

The Last Acceptable Prejudice: Overweight Gender Bias

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ABSTRACT

An analysis of previous research on applicant selection decision-making bias indicates that if subjects are consciously aware that they have been manipulated into a hypothetical legal/ethical dilemma, their hypothetical behavioral response tends toward the ideal, rather than the actual. To learn how researchers might move beyond such difficulties, a multi-phase study was designed on overweight-based bias in job selection. Initial findings (Hillon & Warning, 2006) support the notion that decision-makers express intent at the superficial level in accordance with ethical and legal expectations of society, but their actions tend to be influenced much more heavily by tacit sources of bias. This research offers a preliminary exploration of these cognitive mechanisms and thus, has important implications for effective behavioral modeling in human resource decision support systems. The current study introduces the role of gender in terms of male and female respondents to evaluate overweight applicants through a lens of appearance bias.

LITERATURE OF OVERWEIGHT BIAS AND PHASE ONE

...hidden biases can be disastrous for the employees who suffer as a result of them; they can also damage businesses by leading managers and employees to make flawed business decisions in a number of areas, including hiring, promotion, training opportunities and project assignments” (Babcock, 2006)

Overweight people are the last group against which it is acceptable to discriminate. Many feel that overweight is a matter of choice and therefore, assumed to be an acceptable bias. Weight-based discrimination is not a problem that only affects a few women. Overweight women make up a large percentage of our population, as sixty-two percent of women aged twenty to seventy-four are overweight. These overweight women endure more discrimination than overweight men (Griffin, 2007). Recognition of the effects these perceptions have on female applicants and employees must become a priority.

The specific vehicle for this study on decision-making bias is a timely and emerging issue in the contemporary business environment. Appearance-based bias is perhaps the last frontier for legal forms of discrimination, as evidence of detrimental impacts from weight-based bias has been found in research across a wide range of life activities, including every phase of the human capital management process (Roehung, 1999, Arce, 2011). However, much of this research activity seems to have been conducted outside of the human resource management related disciplines and outside of business disciplines in general, with the tangential exception of law and social psychology.

Recent court rulings have regarded obesity as a physical impairment potentially subject to ADA regulation and more flexible EEOC guidelines have allowed obesity to meet impairment definitions (Puhl & Brownell, 2011). However, the issue of weight-based appearance discrimination currently falls into a legal gray area because, except in extreme cases, obesity has generally not been upheld as a disability, and is “a major legal battle [is] brewing as obese Americans fight for protection under the ADA [Americans with Disabilities Act Amendment Act]” (Guild, et. al, 2007, Section 902.1.d

American Disability Act Amendment Act, 2008) as physical appearance has only rarely been upheld as a bona fide occupational qualification (Whatley, 2005). Thus, weight-based discrimination cases depend upon establishing that the perception of impairment on the part of an employer resulted in unequal and harmful treatment of an employee whose work performance was not actually impaired by his/her above average weight (Ziolkowski, 1994, Solovay, 2000).

Changes in legal and regulatory perspectives represent a rather superficial level of analysis in relation to the deeper cognitive level at which biases originate. A critical assessment of previous research designs indicated a direction for insight into the cognitive processes of bias formation to improve decision support systems for human capital management. Previous research such as that of Polinko and Popovich (2008) utilized a lack-of-fit approach (Heilman, 1983) to model the cognitive reasoning process behind obesity discrimination. In essence, this model posits that bias results from an incongruity or lack of fit between the decision-maker's perceptions of an applicant's work-related personal characteristics and the requirements of the job. For instance, assuming that all other qualifications were equal, the lack-of-fit model would predict that an attractive or average weight applicant would have an advantage over an unattractive or obese applicant if a job is perceived to require strenuous physical activity or frequent contact with the public. Although no hiring bias was found in Polinko and Popovich (2008), there was strong evidence that subjects attributed negative work related behaviors to overweight job applicants. A partial ethnostatistical analysis (Gephart, 1988) of this study indicated that the finding of no job selection bias could be due to experimental design. Specifically, the design did not mirror a realistic job selection process because subjects were not asked to act on their biases by choosing among obese and average weight candidates.

The first part of this study, already executed and reported, was designed to elicit action in line with tacit biases in a realistic job selection process. This phase of the investigation presented the results of a study in which subjects were asked to evaluate their dispositions toward two photographs of job applicants. The photos were actually of the same person at two visibly different weight levels, thus, the potential for confounding influences due to individual differences in facial features was greatly reduced. After assessing dispositions, subjects were given a choice of two office assistant jobs for which a hiring recommendation could be made. The job descriptions differed only in their degree of public visibility and required no significant physical activity. Contrary to previous research findings, dispositions based on appearance were strongly associated with job selection bias. Although talent and experience levels of the two candidates were equal, subjects placed the obese candidate in the non-public position in 88% of the cases and placed the average weight candidate in the visible position in 83% of the cases.

In order to understand the cognitive processes that allowed appearance-based bias to become the decisive influence factor, the data was reduced through a principal components factor analysis. The reduction of the job candidate disposition data and the respondent demographic and self-appraisal data resulted in distinctly different factor groupings in relation to each applicant, thereby indicating the presence of different cognitive associations. These cognitive mappings of bias formation in job selection may help to explain the general structure of bias in human capital resource management decision-making. The most striking finding and most relevant point to the understanding of bias in decision-making from this study is that subjects' perceptions which had no rational basis or supporting data wielded an inordinate amount of influence. The most striking finding and most relevant point to the understanding of bias in decision-making from this study is that subjects' perceptions which had no rational basis or supporting data wielded an inordinate amount of influence.

GENDER BIAS: PHASE TWO

To augment the results of Phase One, a follow up investigation was designed which introduced gender as an additional factor of hidden bias influencing employment decisions. As suggested by Heilman (1993), the role of gender may allow for a better understanding of obesity discrimination in general and, to fulfill Whatley's (1995) implication that investigations focus on up and coming trends in the world of image gender based discrimination. Previous research suggests that gender may indeed play a critical role in the hidden bias as it relates to employment scenarios.

A study by Pingitore, Dugoni, Tindale, & Spring (1994) used videotaped mock interviews with the same professional actors acting as job applicants for computer and sales position in which weight was manipulated with theatrical prostheses. The study revealed that there was a significantly higher bias toward overweight female applicants than for overweight male job applicants. Heavier applicants were recommended for computer positions than for sales positions. Moreover, an analysis from the National Longitudinal Survey examined over 8000 men and women indicated that women face a significantly higher wage penalty than obese men (Pagan & Davila, 1997).

Stunkard and Stellar's (1984) study of over 2000 women and men (18 years and older) reported that obesity lowered wage growth rates by 6%. Additional studies indicated economic penalties were greater to overweight women than overweight men. This study that indicated obese women are much more likely to be hired for lower level jobs than were overweight men. Obese men do not face a similar wage penalty but are still paid less than average weight men. Similarly, in Crandall's (1994) study of overweight women, it was found that gender bias even extended to secondary school environments. In that study, College seniors completed questionnaires about their weight; it was found that a hidden bias existed in educators that would accept overweight males students but would present negative feelings toward overweight college females. Other numerous examples exist for the proverbial "double standard" that exists for inherent inequity of criticism for men and women in terms of their respective images and appearance. Indeed, popular culture itself today exacts very different standards for judging competence, ability, knowledge, and personal character; as Techman, Gapinski, and Brownell (2001) indicate, it is important to note that the increasing prevalence of obesity will lead to more and more discrimination, as culturally based prejudice has increased over the past several years.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this phase of the investigation was to determine the role gender played in the formation of bias in the selection of employment candidates. It was reasoned generally that since previous research had suggested disparate perceptions of overweight men and overweight women in various contexts, these perceptions would extend to workplace decisions. The following research questions were posited:

RQ1: Do men possess more hidden bias toward overweight men than to overweight women?

RQ2: Do women possess more hidden bias toward overweight men than to overweight women?

METHOD

Using similar procedures as were used in Phase One, the disposition index was employed (Polinko and Popovich (2008) to examine subjects' propensity to judge others based on gender rather than general

physical appearance. To richly investigate the interactions of gender, we controlled both the gender of the respondents and the gender of the stimulus to find out how:

Male respondents evaluate overweight male applicants

Male respondents evaluate overweight female applicants

Female respondents evaluate overweight female applicants

Female respondents evaluate overweight male applicants

For this study, 100 undergraduate business students (50 female, 50 male) were surveyed who were enrolled in a medium-sized public institution in a major metropolitan area. As with the original procedures, respondents were given instructions to complete the disposition index with regard to their sample "applicants." The males and female applicants were the same people but at different body weights. Each of the respondents evaluated both normal weight and overweight male and female applicants using a split half testing method. Respondents were debriefed fully after their reactions had been recorded. A job description of a highly visible sales representative position was constructed and resumes presented for each applicant. The resumes of the overweight applicants contained significantly higher levels of experience and skill bases appropriate for the sales position. Respondents were instructed to read the job description and each resume and then complete the hiring decision..

FINDINGS/DISCUSSION

Phase Two: Male Evaluator Hiring Decision Results:

Male evaluators indicated that they would hire only 5% of the overweight female applicants and 95% of the normal weight female applicants but 20% would hire the overweight male applicants 80% percent of the normal weight males.

Phase Two: Female Evaluator Hiring Decision Results:

Female evaluators indicated that they would hire 72% of the overweight female applicants 28% of the normal weight female applicants and would hire 71% of the overweight male applicants and 29% of the normal weight male applicants.

Phase Two: Male Attribute Scores:

Overweight males and thin females were perceived to be untrustworthy than thin males and females. Overweight males and thin females were perceived to be more indecisive than thin males and females. Overweight males and overweight females were perceived to be more unproductive than thin males and thin females. Overweight females were perceived to be more untidy, unattractive and weaker than overweight males and thin females and thin males. Overweight females were perceived to be unstable, selfish, nervous and inactive and have low self regard than overweight males and thin males and thin females. Overall perception by male evaluators gave overweight females lower disposition scores than overweight males and thin males and thin females.

Phase Two: Females Attribute scores

Thin males and thin females were both perceived to be more untrustworthy, untidy, and selfish than overweight males and overweight females. Thin females and thin males were perceived to be more incompetent, unproductive, disorganized and unsuccessful than overweight males and overweight females. Overall perceptions by female evaluators gave thin males lower disposition scores than overweight males and overweight females.

While Phase Two research results affirm the previous Phase One study, Phase Two findings indicate that male evaluators tend to perceive overweight females and overweight males less positively than normal weight applicants. However, evaluative perceptions of overweight females were more pronounced than evaluative perceptions of overweight males. Female evaluators tend to perceive overweight males and females more positively than thin males and females.

DISPOSITION INDEX SCORES

Table 1: above depicts the raw respondent data.

Attribute		Female Raters				Male Raters			
		Males		Females		Males		Females	
		Normal Weight	Overweight						
Trustworthy	Untrustworthy	24	26	39	11	37	13	15	35
Tidy	Untidy	38	12	41	9	36	14	29	21
Productive	Non-productive	37	13	33	17	34	16	38	12
Attractive	Unattractive	29	21	31	29	39	11	48	2
Stable	Unstable	26	24	25	25	44	6	26	24
Unselfish	Selfish	34	16	37	13	41	9	25	25
Active	Inactive	39	11	36	14	43	7	41	9
High self regard	Low self regard	36	14	35	15	48	2	36	14
Strong	Weak	24	26	29	31	33	17	31	19
Competent	Incompetent	12	38	20	30	37	13	29	21
Organized	Disorganize	31	29	38	12	37	13	44	6
Successful	Unsuccessful	11	39	16	34	27	23	38	12
Decisive	Indecisive	24	26	27	23	30	20	29	31
Calm	Nervous	37	13	34	16	26	24	30	20

The first question asked in this study was whether males possess more hidden bias toward overweight men than overweight women. This body of evidence indicates that qualifications were

completely over shadowed in the hiring decision making process by males in favor of thin females applicants. However, the hiring decision and attribute assignment for overweight males were significantly less severe than for overweight females. Gender stereotypes may be more pronounced for women than for men. Harris, Harris and Bochner (1982) also found that obese women were assigned significantly more negative attributes than those assigned to obese men.

The second question asked in this study was whether females possess more hidden bias toward overweight men and for overweight women. The attributes assigned to overweight males and overweight females were significantly higher by female participants. Dispositional scores indicate that both thin males and thin females were assigned less favorable attributes by female respondents. Female evaluators decisions may have been shaped by superior resume qualifications of the overweight applicants. Such positive information may have discouraged the attribution of specifically stereotypical traits associated with obesity.

These findings provide greater insight into the social consequences of obesity by suggesting that overweight adult women are much more likely to suffer employment bias than overweight men. These findings also suggest that male decision makers are more likely to over look applicant credentials in favor of applicant appearance.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Human resource management must begin to recognize and address overweight discrimination which is seemingly tangential to gender discrimination. Just as racism, age, color and religious bias still divides and erodes human productivity so does weight-based discrimination. If sixty two percent of women who are overweight are systematically discriminated against, often times by other women, this bias has the potential to be destructive to women's overall achievement.

Human resource professionals should address this issue through compliance with existing hostile work environment legislation, ADAAA guidelines and organizational sensitivity education programs to increase awareness of this subtle insidious bias. In addition, observances of managers' decision making and rapport should be monitored. For example, body language and non verbal behaviors as managers interact with overweight coworkers. Frequent glances at bodies, distant attitudes and muttered jokes can all be signals of discrimination and prejudice. Human resource professionals should look for differences in treatment of online applicants between in-person and distance communications and recognize applicants who submit resumes that receive enthusiastic email replies and then after in-person interviews are turned away without reasonable explanation. These findings provide little encouragement for the prospect of training. Although sensitivity training may dissuade employers from making stereotypical attributions about overweight employees, it may be much more difficult to prevent basic affective gut responses from influencing employment decisions

Limitations of this research were sample size, demographics and geographic diversity. However, based on this preliminary study there is evidence to suggest that there exist an urgent call for additional research in all disciplines to further examine this socially acceptable yet devastating source of discrimination. Further limitations of this study regard its generalizability to hiring bias in a natural business setting. This study's validity is limited by the fact that raters were not experienced or empowered to make hiring decisions.

Further study is disparately needed in the arena of this last acceptable prejudice. Researchers should question the extent of skill, talent and expertise waste due to concerns about healthcare cost associated

with overweight employees and because of stereotypical hidden bias. Methods to monitor prejudiced decision makers who ignore qualified overweight applicants and overweight employees' superior performance records requires further study as well as further investigation regarding the possibility to isolate characteristics of those decision makers with preconceived perceptions that result in discrimination against overweight people.

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