

Overweight men just as likely as overweight women to face discrimination

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Men who are overweight are just as likely as overweight women to experience interpersonal discrimination when applying for a job or shopping at retail stores, according to new research from Rice University and the University of North Carolina, Charlotte (UNCC).

"We were interested in looking at biases toward [men](#) who are heavy in employment settings," said Enrica Ruggs, assistant professor of psychology at UNCC. "A lot of the research that has looked at weight stigmatization or discrimination toward heavy people has tended to focus on women. It's perceived as more of a critical issue surrounding women, so we wanted to see if men experience some of the same types of detriments that women face."

Ruggs earned her doctorate at Rice under the guidance of Mikki Hebl, professor of psychology and management, and started the research at Rice. She and Hebl conducted two studies for the paper, "Weight Isn't Selling: The Insidious Effects of Weight Stigmatization in Retail Settings."

In the first study, non-overweight men went out into the field and applied for jobs at [retail stores](#) in the southern U.S. Then researchers had the same men apply for jobs at different stores wearing overweight prosthetics. The researchers also wanted to investigate if overweight men would be subjected to discrimination as customers, so the same men posed as customers and visited other retail stores. In both situations, the "actors" were given scripts to closely follow.

"We wanted to see if there were differences in treatment they received when they were not heavy versus heavy," Ruggs said.

Researchers found that when the men applied for jobs or were shopping as customers in their overweight prosthetics, they experienced more types of subtle discrimination, or what the researchers call "interpersonal discrimination."

"They didn't experience 'formal' discrimination or illegal types of discrimination," Ruggs said. "Before we had the actors apply for jobs, we confirmed the company was hiring. None of the overweight men were kept from applying for positions.

"But they did experience greater amounts of interpersonal discrimination or subtle negative behavior toward them," Ruggs said. "Employees they interacted with would try to end the interaction early, there was less affirmative behavior like less nodding or smiling; there was more avoidance types of behavior like frowning and trying to get out of the interaction," she said.

Researchers had the actors use a scale of 0-6, with zero meaning no discrimination and six meaning extremely discriminatory.

"We have these measures on a scale and the means or averages were different compared with when they were heavy and not heavy," Ruggs said. "The overweight men rated stores at 2.3 compared with 2.0 when they were their average weight. Observers who were pretending to shop inconspicuously watched the interactions and provided independent evaluations. Their results were consistent with the actors, as they witnessed greater interpersonal discrimination when the men were heavy compared with when they were not. It may not seem like a lot, but it's statistically significant. It suggests that men who are heavy are experiencing really negative behaviors more often than men who are not

heavy.

"Their chances of getting employment could be less, or if they're shopping as customers, it has implications for their decision-making processes in terms of purchasing things," she said.

What if the male retail employee is overweight?

The second study, which was conducted in a lab setting, found the same types of subtle discrimination was taking place, this time with the customer being the discriminator.

Researchers created marketing videos of five products that were generally neutral in terms of having wide appeal for a wide target market, items like luggage and coffee mugs. The actors, in this case both men and women, were again portrayed as overweight and not overweight in the different videos that test subjects were told would be used to launch a new product to be sold online.

The goal was to see how customers evaluated those employees and determine whether having heavy employees influenced customer evaluations of the products and the organization. Participants of the study were given a questionnaire to fill out after watching the marketing videos.

Researchers found that participants who viewed the heavy employees' videos reported more negative stereotypical thoughts about the employee. Specifically, they thought overweight representatives were less professional, their appearance was less neat and clean and they were more careless. These stereotypical thoughts in turn led to negative evaluations of the employee as well as the organization and the products.

"It's really unfortunate," Ruggs said. "There are these really subtle

influences that can have large negative effects on heavy men in the retail settings—that's whether they're applying for jobs, they're actual employees or as customers," she said.

"These findings are another reminder that there is still more work to be done in terms of creating equitable workplaces for all employees, potential employees and consumers. This is something organizations can take an active role in," Ruggs said.

"One of the problems is that people currently have very few positive images of heavy individuals excelling in work settings. Organizations can try to influence perceptions and attitudes about heavy employees by positively highlighting these employees and individuals more in overall marketing and branding efforts. It's time to change the narrative of what is considered normal, beautiful and professional. One step is to provide better role models through the messaging that is out there, be it through media advertisements as well as through equitable hiring of employees of all sizes who interact with customers," she said.

Ruggs added that customers or applicants who experience subtle biases might be less willing to spend money at the store or patronize the store again or recommend it to their friends. She said companies can do better job training on customer relations as part of the employees' new-hire process.

The study was published in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

More information: Enrica N. Ruggs et al. Weight isn't selling: The insidious effects of weight stigmatization in retail settings., *Journal of Applied Psychology* (2015). [DOI: 10.1037/apl0000017](https://doi.org/10.1037/apl0000017)

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