

**Title: Best Practices for Weight at Work Research**

Short title: Best Practices for Weight at Work Research

Grace Lemmon<sup>\*1</sup>, Jaclyn M. Jensen<sup>1</sup>, Goran Kuljanin<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Department of Management & Entrepreneurship, DePaul University

<sup>\*</sup>Grace Lemmon, 1 E. Jackson Blvd., Suite 7000, Chicago IL, USA (email: glemmon@depaul.edu)

**Abstract:**

Popular and influential social commentators have called organizations complicit in perpetuating weight-based bias and mistreatment. Although our field has advanced our understanding of the *economic* consequences of being fat at work (e.g., salary; job performance; promotions), we urgently need more research on the *interpersonal* experiences of this swath of workers so that we can appropriately advise organizations. In this article, we describe how organizational psychology researchers can answer this call to do more research on weight at work (a) even while feeling uncomfortable with a topic that can feel personal, medicalized, and/or overly intertwined with other DEI-based topics; (b) by incorporating insightful research from outside disciplines that centers weight controllability and weight-based mistreatment deservedness; and, critically, (c) while approaching weight at work research with a respectfulness that conveys an understanding of the complexities intertwining weight, health, and personal agency. In culmination, this article offers to our field a flexible, living document entitled *Best Practices for Weight-Based Research in Organizational Studies*.

**Keywords:**

stigma, diversity, discrimination

**Data Availability:**

No data used.

Exceptional, thoughtful, and controversial social commentary on the topic of fat stigmatization has emerged in recent years. This body of work examines how Western culture, in common discourse and community life, views, judges, and reacts to fat bodies. Common threads emerge from this work, such as rampant fat stigmatization, workplace mistreatment due to fatness, and deeply wounding professional and psychological maladies resulting from antifat bias. To contextualize their experiences, these authors often begin by vulnerably parsing the challenging experience of occupying a fat body in a disapproving society, and then move to situate their experience in a more macro frame. In the tradition of viewing fatness from the vantage point of social justice in order to seek understanding and even solace (Orbach, 1997), the authors often reframe the fat lived experience through the lenses of fat activism, identification of distinctive and destructive cultures around dieting and wellness, fat shaming, lesser known research around the efficacy of intentional weight loss, and linkages between antifat attitudes and violence, patriarchy, classism, and racism, to name a few (Bacon, 2020; Farrell, 2021; Gay, 2017; Glass & West, n.d.; Gordon, 2020; Harrison, 2019; Strings, 2020; West, 2016). These authors continue with this broader frame by damningly pointing to institutions as structures complicit in perpetuating weight bias, including vis-à-vis biased administrative policies, lack of protective formalized procedures, and neglected cultural elements. Central to our field, due to either their use of misinformation, their inaction, or even their ignorance, organizations are repeatedly framed as *perpetuating* fat stigmatization rather than working to alleviate it (Gay, 2017; Gordon, 2020; Jensen et al., 2020; Tovar, 2018).

As such, we write this commentary because organizations have been called out as complicit in antifat bias, and they urgently need our council. Our field needs evidence-based research on the experience of fat embodiment, beyond economic discrimination research (which

has been well-established; e.g., Agerström & Rooth, 2011; M. V. Roehling, Pichler, et al., 2013; Rudolph et al., 2009; Vanhove & Gordon, 2014) and toward the lived, nuanced experiences of fat workers. We also write this commentary because many of us, as researchers, may be hesitant to broach the topic of weight at work because it is fraught, sensitive, and embedded in larger, less comfortable conversations around controllability, social dominance, acceptance, and inclusivity (Lemmon et al., 2022). In our commentary, we outline typical and automatic reactions of researchers toward the study of weight at work, as well as how to reframe such reactions to encourage inclusive, expansive coverage of the topic. We write this article because weight at work research invites a rich, multidisciplinary exploration wherein we can weave fascinating, instructive literature from other fields to advance understanding. Here, we eagerly share potential starting points for future research that considers both a summation of existing organizational literature and two critical, distinctive elements that influence how we understand body size: weight's controllability and deservedness of weight-based mistreatment.

Finally, we write this commentary because we wish to codify, in a flexible, living document, best practices that researchers can use to align their research on weight at work with critical inclusivity perspectives. Such guidelines can help us all suppress prejudice as we move forward in our weight-centric research, resolutely shedding the antifat bias that is both common and *increasing* (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2022; Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). As such, we develop an initial draft of *Best Practices for Weight-Based Research in Organizational Studies* to make sure that we step into weight-focused research with the respect, understanding, and depth with which we cover more well-defined diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues, including burgeoning areas of study such as neurodiversity (LeFevre-Levy et al., in press). Of course, we invite readers to collaboratively update and amend these *Best Practices* as the conversations and

understandings of fatness in social life, and necessarily organizational life, evolves as we tease apart the thornier aspects of studying weight at work.

### **Resistance to Research on Weight at Work**

Antifat bias stems from the belief that fat people possess little self-control; act lazily and sloppily; enact noncooperative, selfish behaviors; and generally are incompetent (Crandall, 1994; Crandall & Martinez, 1996; Levine & Schweitzer, 2015). This form of bias increased in recent years, a notable shift because bias against other historically marginalized groups (e.g., gay people, those of the Muslim faith, women) decreased during the same time period (Charlesworth & Banaji, 2022; Puhl et al., 2008). This bias does not dissipate because popular culture reinforces these stereotypes at every turn, particularly through *growing* permissiveness of antifat bias over time (Lemmon et al., 2022; Tomiyama et al., 2015). Even physicians, who possess the research acumen to understand the strongly detrimental effects of stigmatizing fat people and complicated relationship between weight and health, exhibit strong, destructive bias toward fat people (Major et al., 2014; e.g., Phelan et al., 2014; Sabin et al., 2012). Taken together, these findings may make organizational researchers back away from the study of weight at work. We may hesitate due to our own implicit or explicit antifat bias; we may hesitate to wade into waters where *physical health* is never far removed from the conversation; or we may hesitate because we feel unsure about a reasonable entry point. In this spirit, as a heuristic-based guide to understanding one's own feelings toward starting to research weight at work, we summarize the hesitations or defenses researchers feel around this topic (Table 1). Given the urgency with which we need to generate quality research on weight at work, we also provide reframes to motivate engagement with particularly germane research questions (Epstude & Roese, 2008).

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In brief, the three categories of defensive postures that inhibit research on weight at work are: (a) *antifat bias*, (b) *paralysis*, and (c) *gatekeeping*. Those researchers experiencing (and admitting) *antifat bias* are not alone as beliefs about weight controllability, outlined in great detail in the next major section, pervade Western society (Pearl & Puhl, 2014). Fortunately, one remedy for *antifat bias* is clear: Read up! Doing so requires you to carefully consider evidence that fat people do not respond to bias with sustainable strivings to be thin, and, in fact, stigma toward fat people is now associated with disordered, antihealth behaviors that can ultimately cause weight gain (Major et al., 2014; Puhl et al., 2020). Furthermore, consider the body of research that questions causal relationships between weight and health; interrogates the viability of caloric restriction (i.e., dieting of *all* kinds) for long-term weight loss; highlights how contextual features, mostly related to socioeconomic status, impact weight controllability; and doubts about the prognosis that fatness dooms a person to ill health (e.g., Bacon et al., 2002; Benton & Young, 2017; Dulloo & Montani, 2015; Fildes et al., 2015; French, 1994; Hemmingsson, 2014; Liu & Guo, 2015; Logel et al., 2015; Lowe et al., 2013; Mann et al., 2007; McGee, 2005). We share this not to minimize or denigrate the substantial body of evidence that correlates body size with health but, instead, to suggest that the story of weight, size, and health is more complicated than assumed. Finally, antifat bias also comes with a tendency to “minoritize” the issue, meaning to levy the costs of the issue directly onto a distinct marginalized group (Huff, 2009; Sedgwick, 1990). This manifests as thinking that fat employees control fully the “problem”: if they shrink their body size, a range of personal and professional costs effectively disappears (M. A. Johnson & Schminke, 2019). Issues related to the viability of that

argument aside, we urge researchers to take a more “universalizing” tact: When we *all*, irrespective of body size, acknowledge how riddance of antifat bias improves workplace functioning (and our lives), we are better off. We do not live in fear of weight gain (e.g., during times of hormonal change; during illness; during stress; due to aging, menopause, pregnancy, parenthood; due to simply shifting priorities); we do not feel anxious for close others in fatter bodies; and we benefit knowing that we are part of a culture where we give respect to a *person* rather than a body size.

For researchers experiencing *paralysis* when considering weight-based research, possibly due to a pervasive belief that fatter people are deserving of moral censure (Crawford, 1980), we point broadly to the knowledge generation mechanisms undergirding our discipline. Researchers can collectively create and push forward an agenda of research that, at any single point, lacks perfection, but, as a whole, advances the science. We only need to be willing to take the first step into the research arena so that the next team can lay their proverbial brick. Taking a dose of our own medicine, let us all cultivate a compassionate growth mindset as we approach this challenge and begin to chart a research agenda that, although lacking perfection, emphasizes progress. We outline this reframe in much greater detail in the next section when discussing the complex relationship between weight and health.

Finally, for researchers concerned with construct proliferation, duplicative efforts, and/or redundancies within the field, the study of weight at work is no cause for alarm: *Gatekeeping* only stifles nuanced discussion of what it means to be fat at work. To accept this reframe, we must think precisely about how fatness overlaps and does not overlap with other demographic-based research. First, most people believe a fat person controls their weight and chooses to remain that size (Lee et al., 2014a). This contradicts current science related to weight: fatness

may not be malleable for a notable portion of the population (Benton & Young, 2017; Fildes et al., 2015), which implies that fatness could operate much like someone's static ethnic makeup, even though *others* might observe weight to be alterable. Second, what does it matter if someone chooses to remain fat? Do we reserve respect only for those making choices that align with our viewpoints (Gordon, 2020)? With the powerful idea that counterfactual information can necessitate behavioral change, we invite gatekeeping researchers of weight at work to conduct important thought experiments around controllability. For example, liberal ideals give autonomy to members of society to self-determine gender and sexuality. We also intentionally give voice to groups otherwise marginalized by society. Why should this courtesy not be extended to fat people? We are *well* beyond asking that certain characteristics found locally within a demographic group change in order to conform to dominant ideals (e.g., we would not ask an African American woman to change her natural hair). Should we not extend that respectfulness to weight? These tensions—between what is and is not controllable, between what is and is not deserved, and between *whose* evaluations of fatness matter most, the actor or the observer—undercut the belief that little is gained (or much is duplicated) through examining fatness in the workplace.

Now that we worked to articulate hesitations to engage with weight at work research, we can more squarely address how we can provide effective council to organizations. To do so as a field, three things must occur: First, we need to recognize the overarching state of the literature; second, we must address where weight-based research must turn next, namely how weight control and weight-based mistreatment deservedness influence our sensitivity and sympathy toward weight-based matters, with particular attention paid to nuances of the construct that differentiates it from other demography-based research; and third, we need to, collectively,

establish living guidelines for researchers interested in weight-based research that reflect awareness of weight's novel attributes and lets the voices of fat-bodied workers be fully incorporated into both our approach and execution of weight-based research at work.

### **The Current State of Weight-Based Research**

Robust meta-analytical research on weight at work suggests that fatter employees suffer from poor economic outcomes at work (Nowrouzi, 2015). For instance, organizations are less likely to select fatter employees (Agerström & Rooth, 2011; M. V. Roehling et al., 2007; Rudolph et al., 2009; Vanhove & Gordon, 2014). Once employed, managers and customers rate fatter employees as poorer performers, irrespective of objective outcomes (Rudolph et al., 2009; Ruggs et al., 2015), and—creating a double-bind—train their fatter employees less effectively (Shapiro et al., 2007). Interpersonal mistreatment from customers, toward fatter workers, for example, also occurs commonly (Ruggs et al., 2015). Organizations are also more likely to punish fatter workers (M. V. Roehling, Roehling, et al., 2013). Further, organizations deny promotions to fatter employees at greater rates than nonfat employees (M. V. Roehling, Roehling, et al., 2013; Rudolph et al., 2009), and even highly skilled, extensively experienced executives suffer from stalled career progress if they occupy a larger body (King et al., 2014; P. V. Roehling et al., 2009). Research also finds that fatter employees earn less than their slimmer counterparts (Judge & Cable, 2011; M. V. Roehling, Roehling, et al., 2013). On the whole, our field describes that fatter employees experience robust deficits in objective career success. Further, fatter employees represent a group of people whose level of stigmatization is high and who receive little protection under employment law (e.g., very few jurisdictions outlaw weight-based discrimination), making them a “susceptible class”—vulnerable to exploitation (A. F. Johnson et al., 2021).



*Why* does this discrimination against fatter employees occur? Organizational research has begun to parse some of the underlying mechanisms. Research has found that, for example, we levy stereotypes of being less warm and less competent on fatter employees, effectively diminishing their contributions to both work product and beneficial social cooperation and coordination within the organization (Cuddy et al., 2007; Levine & Schweitzer, 2015). This research also finds that we assume fatter people are selfish (taking more than they need—extrapolated from their presumed behavior with food) and that this selfishness spills over on their prioritization of the self over the group (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015).

A final stream of organizational research has begun examining what we now know is a hugely pervasive and pressing issue: the interpersonal mistreatment—including bullying, interpersonal discrimination, and harassment—of fatter employees explicitly because of their size. Some 75% of fatter employees report interpersonal mistreatment specifically because of their size in the past 6 months, far outpacing other nonambiguous forms of interpersonal mistreatment (Dhanani et al., 2018), and chronicles the accumulation of a host of mental, physical, and occupational deficits because of the experience (Lemmon & Jensen, 2017; see also: M. V. Roehling, Roehling, et al., 2013). Incivility at large overwhelmingly impacts fatter people (e.g., they report being stigmatized over 11 times within a 2-week period, on average; Spahlholz et al., 2016; Vartanian et al., 2014), so this finding is, on the one hand, unsurprising, but, on the other hand, jarring, given the emphasis on decorum and respect expected in professional spaces. Research points to the permissiveness of Western culture around mockery of weight as germinating and then minimizing mistreatment of fatter people (Burmeister & Carels, 2014; Ravary et al., 2019). It is from this point we next examine where weight-based research must extend.

### Where Weight-Based Research Must Extend

We know the rates at which weight-based stigmatization and mistreatment occurs—from economic discrimination to mistreatment rooted in incivility, bullying, and abuse—but we are less certain about the processes that both predict and outline the consequences of mistreatment. Although stereotyping offers one possible mechanism (Levine & Schweitzer, 2015), how those stereotypes develop and wend their way to impact the victim is a separate matter. Fortunately, research outside the organizational domain offers many insights into this process, including clues as to why weight-based research should be approached with a different lens than other demography-based research. To advance this conversation, we next utilize this research to examine the stigmatization process undergirding weight-based mistreatment.

Rooted in Goffman's work on stigmatized characteristics, we start with the established frame that fatness relates to both perceiving the fatter person as having physical disfigurement and notable flaws of character, including connotations with laziness, selfishness, and low conscientiousness (Crandall, 1994; Crandall & Martinez, 1996; Goffman, 1963). Within the model of fat stigmatization, how that frame translates into prejudicial action remains underexplored. Justification-suppression theory (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003) offers broad instruction: Explicitly, factors that loosen *suppressed* bias enable prejudicial attitudes to surface, and instigators seek to *justify* their subsequent prejudicial actions on this basis. As such, weight attributes that reduce suppression—here identified as perceptions of *weight's controllability*—and factors that give pretense or absolution to those who turn that prejudice into action—here identified as *deservedness of weight-based mistreatment*—advance our understanding of fat stigmatization. Though related, *controllability* relates more to the belief that one's weight is a matter of willpower, whereas *deservedness* captures acting on dislike of fatter people; we find

this difference is mirrored by the dimensionality of antifat attitudes (Crandall, 1994).

Furthermore, there is reasonable evidence that **both** a perpetrator and victim understand, justify, and even absolve maltreatment based on fatness's negative connotations (Crawford, 1980; Durso & Latner, 2008), suggesting controllability and deservedness impact both motivational mechanisms for weight-based mistreatment (on the part of the perpetrator) *and* attribution/coping mechanisms (on the part of the victim). To motivate more nuanced exploration of weight-based mistreatment at work, these dynamics are teased apart next.

### **Controllability of Weight**

Westerners generally believe that a person's weight is controllable (Black et al., 2014; Durso & Latner, 2008; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; NORC, 2016). This spare fact blooms many biases and assumptions about fatter people: that, with sensible and diligent effort, they can alter their body size to conform to a subjective standard of *not* fat; that a lack of intentional effort, or more acutely laziness, is the cause of their fatter body; and that they choose to prioritize their own excessive needs over values of restraint, discipline, and conscientious effort (Crandall, 1994; Crandall & Martinez, 1996; Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Levine & Schweitzer, 2015). Essentially, when we believe in weight's controllability, we assume fatter people lack conscientiousness, willpower, discipline, and motivation, which are a constellation of attributes sometimes referred to as the Protestant work ethic (Crandall, 1994; Quinn & Crocker, 1999); those without this Protestant work ethic are looked down upon within our individualistic Western culture.

Controllability of weight is a complicated subject, one that stymies even obesity researchers themselves (Belluz, 2022, 2023; Franks & Atabaki-Pasdar, 2017), but it is exactly that complexity that belies a simple association between effort and weight loss. On the one hand,

human biology is designed to be more interested in survival rather than svelteness, often resisting attempts to permanently lose weight by activating a variety of autonomic processes designed to slow metabolism and increase the reward value of all things food related (Bacon, 2010; Benton & Young, 2017; Lowe et al., 2013). The sheer number of people who lose and regain weight—95% or more (Fildes et al., 2015; Ikeda et al., 2005), with two thirds regaining more weight than they started with (Logel et al., 2015; Lowe et al., 2013)—also reflect that, irrespective of the reason for that regain, controlling one's weight is very, very difficult for the average person. On the other hand, sustainability aside, people can and do lose weight, and lose it often. A huge tome of medical research does show that weight loss is possible, at least in the short term (e.g., Dansinger et al., 2007; Hartmann-Boyce et al., 2022). Perhaps most critically, by and large most people *believe* weight is controllable, including the majority of people in fatter bodies (Carels et al., 2013; Puhl et al., 2017).

This belief in weight controllability held by the thin and fat alike, even in the face of evidence that calls such a belief into question, makes weight distinct from other demographic attributes and therefore deserving of its own examination. Consider, for example, disability status. Those with a disability do suffer from mistreatment at work, including lack of respect, hostility, and economic consequences, but this mistreatment is less for low-onset controlled disabilities (i.e., due to factors beyond their control such as heredity or an accident), for those that can conceal the disability, and those older in age (Bogart et al., 2019; Lyons et al., 2017; Namkung & Carr, 2019; Richard & Hennekam, 2021). For example, individuals with disabilities for which they are not responsible are served by distancing themselves from the disability, as it reduces pity and improves manager hiring intentions (Lyons et al., 2017). In this way, the consequences of one's disability could be mitigated by framing it as controllable because that

controllability is *believable* (B. Weiner et al., 1988), unlike the public's general perceptions of weight (Black et al., 2014). More complicated, consider gender and sexual orientation mistreatment. Modern views of controllability suggest that we are the gender we identify with and the sexual orientation we are born with; that is, we have little control over these attributes. Yet, on the periphery of society, some view it as a *choice* to be anything other than one's biological sex or to pursue partners outside heteronormative standards. This faction judges a so-called transgressive gender or sexual identity a choice and, consequently, a violation of social norms. Although far from perfect (Doan et al., 2019; Mitchell, 2022), LGBTQIA+ activism, including advances in transgender voices and rights (McCarthy, 2021; Triana et al., 2021), have helped us culturally understand the more complicated narrative around controllability of these attributes (McCarthy, 2019), effectively shrinking this rogue faction. The consequence is more organizational awareness into the lived experience of such workers, resulting in the now extremely popular Pride month celebration, employee resources groups for LGBTQIA+ members and allies, and legal protections for these diverse workers (Abad-Santos, 2018; *Protections Against Employment Discrimination Based on Sexual Orientation or Gender Identity*, 2021; Ronan, 2021; The White House, 2021; Welbourne et al., 2015).

What does differentiating weight from other demography-based research on the basis of controllability mean for weight-based mistreatment? Broadly, we, as humans, stigmatize more harshly what we feel people can control (Chaney & Wedell, 2022; Rodin et al., 1989; Zhang et al., 2020), meaning that stigmatization of fatter employees is likely more sticky and more resistant to change than stigmatization of other demographic characteristics—such as those described above—assumed to be less controllable. Without clear, unequivocal evidence, pervasive culture norms about a fatter person's lack of control over their own body appears

inevitable. This is supported by the justification-suppression theory, which states that without information that undercuts stereotypes about a stigmatized characteristic, humans tend to act intuitively in a prejudicial manner, without much hesitation or guilt (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003).

Within the context of controllability, the dynamic between the perpetrator and victim of weight-based mistreatment can be even more finely parsed when we utilize a psychological theory that examines how we judge one another relative to controllability: objectification theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997). In Western culture, judgment of one's body size (and shape, color, age, etc.) by other people is viewed as natural, normal, and inevitable. This dynamic creates expectation that a person will accept and respond to an observer's judgments insofar as they will put forth dutiful efforts to shift their body more toward the dominant ideal, which, today, means slim. Furthermore, the actor proactively engages in *self*-judgment as they chase the idealized form. This objectification process only works when weight is thought to be controllable by both observer *and* [fat] actor.

This multilevel process of objectification offers a clear vantage point for weight-based researchers to understand the implications of weight controllability beliefs on antifat bias (Lemmon et al., 2022; Zhang et al., 2020). Objectification theory states that standards for body ideals are well known, meaning that a fatter person cannot plead ignorance that their body does not live up to some standard. Furthermore, the theory states that one's worth is derived from conformity to standards—or more bluntly, the control they exert over themselves to meet those standards—which puts a fatter employee in the precarious state of questioning their own value rather than knowing their intrinsic worth and self-advocating when someone impinges upon it through mistreatment. Within this theory, there is no moment of reflection on the part of the

observer about the fairness of the norms, or more acutely, *if* the norms are achievable through personal effort. In this way, controllability of weight is assumed, giving the observer license to comment on a fatter person's lack of control (given the presumed strength of that social violation) and the fatter person stronger incentive to internalize the judgment. Finally, as a product of that judgment process, objectification theory states that not living up to an ideal stimulates self-loathing and self-flagellation because of the deep internalization of not meeting a critical cultural standard. It is exactly this self-harm that suggests fatter employees experiencing mistreatment may punish *themselves* because they knowingly did not conform to a known cultural standard. Sometimes this self-punishment is labeled as the ironic effect of weight stigma, and it is exacerbated as beliefs around controllability increase (Himmelstein et al., 2015; Hunger et al., 2015; Lemmon & Jensen, 2017; Levy et al., 2021; Major et al., 2014; O'Brien et al., 2016; Reinka et al., 2021; Zhu et al., 2021). The importance of including the ironic effects of stigmatizing experiences into our models of weight-based mistreatment cannot be understated: The harm that fatter employees incur is not simply contained within the mistreatment, but instead impacts their entire posture toward *self-care*, *self-blame*, and *self-punishment*.

Given the foregoing, we now more concretely describe future research on weight-based mistreatment that addresses the key role that controllability perceptions play in the stigmatization process. First, research needs to examine the implications of controllability beliefs on the lived experience of the fatter employee. For example, what does reporting, whistleblowing, or other ways of self-advocating for fair treatment look like when a fatter employee feels that they control the reason they are mistreated? Preliminary research suggests that, in the face of weight-based mistreatment, the majority of employees do *not* report the incident (Lemmon & Jensen, 2017), meaning that scope and breadth of this issue may be underreported. Next, where and how does a

fatter employee cope with the mistreatment when they believe the resolution—being smaller, which they control—lies within themselves? Fatter employees report broadly disturbing reactions to the mistreatment, from bottling up their emotion to self-abuse (Lemmon & Jensen, 2017) —does belief that they failed to control the abuse play into these outcomes? Mistreated fat employees may also experience the sickening logic of abuse: that they brought on their own mistreatment because they control the reason—their weight—that stimulated the mistreatment (Gordon, 2020). Finally, observers of mistreatment go through an internal judgment process when evaluating how to process the situation, including decisions about intervention (Reich et al., 2021). Are those observing mistreatment of a fatter colleague less likely to notice or report such an incident if their *interpretation* of the situation reveals low empathy toward the fat target, stimulated by feelings that the targeted deserved the mistreatment because they control the reason for it (fatness)? Clearly controllability perceptions create questions that must be resolved from the vantage point of the victim of mistreatment and the constellation of actors who observe and have a duty to report and respond to it.

### **Deservedness of Mistreatment**

Intertwined and interrelated with controllability is the issue of *deservedness*. This idea suggests that perpetrators of weight-based mistreatment believe that mistreatment is deserved because by choosing to remain fat, the derogation, hostility, and stigmatizing consequences of being fat are deserved (Durso & Latner, 2008; see also: Romano et al., 2022). Through the lens of justification-suppression theory, controllability and deservedness sequentially motivate prejudice: Whereas weight controllability perceptions spark a perpetrator to unearth or unmask their antifat feelings, justification for mistreatment enable such feelings to translate into *action*, with the perpetrator relying on the notion that the victim deserved mistreatment due their lack of



control (Crawford, 1980). To explore this, we again look at the prejudice suppression-justification dynamic by way of differentiating weight from other demographic characteristics and then describe how humans generate feelings of deservedness.

Deservedness differentiates weight from other demography-based attributes when considered alongside controllability perceptions. Take age-based discrimination: Because one cannot control the movement of time, acting prejudicially toward an older person at work because they *deserve* that mistreatment is unlikely—they cannot prevent their age. At the same time, race presents a slightly more ambiguous vantage point in that some people feel that a person can control their *expression* of race (e.g., wearing one's hair in Eurocentric hair styles to signal assimilation; Dawson et al., 2019); the heinous subtext of such pressures is that stepping outside Eurocentric norms makes you more culpable in the racism received. Similarly, to *not* come out as LGBTQIA+ at work can offer similar protection as suppression expressions of race (Corrington et al., 2019; Ozeren, 2014); without disclosure, you protect yourself from mistreatment that would otherwise be partially “your fault” for not concealing your sexual identity. Although our intent is not to compare the suffering of different identity groups, we must note that weight as a demographic attribute that connotes deserved mistreatment remains much less ambiguous than the examples above when considering core characteristics of a stigmatized identity (Zhang et al., 2020). In other words, weight explicitly has features that intensify its stigmatization: its associations with controllability, previously outlined; its associations with factors that are perceived to impact others (e.g., disruption to unit work goals or interdependent tasks because the fatter person is perceived to be less competent; Levine & Schweitzer, 2015); its associations with core self-beliefs (Durso & Latner, 2008); and its logical inability to be concealed or immediately changed.

Once more, research outside of the organizational realm suggests fruitful paths to understanding better how the process of stigmatization unfolds when we consider this novel attribute of weight: that one deserves the harsh consequences of remaining fatter. First, we must consider why an observer feels comfortable mistreating a fatter person, in other words, what motivates an *internal* judgment of distaste for a fat person to evolve into actual behavioral mistreatment of a fat person? Justification suppression theory describes a tipping point: When one feels justified in their prejudice toward someone else, that prejudice is likely to translate into action (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). The theory of healthism describes from where that prejudice germinates. Specifically, when someone adopts an ethic of healthism, they believe that we, individually, have a moral imperative to pursue health. Weight, namely maintaining a lower weight, is viewed as a path to achieve said health (Crawford, 1980). As such, someone holding a view of healthism believes that failing to be slimmer means you lack discipline, work ethic, personal responsibility, and self-respect, reflecting stigmatization rooted in flaws of character (Goffman, 1963) and a pretense for censure (Crandall, 1994). Furthermore, failing to conform to health ideals can incite moral disgust (Lieberman et al., 2012). Critically, the victim of weight-based mistreatment can also hold a view of healthism, which may lead them to conclude that they deserve subpar treatment or even that they brought the mistreatment onto themselves (Durso & Latner, 2008; Jiménez-Loaisa et al., 2020). The final consequence, then, is feeling that mistreatment levied on a fatter person is deserved—from both the instigator and victim—as that fat person failed to meet their moral duty to be slim. Thus, healthism must be accounted for in developed models of fat-based mistreatment at work.

With deservedness in mind, models of weight-based mistreatment that incorporate stigmatization must also account for the nuanced dynamic between observer and a fat actor.

Neurobiological research found that observers are less sensitive and reactive to the pain of fatter people when they think that the fatter person deserves censure for their unacceptable size (Azevedo et al., 2014). Our models, then, should account for both the motivation on the part of the observer to punish “deserving” fatter people and the potential for the observer to be less sensitive—or even aware—that they are punishing a fat person, meaning they are effectively ignorant of their own prejudice (Chaney & Wedell, 2022).

For the fat person receiving mistreatment, we know that internalized weight bias, which indicates antifat sentiment coupled with the belief of weight controllability, is likely strong (Carels et al., 2013; Puhl et al., 2017). The majority of fatter people feel they deserve less respect, more prejudice, to be looked down on, and to lead less fulfilling social lives (Durso & Latner, 2008). Research demonstrates that this internalized bias mutates into a feeling of anticipating and even deserving social rejection, discrimination, or social censure, all hallmarks of self-devaluation (Blodorn et al., 2016; Crocker et al., 1993; Pudney et al., 2020; Romano et al., 2022). These could include some forms of weight-based mistreatment (e.g., not being selected for promotion; being ostracized at work). Models of weight-based mistreatment must account for deprecations in self-confidence and self-worth stemming from mistreatment coupled with attributions of self-blame versus other blame, that is, “I brought this mistreatment on myself.”

Finally, when one thinks mistreatment is deserved, coping processes may be influenced. Fatter people experiencing mistreatment report mixed coping mechanisms, with the majority indicating poor coping, including mechanisms that include self-harm (e.g., excessive drinking, drug use, cutting themselves; Gerend et al., 2021; Lemmon & Jensen, 2017; Puhl & Brownell, 2006). In fact, many of the effective coping mechanisms (*italicized next*; Zhang et al., 2020)

suggested for those being stigmatized could fail to work when the victim believes the mistreatment is earned: Perhaps they cannot *manage information* about their weight (e.g., their weight may be a product of genetics or illness) because they believe that these are simply excuses (Lee et al., 2014b); perhaps they cannot *reconstruct* what it means to be fatter because the moral failing of fatness is too embedded within our culture (Crawford, 1980); perhaps they cannot engage in effective *emotion work* because their feelings of self-blame inhibit self-compassion (Hilbert et al., 2015); and perhaps they cannot put in place effective *boundary management* by finding solace in an “in-group” because others feel that their weight may be communicable (Tapp et al., 2020). For the victims of weight-based mistreatment, offering compassion and kindness in the face of mistreatment is clearly needed as they receive censure from both themselves and Western culture at large (Hilbert et al., 2015).

### **Applied Effects of Controllability of Weight and Deservedness of Mistreatment**

Fundamental models of weight-based mistreatment can evolve based on our understanding of weight’s controllability and weight-based mistreatment’s deservedness. They can also inform more applied questions germane to broader organizational and disciplinary goals. As such, we articulate here how organizational psychologists may therefore benefit from this nuanced model and how it can advance the council we provide to organizations.

Particularly of the moment, numerous popular press stories describe how people are coping with presenting their fatter bodies (which gained weight during lockdown and stress of the pandemic) in professional spaces, post-COVID-19 (*New York Times* Video Team, 2021; J. Weiner, 2021). This is exactly the kind of conversation we want the field to feel comfortable entering! Employees—let alone fat employees—do not check their body image at the proverbial door, and we must have a better understanding of how the body image of fat workers, in

particular, impact their daily workplace experience. Body image reflects how core conceptions of the self, such as confidence, competence, and esteem, shape shift based on one's image of the self (Cash, 2004). We can also address where this worry about how others will view and treat them originates—likely from their own beliefs that they should have controlled themselves better; that *others* think they lost control; and that they will deservedly receive judgment and censure from peers on their body. Historically, organizational researchers hold great interest in how self-evaluations impact workplace attitudes, behaviors, and interactions, and the model of weight-based mistreatment provided here—specifically one that accounts for controllability and deservedness—helps organizational psychologists more holistically understand human models of well-being.

More broadly, we can utilize the outlined theories to develop more fat-based models of predation of larger employees. Victim selection is likely more nuanced than *any* fat person at work will do, as predators focus on the more vulnerable (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004) and seek to reinforce social dominance in ways that conform to prevailing social norms (Pratto et al., 1994). This means that victim selection based on signaling of a victim of nonconformity (e.g., eating something believed to be unhealthy might *increase* the perception they deserve mistreatment) can stimulate stigmatization processes as the person draws attention to their alleged physical disfigurement and character flaw (e.g., selfishness; Goffman, 1963; Levine & Schweitzer, 2015). As another path forward, researchers can seek to peer directly into the minds of those who engage in weight-based mistreatment to explore exactly *how* feelings of controllability and deservedness of mistreatment percolate into direct action, that is, to look at the process within the process. For example, looking deeper into the moral claims embedded in healthism, do feelings of deservedness emerge from more individualistic priorities, such as rights to free speech (e.g., *I*

*have the right to let this person know their size is a problem because it's [allegedly] influencing their ability to be a good colleague*) or even more collective priorities, such as the duty to care for fellow humans (e.g., *I must be direct and brutal with this person about their weight to motivate a change in their behavior*)? Alternatively, research on the behavior of ostracizing another person points to viewing the target as both violating some norm (as occurs when one holds the stigmatized characteristic of being fatter) and being viewed as expendable (as occurs when there is a belief that a fatter employee is fundamentally unable to contribute to the work group) as key predictors of exclusionary behavior (Rudert et al., 2023)—modeling these same motivations may be instructive for understanding motives behind predation of fatter employees. As such, organizational psychologists who more accurately understand why weight-based mistreatment occurs from more process-oriented models of predation can be in a better position to counsel organizations on proactive measures to stem just prejudicial action, effectively providing organizations with advice on early warning signs that mistreatment will likely occur. This also suggests said advice can improve protection and support of vulnerable, “susceptible” employees, which is a valiant disciplinary goal (A. F. Johnson et al., 2021).

Interesting intersectionality questions naturally emerge as well (Hester et al., 2020; Himmelstein et al., 2017; Munro, 2017), such as: Do fat *minority* employees experience more abuse at work due to their size than fat *majority* employees, given the inherently vulnerability of the former group; and if so, how do issues of controllability and deservedness intertwine to determine the strength of the effect? Do, for example, multifactorial attributes that are *perceived* controllable (e.g., a fat, transgender black employee with dreads) inflame the strength of mistreatment? Organizational psychologists, generally, seek to understand the nonuniform, multiplicative impact of mistreatment on marginalized employees (Hall et al., 2019), and the

intersection of weight with other attributes provides a fertile ground for how such exponential dynamics play out.

Finally, compelling work on interventions to reduce weight stigmatization reveals that convincing accounts of weight's etiology—namely that a person's weight has multifactorial origins, of which many are outside one's direct control—reduces observer stigmatization and discrimination toward fatter people (Breithaupt et al., 2020; Lee et al., 2014a). Such an intervention can be brief, particularly when emphasizing the role of genetics, and can have longer term influence on weight-based attitudes (Diedrichs & Barlow, 2011; Hilbert, 2016). Furthermore, information provided to observers that medicalizes weight (which is controversial among fat activists, we must add) by framing fatness as a disease or suggesting that excess weight relates to food addiction, which in combination suggest that weight is not as controllable as we think and therefore not as deserving of censure, reduces fat stigma (MacInnis et al., 2020; O'Brien et al., 2020). Media research echoes this finding: When media frames fatness as controllable and suggests that a fat person's lack of control creates health problems (implying deservedness), antifat attitudes, including outright prejudice and punishment of fat people (e.g., through disproportionate insurance premiums), increases (Frederick et al., 2020). In contrast, media that frames weight as less of a choice than typically thought effectively suppresses this prejudice. This research suggests directly that reorienting an observer's attitude toward weight's controllability and deservedness directly impacts the observer's interest in stigmatizing and punishing a fatter person. This is the justification suppression model in action—sufficient evidence to undercut one's prejudice stifles its influence on everyday action. For those organizational psychologists with a goal of intervention and prevention of workplace mistreatment at large, creation of interventions to reduce weight stigma that incorporate

controllability and deservedness as key mechanisms for altering the rate and intensity of weight-based mistreatment would help them reach their goal with more effectiveness and precision.

### **Best Practices for Weight-Based Research in Organizational Studies**

As humans, we hold a variety of conscious and subconscious biases and prejudices. Weight-based prejudice is very common, very extensive, and has *increased* over time (Andreyeva et al., 2008; Puhl et al., 2008). Furthermore, when social norms do not provide explicit instruction and, relatedly, fail to punish or otherwise sanction those expressing prejudicial attitudes, discrimination is more common and less likely to be detected (Gaertner & Dovidio, 2000). Crandall and Eshleman's (2003) work on justification-suppression theory clearly articulates this: Without conscious, intentional, directed effort to suppress prejudice, it blossoms; and the same holds for weight in the absence of social consensus around fat-shaming<sup>1</sup> alongside strong cultural narratives that fatter people can control their weight and deserve to be punished when they do not (Crandall, 1994; Crandall & Martinez, 1996; Crawford, 1980),

This means our call to increase weight-focused research and to lean into the nuances of weight-based stigma comes with a strong recommendation to *also* examine and understand our own weight-based biases. There are two means to do this. First, we reject the victim precipitation model as it relates to weight-based matters. Second, we proactively follow best practices for inclusive, respectful, and sensitive research on the topic. With respect to the former, by critically integrating the foregoing research on controllability and deservedness into our own understandings of weight—and consequently our models of weight-based processes at work—we more accurately see how stereotyping and stigmatization plays out from the vantage point of both the perpetrator and victim, and, possibly, us as researchers. Narratives of controllability and

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<sup>1</sup> Culturally, some feel it is appropriate to use fatness as a punchline (Lemmon et al., 2022).



deservedness directly inform the extent to which a fatter person receives blame for their own mistreatment (Cortina et al., 2018; Gordon, 2020). Whenever we (meaning the victim, the perpetrator, or ourselves as researchers) think that a fat person must *stop being fat* to avoid prejudicial outcomes, we invoke the victim precipitation model and reveal a particularly deep root of antifat bias.

Second, with awareness of the unintentional yet easy missteps to take when investigating fatness in the workplace, we offer these *Best Practices for Weight-Based Research in Organizational Studies*. These best practices—meant to be a living, flexible document—updates and integrates modern understandings and perspectives of fatness, specifically those embedded in the cultural commentary and the medical sciences. These best practices also respond to the needs of fat-bodied people, who tire of endlessly explaining why certain perspectives and viewpoints carry with them inherent antifat bias (Gordon, 2020), akin to how people of color tire of explaining racism or women tire of explaining sexism. We each have a responsibility to self-educate, self-monitor, and move forward more informed when broaching topics related to inclusion. Guidelines that address the neglected topics of weight controllability and deservedness directly aim to reduce prejudice that may otherwise implicitly embed themselves in our work.

### **Best Practices Dimension 1: Background Work**

Writers on weight at work must expand their understanding of how fat is viewed by both fat-bodied and nonfat-bodied people. Much social, cultural, political, and medical research and writing offers thoughtful and nuanced background information. As such, writers on weight at work should:

- (a) Think critically about the roots of antifat bias, namely controllability and deservedness, and how each dimension influences their presumed understanding of how fatness is perceived (by oneself, by others).
- (b) Familiarize themselves with the complicated medical narrative that relates weight and health, inclusive of healthism (Crandall, 1994; Crawford, 1980), which reflects the societal attitude that being in “good health” is a moral imperative that brings into question the deservedness of mistreatment. Among other issues, this is a very ableist sentiment.
- (c) Consider basic psychology research on body image, social dominance, and objectification theory (and more!).
- (d) Be aware of language around *choice*—people can choose to be fat, and some people cannot help but be fat; *all* people deserve care and respect.
- (e) Carefully check their work to make sure the “logic of abuse” does not unintentionally frame their studies; that is, that they do not imply fat people are asking for it, implying they deserve their own mistreatment (Cortina et al., 2018; Gordon, 2020).
- (f) Make sure they do not patronize those in fatter bodies nor “concern troll” them (Jensen et al., 2020).
- (g) Recognize the implications of a focus on “wellness” rather than weight (e.g., wellness is now, sadly, a dog whistle that nearly always includes connotes some element of weight loss; wellness is *expensive*; Harrison, 2019).
- (h) Familiarize themselves with the intersection of the study of weight and gender, race, and class (and, related, capitalism, consumption, power, privilege, oppression, even politics [“Let’s Move!”] and religion [“purity”/“sin”]; e.g., Campos, 2004; Strings, 2020).

### Best Practices Dimension 2: Study Design

Even a research study design can be influenced by antifat bias insofar as weight is viewed as alterable and/or under the direct control of a participant. As such, writers on weight at work should:

- (a) At times, body size (measured as body mass index, perceived size, relative size, self-reported size, or some other metric) as an exogenous variable may be necessary, such as linking body size to rates of reported discrimination; however, researchers should consider carefully their descriptions of weight in such models, making sure they do not position weight as *alterable* or a *choice* (e.g., the larger person must lose weight to reduce discrimination; the larger person chooses to remain large and is therefore choosing to remain vulnerable to discrimination).
- (b) Be clear about your rationale for choosing one form of body size measurement and what that choice's pros and cons are; for example, body mass index does not capture fat *distribution*, which influences reported rates of pay discrimination (Song & Baek, 2021); or self-reported body size may be influenced by inaccurate perceptions or body dysmorphia (e.g., Stommel & Schoenborn, 2009)
- (c) Consider the potential prejudicial outcomes of framing "weight" as a "cost" (e.g., M. A. Johnson & Schminke, 2019); this implies that larger people, in some part, deserve different treatment because costliness connotes a negative attribute.
- (d) Acknowledge that fat people are a heterogeneous group (just like all men or members of a given race are not interchangeable); ask yourself, in the course of your research are you treating the group as a monolith, or are you allowing for personalization?

### Best Practices Dimension 3: Study Presentation

Stylistic choices when presenting results should also reflect sincere respect for body diversity. As such, writers on weight at work should:

- (a) Never use stereotypical imagery.
- (b) Be mindful and clear about your language choices (e.g., larger bodied v. fat; different types of fat, like small fat; Puhl, 2020).
- (c) Avoid weight-based puns; again, as a field we would not make puns about race or gender.
- (d) To support theory building in this domain, be precise in how you are framing antifat bias relative to your work, invoking literatures appropriate to your research question; this means either choosing or knitting together your frame of weight through the lens of viewing those in larger bodies as a vulnerable minority, or more stringently, a class in need of protection; or viewing weight and its perceptions and consequences through the process of stigmatization; or viewing weight through the lens of distorted body image and punishing objectification.

#### **Best Practices Dimension 4: Consider Your Research Through a Broader Lens**

Coming full circle, not only should background reading motivate how you frame weight within your study, this same work can also help you frame your results for impact. As such, writers on weight at work should:

- (a) Incorporate awareness of the systemic issues related to size, for example, access to quality food; access to safe spaces to walk; time to go to the gym. Does your research speak to this, or at least control for it?
- (b) Consider the results of your study within the context of fat activism and/or fat advocacy: How can your results be used to advance social justice for fat people?

- (c) Be aware of the commoditization of weight (e.g., through wellness programs at work; through wellness/diet industries at large) and how this pushes us to think that the problem is the bad behavior of *consumers* (e.g., fat people should buy products to fix issues) rather than the irresponsible behavior of the *companies* (who often push useless products).
- (d) Acknowledge how intersectionality could create disparate impact for certain subgroups of fat people (Himmelstein et al., 2017).

## Conclusion

Our field must be prepared to proactively counsel organizations on weight-based matters at work. Doing so effectively requires three things, which we outline in this commentary: (a) We should each examine and even confront our hesitations to approach this sensitive topic at work; (b) when we do research on weight at work, we should integrate perspectives on weight that enliven the stigmatization process, namely that weight is controllable and mistreatment sown from fat bias is deserved, in order to best describe the deep roots of weight-based mistreatment; and (c) we should carry out this research using *Best Practices for Weight-Based Research in Organizational Studies*, developed from understanding and sensitivity to the voices of those in larger bodies. We await eagerly the updates and amendments our field makes to these *Best Practices* as we deepen our understanding and respect of weight at work matters.

Table 1

*Defensive Postures and Reframes to Spark Research on Weight at Work*

<i>Defensive posture</i>	<i>Current assessment</i>	<i>Reframe</i>
<b>Explicit/implicit antifat bias</b>		
Backstopping	We need some level of fat shaming in society to dissuade people from becoming fat, akin to how we shame smokers (e.g., <i>New Rule</i> , 2019).	Shaming others because of their weight leads to opposite-than-intended consequences (Major et al., 2014; Puhl et al., 2020)
Deservedness	People in fatter bodies need to lose weight; it will solve their health problems <i>and</i> their social/confidence problems at work; organizational researchers do not have a role in this psychological process.	We need to move on from weight loss as a remedy: permanent weight loss is near impossible (Benton & Young, 2017); weight should not be the basis for feeling worthy (Crawford, 1980); people deserve human respect irrespective of their size (Gordon, 2020)
Disinterest	Weight does not feel like an issue in my (mostly wealthy, liberal) academic bubble.	Practically, it may not be an issue that touches you <i>today</i> but maybe tomorrow (e.g., personal health issues). More philosophically, society functions better when we improve life for <i>all</i> people not just <i>similar</i> people.
Exhaustion	Weight feels like just another thing we must be “politically correct” about.	People suffer when they are marginalized; we cannot pretend that words do not impact others (Williams, 2019).
Privilege	I do not want to give up privilege I possess by being thin by discovering that the value of my thinness is predicated on the systemic devaluation of fatness.	<i>Option 1:</i> Consider the study of weight at work insurance: you might need the results of our study one day to better understand (and improve) your/your loved one’s professional world. <i>Option 2:</i> Consider virtues other than

		thinness that make you feel powerful. <i>Option 3:</i> Do you really want your privilege pinned on something as ephemeral and out of your control as your physical body?
<b>Paralysis</b>		
Anxiety	Talking about fatness at work is so sensitive. I do not want to offend anyone!	We are fully capable of approaching this topic with tenderness and openness. I will educate myself broadly on the topic before diving in.
Dramatization	We cannot talk about weight without being emotional about it.	We need not talk about a topic with cool remove to add to the science.
Fool's errand	Antifat bias pervades society <i>and</i> feels socially acceptable in most circles; the battle is already lost.	Nonorganizational research already points to remedies for rooting out antifat bias in life (Brochu et al., 2020; Hilbert, 2016); interventions can and do work. We need research that applies them to an organizational context.
<b>Gatekeeping</b>		
Boredom	We feel already knowledgeable of weight's impact on workplace outcomes due to our robust studies on discrimination and weight. Do we really need <i>another</i> study on the topic?	Economic outcomes are not the only consequence of existing in a larger body; social commentary eloquently outlines the daily indignities that fatter people experience at work.
N.I.M.B.Y.	Let us leave this topic to the medical professionals.	Organizational researchers are fully capable of reading and understanding biomedical research at the population level (i.e., not necessarily the cellular level), as well as psychological and social psychological research. We

		can borrow from them, as they borrow from us. See, for example, the explosion of research on sleep and work published in our journals.
Old wine, new bottles	We know people are mistreated and bullied through the incivility literature—how is mistreatment of fat people at work new?	We do not say the same when we study race-, gender-, or age mistreatment at work; Why do we create this barrier for studying fat-bodied people?
Prioritization	Fat people do need study, but the medical field should go first because figuring out how to slim fat people down is more important.	We possess the skills and tools to understand internal processes in the minds of employees, including those in fatter bodies and those who predate fatter bodies.



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