

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF OVERWEIGHT MANAGERS

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ABSTRACT

Obesity is a current and growing concern in America and has been the subject of much research. Some examination is in the area of anti-fat bias or in the perceptions of people classified as fat. Much of the work on this topic is contained in the social psychology literature, while only some research has examined obesity in organizations. Previous research has used several terms to describe overweight people, but study looks at the semantic differences in personality characterizations which might occur while describing a manager as oversight, obese or fat. The identification of these characterizations is the first step in ways to combat these stereotypes in the workplace.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Karris (1977), in a study of renters, found evidence to support the idea that the anti-obese bias was as real as racism. Those who were obese were treated differently than other people. In addition, Hiller (1981) found that overweight persons were subject to negative personality characterizations. Her experimental study found perceptions that overweight people were more likely to be thought of as sad or have other negative semantic differences in comparison to others. Schwartz et al. (2006) found that this bias was related to one's own body image. Wang et al. (2004) discovered support for the perceptions that fat people were lazy but interestingly found that fat people did not show in-group preference as other "out-groups" do.

A 1979 study found that fat people should not even apply for some jobs as those hiring stereotyped jobs as to whether fat people would be appropriate for them (Larkin & Pines 1979). A 2006 study found similar results in that some "out of sight" jobs were perceived to be more suitable for fat people (Venturi, Castelli & Temelli 2006). In addition, the results of an experimental interview simulation found evidence of bias (Pignatori 1994).

This preliminary literature review seems to indicate that bias toward overweight persons exists. The purpose of this study is to find if this bias only exists in a visual form or is it also carried out by verbal means? Also, is there a difference in characterization, which is related to a semantic difference in words used to describe fat or overweight individuals?

SAMPLE

The data was collected in 2010 from a sample of students attending introductory management classes at a major university in the southeastern United States. The students in these classes were in both business and non-business majors. The instrument included the Schein 92 item descriptive index as well as demographic data such as sex, age, college major, class, and self-identified body type. Of the surveys distributed, there were 278 usable responses, which was sufficient for analysis. TABLE ONE displays the data summary.

TABLE ONE
SAMPLE DATA

	Number	Percentage
MALE	155	56
BUSINESS MAJOR	179	64
SOPHOMORE	86	31
JUNIOR	154	56
SENIOR	34	12
SLIM	118	45
MEDIUM	136	49
LARGE	19	6
AVERAGE AGE	20.5	

METHOD

This study used the 92-item Descriptive Index originated by Schein (1973, 1975). This instrument has been used with success with many previous studies (c.f. Brenner, Tomkiewicz & Schein, 1989; Heilman, Block, Martell, & Simon, 1989; Dodge, Gilroy, & Fenzel, 1995; Tomkiewicz & Brenner, 1996; Tomkiewicz, & Bello, 1997; Tomkiewicz, Brenner & Adeyemi-Bello, 1998, and Tomkiewicz, 1999) to define male, female, African-American, white, and Hispanic race stereotypes and the characteristics of managers and successful middle managers. Four forms of this index were used. Wherein Schein originally had respondents describe women in general, men in general and middle managers, respondents in this study were asked to describe male managers in general; male overweight managers; male obese managers and male fat managers. Males were selected as research seems to indicate males and female managers and overweight individuals are viewed differently. Also definitions of overweight and obese were provided to the students.

The instructions on the four forms of the descriptive index were as follows:

On the following pages you will find a series of descriptive terms commonly used to characterize people in general. Some of these terms are positive in connotation, others are negative, and some are neither very positive nor very negative.

We would like you to use this list to tell us what you think male managers in general are like, or male overweight managers or male obese managers or male fat managers. In making

your judgments, it may be helpful to imagine that you are about to meet a person for the first time and the only thing you know in advance is that the person is a male manager (overweight male manager or obese male manager or fat male manager). Please rate each word or phrase in terms of how characteristic it is of male managers in general or overweight male managers or obese male managers or fat male managers.

The ratings of the descriptive terms were made on a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (not characteristic) to 5 (characteristic) with a neutral rating of 3 (neither characteristic nor uncharacteristic).

Each respondent will receive only one form of survey.

The full Schein instrument is contained in APPENDIX ONE. Demographic data was collected from the respondents as the literature indicates these data are important in influencing attitudes. Traditionally, the Schein is analyzed by the use of intra-class coefficients and analysis of variance. These techniques indicate if there is resemblance between the various groups—compared one to another.

ANALYSIS

Intra-class correlation coefficients (r') from two randomized groups analyses of variance were computed to determine the degree of similarity between the groups. All combinations of male managers in general; fat male managers; obese male managers; and overweight male managers, for the total sample were compared (c.f. Hays, 1963: 424). Male and female respondents were also analyzed separately. The classes, or groups, were the 92 descriptive items for each of the four groups. The larger the value of r' , the more similar observations in the same class tend to be. Thus, the smaller the within-item variability, relative to the between-item variability, the greater the similarity between the mean item ratings of either the descriptions of managers in general and obese male managers, and so forth.

For the entire sample there was not significant resemblance between male managers in general and fat male managers ($r'=.17$, $p\leq.052$), between male managers in general and obese male managers ($r'=.054$, $p\leq.318$) or between male managers and overweight male managers ($r'=.013$, $p\leq.547$). Thus there is no resemblance between the perceptions of male managers in general and any group with a weight descriptor—fat, overweight or obese.

The three groups with weight descriptions were then compared to each other. Fat male managers show resemblance to overweight male managers ($r'=.372$, $p\leq.001$); fat male managers show resemblance to obese managers ($r'=.263$, $p\leq.009$) and the perceptions of obese male managers resembles that of overweight male managers ($r'=.82$, $p\leq.000$). While the sample in general did not see a resemblance between male managers in general and any male manager with an excess weight description they did see similarity between all male managers described as being outside the weight norms.

The data was then examined by looking at the responses of males and females. Male respondents found a resemblance between male managers and obese male managers ($r'=.257$, $p\leq.006$) but found no resemblance between male managers and fat male managers ($r'=.092$, $p\leq.190$) or male managers and overweight male managers ($r'=.134$, $p\leq.099$).

Male respondents did not see similarity between fat male managers and obese male managers ($r'=.041$, $p\leq.348$) or fat males and overweight male managers ($r'=.124$, $p\leq.119$) but interestingly did find resemblance between obese male managers and overweight male managers ($r'=.610$, $p\leq.000$).

The female respondents did not perceive resemblance between male managers in general and any male manager with a descriptor indicating excess weight. Male managers in general compared to

fat male managers ($r'=.065$ $p\leq.268$); compared to obese male managers ($r'=.050$ $p\leq.317$) and overweight male managers ($r'=-.179$ $p\leq.957$). The female respondents did, however, see all three groups with excess weight descriptors as resembling each other; fat male managers compared to obese male managers ($r'=.620$, $p\leq.000$); fat male managers compared to overweight male managers ($r'=.754$, $p\leq.000$) and overweight managers compared to obese male managers ($r'=.695$ $p\leq.000$).

DISCUSSION

While the overall examination did not find a resemblance between male managers in general and those described as having excess weight, the study did find similarity between all three groups that were outside the norm. The females in the sample perceived all groups in the same manner, while the males found a resemblance between male managers in general and obese managers and only found overweight and fat male managers to resemble each other.

It would appear that females react more strongly to any description of a manager with excess weight. Conventional wisdom would suggest that this perception is negative. Males on the other hand appear to make a distinction between obese as a descriptor and either fat or overweight. It can also be surmised that the descriptors fat and overweight are perceived negatively. Hence, the idea that how a manager is described is related to the perception of that manager further research is needed. The data will be analyzed to determine if, in fact, the perceptions of managers with descriptions outside the norm for weight are more negative than those for a male manager in general. Future research should apply this analysis to female managers and determine if they are perceived more negatively than male managers who are outside the weight norms.

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APPENDIX ONE

INSTRUCTIONS - DESCRIPTIVE INDEX

On the following pages you will find a series of descriptive terms commonly used to characterize people in general. Some of these terms are positive in connotation, others are negative, and some are neither very positive nor very negative.

We would like you to use this list to tell us what you think managers in general are like. In making your judgments, it may be helpful to imagine that you are about to meet a person for the first time and the only thing you know in advance is that the person is a male manager [or fat male manager or overweight male manager or obese male manager depending on the survey]. Please rate each word or phrase in terms of how characteristic it is of managers in general.

The ratings are to be made according to the following scale:

5 - Characteristic of managers in general

4 - Somewhat characteristic of managers in general

3 - Neither characteristic nor uncharacteristic of managers in general

2 - Somewhat uncharacteristic of managers in general

1 - Not characteristic of managers in general

Place the number (1, 2, 3, 4, or 5) which most closely represents your opinion on the line next to each adjective.

5 - Characteristic

4 - Somewhat characteristic

3 - Neither characteristic nor uncharacteristic

2 - Somewhat uncharacteristic

1 - Not characteristic

Curious		Vigorous	
Consistent		Timid	
High need for power		Sophisticated	
Sympathetic		Talkative	
Fearful		Strong need for security	
Adventurous		Forceful	
Leadership ability		Analytical ability	
Values pleasant surroundings		Competitive	
Neat		Wavering in decision	
Uncertain		Cheerful	
Creative		High need for autonomy	
Desire to avoid controversy		Able to separate feelings from ideas	
Submissive		Competent	
Frank		Understanding	

Courteous		Vulgar	
Emotionally stable		Sociable	
Devious		Aggressive	
Interested in own appearance		High self-regard	
Independent		Grateful	
Desire for friendship		Easily influenced	
Frivolous		Exhibitionist	
Intelligent		Aware of others' feelings	
Persistent		Passive	
Objective		Decisive	
Speedy recovery from emotional disturbance		Not uncomfortable about being aggressive	
Shy		Direct	
Firm		Hides emotion	
Prompt		Authoritative	
Intuitive		Self-confident	
Humanitarian values		Sentimental	
Knows the way of the world		Steady	
Dawdler and procrastinator		Assertive	
Quarrelsome		Feelings not easily hurt	
Industrious		Dominant	
Well informed		Tactful	
Nervous		Helpful	
Reserved		Strong need for achievement	
Ambitious		Deceitful	
Not conceited about appearance		Generous	
Strong need for social acceptance		Bitter	
Hasty		Logical	
Obedient		Skilled in business matters	
Desires responsibility		Selfish	
Self-controlled		Demure	
Modest		Kind	
Self-reliant		Strong need for monetary rewards	