


COMMENTARY

Importance of considering intersectionality when studying weight at work

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We agree with Lemmon et al. (2024) that the study of weight at work warrants more research attention. Such research is especially important considering that the *majority* of Americans are considered overweight and thus may be subjected to mistreatment at work. Approximately 30% of Americans today are considered overweight, and an *additional* 42% of Americans today are considered obese (Hales et al., 2020). Furthermore, the prevalence of being overweight or obese varies by gender and race. For example, in the United States, about 50% of non-Hispanic Black adults are considered obese, whereas only 16% of Asian adults are considered obese. Rates of obesity among adults in the U.S. are similar for men (43%) and women (42%); however, differences emerge when looking at the combination of race and gender (e.g., 57% of Black women are considered obese compared to 41% of Black men; NIDDK, 2021). Because of differences in weight when considering multiple background characteristics simultaneously, it is not only important (as Lemmon and colleagues point out) but necessary to take an intersectional approach when studying the interpersonal effects of weight at work. Failing to do so may lead us to form broad conclusions that do not generalize to specific segments of the working population (e.g., Black women, White women) and may lead to underestimating the negative effects of weight on work-related outcomes for certain segments of the working population while potentially overestimating its effects for others.

This commentary extends Lemmon and colleagues' discussion of intersectionality by delineating how the combination of weight with other identities (facilitating Lemmon et al.'s first best practice termed "Background Work") may affect individuals' experiences at work with a specific focus on gender and race. Although we focus on these two identities, we recognize that weight discrimination may also intersect with other aspects of a person (e.g., sexual orientation, age, socioeconomic status, etc.). Additionally, we point researchers to various theoretical lenses that may be useful in guiding future research on weight, race, gender, and workplace experiences. We hope to inspire researchers to consider intersectionality when designing research on weight at work so that our field can gain a deeper understanding of how weight affects interpersonal treatment for *all people*, especially in light of the fact that the non-White and non-male segment of the U.S. labor force consists of over 18 million employees and is projected to continue to grow in the next decade (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2022).

In a work context, being overweight is associated with both formal discrimination (e.g., negatively impacting hiring decisions; Rudolph et al., 2009) and more subtle forms of discrimination (e.g., interpersonal mistreatment; King et al., 2006). Facing weight-based discrimination is unique from other forms of discrimination because anyone (i.e., people of all genders, races, religions, etc.) may be subjected to discrimination on the basis of their weight. However, women may face stronger stigma surrounding their weight, as American society has historically emphasized a "thin" ideal body shape that is more strongly applied to women than men (e.g., Chrisler, 2012). Additionally,

different race-based standards, norms, and stereotypes exist surrounding weight. Therefore, overweight and obese people of different races and ethnicities may face different weight-based reactions and treatment resulting from others' stereotypes and expectations.

It is important to clarify that we do not mean to suggest that certain people (e.g., White men) will not face discrimination as a result of their weight—we know this form of discrimination can affect everyone. Rather, we feel it is important to understand how and why weight discrimination may be affecting certain groups of people disproportionately. Ultimately, this is important from both a legal perspective (e.g., although weight-based discrimination is not illegal under federal law unless associated with a disability under the Americans with Disabilities Act, there may be legal ramifications if it impacts different genders or races differently¹) as well as a diversity and inclusion perspective (e.g., raising awareness of the unique biases others face is crucial so that we can work toward reducing and ultimately eliminating them).

Weight and gender

As noted previously, weight-based discrimination may be especially pronounced for women. In fact, for men, being larger (i.e., more muscular) than average is often seen as ideal, whereas for women, being thinner than average is seen as ideal (Chrisler, 2012). In line with these societal norms, research finds that experiences of weight-based discrimination are often stronger for women compared to men. For example, a meta-analysis of 59 correlational samples revealed that gender moderated the relationships between weight and workplace outcomes such that women experienced greater weight-based discrimination at work than men (Vanhove & Gordon, 2014). Furthermore, women report *perceiving* 16 times the amount of weight discrimination in the workplace compared to men (Roehling et al., 2007). Such discrepant perceptions may be important in considering how people affectively and behaviorally respond to weight discrimination. In addition to gender, a person's race may influence the amount of weight-based discrimination with which he or she is faced.

Weight and race

One reason why weight may be perceived differently depending on the target individual's race is that people have different levels of exposure to overweight and obese individuals of different racial backgrounds. As of 2018, the rate of obesity was highest among Black adults (49.6%), followed by White adults (42.2%), with rates among Asian adults being substantially lower (17.4%; Hales et al., 2020). For women in particular, Black women have the highest obesity rate (56.9%) followed by White women (39.8%) and Asian women (17.2%; Hales et al., 2020). One way in which such different rates may translate into differential treatment from others may be explained by Zajonc's (1968) "mere exposure effect," which refers to the observation that "repeated, unreinforced exposure is sufficient to enhance attitudes toward a stimulus" (Bornstein and D'Agostino, 1992, p. 545). This suggests that the mere increased exposure to heavier Black women may be enough to dampen negative attitudes toward them, whereas less exposure to heavier Asian women may create more negative attitudes toward them.² Furthermore, there is evidence of different cultural weight ideals based on race, with Black people tending to be more accepting of heavier weights

¹Importantly, although weight discrimination is not illegal under federal law, some states and jurisdictions do indeed offer legal protection against discrimination for overweight workers (e.g., Michigan, San Francisco, Washington DC, and recently New York City).

²Here we do not intend to suggest that Black women do not face weight-based discrimination. Rather, we speculate on the basis of the mere exposure effect that the penalty they receive for being overweight may be less extreme than that of Asian women. Although not the focus of the present commentary, it is important to note that Black women (irrespective of their weight) do face unique stereotypes and discrimination in the workplace.

compared to White people (e.g., Hebl & Heatherton, 1998). Additionally, Black people are often stereotyped as big (e.g., Wilson *et al.*, 2017) and overweight (e.g., Ghavami & Peplau, 2013) by others.

Importantly, limited research on how race and gender may jointly impact weight discrimination or stigmatization has included Asian people. This is concerning because Asian women may face an even stronger cultural pressure to be thin, as many modern Asian cultures emphasize an extremely thin ideal (e.g., Jackson *et al.*, 2021). Furthermore, Asian women are often stereotyped by others as being expected to be petite or small (e.g., Mukkamala & Suyemoto, 2018). This suggests that Asian American women may face particularly strong societal pressure to conform to stereotypes and expectations regarding a small body size and may stand out more when not conforming to such standards. Additionally, a series of studies by Handron *et al.* (2017) showed that weight influenced perceptions of the “foreigner” stereotype applied to Asian Americans (Devos & Banaji, 2005), such that overweight Asian Americans were actually perceived as more American than their nonoverweight counterparts, suggesting that one form of stigma (that of being overweight) may actually be functional in overcoming another form of stigma (that of appearing foreign) for this group.

Despite the aforementioned reasons to believe weight may impact people with different backgrounds in unique ways, limited research on weight in the workplace has considered how intersectionality (e.g., race and gender) impacts interpersonal experiences related to weight at work (e.g., weight-based mistreatment). We next turn to a discussion on various theoretical frameworks that offer potential starting points for researchers to consider when designing research on weight at work from an intersectional perspective. In particular, we will discuss the model of stereotyping through intersectional and associated categories (MOSAIC; Hall *et al.*, 2019), the stereotype content model (SCM; Fiske *et al.*, 2002), and the parallel constraint satisfaction theory (PCST; Kunda & Thagard, 1996). We also mention the justification-suppression model (JSM; Crandall & Eshleman, 2003), which Lemmon *et al.* (2024) discuss, expanding on how such a theory may be applied to intersectional populations. It is important to note that we offer a selective sampling of theories, and there are certainly other theories that may inform the intersection of gender, race, and weight at work. Our goal in this discussion is to demonstrate the potential for selected frameworks to address important intersectional questions about weight at work and spark readers’ interests in pursuing such research.

Theoretical perspectives to provide an intersectional frame to weight at work

The model of stereotyping through associated and intersectional categories (MOSAIC; Hall *et al.*, 2019) was developed in order to better understand how evaluators’ awareness of a person’s multiple demographic categories simultaneously can impact interpersonal evaluations. Thus, it is well suited to examine how multiple categories such as weight, gender, and race may simultaneously influence the way one is treated in the workplace. In essence, MOSAIC proposes that stereotypes applied to a person are formed via combination of the stereotypes of the person’s various demographic categories, which results in an *integrated* stereotype that can influence expectations of the employee, as well as the strength of prescriptive (beliefs regarding what one ought to do) or proscriptive stereotypes (beliefs regarding what one ought *not* to do) that are applied to the individual being evaluated. Such expectations and stereotypes provide the lens through which one is evaluated and can result in either more favorable or unfavorable evaluations.

Regarding weight, a focus on *proscriptive* stereotypes is warranted given that the proscription against being overweight for women, in particular, is well documented. For women of different races, theorizing using MOSAIC suggests that feminine gender norms and stereotypes may be amplified for Asian women relative to White women, and diluted for Black women relative to White women, due to established implicit associations between genders and

racism (e.g., Goff et al., 2008; Johnson et al., 2012). Such heightened proscriptive stereotypes (i.e., proscribing being overweight) applied to Asian women in turn may lead to particularly harsh evaluations due to perceivers' lower "threshold" for exhibiting the proscribed behavior. On the other hand, diluted feminine stereotypes applied to Black women may in turn lead to less harsh reactions due to perceivers' higher threshold for exhibiting the proscribed behavior. Therefore, a research question to explore in the context of MOSAIC is: How do stereotypes of people with multiple identities combine to influence the proscription against being overweight, and in turn, affect evaluations of overweight people in the workplace?

An alternative approach using the MOSAIC as a framework considers one's weight status as an identity whose stereotypes interact with one's other demographic category stereotypes. For example, using the MOSAIC model, Sim et al. (2022) found that contradicting stereotypes of Black men as threatening and obese people as being incapable of threat, led to diluted threat stereotypes being applied to Black obese men. This approach may also help to explain the previously mentioned findings by Handron et al. (2017)—contradicting stereotypes associating Asian people with being foreign, and associating obesity with being American, may drive the diluted foreigner stereotypes applied to obese Asian Americans. Therefore, another research question to be explored with MOSAIC is: How do stereotypes associated with being overweight combine with stereotypes surrounding gender and race to impact how overweight people of different genders and races are perceived and subsequently treated at work?

Another theory that focuses on the stereotypes applied to different groups that may prove a fruitful starting ground for intersectional weight research is the stereotype content model (SCM; Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2002). In the SCM, perceptions of different groups are associated with two core dimensions of warmth and competence, which in turn generate different emotional reactions (i.e., admiration, contempt, envy, and pity). These emotional reactions subsequently influence different types of interpersonally directed behaviors (e.g., active vs. passive, facilitative vs. harmful). Although research using the SCM has uncovered where certain groups fall on the dimensions of warmth and competence (e.g., Black people tend to be perceived as less competent and less warm; Sanders & Sullivan, 2010; Asian people tend to be seen as competent but cold; Berdahl & Min, 2012), future research could incorporate weight into such investigations. In particular, research using the SCM could address the question: Where do stereotypes of people of different genders, races, and weights fall along the continuums of warmth and competence, and how does this impact how they are treated by others at work?

Next, parallel constraint satisfaction theory (PCST; Kunda & Thagard, 1996) describes how perceivers consider both common stereotypes as well as individuating information when forming impressions of others. Additionally, when forming impressions, one makes internal or external attributions for the target's behavior. Characteristics aligning with stereotypes of a group are likely to prompt *internal* attributions because stereotypes result from dispositional characteristics applied to particular groups as a whole (e.g., Motro et al., 2022). Therefore, considering stereotypes of Black women being large (e.g., Ghavami & Peplau, 2013), this suggests observers may be more likely to attribute a Black overweight woman's weight to internal causes that are within one's control (i.e., eating in excess) as opposed to external, environmental factors (i.e., access to affordable, healthy foods). Research using the PCST could attempt to answer the question: How do stereotypes of different genders and races combine to impact how attributions (internal versus external) are made regarding one's weight?

Finally, Lemmon and colleagues highlight the justification-suppression model of prejudice (JSM; Crandall and Eshleman, 2003) in their focal article; therefore, we will not review the major tenets of the theory but rather pose the question: How might the JSM operate differently for employees with intersectional identities? As an example, those who have internal racist beliefs might "suppress" their prejudices against people of different races (due to strong norms against racism), but perhaps when those people are *overweight*, their prejudices are "released" due to feeling justified in their prejudice in light of beliefs that people are in control of their weight.

Table 1. Summary of Recommended Theoretical Frameworks for Assessing Intersectionality

Framework	Description	Example research question	Example citations
MOSAIC (Hall et al., 2019)	Describes how evaluators' awareness of an individual's membership in multiple categories can simultaneously impact interpersonal evaluations	How do stereotypes of people with multiple identities combine to influence the proscription against being overweight and, in turn, affect evaluations of overweight people in the workplace? How do stereotypes associated with being overweight combine with stereotypes surrounding gender and race to impact how overweight people of different genders and races are perceived and subsequently treated at work?	Sim et al. (2022)
SCM (Cuddy et al., 2008; Fiske et al., 2002)	Describes how group membership perceptions vary in warmth and competence, and lead to differential emotional reactions, ultimately leading to positive or negative interpersonal behaviors	Where do stereotypes of people of different genders, races, and weights fall along the continuums of warmth and competence, and how does this impact how they are treated by others at work?	*Berdahl & Min (2012); *Strinić et al., (2021); *Smith et al., (2023)
PCST (Kunda & Thagard, 1996)	Describes how impression formation is a product of both common stereotypes and individuating information, and posits that group stereotypes typically prompt internal (vs. external) attributions to behavior	How do stereotypes of different genders and race combine to impact how attributions (internal versus external) are made regarding one's weight?	*Motro et al., (2022); *Evans et al., (2019)
JSM (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003)	Describes how internal biases can be "loosened," enabling individuals to act on them and seek out justification for prejudicial actions	How might the JSM operate differently for employees with intersectional identities?	*King et al., (2006); *Miller et al., (2009)

Note. MOSAIC = model of stereotyping through associated and intersectional categories. SCM = stereotype content model. PCST = parallel constraint satisfaction theory. JSM = justification-suppression model. *indicates studies that are workplace specific.

This would lead to a type of "double jeopardy" effect for racial minorities who are overweight (e.g., Berdahl & Moore, 2006).

Concluding thoughts

Our commentary expands on what Lemmon and colleagues' termed "Background Work" by explicitly discussing *why* an intersectional perspective is crucial when engaging in weight-related research in the workplace. In addition to providing the *why*, we also pointed to four theoretical frameworks catered toward intersectional perspectives as well as potential research questions (summarized in Table 1). Although we focused on race and gender, we acknowledge that the cited examples were limited in terms of the diversity of races and ethnicities (e.g., Latino, Middle Eastern, Pacific Islander), genders (e.g., nonbinary, transgender), and nationalities (i.e., most samples were American) discussed. We see this as a call for further research to expand the ideas presented in this commentary and consider more diverse groups of people. This point is particularly important in light of how psychology as a field has been criticized for using primarily "WEIRD" samples (western, educated, industrial, rich, and democratic; Muthukrishna et al., 2020). We encourage future research to take an intersectional approach when considering weight-based experiences, and we hope that the theoretical

frameworks and potential research questions provided in this commentary may inspire more inclusive research on weight in the workplace.

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