

# Weight discrimination in the american workplaces health essay

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A new type of discrimination has appeared in the American workplace. Individuals are now being discriminated because of their body weight. Typically, discrimination takes place in many forms such as refusal to be hired, lower wages, unexplained terminations, and failure to be promoted. The purpose of this paper is to determine whether discrimination against obese individuals is a significant issue in the workplace. By analyzing and comparing various studies that relate to obesity, the following reports conclude that weight discrimination is evident in the American workplace and may be as serious as ageism and sexism. It is also found that the beliefs justifying weight discrimination can be challenged and may even be false. On the whole, weight discrimination is unethical and there is a strong need for anti-discrimination laws.

## Introduction

Many forms of discrimination are present in the workplace. Most commonly, the prejudice is against one's race, gender, and class. Recently, people of different sexual orientations such as lesbians, gays, bisexuals and transsexuals have also been discriminated against. However, there is a new type of discrimination that many people do not consider: obesity. In the United States of America, more than one-third of adults are obese (35. 7%) and approximately 17% (or 12. 5 million) of children aged 2 to 19 years old are obese (Odgen, Carroll, Kit, & Flegal, 2012). Obesity in adults is defined as having a BMI greater than or equal to 30. It is calculated in terms of BMI (body mass index), which is weight in kilograms divided by height in meters

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squared (Odgen et al., 2012). As obesity is increasing and becoming a serious issue, so is the discrimination against obese individuals. It is important to note that discrimination is distinct from prejudice in that discrimination refers to negative treatment of people because of their membership in a particular group. Prejudice indicates attitudes, while discrimination depicts behavior, hence prejudiced attitudes do not always translate into discriminatory behavior. This paper will discuss whether weight discrimination is an issue in the workplace, how significant of an issue it is, and if this discrimination is justified in any way. Some of the topics that will be covered are the costs of obesity in the workplace, the legality of weight discrimination in comparison to the ethics surrounding it and the question of obesity being considered a disability. In addition, this paper will compare weight discrimination against race and gender discrimination. Methodology will include statistics from the American federal government and from studies published in the Journal of Obesity in the form of self-reports, surveys, tables and charts.

## **Magnitude of Weight Discrimination**

A recent study published in the International Journal of Obesity by researchers Brien, Latner, Ebnetter & Hunter aimed to discover the relationship between explicit measures of anti-fat prejudice and the behavioral manifestation of them (2012). In this study, researchers gave participants a set of resumes of females applying for a managerial position, with each resume containing either a photo of a female before weight-loss surgery or a photo of the same female after weight-loss surgery. The participants were then told to assess the obese and non-obese females

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across a number of selection criteria. The researchers discovered that obesity discrimination was displayed across all selection criteria such as starting salary, leadership potential, and likelihood of being selected for the job. In other words, these selection criteria were negatively affected for women who were considered obese. The obese women were more likely to be discriminated against when looking for jobs and were offered lower starting salaries than when they were not overweight. As one of the first studies to highlight obesity discrimination, Brien (2012) concludes that the "findings show that there is a clear need to address obesity discrimination, particularly against females who tend to bear the brunt of anti-fat prejudice. Prejudice reduction interventions and policies need to be developed". Even more dramatic evidence regarding weight bias that working women face is apparent in a Michigan State University study led in 2007 by researchers Mark Roehling, Patricia Roehling and Shaun Pichler. The results in the study indicated that women are 16 times more likely than men to report weight discrimination in the work place. The study categorized people into four categories: normal weight (BMI – 19 to 24. 9), overweight (BMI – 25 to 29. 9), obese (BMI – 30 to 34. 9), and very obese (BMI – 35+). They discovered that overweight respondents were 12 times more likely than normal weight respondents to report weight-related employment discrimination, while obese individuals were 37 times more likely. Even more surprisingly is that the severely obese were 100 times more likely to face weight discrimination. Yet, weight discrimination in the workplace is often largely ignored. In spite of this, weight discrimination has recently been the subject of much media coverage after a hospital in Texas implemented a hiring policy barring

potential employees who were obese (Ravitsky, 2012). Per the hiring policy, the hospital only considers potential employees with a body mass of less than 35. According to the policy, an employee's physique must fit with an image of a health care professional, including an appearance that does not distract hospital patients (Ravitsky, 2012). Although most forms of discrimination are banned, weight discrimination is not. In fact, Michigan is the only state that prohibits discrimination based on weight. But everywhere else, employers are free to deny an overweight employee a job if they have a legitimate business reason. In terms of legislation, obesity can fall under the protection of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) which is enforced by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC), covering only morbid obesity (100% over ideal weight) and obesity caused by a physiological disorder. Some people applying to the Texas hospital may have a BMI higher than what the hospital requires but not so high so as to constitute morbid obesity. Therefore, the individuals are not covered by EEOC's laws prohibiting discrimination. Furthermore, it is clear that federal and state fair employment laws in US indicating "equal employment opportunity" do not fully embrace this principle. The laws identify a limited set of characteristics that offer special protection to those who are considered vulnerable ("protected characteristics" such as sex, race, age, etc.), leaving employers with room to discriminate against personal characteristics which are unrelated to job performance (Roehling, 2002). As a result, employers are legally free to discriminate against job applicants and employees based on their weight, excluding individuals who qualify as "disabled", provided that the employer applies the weight criterion equally

across everyone. In conclusion, both the studies and the newspaper article reveal that obese people do in fact suffer from weight discrimination throughout the employment process which means that policies against weight discrimination need to be implemented.

## **Weight Discrimination versus Other Discriminations**

It is apparent that weight discrimination is indeed an issue and a very prevalent one in American society. However, it has not yet been established how significant of an issue it is, especially compared to other types of discriminations such as racism and sexism. A study published in the International Journal of Obesity examined the experiences of weight/height discrimination in a representative sample of US adults and compared it with discrimination experiences based on race and gender (Puhl, Andreyeva, & Brownell, 2008). The study concluded that among US adults, weight/height discrimination is the third most prevalent among women (after gender and age discrimination) and the fourth most prevalent form of discrimination among all adults (after gender, age, and race discrimination). This means that weight/height discrimination is comparable to reported rates of racial discrimination, particularly among women. In some cases, weight/height discrimination is even more prevalent than discrimination due to gender and race. If this form of bias continues without any interventions, weight discrimination will become socially acceptable. It is clear that organized efforts to reduce weight bias are necessary. A limit to this study is that weight and height are categorized as one. However, evidence suggests that this category primarily reflects weight discrimination. Similarly, a study by L. R. Vartanian examined the role of disgust in evaluations of obese people

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compared to other social groups such as smokers, drug addicts, women, and homosexuals (2010). Disgust is an attitude that a person may have towards an individual or group of individuals. If that person acts upon this attitude, it will lead to discrimination. Thus, discrimination can be a consequence of disgust. In this study, participants were asked to rate how much they believed that obesity is a matter of personal control, indicate their level of disgust towards obese people, and report their attitudes towards obese people. The study concluded that disgust was the most chosen negative attitude towards obese people. Furthermore, obese people were rated the least favorable and most disgusting from almost all other social groups. These results show that disgust is a very significant aspect of weight bias and that there may be more negativity towards obese people than towards women, homosexuals, smokers, and drug addicts. In fact, overweight job applications are judged even more severely than ex-felons or applicants with a history of mental illness (Kennedy and Homant, 1984). As observed, there is ample evidence that weight discrimination may be as or is even more prevalent than discrimination against other social groups.

## **Justifying Weight Discrimination**

It is obvious that discrimination against obese people is a widespread problem in the workplace. It is also clear that it can be compared to discrimination against race, sexual orientation and gender. The questions that should now be raised are: do people have justifiable reasons to discriminate against obese people in the employment process? Do obese pose a threat to employment, are they costing employees more money, and are they reducing a business's productivity? Are there aspects of weight

discrimination that make it appropriate than discrimination based on other characteristics, such as race and gender? In 2010, a study by Finkelstein, DiBonaventura, Burgess and Hale was conducted to answer these questions. The objective of the study was to calculate medical expenditures and the value of lost productivity (including absenteeism and presenteeism) due to overweight and obese US employees. The results of the study indicated that per capita medical expenditures and the value of lost productivity attributable to obesity range from \$1143 to \$6664 a year. The results showed that the cost of obesity among U. S. full time employees is around \$73. 1 billion. This is equivalent to the cost of hiring an additional 1. 8 million workers per year at \$42, 000 each. These figures show that employees are losing a staggering amount of money in the forms of higher premiums, copayments and deductibles for medical services because of overweight employees. Also, businesses are losing productivity by spending money on overweight employees which they could use instead to hire more workers, train employees and expand their business. The study claims that individuals with a BMI above 35 represent 37% of the population but are responsible for 61% of the excess costs. It is clear that reducing the prevalence of obesity could result in significant savings to employers. Similarly, another study was done to determine if there is a correlation between BMI, healthcare costs, and absenteeism. After the researchers, Burton, Chen, Schultz and Edington, examined 3066 First Chicago NBD employees, it was concluded that overweight people are more likely to have additional health risks, short-term disabilities, illness absences, and higher healthcare costs than people with a normal BMI (1998). Both studies show that overweight people are costing



employers more money. On the other hand, researcher Mark Roehling believes that three conditions must be met in order for an employer to attribute costs to overweight employees (2002). Firstly, the employer must be able to demonstrate the costs. This means he or she should not rely on assumptions based on overweight employees. Instead, he/she should be able to show credible evidence that can be appropriately generalized to the employee in question. As seen in the previous study, which claims that obesity costs are \$6000 for very obese women, should not be viewed as evidence for costs associated with mild or moderate obesity. Also, the employer must take into consideration that these costs may merely be associated with obesity due to an underlying condition that leads to weight gain (e. g. diabetes) and not directly related to obesity itself. It is wrong to assume that every overweight person that is hired will produce such costs if there is no evidence that the individual has a health condition such as heart disease, diabetes and the like. Secondly, employers must compare the costs of hiring an overweight employee against the benefits which they provide for the company. The benefits that a qualified employee provides may outweigh the costs of the employee being overweight. Lastly, rejecting to hire an overweight employee is acceptable only if the costs produced are an unreasonable burden on the employer. An example would be of a small employer facing financial troubles and possessing very few resources. Such an employer would be justified to take into account the fact that hiring an overweight employee may require new office furniture and other accommodations, which will be a hardship to the employer. Costs are one of the main reasons that employers justify discrimination against overweight

people. Another reason is the belief that overweight people have lower performance levels. Overweight people receive negative treatment because of the belief that they possess a number of undesirable characteristics such as laziness, inability to get along with customers and possessing less intelligence. These stereotypes lead many employers to believe that overweight applicants are poor performers on the job. However, besides a few circumstances where weight may play a factor to the performance of a specific job, there is no empirical evidence that overweight employees perform poorly, in general (Roehling, 2002). Lastly, many believe discrimination based on weight is justified because, unlike being a woman or of color, being overweight is considered somebody's own fault. People believe that overweight people can lose weight as long as find the will power to do so. However, for many individuals, scientific evidence suggests that body weight is not just due to the amount of food one consumes, but is attributable to many psychological, environmental, physiological and genetic factors (Roehling, 2008). It is unethical to blame and discriminate a person for being overweight when it could be due to genetics or hormonal imbalance.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, it is found that weight discrimination is apparent in the North American society. There are a few justifications for weight discrimination but for the most part, weight discrimination is unethical and unfair as it is similar to discrimination based on one's gender or race. Weight discrimination takes many forms, such as failure to hire an otherwise qualified worker, payment of lower wages relative to normal weight counterparts, and failure to

promote an overweight employee (Kristen, 2002). The evidence further suggests that women are most affected by weight discrimination. There are a few things employers can do to reduce weight discrimination in the workplace. One of those, as previously mentioned, is not to submit to and reinforce stereotypes regarding overweight people, such as they are lazy and incompetent. Another thing employers can do is introduce benefits and programs that are aimed at providing healthy lifestyles. They can offer incentives that encourage healthy behavior such as lower premiums, healthy cafeteria food and discounted gym memberships for their employees. Also, employers can provide a healthy environment in the workplace by creating walking paths, encouraging stairwells, or providing healthy catering services and vending machines (Heinen & Darling, 2009). Lastly, but most importantly, federal and state fair laws should be altered to include antidiscrimination laws based on weight. After surveying 1001 adults in order to examine public support for legislative measures prohibiting weight discrimination, Paul and Heuer (2011) discovered that 65% of men and 81% of women are supportive of laws that prohibit weight discrimination in the workplace, especially laws that would prohibit employers from refusing to hire, terminating, or denying somebody a promotion based on their body weight. In conclusion, it is clear that discrimination of a person's body weight impacts the American population. Evidently, this issue needs to be addressed and policy makers need to develop antidiscrimination laws.