

COMMENTARY

# Becoming and acting as an ally against weight-based discrimination

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We appreciate and agree with the importance of the Best Practices for Weight at Work Research outlined by Lemmon et al. (2023). To help further contribute to this body of literature, we connect the scholarship related to weight-based<sup>1</sup> discrimination to contemporary allyship scholarship. Allyship support and advocacy behaviors improve employee experiences on day-to-day and long-term bases, and are therefore critical to research about weight at work. It is critically important to examine the development of allies against weight-stigma for two reasons. First, misguided assumptions about the controllability of weight (and resultant expectations that the victims of weight-stigma are solely responsible for reducing the negativity they experience by changing their body size; Lemmon et al., 2023) can be a mitigable but particularly pernicious barrier to people becoming allies against size based discrimination. Second, the direly misguided notion that certain discriminatory behaviors (e.g., commenting on others' sizes, recommending size management strategies) are deserved, helpful, and welcome for people in larger or smaller bodies represents an example of inappropriate expression of mistreatment that allyship behaviors can address (Snizek, 2021). Importantly, such perspectives and behaviors are ultimately harmful for both the targets of weight-based discrimination and others around them (Major et al., 2018). As such, to support the development of allyship against weight-stigma in research, we draw from past research to (a) outline how individuals, including researchers, may develop into allies against weight-stigma, and (b) describe specific behaviors that allies can engage in to combat weight discrimination.

## Development of allyship for weight-based discrimination

Ally identity development represents an individual-level, socio-cognitive, and behavioral transformation of the individual to curb the perpetuation of weight-stigma by oneself and others. Lemmon et al. (2023) assert that researchers should acknowledge uncomfortable feelings about weight and consider that disinterest not only impedes organizational research but also enables mistreatment. Answering this call to catalyze research through personal reflection, we draw inspiration from a recent synthesis of the ally identity development literature (Martinez et al., 2023) to outline how individuals may progress from an inability or unwillingness to address weight-based discrimination to being successful allies for people in larger or smaller bodies.

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<sup>1</sup>We discuss weight-stigma toward people in smaller and larger bodies given we provide several examples that are relevant for people in both groups (e.g., disordered eating). Furthermore, in line with Lemmon et al. (2023)'s recommendations to be aware of our use of language, we use "person in larger body" or "person in smaller body" throughout. We recognize the oppressive histories of the terms "fat," "obese," and "overweight," and based on our reflexivity, we are not in a marginalized position to reclaim such terms ourselves.

The first of five stages of ally identity development is *Apathy*, which includes unawareness, disinterest, or tolerance of prejudice and discrimination. Apathy justification is likely to manifest around weight-stigma due to perceptions that the people with larger or smaller bodies are responsible for the discrimination that they experience due to perceived body size controllability. Indeed, perceived controllability and deservedness predict one's likelihood to espouse anti-fat prejudice and/or fail to consider anti-fat prejudice to be harmful (Lemmon et al., 2023). Furthermore, people in the apathetic stage are also more likely to actively justify (rather than suppress) their prejudicial beliefs due to controllability perceptions (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). For researchers, apathy is reflected in research designs that conflate group characteristics and use downward and upward (e.g., inferior and superior) group comparisons (e.g., equivocating body size with health), thereby reifying mechanisms of workplace mistreatment (e.g., on the basis of body size; Nutter et al., 2021). Apathy can also manifest as not considering or downplaying the importance of weight in research designs in which it would be appropriate to do so.

Progressing from *Apathy* typically requires experiencing *Dissonance*, the second stage of ally identity development (Martinez et al., 2023). Dissonance is typically caused by hypocrisies including (a) a newfound awareness of prejudice and discrimination, and an appreciation of the resultant harm they can cause, and (b) a stark realization that one may have contributed to such oppression as a function of one's contextually privileged identities. Thus, developing an ally identity against weight-stigma involves acknowledging that weight is often not controllable (Gordon, 2023; Lin & Stutts, 2020), that anti-fat bias exists (Lewis et al., 1997), that it is highly prevalent in workplaces (Puhl et al., 2008), and that it is imminently harmful to employees (Hunt & Rhodes, 2018; Major et al., 2018). As individuals become more aware of interpersonal mistreatment and denigrating media representations of people in larger bodies (Ravary et al., 2019), along with global-scale prejudice, they are more likely to progress from the apathy stage.

Moving from the apathy stage to the dissonance stage can be challenging for many as it requires reflection on one's own worldviews and lived experiences in society, including widely-held misinformation. The dissonance stage for allies against weight-stigma in research may include acknowledging the hypocrisy that health promotion programs that emphasize individual responsibility may actually increase the prevalence of weight-based discrimination (Täuber et al., 2018). With regards to ally development, we highlight two hypocrisies that we have found beneficial to explore in anti weight-stigma organizational training ([redacted for naive review]). First, prospective allies should critically consider *who* benefits from diet culture in the US—the weight loss industry, currently worth more than \$224bil (Facts & Factors, 2023). Second, people often believe that they are justified in apathy toward weight-stigma because *they* want *others* to be healthier. On the contrary, one's health is *not* owed to others, and weight-stigma does not improve but harms health. Indeed, anti-health behaviors are associated with weight-stigma (Puhl & Suh, 2015), including eating disorders, which are the most deadly mental health condition, regardless of body size (NEDA, 2022). Not only does “dieting” *not* promote health, with 95% of intentional weight loss attempts failing (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Tylka et al., 2014)—worse, one in four intentional weight loss attempts develop into eating disorders (NEDA, 2022). Thus, we prompt researchers to study behaviors that would be consistent with believing that weight-stigma causes injustice.

As Lemmon et al. (2023) suggested: “Read up!” For allies, resolving dissonance requires *Learning*, the third stage of ally identity development (Martinez et al., 2023). Learning involves seeking out information, forming relationships, and finding local resources. Specifically, researchers in the learning stage of allyship against weight-stigma can read personal accounts and scientific literature related to weight-stigma, view media and media critiques focused on weight-stigma, follow body size and body positivity activists on social media, and contribute time and money to organizations that fight against weight-stigma. In particular, we recommend that researchers reflect inwardly to examine their relationships with their own bodies, as weight-stigma

is often motivated by individuals' relationships with their own bodies (Major *et al.*, 2018). Through conscientious reflection, allies may reduce their projected weight-stigma toward others.<sup>2</sup>

Fledgling allies tend to become more emboldened to actually engage in allyship behaviors as their knowledge increases. However, allies frequently make mistakes; thus the fourth stage of ally identity development is *Stumbling*. Researchers developing as allies against weight-stigma might stumble in designing research by implicitly or explicitly (a) drawing attention to people's size, (b) commenting on people's eating behaviors with unsolicited advice, (c) bringing up body positivity while assuming that another party wishes to discuss it merely because they are in a larger body, (d) speaking over people in larger or smaller bodies and thus removing their agency to empower themselves, or (e) highlighting unsolicited positive stereotypes (i.e., tokenizing body positivity, sassiness, or knowledge about cooking). For example, a qualitative study identified a common microaggression involving complimenting people in larger bodies for exercising; participants described unsolicited "praise" from strangers as evoking shame, reinforcing anti-fat stereotypes, and easily being dismissed by bystanders as words of "encouragement" (Sniezek, 2021). All of these examples illustrate that allyship against weight-based discrimination is nuanced and tied to the controllability and deservedness characteristics of weight-stigma. Even well-intentioned behaviors can perpetuate weight-stigma.

The ideal balance of allyship beliefs and behaviors is conceptualized as *Integration*, the fifth stage of ally identity development. A theoretical endpoint on the allyship journey, *Integration* entails never stumbling, so it is best understood as an aspirational yet unrealistic goal (Martinez *et al.*, 2023). During integration, allies recognize that stumbling will occur and appreciate individuals who flag weight-stigma rather than apologizing or defending prejudiced statements—both of which displace responsibility from the ally to perform strategic ally behaviors, which we outline next. As such, researchers should be open to constructive criticism from others and actively seek to incorporate the perspectives of those in larger and smaller bodies in the design, implementation, and dissemination of their work, in line with participatory action research principles (see Bernard *et al.*, 2023).

## Strategies to combat weight-based discrimination

In this section, we draw from prior research that conceptualizes allyship behavior in two broad categories: supportive behaviors and advocacy behaviors (Martinez & Hebl, 2010; Ready *et al.*, 2023; Sabat *et al.*, 2013; Snoeyink *et al.*, 2020). Both support and advocacy vary in level of intervention (i.e., interpersonal to structural; Rappaport, 1977), so researchers should assess the characteristics of the contexts in which they conduct research to determine how to effectively apply their interpersonal skills or structural power as allies against weight-based discrimination.

*Supportive* behaviors are usually individual-level actions that improve a specific person's experience in a short-term timeframe. An important phenomenon that allies can attend to with support is responding to microaggressions, which have large impacts; contribute to discriminatory cultures; and produce negative emotional, physical, and formal effects (Major *et al.*, 2018; Rosette *et al.*, 2018; Valian, 1999). Supportive responses to microaggressions often include actively listening to and affirming coworkers in larger or smaller bodies who speak up about experiencing mistreatment. Allies providing support in these instances need to avoid excusing microaggressions, which by definition are "easy to excuse," or often perceived as minor despite reinforcing harmful stereotypes (Williams, 2019). When coworkers experience weight-based discrimination, a supportive allyship behavior would be to follow up with them to make sure they are okay; validate their experience; and give them an opportunity to advocate for themselves.

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<sup>2</sup>Recommended media for developing allies: a. (Bacon, 2010). *Health at every size: The surprising truth about your weight*. BenBella Books, Inc. b. (Taylor, 2021). *The body is not an apology: The power of radical self-love*. Berrett-Koehler Publishers. c. (Strings, 2019). *Fearing the black body: The racial origins of fat phobia*. New York University Press.

These behaviors are incorporable to industrial and organizational psychology research design and practice. When things are not okay, supportive allies within organizations will lend a shoulder to cry on. Researchers may gather qualitative data from said employees corroborating weight-based discrimination in the workplace or describing coping mechanisms to buffer the associated negative impacts (Gerend et al., 2021). In such contexts, researchers should be prepared to provide support and validation in the moment in addition to external resources as desired. Contextually, researchers can study peer groups (important for confronting weight-based discrimination among college students; Stevens, 2018), and workplace employee resource groups (Welbourne et al., 2015) to understand and bolster community support. Researchers can also study coworkers practicing effective coping mechanisms, such as seeking support from friends, coworkers, or family; changing perspectives on mistreatment to emphasize self-compassion; or engaging in other activities to get one's mind off of difficult memories of mistreatment (Gerend et al., 2021). Finally, conducting research that highlights experiences of discrimination, harassment, and ostracism can elicit negative affect among those conducting the research, particularly if the researchers are especially empathetic or are members of the targeted groups themselves (Garcia et al., 2023). As such, researchers can lean on each other for support to grapple with the negativity they are helping illuminate.

Although many allyship behaviors manifest as support, other behaviors are better classified as *advocacy*, which entails behaviors that contribute to macro-level or long-term campaigns to promote inclusion, advance opportunities, and combat discrimination; that is, advocacy does not necessarily involve a specific, individual recipient of support (Evans & Wall, 1991). Allyship advocacy behaviors present a tall order for weight-based discrimination researchers. Indeed, weight-based discrimination has been classified on the high end of susceptibility to mistreatment at macro-levels, according to the employment protections and stigmatization classification model (Johnson et al., 2021), which considers the high level of stigmatization (via morality beliefs and perceived controllability of weight), the increasing prevalence of anti-fat bias (Andreyeva et al., 2008), and the absence of nondiscrimination corporate policies and federal legislation. Thus, researchers should seek out local opportunities for advocacy, such as speaking up in one's research for nondiscrimination policies on the basis of body size, campaigning for nondiscrimination legislation with empirically-based information, contributing to advocacy organizations addressing weight-stigma, or (perhaps most importantly) confronting weight-stigma when it occurs—on paper or in-person. For example, healthcare providers and healthcare personnel management researchers have a unique opportunity to advocate for policy to prevent the neglect of pain among patients in larger bodies (Azevedo et al., 2014). In addition, the confronting prejudiced responses model (Ashburn-Nardo et al., 2008) can be readily adapted to weight-stigma for researchers to identify the cognitive hurdles that stand to be overcome through research encouraging engagement in confrontation behaviors. Specifically, researchers should consider improving bystanders' abilities to (a) recognize that weight-based discrimination is occurring, (b) determine that the discrimination is harmful and warrants intervention, (c) decide that they are responsible for intervening, and (d) have confidence in their intended response to address weight discrimination successfully. As discussed previously, controllability myths and justification processes can contribute to these hurdles preventing confrontation behaviors, thus stifling allyship in the form of advocacy. We note that the efforts of the authors of the focal article (Lemmon et al., 2023) to draw more attention to the influence of weight in organizational research represents an excellent form of advocacy in its own right.

## Conclusion

It is our hope that bridging the weight-stigma literature and the contemporary allyship literature will provide actionable strategies for everyone interested in creating change, including research

scholars and practitioners. Knowledge about weight-stigma (and the lack thereof) influences how allies develop. Thus, educating others about harmful stereotypes can help them become better allies against weight-stigma, and can increase the likelihood of engaging in effective support and advocacy behaviors for people in larger or smaller bodies.

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