

Obesity research paper

[Technology](#), [Development](#)



Occupational Characteristics and the Obesity Wage Penalty

This paper demonstrates that obese women are more likely to work in jobs that emphasize physical activity, but they are less likely to work in jobs that emphasize public interaction. The same patterns in occupational characteristics do not exist for obese men. In light of prior literature finding an unexplained wage gap between obese women and non-obese women, these results are particularly relevant since physical activity jobs pay relatively less on average, while public interaction jobs pay relatively more. Moreover, the few obese women who work in public interaction occupations receive lower wages than non-obese women, and their wage penalty offsets the general premium to working in a job emphasizing public interaction.

Together, these results suggest that taste-based discrimination may be driving occupational sorting among obese women and, as a result, is at least one source of the wage penalty experienced by obese women. Numerous studies have documented a negative correlation between obesity and wages. A few of these studies, such as Cawley (2004), have suggested a causal link, demonstrating that, at least for females, obesity lowers wages. What is less well understood is why obesity lowers wages. This paper explores one potential explanation for why obesity lowers wages: differences in occupational characteristics between the obese and the non-obese. The characteristics of occupations held by obese workers may differ from the characteristics of occupations held by non-obese workers for two reasons. First, obese workers may seek to avoid certain occupational characteristics made unpleasant by their obesity. If this labor supply story is correct, then

obese workers would require a wage premium, or compensating differential, to compensate them for working in an occupation with such unpleasant characteristics.

Second, obesity may increase the costs of employment in occupations with certain characteristics. Obesity may lower a worker's ability to complete particular tasks, for example, or raise employers' costs of providing a worker with fringe benefits. Taste-based discrimination against the obese by employers (or their customers) likewise may increase the costs of employing the obese, particularly in occupations requiring frequent contact with these individuals. If any of these labor demand stories are correct, then employers would be unwilling to pay obese workers the same wages as non-obese workers in occupations with characteristics negatively affected by obesity. This paper considers both the supply-side and the demand-side explanations in evaluating whether there are differences in the characteristics of occupations held by the obese, and how these differences might help explain the obesity wage penalty. Previous literature from the related fields of health and beauty has suggested two types of occupations in which obese workers may be relatively underrepresented: physical activity occupations and public interaction occupations.

Using matched data from the Current Population Survey (CPS), the American Time Use Survey's Eating and Health Module (ATUS EHM), and the Occupational Information Network (O*NET), I find that heavier women are less likely than their normal-weight counterparts to work in public interaction occupations, and the heaviest women who do work in these occupations

encounter a wage penalty. Contrary to my initial predictions, however, I find that heavier women are more likely to work in physical activity occupations. Together, these results indicate that the wage penalty encountered by obese females in the labor market is the result of lower labor demand.

Previous Research on the Physical Qualities Affected by Obesity

Medically defined as a body mass index (BMI) of thirty or greater, 1 obesity is a twofold issue: it has the potential to impact both a person's health and a person's appearance. 2 Health researchers have linked obesity to the development of functional limitations in performing physical tasks, which in turn, could affect an individual's ability and willingness to perform physical tasks at work. Ferraro et al.

(2002), for example, found in a panel study of adults ages twenty-five to seventy-seven that obesity increased an individual's self-reported likelihood of developing both an upper-body functional limitation (including dressing oneself, reaching for a five-pound object, and gripping) and a lower-body functional limitation (including standing up from a chair, climbing stairs, getting into a car, running errands, and doing light chores). Alley and Chang (2007) reached similar conclusions in their study of adults ages sixty and older, finding that obesity increased an individual's likelihood of developing at least one functional limitation (defined in the study as a self-reported difficulty or inability to walk one-fourth mile, walk up ten stairs, kneel, lift ten pounds, walk between rooms, and stand from a chair). The increase was especially dramatic for morbid obesity, medically defined as a BMI of forty or higher. Similarly, a study of women ages forty-five to fifty-six by Hergenroeder et al. (2011) found that obese women not only self-reported

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lower rates of physical function than normal-weight women but also performed worse than normal-weight women at physical tasks assigned to them by the researchers, such as walking and standing from a chair. In addition to obesity's potential impact on physical capabilities, obesity also has the potential to affect an individual's personal appearance.

Rooth (2009) demonstrated that photos of white males and females who had been previously rated as attractive were later rated as unattractive after the photos had been manipulated to make these individuals appear obese. Similarly, Hersch (2011) showed that for white females, black females, and white males surveyed in the Detroit Area Study, obesity had a negative impact on their attractiveness ratings.

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