

## **Activity Session**

### **Truth or Myth: Size Doesn't Matter?**

#### **Abstract**

There is a pervasive anti-fat bias in society, and inherently, in organizations. However, despite evidence of negative outcomes of the stigma and stereotypes experienced by fat persons, there has been little and nascent work done to disrupt the bias and reduce it. Our roles as management educators provide the opportunity to expand the notion of who deserves social justice and what it means to support body size equity. In this exercise, we present an experiential learning experience educators can use to reduce students', undergraduate and graduate, explicit and implicit anti-fat biases.

**Keywords:** Anti-Fat Bias, Body Diversity, Experiential Learning Activity

## Introduction

It is known that anti-fat bias is the last socially acceptable form of discrimination (Brochu & Esses, 2011), depriving many people who live in larger bodies of equal treatment and exacerbating the discrimination an individual as a member of multiple marginalized communities experience (McCullough Campbell, 2020; Strings, 2019). Anti-fatness, anti-fat bias, weight bias, weight stigma, or fat phobia are all terms that describe an aversion to fat bodies or additional fat on a body. Most people of all sizes possess an anti-fat bias, ranging from explicit attitudes and fat shaming to implicit attitudes and microaggressions driven by “good” intentions. This bias invokes many discriminations against fat persons, many of which take place at work, including job interviews, performance appraisal, promotions, perceptions in the workplace, and how companies promote the health of their employees (Powroznik, 2017; Kirkland, 2014). These acts (intentional or unintentional) have well-known negative effects on fat persons’ mental health, quality of life, health care, salary, and job opportunities (Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993; Daly, Sutin, & Robinson, 2019; Sutin, Stephen, & Terracciano, 2015). However, many activists are fighting back against the bias, especially considering its roots in racism, sexism, ableism, and capitalism (McCullough Campbell, 2020). There is a growing literature studying anti-fat attitudes and various intervention methods meant to disrupt people’s anti-fatness. Since the study of this bias is relatively new, gaining traction in the last decade, there remains no set way to disrupt and lessen people’s anti-fat bias, but researchers have found some guiding principles (Danielsdottir, O'Brien, & Ciao, 2010). An intervention is most effective when: controllability bias is addressed, fat is not treated as inherently bad, it includes information about critical weight science challenging the assumptions of fat’s effects on health, includes positive interactions with

fat persons, and exposure to a diverse set of bodies (Brochu, 2020). In popular media, activists of the fat acceptance movement also offer insights in overturning one's own anti-fat bias including not talking about diets/weight in our everyday conversations, no commenting on others' bodies positively or negatively, not sharing health advice (especially when unsolicited), reduce anti-fat media exposure, and counter anti-fat self-talk (aboutobesity, 2021; Dolgoff, 2021; Villines, 2022).

The key takeaway from this, we as management educators need, is our role in changing the narrative (McCullough Campbell, 2020). As we send students into the working world to be managers and business leaders, we want to disarm the biases that students bring with them into the workforce, including anti-fatness. Our submission provides exercises educators can use in the classroom, following the best practices found in prior research and activism, to inspire students to question their anti-fat attitudes and combat their own and others' anti-fat bias.

### **Theoretical Foundation**

#### **What is anti-fatness?**

There are many names for anti-fatness, but they all describe a negative attitude and/or aversion to fatness (Brochu, 2020; Daniélsdóttir, O'Brien, & Ciao, 2022; Flint, Hudson, & Lavalley, 2013; Henderson, Matthews, McKersie, & Whitman, 2022). Anti-fatness, anti-fat: bias, attitudes, prejudice, weight stigma, weight bias, and fat phobia are all terms to describe the dislike of fat on bodies. In this submission, we primarily use the terms anti-fatness and anti-fat bias since these are the terms used by fat acceptance activists and most accurately name the attitude (Gordon, 2021).

Researchers studying anti-fat bias have sought explanations for how this bias forms. Using self-report surveys, attribution theory, self-identity theory, and sociocultural theory have

been the most prevalent explanations for anti-fat bias. Attribution theory characterizes the controllability one has over their weight as a source of anti-fat bias, where people believe that one has complete control over their weight based on diet and exercise (Crandall, 1994; Brochu, 2020; Danielsdottir O'Brien, & Ciao, 2010; Elran-Barak & Bar-Anan, 2018). Self-Identity theory posits that based on what “group” one identifies as (thin or fat) determines their fat bias (Elran-Barak & Bar-Anan, 2018; Ritzert, Anderson, Reilly, Gorrell, Forsyth, & Anderson, 2016). Lastly, socio-cultural theory assumes that most people prefer thinness more than fatness and weight is important (Elran-Barak & Bar-Anan, 2018; Carels & Musher-Eiszenmen, 2009; Ritzert, Anderson, Reilly, Gorrell, Forsyth, & Anderson, 2016).

### **Anti-fat discrimination**

Like many biases, multiple stereotypes have arisen regarding fat people. People perceived as overweight are often considered less intelligent, less conscientious, less self-disciplined, lazier, and sloppier than thinner people or people in straight-sized bodies, and also, to a lesser extent warmer and more jovial (jolly fat) (Henderson et al, 2022). Many of these stereotypes form because there is a controllability bias associated with a person's weight and size (Brochu, 2020; more) and most people believe that a person's weight can be controlled and changed by the individual (Li, Kokkoris, & Savani 2020). When this belief is paired with the universal belief that everyone can achieve their ideal weight, people become more likely to subscribe to size discriminatory practices (Jovancevic & Jovic, 2022), like pay by weight policies (Li et al., 2020).

Research has found that these beliefs and stereotypes of fat persons result in weight-based discrimination (Roehling, 1999; Roehling, 2002; Rudolph, Wells, Weller, & Baltes, 2008). Stereotypes stemming from anti-fat bias effect whether hiring managers would invite a larger

person to interview for a position (Agerstrom & Rooth, 2011; Pingitore, Dugoni, Tindale & Spring, 1994), subordinates' perceptions of their larger supervisor's leadership ability and their relationship with the supervisor (Henderson et al, 2022), bias the performance appraisal process (Bento, White, & Zacur, 2012; Ji, Huang, Liu, & Phillips, 2021), the perceived political competence of a larger political office candidate, how much blame an outside observer assigns to the leader of a work group for performance (Merritt & Lynch, 2020), the effectiveness of training a larger individual being undermined by the trainer's beliefs and expectations (Shapiro, King, & Quinones, 2007)

These beliefs extend past the beliefs and actions of individuals. Researchers have found evidence of stigmatizing and discriminatory practices at the organizational and societal level, such as: the gender wage gap where larger females earn far less than larger men (Judge & Cable, 2011), workplace health programs implementing punitive policies against higher weights even if the policy is more expensive than an incentive policy (Tannenbaum, Valasek, Knowles, & Ditto, 2013) and send signals to the rest of the company that larger individuals are problematic, resulting in larger persons getting lower hiring recommendations and other negative outcomes throughout the organization (Powroznik, 2017; Kirkland, 2014).

### **Interventions' Best Practices**

In order to reduce this bias and its negative effects, researchers have tested various methods of intervention including contact exposure to images of and interactions with people with larger bodies and to challenge the assumption that thinness is preferred (socio-cultural theory) (Flint et al., 2013; Eretzian Smirles & Lin, 2018; Alperin, Hornsey, Hayward, Diedrichs, & Barlow, 2014), education on the role of metabolism and genetics in weight and exposure to critical weight science to challenge the controllability bias (attribute theory) (Crandall, 1994;

Brochu, 2020; Diedrichs & Barlow, 2011; Martingano et al. 2023; Swift et al., 2013), cognitive dissonance between self-reported beliefs about one's own kindness and openness and the negativity they show to fat people, challenging their identity and evoking empathy (self-identity theory) (Breithaupt, Trojanowski, & Fischer, 2020; Teachman, Gapinski, Brownell, Rawlins, & Jeyaram; 2003), and guided acceptance commitment therapy using a self-help book, email prompts, and phone coaching to combat how one perceives themselves (self-identity theory) (Potts, Krafft, & Levin, 2022),.

Reviewing the literature on anti-fat bias reduction, there have been mixed results (Danielsdottir, O'Brien, & Ciao, 2010; Brochu, 2020), but some best practices have emerged. Interventions that address controllability bias have shown to reduce the negative stereotypes associated with being fat (Danielsdottir et al, 2010) and when done in a way that is credible and does not reinforce that thinness is better, it shows positive changes in explicit and implicit attitudes towards fat persons (Brochu, 2020).

Due to the inequity in our society caused by anti-fat bias and the effects it has on people's mental health, negative professional outcomes, and systemic issues, we as educators have a responsibility to work towards body size equity by educating our students and advocating for those whose bodies are considered nonconforming (McCullough Campbell, 202).

### **Role Play**

Role plays have been used in classrooms for creating a "learning by doing" process which often leads to higher engagement and lasting impact (Paschall & Wüstenhagen, 2012; Monahan, 2002). Role plays are considered to be one of the most useful methods while teaching negotiations in classrooms (Poitras, Stimec, & Hill, 2013; Wesner & Smith, 2019). Increasingly, role plays have been used in training students around diversity, equity, and inclusion issues.

Since role plays involve students to step into someone else's shoes, they help to focus on behaviors and skills in addition to generating awareness and knowledge, they help cover the four core objectives of teaching diversity, equity, and inclusion (Hartwell, Cole, Donovan, Greene, Burrell Storms, & Williams, 2017; King, Gulick, & Avery, 2010; Schmidt-Wilk, 2020; Duncan, 2020). Effective role plays can help in developing skills and changing behaviors by providing practice-fields to students that allow them to relate to explicit and implicit biases and implement intervention strategies (Garavan, 1997; King, Gulick, & Avery, 2010). Thus, role plays are effective tools in generating awareness about, and developing skills to combat explicit and implicit biases.

As our proposed exercise with role-plays about anti-fat bias includes reading the role play, stepping into someone else's shoes, enacting the role play, reflecting on the experience, and brainstorming about future strategies, it utilizes the four stages of Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory viz. concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experience (Kolb & Kolb, 2005; Kolb, 2015).

This exercise can be utilized for both undergraduate and graduate students in classes including management, diversity, organizational behavior, healthcare management, nursing, medicine, and any course that covers diversity issues.

### **Exercise Overview**

#### **Learning Objectives**

This exercise aims to help participants to identify the ways in which anti-fat bias and body image issues show up in everyday life, understand the experiences of the people in larger bodies, examine the implications of anti-fat bias, understand controllability bias, and equip participants with strategies to overcome anti-fat bias. The exercise has the following learning objectives:

- Define anti-fat bias
- Recognize that anti-fat bias affects the ways in which we perceive individuals and reflect upon own behavioral responses to fatness
- Examine the everyday experiences and discrimination faced by people in larger bodies
- Distinguish between anti-fat bias and controllability bias
- Evaluate the implications of anti-fat discrimination
- Teach strategies to overcome anti-fat bias and advocate for those whose bodies are considered nonconforming

**Setting and Equipment:**

The goal of this exercise is to bring awareness to body image bias in professional settings. The exercise can be done with up to 56 people. We will need a large room with enough room for smaller breakout spaces and multiple copies of the role descriptions.

**Method:**

*Step 1:* Facilitators separate the participants into four groups. Participants in each group receive one of four descriptions that describe experiences of four different individuals attending a conference and job interview. For the first 15 minutes participants are in groups of 10 people or more that have the same description. During this time participants read and discuss the role that they have received. This is time for participants to “get in character” (Appendix 1-4)

*Step 2:* Subsequently participants divide into groups of 4. Make sure that you have one of each role in the groups of 4. During these 25 minutes participants share the experiences that they have in their role descriptions. Facilitators encourage participants to talk about what similarities and differences they encounter within their groups of 4.

*Step 3:* Debriefing occurs. During this time facilitators discuss emotions that came up during the exercise and how they apply to real life scenarios and situations. Themes that facilitators will aim to cover include but are not limited to right to exist with dignity, bias, health at every size, mental health, assumptions and controllability.

**Session Description:**

Intro and instructions	10 minutes
Step 1- Big groups and preparation for role with others that have the same roles.	15 minutes
Step 2 - Groups of 4 (one of each role)	20 minutes
Step 3 - Debrief	25 minutes
TOTAL	75 minutes

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**Appendix 1: Role Description 1**

*Name: Cypress*

*Weight: 230 pounds*

*Height: 5'2"*

*Health: Excellent*

You have been invited to go to a conference. Your department is able to provide some funds for you to attend, enough for the cost of a ticket and modest accommodations. Airplane seats these days are more and more narrow - airlines will soon be selling standing tickets. Ugh, you would really prefer to have two seats to be comfortable. You go to your department administrator, but you are embarrassed to tell her why you need more money. You do not receive any extra funding. Finally, the day is here; time to take the trip, and after what is an excruciatingly uncomfortable 12-hour flight, you land at your destination. You are in the cab finally; you can relax now you will be at the hotel soon. Just as you are expecting a nice mellow drive, your cab driver starts telling you out of nowhere how his sister lost weight on this new diet. In fact, he has tried it too and it really helped his cholesterol levels. He tells you should really try it. Your cholesterol levels are fine thankfully you tell him. The first thing you do when you get to the hotel is to ask if they have a gym. The receptionist tells you they have some machines but probably none of them suitable for you. You check out the gym- what was she talking about? This will do fine.

At breakfast the next day, you don't really find any healthy food options, but it's a hotel breakfast and part of the package so what the heck! You load up on the donuts, waffle fries, bacon, and scrambled egg. "It's a cheat day for me" you hear someone say to you as you sit down.

Finally, the conference draws to a close and you have your interview that is scheduled for the last day. You have 5 A level publications, a great service record, and you love teaching—you are so committed you even go to MOBTS every year. This year was even the 50th anniversary...It was so much fun... Stop it! You need to focus right now. This is AOM and your life is on the line. You need to get this job.

Your interviewer asks you a lot about self-discipline and your writing schedule. You find this a little odd, but you share your usual day plan with them, they respond with "well surely not every day". Really odd...why on earth would they doubt you? You really don't feel the interview went well.

**Appendix 2: Role Description 2**

***Name: Kai***

***Weight: 115 pounds***

***Height: 5'1" feet***

***Health: Excellent***

You have been invited to go to a conference. Your department is able to provide some funds for you to attend, enough for the cost of a ticket and modest accommodations. Finally, the day is here, and it is time to take the trip. After what is a super long 12-hour flight, you land at your destination. You have a chatty cab driver take you to your hotel. You see some colleagues on the way in and you stop to have a chat with them before you check in. You have your networking game down! Your brain is on and ready to party. First thing you do is ask if the hotel has a gym. Got to keep that blood flowing!

At breakfast the next day you don't really find any healthy food options, but it's a hotel breakfast and part of the package so what the heck you load up on the donuts, waffle, fries, bacon, and scrambled egg- it's a cheat day!

Finally, the conference draws to a close and you have your interview that is scheduled for the last day. You have 5 A level publications, a great service record and you love teaching—you are so committed you even go to MOBTS every year. This year was even the 50th anniversary...It was so much fun... Stop it! You need to focus right now. This is AOM and your life is on the line. You need to get this job.

The interview goes well, and you think you have it in the bag! A week well spent.

**Appendix 3: Role Description 3**

***Name: Elliot***

***Weight: 230 pounds***

***Height: 5'2"***

***Health: Poor***

You have been invited to go to a conference. Your department is able to provide some funds for you to attend, enough for the cost of a ticket and modest accommodations. You cannot fly without two seats because you need some space for your oxygen tank. You go to your department administrator and local disability office, and you are given some extra funds for your plane ticket. Finally, the day is here; time to take the trip. After what is an excruciatingly uncomfortable 12-hour flight, you land at your destination. You have a chatty cab driver take you to the hotel. He is wondering if you have anyone traveling with you. "It must be hard to travel alone in your condition," he says. You finally get to the hotel, and you have trouble with your knees getting into the elevator. A casual passerby helps you with your luggage and gets on the elevator with you. "I also had bad knees but then when I lost the weight, I started to feel a lot better! You can do it too, don't lose hope". Great, just what you needed to hear. They will probably be at the conference too.

At breakfast the next day you don't really find any healthy food options but it's a hotel breakfast and part of the package, so what the heck! You load up on the donuts, waffle, fries, bacon, and scrambled egg- it's a cheat day!

Finally, the conference draws to a close, and you have your interview that is scheduled for the last day. You have 5 A level publications, a great service record and you love teaching—you are so committed you even go to MOBTS every year. This year was even the 50th anniversary...It was so much fun... Stop it! You need to focus right now. This is AOM and your life is on the line. You need to get this job.

Your interviewer asks you a lot about self-discipline and your writing schedule. You find this a little odd, but you share your usual day plan with them, they respond with "well surely not every day". Really odd...why on earth would he doubt you? You really don't feel the interview went well.

**Appendix 4: Role Description 4**

*Name: Asa*

*Weight: 115 pounds*

*Height: 5'1"*

*Health: Poor*

You have been invited to go to a conference. Your department is able to provide some funds for you to attend, enough for the cost of a ticket and modest accommodations. You do require some extra care when traveling so you are a little nervous about being able to cover that. You think you might not be able to make it to the conference. When you bring this up to your department administrator you get some additional funds. Phew, this will make it a little easier on you, but not much. Finally, the day is here to take the trip, and after what is an excruciatingly uncomfortable 12-hour flight, you land at your destination. You have a chatty cab driver take you to the hotel, and he is wondering if you have anyone traveling with you. "It must be hard to travel alone in your condition," he says. You get to your hotel room and the bed is way too high, and there is no way you will be able to get in and out every day! You ask if the hotel has any other rooms available, but the best they can do is bring what is best described as a child's cot into your room. "You should be able to fit!" says the person who brings it after giving you a quick look over.

At breakfast the next day you don't really find any food options you can eat, so you skip the meal. Finally, the conference draws to a close, and you have your interview that is scheduled for the last day. You have 5 A level publications, a great service record and you love teaching—you are so committed you even go to MOBTS every year. This year was even the 50th anniversary...It was so much fun... Stop it! You need to focus right now. This is AOM and your life is on the line. You need to get this job.

Your interviewer asks you a lot about how much you are able to devote energy to your work. The questions about mental health are coming up quite often. You think "I must really look bad sleeping on that terrible thing all week! Why do they keep asking me all these pointed questions?" Overall, the interview goes well, and you feel you might have a good shot.