

COMMENTARY

## Organizational research on weight stigma must center targets' perspectives

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As the focal article (Lemmon et al., 2024) highlights, the field of organizational psychology has advanced the understanding of weight stigma's economic consequences (e.g., effects on salary, perceived hireability, and promotions). However, much of this work emphasized biases in third-party judgments of heavier individuals and neglected heavier employees' first-person experiences with workplace weight discrimination. In this commentary, we argue that organizational research must integrate the perspectives of heavier employees to form a complete and holistic conception of weight stigma's effects on the workplace. Guided by this central thesis, we outline how organizational science can leverage existing research on first-person experiences with weight stigma to predict how its cognitive, motivational, and health effects will impact work outcomes.

At the heart of our recommendation are two core tenets of a social identity approach to stigma. First, weight-based mistreatment represents a form of *social identity threat*, whereby heavier employees are demeaned and devalued because of their size. These identity threats can be concrete (e.g., supervisors disparaging employees' size) and amorphous (e.g., employees worry that their behavior will be viewed through the lens of negative stereotypes about heavy people). Second, these threats are stressful, impair performance, undermine well-being, and damage health (Major et al., 1998). This social identity perspective predicts that workplace weight stigma will impair work outcomes through interrelated psychological and physiological paths.

### Weight stigma impairs cognitive and motivational processes

Stress caused by weight stigma is expected to negatively impact work outcomes by depleting cognitive resources, interfering with creative thinking, and reducing motivation. First, weight stigma is expected to consume working memory resources, which prevents employees from operating at peak performance. From this perspective, top performance—particularly for difficult and complex tasks—requires individuals to engage substantial working memory resources to succeed. However, stress caused by weight stigma monopolizes working memory, as heavier employees try to cope with negative emotions triggered by mistreatment and concerns that their behaviors will be interpreted through the lens of negative weight-based stereotypes (Schmader et al., 2008). Consequently, weight stigma likely puts heavier employees at a professional disadvantage because working memory resources are divided between coping with identity threats and critical job tasks. Considerable research on identity and stereotype threat supports this prediction. For example, compared to nonthreatening testing conditions, activating negative gender and ethnic stereotypes decreased working memory capacity among women and participants of color (Schmader & Johns, 2003). Subsequent research indicates that concerns with stigma seem to have particularly strong effects on tasks requiring working memory (e.g., advanced mathematics problems; Beilock et al., 2007). As this work illustrates, stigma adversely affects

working memory and subsequent performance. By extension, weight stigma is predicted to disadvantage heavier employees because it consumes working memory resources necessary for top performance.

Weight stigma also disrupts other executive processes that are essential to job performance. Effective job performance requires focus and persistence through challenges to maintain goal-directed behaviors. Managing the stress caused by weight stigma is an effortful and taxing endeavor that exhausts executive resources, as individuals try to suppress negative emotions or compensate for negative stereotypes by expending extra energy to make positive impressions (Hunger et al., 2015). For example, heavier employees might work extra hard to smile, project positive emotions, and present an organized workspace to ingratiate themselves with coworkers and disconfirm stereotypes of heavy people as sad and slovenly. As such, heavier individuals likely cannot work at their peak ability because they expend cognitive resources to manage stigma-related stress and self-presentational concerns. In keeping with this idea, past research has shown that heavier women exposed to a weight-based identity threat experienced impaired attentional control and cognitive inhibition as indicated by worse performance on a Stroop task (Major et al., 2012). Quite simply, managing stigma-related concerns disrupts attention and performance monitoring. Consequently, heavier employees may have less attentional resources to devote to performing tasks and inhibiting task-irrelevant information.

Simultaneously, job performance might also suffer because higher-weight employees' self-regulation becomes fatigued, reducing employees' capacity to persist on challenging and long-term work activities. For example, relative to control participants, when heavier women read an article about workplace weight discrimination, weight stigma concerns were activated and subsequently undermined behavioral regulation and feelings of control (Major et al., 2014). In the context of the workplace, these findings suggest that active stigma concerns may undermine employees' capacity to focus and persist on professional tasks, ultimately preventing optimal performance. Altogether, these findings illustrate the exhausting effects of weight stigma on cognitive resources needed to execute tasks. As such, heavier employees may underperform at work when they expend limited cognitive resources to manage identity-based threats.

Another process that may be disrupted by workplace weight stigma is creativity. Innovation is essential to organizational success through the development of novel products and improving operational processes. Employees also frequently encounter new and complex work problems that require creative problem-solving. In these cases, creativity is critical to professional success. As such, in many occupations, creativity is considered an important facet of job performance (Harari et al., 2016). However, weight stigma may interfere with heavier employees' ability to think creatively. Past work shows that priming negative stereotypes induces a prevention focus characterized by risk aversion and efforts to reduce errors and avoid failure (Seibt & Förster, 2004). Critically, this prevention focus impedes abilities to think creatively and generate novel ideas. Similarly, components of stigmatization like subordination and low status have also been found to undermine creativity and limit abstract thinking (Galinsky et al., 2008; Smith & Trope, 2006). When people are disempowered (i.e., stigmatized), they are less likely to engage in the "out of the box" thinking valued by organizations. As this work attests, weight stigma's capacity to induce a prevention focus and feelings of subordination stand to negatively impact creative and abstract thinking.

Finally, weight stigma may disadvantage heavier employees by undermining motivation. Extensive evidence underlines the pervasiveness of weight stigma in organizations, and discrimination against heavier individuals has been documented across all employment stages (e.g., hiring, promotion, termination; Puhl & Brownell, 2001). As such, many heavier individuals likely experience the workplace as a threatening and demoralizing place. As considerable work on general workplace mistreatment attests (e.g., Tepper, 2000), abusive and hostile work environments poison morale and workplace motives. From this perspective, by fostering a threatening workplace, weight stigma is likely antithetical to professional motivation.

Moreover, in addition to viewing the workplace as threatening, heavier employees likely perceive the workplace as unfair and unjust. Extensive research has uncovered how heavier employees are mistreated due to their weight in a variety of ways including performance evaluations, salary outcomes, and interpersonal interactions (Puhl & Heuer, 2009), reflecting forms of procedural, distributive, and interactional injustice (Beugre & Baron, 2001). Not only are experiences of mistreatment painful, but perceiving those negative experiences as unjust may further reduce employees' work motivation (Pinder, 2014). Past work demonstrates the impact of injustice on work motivation, finding that employees who perceived injustice at work felt lower work engagement. That is, when workers felt like they were treated unfairly, they felt less willing to dedicate energy to performing work tasks (Agarwal, 2014). Work motivation is a critical predictor of job performance, so reductions in motivation due to perceived injustice likely make it difficult for heavier employees to perform optimally.

### **Weight stigma harms physical and mental health**

Weight stigma is also expected to harm heavier employees' work lives by impacting physical and mental health. First, as noted above, weight stigma is stressful. Thus, weight stigma's continuous stress stands to contribute to numerous chronic health conditions. Organizations have a vested interest in the well-being of their workforce, as poor employee health is associated with more health-related absences and impaired productivity and performance (Grossmeier et al., 2016; Wynne-Jones et al., 2009). Absenteeism is costly to both employers and employees, and workers with chronic health conditions tend to have more health-related absences (Bryan et al., 2021). Past work links weight stigma to elevated markers of physiological stress including blood pressure (Major et al., 2012), inflammation (Sutin et al., 2014), and cortisol (Tomiya et al., 2014). Critically, these markers are associated with negative health outcomes like cardiovascular and metabolic diseases. Chronically high levels of physiological stress have a weathering effect on the body (McEwen, 1998), which leads to greater susceptibility of developing stress-related diseases. The constant stress of weight stigma is expected to damage long-term health and performance, systematically disadvantaging heavier employees.

Second, beyond its direct stress-related harms, weight stigma is also expected to hinder health and performance by disrupting a key restorative process: sleep. In addition to the many health outcomes linked to poor sleep (Luyster et al., 2012), sleep quality and quantity are related to a variety of measures that directly impact work experiences including cognitive performance, information processing, employee engagement, job satisfaction, task performance, work-family conflict, and even the occurrence of fatal workplace accidents (Åkerstedt et al., 2002; Litwiller et al., 2017; Mullins et al., 2014). In very basic terms, good sleep is essential for great work. However, research indicates that weight stigma is antithetical to quality sleep (Craven & Fekete, 2022; Lee et al., 2021). Consequently, poor nightly sleep may directly disadvantage heavier employees during the workday. Due to poorer sleep, heavier employees may have less energy and motivation for work. Similarly, sleep deficits may undermine information processing, creativity, and safety monitoring, potentially threatening the security of themselves and others. By disrupting sleep, weight stigma stands to have profound negative effects on the workplace.

Weight stigma is also expected to harm employee outcomes by damaging mental health. Mental health is important to employee performance, and worse mental health is associated with reduced job performance (Montano et al., 2017). For example, depression is particularly detrimental to work performance and absences, and the effects of depression on productivity loss may be double that of physical illness-related absences (Lerner & Henke, 2008; Wang et al., 2004). Critically, weight stigma is associated with increased symptoms of depression and anxiety, reduced self-esteem, lower life satisfaction and well-being, and more suicidal ideation (Hunger et al., 2020a). As these data attest, weight stigma's cumulative effects directly undermine mental

health and well-being. As such, it is predicted that heavier employees may underperform in the workplace as a function of mental health.

### Practical recommendations

To begin centering the voices of heavier employees, we make the following, nonexhaustive, practical recommendations. Guided by principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR; e.g., Israel et al., 2005), researchers should empower heavier employees in the research process to identify organization-specific forms of weight stigma and provide opportunities for review of scientific products to ensure participants are presented with dignity and care. To begin, researchers might partner with employee representatives who can provide insight into how weight stigma presents in their organization and possible avenues for change. Central to this partnership is the translation of knowledge (Wallerstein & Duran, 2017), which in this case might involve educating organizations about the damaging effects of weight stigma highlighted in the previous sections of this commentary and focal article. In other words, researchers and employee representatives work together to mutually share knowledge and collaboratively address weight stigma in the workplace. When successful, this CBPR approach fosters trust between researchers and participant collaborators and this alliance increases the likelihood of employee buy-in for possible intervention (Wallerstein & Duran, 2010). In sum, partnering with affected employees (a) provides researchers with first-hand knowledge of weight stigma's organizational effects, (b) builds trust between researchers and participants, and (c) increases intervention success by affirming the perspectives and agency of participant stakeholders (i.e., heavier employees).

Researchers should also emphasize the first-person experiences of weight stigma. For example, employing established measures to assess the diverse ways in which weight stigma shapes social interactions will afford greater insight into the lived reality of higher-weight individuals and how these experiences affect feelings of personal worth, emotion invalidation, and well-being (e.g., Hunger et al., 2018; Johnson et al., 2023; Tomiyama et al., 2014). Relatedly, researchers should use language that affirms the lived reality of heavier employees (e.g., "20% of employees *experienced* weekly weight discrimination") and avoid language that calls into question the validity and authenticity of their experiences (e.g., "20% of employees *perceived* weekly weight discrimination"). Moreover, researchers should be attentive to weight-related language in research materials and instruments. Because there is considerable heterogeneity in the ways heavier individuals describe themselves (see Meadows & Daniélsdóttir, 2016), with some individuals using person-first language (e.g., person of size) and others adopting identity-first language (e.g., heavier individual), best practice is to let constituent employees' terminology guide research descriptions (Hunger et al., 2020b). Altogether, assessing and affirming first-person experiences with weight stigma and its effects on stress and well-being is of critical importance. Although nonexhaustive, the following recommendations offer a practical start to integrating first-person experiences with weight stigma into organizational weight stigma research.

### Conclusion

Despite advancing understanding of the economic consequences of weight stigma, organizational research stands to benefit from integrating the perspectives and experiences of heavier employees into models of workplace weight stigma. As outlined in this commentary, considering first-person experiences with weight stigma highlights cognitive, motivational, and health paths by which weight stigma harms heavier workers. Inclusion of these perspectives and experiences is critical for a full and representative understanding of weight stigma's damaging effects in the workplace. We encourage organizational psychologists to investigate how first-person encounters with workplace weight discrimination may systematically preclude heavier individuals from achieving occupational success.

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