own right, its practical importance lies primarily in the influence it may exert upon behavior. In particular, a negative stereotype of the overweight could lead to behavioral discrimination against these persons. There are anecdotal reports of such discrimination in the business world (*Newsweek*, 1975, p. 74; *Forbes*, 1974, p. 28). Examination of these reports, however, reveals little hard evidence to substantiate the presence of discrimination. Either the reports are based on casual observation, often by the overweight themselves, or they are the conclusion of correlational studies easily subject to alternative interpretations. For example, in one study of business success, Thomas and Mayer (1973) found that only 10% of executives in the higher wage bracket were 10 or more pounds overweight, while 35% of the executives in the \$10,000 to \$20,000 brackets were at least that much overweight. It is not at all clear, however, that this underrepresentation of fat persons at upper management levels was due to discrimination. It is equally plausible that previously fat persons slimmed down *after* they were promoted, either in response to their new status or to the pressures of the new environment—and not because of weight discrimination. The

same reasoning could account for the smaller proportion of obese students found in a sample of colleges compared with high schools, even after motivational and ability factors had been controlled (Canning and Mayer, 1966).

Even on theoretical grounds it is questionable whether stereotyped thoughts about the obese, or any other social group, will be manifest in discriminatory behavior. It is now well recognized by social psychologists that negative attitudes based on stereotyped perceptions may not be manifest in discriminatory behavior at all (LaPiere, 1934; Wicker, 1971), or if so, only under specific circumstances (Fishbein and Azjen, 1975; Rokeach and Kliejunas, 1972). To investigate whether an overweight stereotype has any behavioral relevance, we need to ensure that the perceiver processes information about the overweight target so as to arrive at a specific prediction or decision about the target's behavior in a particular situational context. The second study reported here was undertaken to learn if there was an association between a work-related stereotype of the obese and hiring decisions in a simulated work setting.

## **STUDY I. THE OVERWEIGHT STEREOTYPE**

This study examined perceptions of the overweight on personality and behavioral dimensions considered important for successful job performance. We wanted to learn if, and in what way, overweight persons were thought to differ from average and underweight people.

### **OVERVIEW**

Subjects were asked to give their impression of three persons about whom they knew only the weight and sex. The verbal descriptions "overweight male (female)," "average-weight male (female)," and "underweight male (female)" were presented in a booklet containing 38 rating scales which described characteristics of the ideal employee (from Riso, 1968), effec-

tive top managers (Siegel and Lane, 1974), and motivated workers (Landy and Guion, 1970).

## METHOD

Forty subjects (20 male, 20 female), aged 17 to 31, volunteered to take part in a study of "social perception." All but 3 saw themselves as average weight. However, according to height-weight tables, 4 persons, 2 men and 2 women, exceeded standard weight norms for their age and size by 25% (Metropolitan Life Insurance Co., 1959).

Weight (overweight, average weight, underweight), sex of subject, and sex of target were varied in a 3 x 2 x 2 mixed factorial design. All subjects responded to the three weight categories (the within-group variable) which were presented in counterbalanced order across subjects. Half of the male subjects and half of the female subjects responded to male targets and the other half responded to female targets.

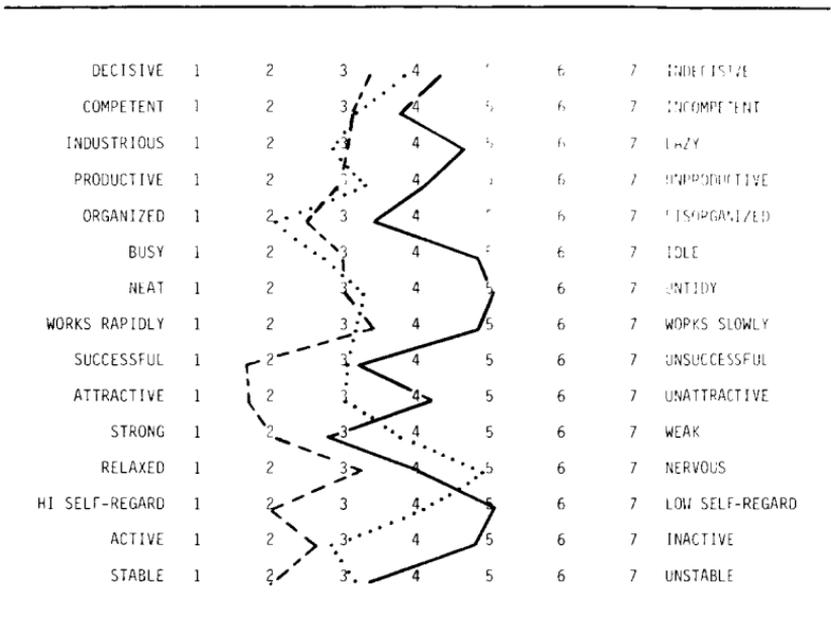
Subjects were tested individually. They were informed that we were interested in how one "forms an impression of another person from just a few facts about that person." They were handed a booklet containing the verbal labels "overweight," "average weight," and "underweight" and the rating scales and were asked to give their first impressions of the three persons. All subjects rated either a male or female in each of the three weight categories on 38 descriptive scales.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The most striking finding was that for each of the 22 dependent variables on which there were significant weight condition differences, the overweight were rated more negatively than the average weight. This pattern of data provides strong support for the existence of a negative overweight stereotype.

Specifically, overweight persons are seen as significantly ( $p < .05$ ) less desirable employees who, compared with others, are less competent, less productive, not industrious, dis-

TABLE 1  
 Mean Personality Ratings for  
 Overweight, Average, and Underweight Categories<sup>a,b</sup>



NOTE: No main effects were found for the following characteristics: frivolous/serious, self-reliant/dependent, compliant/resistant, careless/careful, unsociable/sociable, prompt/tardy, stubborn/docile, dishonest/honest, cautious/rash, uncooperative/cooperative.

a. Main effects of weight were significant at the .05 level or less.

b. Key: Overweight = —; Average weight = - -; Underweight = . . . .

organized, indecisive, inactive, and less successful (see Table 1). In addition, on scales measuring the degree to which certain terms or phrases characterize the target, the descriptive labels conscientious, takes the initiative, aggressive, perseveres at work, and ambitious were seen as *less* characteristic of the overweight than the average weight, while mentally lazy and lacks self-discipline were rated as *more* characteristic of the overweight. All in all, this picture hardly describes the type of person one would choose as an employee. The underweight, by comparison, were viewed unfavorably mainly on those variables with little direct relevance to work, e.g., unattractive, nervous, weak.

To summarize, of the three weight categories, only the overweight emerged as less desirable on traits most clearly denoting positive employee behavior. These findings imply that the overweight in particular may suffer more negative consequences as a result of their weight, especially in the area of employment.

## **STUDY II. DISCRIMINATION AGAINST THE OVERWEIGHT**

The first experiment established the existence of a negative stereotype about the overweight. We then proceeded to explore, in a simulated work setting, whether overweight persons being considered for a job would be likely to encounter discrimination only because of their weight.

Our main concern in experimentally simulating a personnel selection environment was that any observed differences in recommendation for hiring be attributable solely to the applicant's weight. In creating the work setting, however, it was important to structure circumstances so as not to preclude or force discriminatory behavior. For example, the perceived unattractiveness of the overweight might strongly bias the subjects toward a negative hiring decision for a job setting stressing public contact. On the other hand, if a job description called for a physicist and one of the applicants was an overweight Einstein, weight would probably be much less important. Our intention was to provide sufficient information for a behavioral decision, but in a context sufficiently unstructured with regard to these parameters so as to remain sensitive to the rater's stereotype. To do this, we used videotape to present overweight and normal individuals performing identically on two employee selection tests. Since facial gestures and intonations could also influence an interviewer, we kept these influences to a minimum by filming without showing the face and without an audio tract. Subjects were informed that this was done to preserve the job applicants' anonymity.

To deal with the problem of demand characteristics (alerting the subjects that weight was an independent variable), we employed a between-groups experimental design wherein subjects viewed *either* an overweight *or* a normal weight person, but not both. In addition, we minimized our apparent interest in weight by having the camera focus only briefly on the applicant, enough for the viewer to perceive the size, but not enough to make our intention obvious. Through these procedures we were able to control or hold constant numerous secondary variables and examine how weight affected people's reactions to the job applicants.

## METHOD

One hundred twenty (60 males and 60 females) college students<sup>2</sup> participated as part of their psychology course requirement. Groups of 10 to 15 subjects viewed the videotapes in a darkened room at each experimental session. Precautions (e.g., restricted conversation) were taken to minimize group influence on each subject's judgment.

*Experimental Design and Manipulations.* The experiment constituted a 2 x 2 x 2 x 2 mixed factorial design. Sex of subject, sex of job applicant, and weight (average and overweight) of job applicant were between-group variables, and type of task (mental and perceptual motor) was the within-group variable. Thus, each subject viewed only one job applicant, either average or overweight, male or female, who performed two tasks.

The tasks to assess mental and perceptual-motor ability had to be readily photographable and not blatantly biased for or against the overweight person. The test of mental ability was a series of 24 arithmetic progressions, described to subjects as a screening device for work requiring logical analysis and related mental skills. The perceptual-motor task was a standard mirror drawing task performed on a Lafayette model #31010 ap-

paratus and described as a screening device for work requiring eye-hand coordination.

As models of job applicants, two males and two females were selected whose body builds were average or overweight, both in appearance (as judged by three independent raters) and in accordance with Metropolitan Life (1959) height-weight norms.<sup>3</sup> They were videotaped performing the tasks in a setting resembling an office. Two separately filmed segments were constructed. In the first segment, which varied with the weight and sex factors, the model was shown taking several steps toward and then sitting at a desk containing the task materials. To control other appearance variables, the models were nearly identically attired (the males in shirt, tie, and slacks; the females in blouse and slacks), and their voices were not heard.

The second segment of the videotape showed the applicant performing the two selection tests. In this segment, which was identical for subjects in all between-groups conditions, the applicant was not seen at all. For the mirror-drawing performance, subjects saw only a hand (judged by raters as neutral for weight and sex) holding a pencil and trying to track between the borders of a star-shaped pattern. Approximately 10 to 15 errors were made on each leg of the star when the pencil strayed beyond the borders. For the arithmetic progressions test, 24 problems were presented on a screen, 1 at a time, for 10 seconds each. After each 10-second display, during which time the job applicant supposedly gave an answer to the examiner, subjects were informed via a printed videotape message whether the applicant's answer was correct or incorrect. Actual answers were not displayed. According to a prearranged random order, half of the answers were given as correct and half as incorrect.

Subjects were recruited for participation in an experiment that "is part of a larger research program whose purpose is to devise different tests that are useful for judging the qualifications of a person who is applying for a job opening." After restating the goals of the study, the nature of the selection tests was briefly explained and subjects were told that they would be viewing "a videotape made of a job applicant taking these tests

at an employment agency." One of the two tests was then described in greater detail, subjects viewed the applicant (overweight or normal, male or female) perform the test and then completed the experimental questionnaire measuring hiring preference and other dependent variables. This procedure was then repeated for the second selection test. The order in which the "employment tests" were presented was counterbalanced in each experimental condition. Afterward, subjects completed a personality assessment questionnaire, followed by a brief postexperimental questionnaire, and were then informed about the purposes and manipulations of the experiment.

*Questionnaires.* Subjects were asked whether they would recommend or oppose hiring the applicant for a job requiring the skills measured by the selection tests. They responded by checking a seven-point rating scale anchored at one end with "strongly recommend hiring" and at the other end with "strongly oppose hiring." A second measure of hiring preference asked subjects to rate their own chances of being hired, compared with the applicant's, on a seven-point scale anchored with "very poor" and "very good." Based on Festinger's (1954) social comparison theory and related research (Gergen and Morse, 1970), we anticipated that *if* subjects evaluated the overweight applicant's job prospects less positively than those of the average weight applicant, they would rate their *own* chances of being hired as greater after viewing the overweight applicant than after viewing the average weight applicant. Subjects were also asked to assign a starting wage from \$2 to \$4 per hour, if the applicant were hired.

Of interest to students of stereotyping is the mechanism by which stereotyping may lead to discriminatory behavior. One process that has been implicated focuses on the way in which the stereotype may influence processing of information about the target. For example, it has been shown that evidence confirming a stereotype is more easily noticed and is more easily stored in memory than is nonconfirming evidence (Hamilton and Gifford, 1976; Berman and Kenny, 1976; Cantor and

Mischel, 1977; Zadny and Gerard, 1974). More recently it has been demonstrated that stereotypes may also exert retrospective influence, i.e., we may distort, reconstruct, or selectively retrieve information to bolster stereotypic interpretations of another's behavior (Snyder and Uranowitz, 1978; Ross et al., 1975). To assess the operation of this process, we measured recall of information about the applicants' task performance.

Subjects rated the applicant's personality and motivational characteristics on 25 bipolar adjective scales similar to those used in the first experiment. Each adjective pair was placed along a seven-point rating scale with the favorable half of the pair randomly assigned to the right or left position.

To check the effectiveness of the weight manipulation, a brief postexperimental questionnaire assessed perception of the applicant's weight and obtained information about subjects' own weight, height, and age.

## RESULTS

The hypothesis that the applicant's weight would influence the decision to hire for a job opening was confirmed. The overweight applicants were significantly less highly recommended (mean = 3.52) for hiring than the average weight (mean = 3.89) applicants,  $F(1, 120) = 4.44, p < .05$ . Furthermore, the results of this direct measure of discrimination were confirmed by the indirect, social comparison measure of hiring bias. When asked to indicate their own chances of being hired compared with the applicant's, subjects' responses showed a significantly greater expectation of being hired after observing the overweight (mean = 3.76) than after observing the average weight (mean = 3.39) applicant,  $F(1, 120) = 5.06, p < .05$ , suggesting a lower evaluation of the overweight applicant.

Neither sex of subject or of applicant nor type of task was important to the weight discrimination effect. Although male subjects considered themselves more likely to be hired (mean = 3.27), compared with the applicant, than did female subjects (mean = 3.88),  $F(1, 120) = 13.60, p < .01$ , and also assigned

higher dollars per hour starting salary (mean = 2.78) than did female subjects (mean = 2.60),  $F(1, 120) = 5.10$ ,  $p < .05$ , these judgments did not vary as a function of the sex or weight of the applicant. Responses to the postexperimental questionnaire asking subjects to rate the applicant's weight did show that the overweight applicants were perceived as significantly heavier,  $F(1, 120) = 297.9$ ,  $p < .01$ , than the average weight applicants. Some task effects unrelated to weight also were observed.

Having observed the existence of discrimination against the overweight on the two hiring discrimination measures, we checked the possibility that subjects biased their hiring judgments because they misperceived or misremembered the overweight applicant's performance (see Bruner and Goodman, 1947; Tajfel, 1969). However, there was little in the data to suggest that this occurred. When asked to estimate the number of errors committed by the applicants on each of the tasks, no significant main effects,  $F(1, 120) = 1.67$ , n.s., were obtained as a function of the weight manipulation. In addition, there was no difference in the salaries assigned to the applicants as a function of the weight variable,  $F(1, 120) = 1.53$ , n.s.

Impressions of the applicants' work-related personality characteristics were obtained on the scales of the Personality Assessment Questionnaire. These data generally replicated the results of Study I. Compared with the average-weight applicants, overweight applicants were rated as significantly ( $p < .05$ ) *less* neat, active, productive, energetic, ambitious, attractive, and healthy (see Table 2). They also were seen as significantly *more* likely to need prompting, to lack self-discipline, to give up easily, and as significantly *less* likely to take the initiative. Weight differences on the following variables approached significance ( $p < .10$ ): overweight applicants were perceived as being *less* industrious, successful, busy, more in need of supervision, and as having lower self-regard than average-weight applicants. The sex of subject and applicant had little effect on the personality ratings and, since not of theoretical interest, these results are omitted here for the sake of clarity and economy.

TABLE 2  
Means and F Ratios for Personality Assessment Questionnaire

Dependent Variable <sup>a</sup>	Overweight	Average Wt.	F
Neat:untidy	3.88	2.95	12.63**
Needs prompting:self-starter	4.02	4.59	4.50**
Active:inactive	4.67	3.53	23.77**
Unattractive:attractive	3.27	4.39	27.77**
Productive:unproductive	3.88	3.47	4.97**
Sluggish:energetic	3.52	4.27	13.01**
Lacks self-discipline:possesses self-discipline	3.86	4.45	9.00**
Takes initiative:does not take initiative	4.16	3.66	4.87**
Not ambitious:ambitious	4.14	4.66	5.36**
Gives up easily:perseveres at work	4.72	5.27	4.98**
Healthy:ill	3.50	2.72	11.02**
Busy:idle	3.91	3.50	3.01*
High self-regard:low self-regard	4.00	3.58	3.79*
Unsuccessful:successful	3.61	3.95	2.98*
Industrious:lazy	3.91	3.56	2.73*
Needs supervision:works independently	3.84	4.30	3.19*

NOTE: All ratings were made on 7-point (1-7) scales. Higher scores indicate a higher degree of the second characteristic.

a. No main effects were found for the following characteristics: careless/careful, nervous/relaxed, works rapidly/works slowly, decisive/indecisive, competent/incompetent, disorganized/organized, conscientious/not conscientious, inattentive to details/attentive to details, not likeable/likeable.

\* $p < .10$ .

\*\* $p < .05$ .

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

These two experiments demonstrate for the first time under unambiguous experimental conditions that: (1) there exists a negative stereotype of overweight persons on traits relevant to successful job performance; (2) in a simulated work setting this stereotype was associated with discriminatory hiring behavior against the overweight; (3) this discriminatory hiring bias oc-

curred despite objectively equivalent performance on task-related selection tests (physical and mental); and (4) it was *not* the case that subjects misperceived or misrecalled the performance on the selection tests—rather, the overweight subjects were less likely to be hired even though they were perceived to be equally competent on the tests. In short, it seems that there existed a reluctance to hire the overweight that was due to perceived inadequacies on personality and motivational criteria and, moreover, that the selection tests were essentially irrelevant to the hiring decision.

There are, of course, a number of limitations to these conclusions. Our observations were made by American, middle-class college students. It is possible that persons from other ethnic or class backgrounds would have different perceptions of the overweight condition or, in fact, what constitutes “overweight.” The work conditions under which the observations were made were simulated and intentionally designed to optimize the probability of weight preference being exhibited, if it existed. We have no knowledge of how significantly the weight stereotype would affect hiring decisions if there were additional contextual data, e.g., if a job application or resume with more broadly defined skills was also available.

On the other hand, there is increasing evidence that decisions such as hiring a job applicant, or other social judgments, are *not* made by a process of objectively and impartially weighing all of the information that might be available in a job folder. Rather, the decision maker seems to make a judgment that depends on whether the applicant is in some sense “representative” of the kind of person desired for the job (see Kahneman and Tversky, forthcoming; Slovic et al., 1976) or on whether the applicant seems to fit some mental “script” for the position. Note, for example, how political commentators often speculate on whether the public will be swayed by the fact that a political candidate “looks like” a judge or governor (Abelson, 1976). Thus, while further research on possible interactive effects of contextual material is needed, we would be surprised if such

material dramatically altered the results of the present experiments.

Recent theorizing about decision making also raises another concern relevant to the issue of weight discrimination in a work setting. It has been suggested that an important aspect of the decision-making process is whether the judge can easily justify his choice on the basis of salient, visible, or supposedly important characteristics (Tversky, 1972). In this regard, consider Barmash's observation that supervisors "find themselves worried about whether a heavy worker for whom they are responsible might not give the impression to an outside observer, particularly a superior, that their departments are loose, sloppy, or slovenly" (1974: 146). In this light, a normal-weight preference in hiring might not be viewed as discriminatory at all; an employer might very well feel that he could easily justify (even to himself) hiring a normal-weight person in preference to an objectively equivalent overweight applicant.<sup>4</sup> The basis for this justification is that implied in the Barmash quote: hiring the overweight might be bad for business since potential clients or customers either find the overweight person distasteful or associate the overweight condition with deficient performance. While this belief might not be a legally valid defense against charges of a weight preference in hiring, it may be an important psychological aspect of the overweight stereotype that serves to increase the probability of discriminatory behavior.

## NOTES

1. Whether the overweight are in fact characterized by any of these traits is beyond the scope of this research.

2. Although it would have increased external validity, it was impractical to obtain a large number of personnel managers as subjects for our laboratory study.

3. The male model for the average weight condition was 5'7" tall (170 cm) and 148 lbs. (67.1 kg); the overweight male was 5'8" tall (172.7 cm) and 190 lbs. (86.2 kg). For the female job applicants, the average weight model was 5'2" (157.5 cm) and weighed 105 lbs. (47.6 kg); the overweight model was 5'4" (162.6 cm) and weighed 168 lbs. (76.2 kg).

4. Thanks to an anonymous reviewer for raising this issue.

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