Stereotype: Beauty is Good = Weight is Bad

Introduction

Many men and women in the United States and around the world are discriminated against daily because of their body weight. Overweight individuals are seen by many average weight people as being lazy, unattractive, less intelligent, and to have little or no self control. These labels can be very hurtful and damaging to one’s self-esteem [There should be references associated with this information].

It appears that in addition to the rise in the obesity rate in the U.S., discrimination against overweight people is only worsening. Airlines are now charging an overweight/obese person for an additional seat because of their size. There are hundreds of websites and blogs online with the sole purpose of expressing one’s hatred and loathing of obese people. Recently, there have been overweight people performing in skits and situation comedies in order to encourage a cheap laugh at a fat person’s expense [There should be references associated with this information].

A study conducted which included children and mothers in Mexico is very disturbing. The mothers and children (5th and 6th graders) were shown six drawings of children with the same faces and clothing. The differences in the children in the pictures included: one child was healthy, one had facial scarring, one had crutches, another an arm was missing, one child was in a wheelchair, and finally one was obese. The children and mothers were then asked to rank in order one to six, who they would want to be friends with. An overwhelming percentage of the surveys showed the obese child chosen as a friend ranking in at the 5th or last (Barcardi-Gascon, M., 2007).

Another study conducted regarding discrimination looked at the contrast in earnings and growth within the workplace. The results showed that obesity had a negative impact on wage earnings only. The differences were found to be 5.5 percent lower wages for obese men and 10 percent lower wages for obese women (Loh, E., 1993).
Body weight is extremely important in the beauty and entertainment industries. In a 1992 study, researchers found the weight of Miss America contestants and Playboy Playmates had significant weight decreases over a 30 year period. The study also found that their weight was 15 percent below the national average for their height and age. Not surprising, 15 percent below the average for weight and height is one of the same criteria for anorexia nervosa (Wiseman, et al, 1992).

The above studies are not surprising, yet very interesting. After reviewing many of the studies on the stereotype “Beauty is Good”, I decided to conduct an experiment to see if people would discriminate against an overweight person versus an average weight person. I generated three hypotheses: 1) if given a choice between responding to an average weight and an overweight person conducting a survey, subjects will choose to interact with the average weight person more often; 2) men will indicate a higher degree of prejudice than women on the survey [There should be some information or discussion preceding this second hypothesis that suggests why it is a plausible hypothesis and worthy of being tested], and 3) subjects choosing to interact with the overweight person will indicate a lower degree of prejudice toward overweight people than those choosing to interact with the person of average weight.

**Methods**

The experiment began by creating a brief survey. The survey asked people to answer honestly and to rate their prejudice (if any) against overweight/obese people on a scale of “0 – 10”. They were also asked to include their gender and age. The survey also included an area for any comments they may have.

The next step was to find an average weight person and an overweight person to act as confederates who would ask random people to complete the survey. Two male confederates were chosen to conduct the surveys in order to keep gender the same. Confederate A (Kenny) is 6 foot tall and weighs 163 pounds. Confederate B (Kevin) is 5 foot 11.75 inches tall and weighs 310 pounds.

A neutral area was chosen to conduct the surveys, and the surveys were conducted on a Saturday afternoon in order to get a variety of subjects to complete the survey. The confederates were instructed to stand outside in an open area approximately 10 feet apart. They were to ask potential subjects, who happened to be walking by, to complete their survey. They were to use the same verbiage and demeanor, and say thank you to everyone even if declined.

A third person was asked to watch and document the number of subjects that consented and declined each confederate. This documenter stayed far enough away from each confederate to ensure that no association between them was made.
Results

Regarding the first hypothesis (that subjects would choose to interact with the average weight confederate more than the overweight confederate), the data indicated that Kevin, the overweight confederate, had a total of 40 declines and only 10 consents. In contrast, Kenny had only 21 declines and an overwhelming 26 consents. The pie chart in figure 1 shows the differences in the declines and consents for each confederate.

In relation to the second hypothesis (that men would indicate greater weight prejudice on the questionnaires than women), a total of 22 women and 14 men completed the questionnaire. Within those totals, six from each gender had prejudices on the scale of “5” or higher. These subjects were deemed to have a high prejudice against overweight people. Using this criterion, 43% of male subjects had a high prejudice against overweight people as compared to 27% of female subjects. Figure 2 displays these results. [Where possible, most psychologists conducting research use means (averages) to summarize data rather than percentages. In this study, a mean prejudice score could have been calculated for each gender]

Regarding the third hypothesis (that those interacting with the overweight confederate would indicate lower weight prejudice than those interacting with the confederate of average weight), five of the 10 subjects (50%) who completed the survey for the overweight confederate circled the number “5” or higher. In contrast, only 7 of the 26 subjects (27%) completing a survey for the average weight confederate circled a number of “5” or higher. Figure 3 shows these results. [As indicated above, the mean prejudice score for those responding to the overweight confederate could have been calculated and compared to the mean prejudice score for those responding to the average weight confederate].

Discussion

Based on the data available, it appears that the first two hypotheses were supported. Many more subjects declined to respond to the survey when offered by the overweight confederate than when offered by the confederate of average weight. This is certainly consistent with the other research reviewed in this paper, and with the tone of our current anti-obesity culture. In addition, males were nearly 60% more likely to exhibit a high degree of prejudice on the survey. This result could be due to a male tendency to place greater emphasis on visual cues when evaluating others.

The third hypothesis was not supported. Subjects who responded to the overweight confederate were actually more likely to score higher on the prejudice scale than those responding to the confederate of average weight. This result was somewhat surprising. My original reasoning was that the subjects completing the survey offered by the overweight
confederate would have been inclined to lie and circle a lower number depicting less prejudice. It also could have been originally argued that those who choose to interact with the overweight confederate would genuinely have less weight prejudice and this would be reflected in lower scores on the prejudice scale. In view of the results, however, it is possible that interacting with the overweight confederate primed a pre-existing prejudice against overweight people and that this prejudice was not nullified by any sense of obligation to be nice to the confederate administering the survey. This suggests the strength of the prejudice that exists against overweight people.

What does this mean for the future? According to any national survey or news program, obesity is a serious problem and is on the rise. It appears that at some point the overweight individuals will surpass in numbers the average weight individuals. Then will the discrimination reverse itself? Will people then find a plumper figure more attractive than a thin one? Instead of “Super Models” there will be “Super Duper Models”. Perhaps eating disorders like binging/purging and anorexia nervosa will be a thing of the past. Perhaps even if the discrimination of obesity would burn itself out, then maybe obese people could become more accepting of themselves and truly heal themselves from the inside out.

After further review of the confederates used in this study, I wonder how much of their differential treatment by subjects was due to the clothing they were wearing. Both wore jeans and T-shirts with logos, but the logos were different and one was more colorful than the other one (see attached picture [not actually shown in this version of the study for reasons of confidentiality]). In a future study I would have had them wear more similar clothing. It is also possible that the age of the confederates may have influenced the results. Both confederates were in their late teens. Perhaps weight prejudice is greater when dealing with younger people than when dealing with older people.

This research has lots of options and potential. Next time both confederates could dress very business-like, or in contrast they could dress very sloppy. I could also examine the interaction of weight and dress further by having one confederate dress business-like and the other one sloppy and then reversing the roles on another day. It would be interesting to see whether or not weight prejudice is reduced by a business-like appearance and increased by a sloppy appearance. Another option is to change the gender altogether or even mix the gender. It would also be interesting to vary the location of the study to get a wider variety of subjects in terms of age, gender, race, and overall context.

Another goal for a similar experiment would be to see what other factors might even out the playing field between the average weight and overweight confederate. Perhaps a small gift could be offered by the overweight confederate to encourage a decrease in prejudice.
Another interesting option would be to pair people up by having the confederates work with others who vary in attractiveness and/or gender. The options appear to be endless.

However, it appears likely that any research in the near future on weight prejudice will show that this is a strong prejudice and that it may be difficult to offset. Further, if in the distant future, overweight people become more acceptable in the eyes of others, it is likely that others will take their place as the subject of prejudice. It seems that a day without some sort of prejudice on earth will never be seen, felt, heard, or even thought about. Indeed, as long as there are differences between human beings, there will be prejudice lurking in the shadows.

References


Figure 1
Kevin (Overweight Confederate)

Among subjects who consented to survey

Kenny (Average Weight Confederate)

Among subjects who consented to survey
Figure 3