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COMMENTARY

Acknowledging the ramifications of weight-based stereotype threat in the workplace

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The authors of the current focal article made great points regarding the best practices of background work that researchers should engage in prior to conducting a weight at work study; I would like to extend upon these. Lemmon et al. (2024) suggest weight at work researchers should make themselves familiar with psychological research on social dominance, body image, and objectification theory. Additionally, the authors state that weight at work researchers should consider how the study of weight intersects with race, class, consumption, capitalism, privilege, oppression, politics, religion, and power. In addition to these concepts, I think that researchers should also consider the intersection of the study of weight at work with weight-based stereotype threat.

Steele and Aronson (1995) state that stereotype threat is a predicament that may arise from widely known negative stereotypes regarding one's group. The predicament is that, because the stereotype exists, any characteristic one possesses or anything that a person does that conforms to the stereotype makes the stereotype itself seem more plausible as a self-characterization of that person to others and perhaps to the person themself. The consideration of stereotype threat would allow weight at work researchers to better understand how negative stereotypes regarding overweight employees have the ability to affect how these employees perceive themselves being viewed by others in a workplace setting and, in turn, how this affects their work and self-perception. Given that stereotype threat has implications for both the workplace and overweight people, it would be beneficial for weight at work researchers to include the concept in their background work.

Background work on stereotype threat research

The effects of stereotype threat are apparent when a person belonging to a negatively stereotyped group becomes worried that individuals are evaluating them based on negative stereotypes relevant to their in-group (Steele, 1997). The essential element required for stereotype threat to manifest is the apprehension that an individual may validate a stereotype associated with their demographic group (Kalokerinos et al., 2014). Stereotype threat will only occur when the negatively stereotyped individual is aware of the stereotypes regarding their social identity, and they are worried about either being viewed or evaluated through the lens of that stereotype.

Lemmon et al. discussed objectification theory and argued that most people, including overweight individuals, understand what an ideal body should look like. Additionally, objectification theory proposes that people attain a sense of self-worth from their conformity to standards or how much control they possess in regard to reaching ideal standards (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997, as cited in Lemmon et al.). A consequence of nonconformity to an ideal body

image is that both the instigator and the victim of weight-based prejudice feel that mistreatment is deserved as someone who is overweight is not meeting their societal moral duty of being fit and slim (Lemmon et al.). To extend this to negative stereotyping, Khan et al. (2018) found that participants expressed more weight-based negative stereotypes and bias against an obese target when the cause of the target's obesity was framed as a psychological eating disorder compared to a genetic disorder.

Lemmon et al., further suggest individuals who discriminate against others tend to focus on attacking vulnerable people and they seek to reinforce social dominance that is in line with current social norms (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004, as cited in Lemmon et al.; Pratto et al., 1994, as cited in Lemmon et al.). Together, this results in predators picking who to stigmatize and discriminate against based on how or if they choose to conform to social norms. Lemmon et al. give the example of an overweight person eating a believed to be unhealthy item thereby demonstrating their nonconformity to the social norm of being healthy, which might signal to predators that they should be stigmatized. Relating this to stereotype threat, Steele (1997) makes the point that even though stereotyped individuals identify and are aware of a stereotyped outcome relevant to their group, they do not need to believe a stereotype is relevant to them personally. Kalokerinos et al. (2014) note that it is irrelevant if a stereotype is accurate or not in regard to how individuals experience stereotype threat. This suggests that the fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one's group is enough to elicit stereotype threat.

Individuals who are a part of a negatively stereotyped group that is relevant to their social identity are burdened by the fact that people's perceptions of them may be altered to fit existing relevant negative stereotypes (O'Brien & Crandall, 2003). Stereotyped individuals may feel anxious when going about their day because they might do something that confirms a negative stereotype regarding their group (Roberson & Kulik, 2007). For example, Seacat and Mickelson (2009) conducted a study in which overweight women would be exposed to a weight-based stereotype threat primer. The overweight women stated that fear related to being discriminated against and negatively evaluated on the basis of their weight had led them to avoid specific situations and activities where their weight would be made particularly relevant.

Vartanian and Silverstein (2013) found that obesity acts as a status cue and that negative traits like being lazy and sloppy were more closely associated with obese individuals as compared to nonobese individuals. Under stereotype threat conditions, individuals with a body mass index that would categorize them as being obese endured significantly lower working memory ability compared to nonobese individuals (Guardabassi & Tomasetto, 2018). In a workplace context, overweight and obese individuals who have disruptions in working memory due to stereotype threat may fall victim to having their work performance negatively affected. In turn, overweight and obese employees may be seen as less hard working due to having lower performance compared to their nonoverweight counterparts.

Weight-based stereotype threat and the workplace

Stereotype threat can affect multiple facets of the workplace and employee's well-being. Practically every job involves employees being judged by others, and sometimes judging is even required (e.g., performance review). Being judged in a workplace can naturally heighten anxieties; however, anxieties can be abnormally increased for employees who belong to a negatively stereotyped group, especially when they are evaluated on a task for which they are stereotyped to underperform (Roberson & Kulik, 2007). The concepts of stereotypes and stereotype threat have implications for how overweight individuals view themselves and the work that they do. According to Vanhove and Gordon (2014), overweight and obese employees experience greater amounts of negative work-related outcomes such as lower employment and income when compared to employees who are considered to be of a normal weight.

Zacher and Von Hippel (2021) found that overweight employees experience stereotype threat related to their weight and that weight-based stereotype threat is associated with employees experiencing lower self-perceived work ability. Currently, this is one of the only studies to explicitly examine the relationship between weight-based stereotype threats and overweight employees' self-perceived work outcomes. While there might be a paucity of literature regarding weight-based stereotype threat in the workplace there is ample evidence that stereotype threat can negatively affect stereotyped individuals (e.g., Seacat & Mickelson, 2009; Von Hippel et al., 2019).

Weight-based stereotype threat and work outcomes

There is good reason to expect that weight-based stereotype threat in the workplace negatively affects work-related outcomes. It is possible to see how stereotype threat affects employees belonging to different demographic groups that are often negatively stereotyped. Most of the studies that have examined stereotype threat in the workplace have looked at a perspective of race, gender (primarily females), and age. Von Hippel et al. (2019) found that older employees habitually expressed decreased workplace well-being, job engagement, and job satisfaction after a stereotype threat event had occurred during their day. Additionally, Von Hippel et al. (2011) found that experiences with stereotype threat were associated with decreased job satisfaction and an increased desire to quit among women. From both a micro-and-macro-organizational perspective, these findings are important. If an organization is having a problem with employees routinely experiencing weight-based stereotype threat, leading those employees to report lower job satisfaction and higher intentions to quit, the organization could experience decreased employee retention, high turnover, and lost revenue.

Another outcome that may be negatively affected by weight-based stereotype threat is leadership aspirations. Stereotype threat has been found to negatively affect stereotyped employees' leadership aspirations. Gender-based stereotype threat can lead to individuals experiencing decreased performance at work which over time can turn into affected individuals expressing lower leadership aspiration (Hoyt & Murphy, 2016). Additionally, women who watched commercials based on gender stereotypic topics reported having lower leadership aspirations compared to women who watched commercials not based on gender stereotypes (Davies et al., 2005). If organizations do not have many employees staying with them long enough to put employees in leadership positions because of weight-based stereotype threat, the organization could have a workplace with a lot of under-experienced employees with little higher-level leadership.

Lastly, in regard to work outcomes, stereotype threat has been shown to affect employees' disengagement from work. Demerouti et al. (2010) say disengagement occurs when an employee distances themself from their work object, work content, and work in general. Von Hippel et al. (2019) found that older employees who had gone through a stereotype threat-inducing event reported having less job engagement and higher intentions to quit their jobs compared to younger employees. It is plausible that overweight employees can also disengage from work when experiencing stereotype threat, just as has been found for older adults. Disengagement in the workplace has the potential to harm productivity if employees cannot feel connected to or motivated about the work they are doing.

Some people may make the argument that stereotype threats' interaction with weight is different from stereotype threats' interaction with more static demographic categories like gender and race, because of the perceived controllability of weight and thus it should not be given the same amount of attention and respect. However, it is useful to treat weight with similar importance to traditional demographic categories when studying its intersection with stereotype threat. Weight may not be malleable for a large part of the population which suggests that being overweight is similar to static demographic factors like race and gender even if people choose to

view weight as a controllable aspect of a person's identity (Benton & Young, 2017, as cited in Lemmon et al.). This being the case, weight-based stereotype threat research and weight research as a whole should be given the same amount of attention as other research based on demographic factors.

Conclusion

In conclusion, weight at work researchers would benefit from considering the intersection of weight and the effects of stereotype threat on employees. Ideally, weight at work researchers should do background research on weight-based stereotype threat in the workplace when crafting their research in order to better understand how negative weight-based stereotypes affect overweight individuals' work and self-perception. Doing so would allow for a deeper understanding of weight at work and potentially add an extra layer of depth to the researchers' study. Weight-based stereotype threat in the workplace is an important topic for organizational weight research and should be understood and treated as such.

Weight-based stereotype threat background work guideline

Consider psychological research on weight-based stereotype threat and its implications for overweight and obese employees' workplace outcomes.

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