

Multiple Threat: Overweight/Obese Women in the Workplace

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Within the organizational stereotype threat literature, the majority of studies have focused on gender, race, age, and sexuality. One neglected area of increasing concern is that of overweight/obese individuals in the workplace. Recent statistics indicate that obesity is a serious epidemic in the United States with nearly 70% of the U.S. population diagnosable as overweight/obese (Flegal, Carroll, Ogden, & Curtin, 2010). In conjunction with this trend, the percentage of obese or overweight workers represented in the workplace is also increasing. Social psychological research on obesity stigmatization has shown that negative sentiment toward overweight/obese individuals is highly prevalent in society (Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Seacat, Dougal, & Roy, 2014) and that obesity-related prejudice remains one of the last acceptable forms of prejudice (e.g., Brochu & Esses, 2011; Puhl & Brownell, 2001).

Obesity-related stigma is based upon numerous and potent social stereotypes of overweight people including laziness, unreliability, untrustworthiness, low motivation, low intelligence, and low dedication (Puhl & Brownell, 2006; Seacat & Mickelson, 2009). Particularly relevant is that all of these stereotypes are potentially applicable to individuals, evaluations, and consequences within the workplace, yet these stereotypes have received very little attention in the organizational literature. Although we agree with the arguments

put forth by Kalokerinos, von Hippel, and Zacher (2014) that continued research on the topic of stereotype threat in the workplace is important to the field of industrial–organizational (I–O) psychology, we feel the authors failed to discuss a critical area of investigation in their focal paper, namely the role of stereotypes and stereotype threat in understanding the evaluation and experience of one of the most prominent marginalized groups in society. This gap most certainly needs to be addressed in the organizational literature. Further, Kalokerinos and colleagues briefly mentioned the work of Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady (1999) and the role of multiple identities in the stereotype threat process as a potential factor in minimizing threat effects among Asian-American women. We applaud the authors for acknowledging this important contribution, but it is also important to note that research on multiple identity threat research remains virtually untouched—especially in the organizational literature. As such, we wish to further conceptualize and discuss the role that multiple identities may play in the stigmatization and stereotype threat process within the workplace. Specifically, we will present the example of overweight/obese women to highlight the potential for layered and synergistic threat effects, whereby both being overweight and female is affiliated with negative workplace-relevant stereotypes. We advance this conceptualization as “multiple threat” within the workplace, to draw attention to the fact that stigma and stereotype threat may be connected to more than just two identities.

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Viewing stigma and stereotype threat as layered effects connected to multiple identities may also help to address one of the major gaps in the stereotype threat literature identified by Kalokerinos and colleagues, namely by helping to identify pathways through which stereotype threat might come to produce chronic effects in individuals' lives. In the following paragraphs we briefly highlight the literatures on obesity and gender in the workplace and then move to connect these literatures in the framework of multiple threat in the workplace. We conclude this commentary with a brief overview and implications for future theoretical and applied work.

Obesity in the Workplace

Recent research has shown that overweight/obese individuals face frequent and often severe negative judgments and discrimination in the workplace (e.g., Roehling, Roehling, & Pichler, 2007). These encounters are driven by negative stereotypes about obesity and, as was previously mentioned, the vast majority of negative stereotypes characterizing the overweight/obese may be highly relevant to workplace performance and evaluation (laziness, untrustworthiness, low reliability, etc.; Puhl & Brownell, 2006). Research has already demonstrated that these negative stereotypes may have a deleterious impact on overweight/obese individuals outside of the workplace in life domains such as exercise motivation, diet motivation, and caloric consumption (Major, Hunger, Bunyan, & Miller, 2014; Seacat & Mickelson, 2009; Vartanian & Shaprow, 2008). Virtually unstudied, however, is the role that these negative stereotypes might play in the workplace in terms of employee performance and/or evaluation.

Researchers have demonstrated a strong pattern of discrimination against overweight and obese job applicants as well as existing employees within organizations (Roehling, 2002). This research has documented that weight-based discrimination is pervasive and that it occurs at virtually every level of

organizations, from selection to promotion and termination (Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Roehling, 1999). It has also shown that overweight employees have more limited promotional opportunities within organizations, are often placed in positions where they will not work with others, and are often harassed at work (Roehling, 1999) compared to their average weight counterparts. For example, Roehling, Roehling, and Pichler (2007) found that overweight participants were 12 times more likely to report weight-based employment discrimination than average weight participants, while obese participants were 37 times more likely, and severely obese participants were over 100 times more likely.

The effects of weight discrimination appear to be even stronger than those found for gender or race discrimination (e.g., Haskins & Ranford, 1999). In fact, Kennedy and Homant (1984) found evidence that obese applicants were judged more harshly than applicants with a criminal record or history of mental illness. These findings are significant given the lack of legal protection for overweight and obese individuals in the organizational arena. A recent meta-analysis of weight-based discrimination in the workplace confirmed results of previous studies, finding a significant overall effect size for weight-based bias across evaluative workplace outcomes (Rudolph, Wells, Weller, & Baltes, 2009).

What remains to be determined is the effect that weight stigmatization and weight-related stereotype threat may play in the performance of overweight/obese employees. The rich stereotype threat literature highlighted by Kalokerinos and colleagues has shown that stereotype threat can contribute to performance decline among women, racial minorities, older workers, and so on. Further, although researchers have examined health-related performance outcomes among the overweight/obese in life domains outside of the workplace, very little is known about the effects that stigmatization and stereotype threat may have within the workplace. Even less is known about the potential for layered

and even synergistic threat effects when stereotyped identities such as weight status are combined with other identities, such as female gender, that are also negatively stereotyped in the workplace.

Women in the Workplace

Within the workplace women face numerous and potentially negative evaluative judgments surrounding performance, organizational commitment, and productive capacity. Stereotypes about women can significantly hinder their ability to get ahead in the workplace, particularly in male-dominated fields. This gender-based stigmatization can manifest itself in similar ways to weight-related discrimination, from hiring preferences, to decreased promotional opportunities and earning potential. In addition, similar to workers experiencing other forms of stereotype threat, women may have negative job attitudes and higher turnover intentions due to longer term, more chronic stereotype threat effects (von Hippel, Issa, Ma, & Stokes, 2011).

Kalokerinos and colleagues identified a number of negative outcomes that might result from gender-based stereotype threat in the workplace. For example, stereotype threat may cause women to adjust their leadership, negotiation, or communication style (e.g., acting in a more “masculine” way to compensate for negative stereotypes). This strategy often backfires, creating a double-bind situation for women (i.e., a tradeoff between perceived competence and likeability). Stereotype threat may also lead to lower performance for women in the workplace, lower career satisfaction and aspirations, and a resulting reduction in motivation and effort. Finally, organizational initiatives aimed at assisting women in the workplace might actually stigmatize women further by drawing attention to negative stereotypes (e.g., family friendly benefits). Given the thrust of our commentary, we argue that performance-related stereotype threat tied to female gender may be exacerbated when additional negatively stereotyped identities are considered.

The remainder of this piece will focus on the concept of multiple threat (i.e., weight and gender) and the potential for this phenomenon to severely isolate and negatively impact employees’ performance and evaluation.

The Perspective of Multiple Threat

Numerous researchers have demonstrated singular identity-based stereotype threat effects in a variety of life domains from math performance to child care. Kalokerinos and colleagues provided a nice overview of this literature in their consideration of its applicability to the workplace but did not elaborate on the potential implications of multiple identities and stereotype threat within this same domain. The multiple identity threat framework focuses on the interactive and synergistic relationships between any number of identities that individuals may have and that are made relevant in a particular context. The underlying premise of this emerging work is based upon the conceptualization that individuals possess multiple identity domains (e.g., woman, employee, spouse, overweight/obese individual) and that these individuals are then subject to positive or negative stereotypes affiliated with these identities in a particular domain (Rydell, McConnell, & Beilock, 2009). The preponderance of research on multiple identity and stereotype threat has sought to determine whether priming multiple identities can aid in mitigating stereotype threat effects. For example, Rydell and colleagues (2009) sought to test the impact of priming multiple identities to mitigate stereotype threat effects by concurrently priming “female” and “college student” identities and testing the impact that priming these identities had on subsequent math performance. In addition to mitigating stereotype threat effects, it is equally plausible that some individuals will incur even greater performance decrement such as a cumulative negative effect when more than one of their identities is negatively stereotyped within a particular domain. To the best of

our knowledge, no studies have examined this phenomenon in the organizational literature.

Though not the only possible example, we offer the case of overweight/obese women in the workplace as an example for conceptualizing a multithreat framework. Research on weight-based stigma has shown that women are particularly susceptible to weight stigma (e.g., Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012) and that women experience weight-based discrimination at significantly higher rates than men, in part due to the disproportionate social pressure surrounding body image that is placed on women. Considering that many of the negative workplace-related stereotypes affiliated with weight status also share common overlap with those stereotypes affiliated with being a woman in workplace, it would seem plausible that contexts in which both of these identities are primed and are relevant could produce multiplicative stereotype threat effects above and beyond threat produced by a singular identity threat framework. In addition, conceptualizing organizational stereotype threat as a multiple identity threat framework allows for consideration of potential identity-based solutions for addressing stereotype threat effects. As Rydell and colleagues (2009) and others have demonstrated, priming positively stereotyped identities may actually serve to counter the deleterious effects of stereotype threat. This may also be true in the workplace; however, arriving at such conclusions is not possible without consideration of a multithreat framework.

We agree with Kalokerinos and colleagues that future organizational psychological research on stereotype threat should continue, and we also suggest that the focus of this research be, at least in-part, on testing the viability of a multiple identity threat framework. Such research will allow for employees' multiple identities relevant to the workplace to be tested but also for any interaction effects between these identities to be modeled. Interesting questions such as the interplay of potentially controllable

(weight status) and uncontrollable (gender) identities remain to be addressed.

Assessing Multiple Threat and Its Consequences in the Workplace: Future Directions and Practical Implications

Discrimination against overweight/obese workers, particularly women, is a significant problem in the United States and a growing concern internationally. Research overwhelmingly shows that overweight employees are perceived by coworkers as being lazy, lacking self-control, and being less competent than average weight workers (Bellizzi & Norvell, 1991; Larwood, 1995). Reportedly, 60% of overweight or obese women and 40% of men have experienced some form of employment discrimination (Griffin, 2007). In Stunkard and Wadden's (1985) survey on obesity and unemployment in women, 16% of employers reported that there were no conditions under which they would hire obese women. Overall, overweight/obese women have been shown to experience greater levels of discrimination than overweight/obese men (Dugoni, Pingitore, Tindale, & Spring, 1994). For example, Roehling, Roehling, and Pichler (2007) found that women were over 16 times more likely than men to identify weight-based discrimination in the workplace. In addition, Bellizzi, Klassen, and Belonax (1989) demonstrated that women who are overweight are given less desirable job assignments as compared with overweight men. Wage differentials are another area where weight discrimination is evident. A number of research studies have shown that even mildly obese women earn significantly less than thin women, yet this wage discrepancy does not appear for mildly obese men (e.g., Maranto & Stenoien, 2000; Roehling, 1999). Finally, a Harvard Public Health study that longitudinally investigated the social and economic consequences of obesity found that overweight women earn an average of \$6,710 less in household income compared with thin women and have a 10% higher poverty

rate (Gortmaker, Must, Perrin, Sobol, & Dietz, 1993); however, the same study found no relationship between weight and income or poverty for men.

In summary, overweight and obese women appear to be evaluated more harshly than their male counterparts in an organizational domain. They also appear to experience more weight-related discrimination (Puhl & Brownell, 2001). This is important because it indicates that multiple stigmatized social identities may result in compounding effects. As previously discussed, not enough is known about how these multiple identities may interact. They may be independent, multiplicative, or might even serve to negate one another. Further, we argue that it is possible for more than two identities to interact (e.g., overweight/obese women of color), creating three-way interactions or more. While we concur with Kalokerinos and colleagues on the need for more field studies in the area of stereotype threat, we feel that further lab-based research is necessary to tease apart the complex relationships and synergistic effects of the multiple identity threat framework. In addition, a more in-depth examination of how a multithreat perspective functions with respect to an array of evaluative outcomes (e.g., hiring and promotion, performance, and job attitudes) in organizations is needed. Finally, applications of how this multithreat framework could be used to reduce threat in the workplace should be explored.

There are a number of practical implications of this work. To the extent that discrimination against overweight/obese individuals is not job-related, organizations are not taking full advantage of their potential talent. I–O psychologists might address this problem from a training standpoint, considering how attitude change about stigmatized groups might best occur. In conjunction with this, practitioners may wish to consider how to increase social support and coping mechanisms for stigmatized groups, as suggested by Kalokerinos and colleagues. As previously discussed, weight discrimination comes at a high

cost for overweight/obese individuals, both psychologically and monetarily. Thus, employers need to be aware of the impact these judgments can have on current and prospective employees. Although we agree that research on stereotype threat within the workplace is an important and worthwhile endeavor, we also feel that inquiry in this area should expand to examine the interactions between various social identities in an effort to understand multithreat situations in organizations. By measuring stereotype threat using a more sophisticated framework, we hope that we may gain a better understanding of how stereotype threat may come to affect important workplace outcomes.

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