

Title

Overweight Stereotype Humor and the Moderating Effects of a Self-Focus Manipulation

Abstract

Stereotyping of overweight individuals is often expressed in the form of humor, an indicator of nonconscious attitudes and beliefs (Lynch, 2010). Participants in the current study will report their explicit attitudes toward humor that is negatively biased toward weight and complete an implicit association task to measure nonconscious preferences regarding weight. Subjects will be randomly assigned to an experimental or control group. Those in the experimental condition will complete the study in the presence of a mirror, which has been found to stimulate self-focused attention, a predictor of perspective-taking and prosocial behavior (Gendolla & Wicklund, 2008; Abbate, Isgro, Wicklund & Boca 2006). It is hypothesized that self-focused participants will be less likely to implicitly and explicitly endorse obesity stereotypes.

Research Question

Will a self-focus manipulation result in a reduction in the overweight stereotype activation, as evidenced by reduced endorsement of overweight stereotyped humor?

Introduction

Over 30% of American adults are obese according to the National Center for Health Statistics (2007). Aside from the potential health risks posed by obesity, an overweight individual may encounter ridicule and discrimination because of their body size (Wang, Brownell, & Wadden, 2004). Stereotypes regarding overweight people are fodder for popular culture humor, are used to taunt the stars of fictional and “reality” television shows, and form the basis for a multi-billion dollar (\$30-50 billion) weight loss industry (Federal Trade Commission, 2002). Implicit stereotypes, which may influence judgments without conscious awareness, can explain why behavior sometimes contradicts explicit attitudes. Historically, theorists (e.g. Devine, 1989) believed that stereotype activation could not be prohibited, and that implicit biases could not be changed. However, some researchers have documented lower implicit racial stereotyping after manipulations designed to prime positive images of racial diversity (Blair, Ma, & Lenton, 2001; Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001). To date, there is no published research on the successful reduction of implicit overweight stereotypes. A decrease in automatic activation of weight stereotypes would benefit those whose explicit attitudes are in conflict with their non-conscious prejudicial behavior and would benefit healthy women with 22-26% body fat who are unable to prohibit comparative judgments with models and actresses who tend to have 10-15% body fat (Brownell, 1991).

Overweight Stereotype and Attitude Measurement

Brownell (1991) argued that the two keys to overweight discrimination are a preference for thinness and belief that responsibility for weight lies within the individual (a dispositional attribution). Support has been found in research utilizing the Anti-Fat Attitudes Scale (Crandall, 1994) which significantly linked belief in personal control and disdain for overweight individuals with stigma. As automatic, implicit judgments and attitudes can be better predictors of behavior than explicit attitudes (Bargh, 1996, 2002), such preferences and beliefs do not have to be openly endorsed to influence behavior towards overweight people. In Bessenhoff and Sherman (2000),

participants completed a lexical computer-based measure of implicit attitudes (Implicit Association Test; IAT) and self-reported their personal attitudes about overweight individuals. The authors found that those who demonstrated a higher automatic negative association toward overweight individuals chose to sit farther away from an overweight researcher. Self-reported (explicit) attitudes were not significantly related to how far the participants chose to sit away from the researcher. Another measure of implicit attitudes may be humor or laughter, which research indicates is an honest, involuntary signal of one's beliefs and biases (Flamson & Barret, 2008). Lynch (2010) examined gender and racial stereotyped humor responses and found that participant reactions to a white stand-up comedy routine based on gender and racial stereotypes were good predictors of implicit attitudes. Those whose IAT scores showed a preference for whites found the racially charged portions to be funnier, supporting the hypothesis that humor signals in-group status, beliefs, and preferences.

Self-Focus

When an individual is self-focused, current behavior is compared with conscious attitudes and ideals. Research suggests that focus on the self fosters perspective-taking and prosocial behavior as adjustments are made to decrease discrepancies between ideal and actual conduct (Duval & Wicklund, 1972). Many other studies have demonstrated that trait self-focus (as measured by Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss's (1975) private self-consciousness scale) enhances perspective taking and that a self-focus manipulation reduces egocentrism (Gendolla & Wicklund, 2008; Hass, 1979; Stephenson & Wicklund, 1983; among others). In Hass' (1979) classic study participants were asked to draw an E on their forehead while self-focused, as manipulated by the presence of a video camera behind them. Those participants who were self-focused were more likely to draw the E from an observer's perspective than participants who were not self-focused. In one recent study, Abbate, Isgro', Wicklund & Boca (2006) demonstrated that participants who were more self-focused (those who held a mirror) were more likely to take the perspective of another and to help that individual.

Current Study

Taken together these findings suggest that individuals who are self-focused will be more likely to take the perspective of a prejudiced group and be less likely to act upon any stereotypical biases. It is hypothesized that those who complete study materials while looking in a mirror will be less likely to endorse humor that is stereotypical in nature. It is also hypothesized that the manipulation of focus on oneself will decrease the activation of stereotype information as measured by an implicit association test.

Methodology:

This project will involve a lexical computer-based task and a paper and pencil survey. The proposed study will also be the foundation for a large-scale study to be run in the fall. Beginning in April, I will start to write the computer program that will serve as the Implicit Associations Task and put together the paper and pencil survey. The IAT will measure participant's preferences in regard to weight and the survey will be designed to measure explicit attitudes toward weight and reaction to weight biased humor. Specifically, I will be using the following scales: The Shyness Scale (Cheek & Buss, 1981), Humor Styles Questionnaire (Martin et al, 2003), Buss-Durkee Hostility Scale (Buss & Durkee, 1957), Public and Private Self-Consciousness (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975), Locus of Control, Self-focused Attention

Scale (Spievak, 2003), Self-Monitoring Scale (Snyder, 1974), Attitudes Toward Obese Persons Scale (Allison, Basile, & Yuker, 1991), Beliefs About Obese Persons Scale (Allison et al, 1991), Just World Scale (Rubin & Peplau, 1975), Crandall's Anti-Fat Attitudes Scale (Crandall, 1994), Eating Attitudes Scale (Garner & Garfinkel, 1979), Authoritarianism (Kristen), Appearance Schema (Cash & Labarge, 1996), Empathy Scale (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006a) and Body Silhouettes (Stunkard, Sorensen & Schulsinger, 1983).

Beginning in late April I will start to run the study utilizing the BSC subject pool. Undergraduate students will be solicited through sign-up sheets posted in Hart Hall. Psychology professors may give extra credit for, or require, research participation in their courses and this study may serve as one method of obtaining credit. All participants will review an informed consent form and be given an opportunity to ask questions. Participants will be randomly assigned to either a control group or a self-focused group. Those in the self-focus group will complete the computer task and paper and pencil survey just as those in the control group, however they will do so in the presence of a mirror.

I am excited to start this project as stereotyping, prejudice, and discrimination are still far too prevalent in this society. To the best of my knowledge no one has looked at the potential for self-focused attention to moderate overweight biases in such a manner. Furthermore, a decrease in biases may be an important link to decreasing pressures to be thin that may be of consequence to eating disordered behaviors.

Logistics:

This study will be conducted in the Psychology Research Lab in Hart Hall. Last semester I completed the experimenter orientation and the required Human Participants Protection Education for Research Teams online course, sponsored by the National Institutes of Health, and have been running subjects for other IRB approved studies. I will be in the lab daily to run subjects and enter data into SPSS on a daily basis. Each of the four computers is equipped with Super Lab 4.0, which will be used to create and run the IAT. I have taken both Research Methods and Statistics for Psychology and am familiar with the data analysis that will be required for this study. During the summer, my mentor and I will meet on a weekly basis to discuss the progress of the study. We will also be in regular contact via email or phone.

Project Timeline:

- Prior to start: Read experimental and correlational research on the topic.
Design IAT
Complete work on paper and pencil survey, obtain IRB approval
- Week 01: Begin Data collection and Set up SPSS file for data entry
Week 02: Continue data collection and begin literature review
Week 03: Continue data collection and continue literature review
Week 04: Continue data collection and submit literature review to advisor
Week 05: Continue data collection and revise literature review
Week 06: Continue data collection and submit revised literature review to advisor
Week 07: Continue data collection and revise literature review
Week 08: Continue data collection
Week 09: Analyze data
Week 10: Revise literature review and write study results, present at ATP summer

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