

# The Stigma of Obesity in Customer Service: A Mechanism for Remediation and Bottom-Line Consequences of Interpersonal Discrimination

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Using a customer service paradigm, the authors extended the justification–suppression model (JSM) of prejudice (C. S. Crandall & A. Eshleman, 2003) to include contemporary, covert forms of discrimination and to identify a discrimination remediation mechanism. Overall, the results of 3 studies revealed that actual and confederate obese shoppers in high-prejudice justification conditions faced more interpersonal discrimination than average-weight shoppers. Furthermore, Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that adopting strategies that remove perceivers' justifications for discriminating against obese individuals (i.e., the controllability of weight) decreases the incidence of interpersonal discrimination. Additionally, Study 3 demonstrates negative bottom-line consequences of interpersonal discrimination for organizations (e.g., customer loyalty, purchasing behavior). Together, these studies confirm that the JSM applies to covert forms of discrimination, show the importance of examining subtle discrimination, and offer a mechanism for theory-driven strategies for the reduction of covert forms of discrimination.

*Keywords:* discrimination, stigma, customer service, diversity, obesity

Over the past 50 years, many challenges to overt behavioral discrimination have been successful: Educational systems have been desegregated, the Civil Rights Act of 1964 has been enacted, and the Equal Opportunity Employment Commission was established to ensure that employment decisions are free of bias. More recently, protected group members have collected large monetary awards in lawsuits against corporations including Texaco, Shoney's, and Coca-Cola. A message has been sent to corporations, small businesses, schools, and communities: Formal acts of discrimination, such as unfair differences in compensation and selection decisions, will not be tolerated and are prosecutable.

Although it may appear as though U.S. society has been successful in curbing discrimination, organizational researchers recently have recognized that a particularly harmful form of discrim-

ination lingers: interpersonal or covert discrimination. This everyday or modern discrimination poses a much greater challenge to the contemporary workforce because it is subtle and therefore difficult to identify, assess, and eradicate. Notably, in their recent Frontiers Series book, *Discrimination at Work: The Psychological and Organizational Bases*, Dipboye and Colella (2005) concluded that "the subtlety and complexity of discrimination in today's workplace makes it even more pernicious in some respects than the simple and easily identifiable discrimination of the past" (p. 427). Accordingly, many contributors to this book called for future research that goes beyond the traditional focus on overt forms of discrimination to incorporate contemporary, subtle forms of discrimination (e.g., Cleveland, Vescio, & Barnes-Farrell, 2005; Dovidio & Hebl, 2005).

Many questions concerning modern workplace manifestations of discrimination, its potential outcomes, and effective methods by which to identify and reduce its consequences remain unanswered. These questions can begin to be addressed in the context of a recently advanced social psychological model of prejudice: the justification–suppression model (JSM) of the expression and experience of prejudice (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). In brief, the JSM proposes that genuine prejudice (i.e., a negative attitude about a group) is followed either by justification or suppression factors leading an individual to (or not to) express this prejudice (i.e., discriminate or direct negative behaviors toward group members). However, it is unclear whether the justification factors proposed by the JSM apply to both overt and covert manifestations of prejudice. Accordingly, the first aim of the current research was to inform and extend the JSM by integrating the JSM framework with theory

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on overt and covert forms of discrimination. This research may increase the generalizability and applicability of the JSM to understanding contemporary forms of prejudice expression in organizational contexts. The second aim of this research was to test specific elements of the JSM in order to identify a mechanism by which the expression of covert discrimination can effectively be reduced. The third aim of this research was to investigate tangible, financial implications for organizations that result from the expression of interpersonal discrimination.

We begin by discussing the JSM and subsequently address contemporary manifestations of discrimination and their potential inclusion within the framework of the JSM. We will argue that a more complex framework of expressed prejudice—one that addresses more subtle forms of discrimination in addition to the traditional, overt forms—is necessary for understanding the manifestation of discrimination in the work environment. In particular, we will examine these aims by assessing discrimination directed toward a stigmatizable group that includes over 27% of American adults: people who are obese.

### Prejudice Expression–Suppression

The JSM (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003) proposes that once a genuine prejudice (a spontaneous, uncontrolled, affective reaction) is experienced, justification or suppression factors will lead an individual to (or not to) express this prejudice. Suppression is defined as an internal or external motivation to decrease the expression or experience of prejudice. In general, prejudice suppression serves to convince oneself or others that an individual is not prejudiced. The JSM details many sources of prejudice suppression, including social norms, empathy, accountability, and personal values. In contrast, justifications for prejudice permit the expression of an otherwise suppressed prejudice. The JSM conceptualizes justifications as releasing mechanisms, as opposed to causes, of prejudice. Justifications allow the expression of prejudice without suffering any of the external or internal consequences. Examples of justification sources include beliefs in social hierarchies, dispositional attributions, stereotypes, and threat.

Thus, the JSM provides a definitive structure for understanding discrimination in organizations. Furthermore, the JSM offers insight into the design of interventions, remediation strategies, and training programs directed at reducing discrimination: According to the JSM, removing a perceiver's justification for expressing prejudice should reduce the likelihood of discrimination. However, the JSM is unclear as to what form discrimination will take in the presence of justifications. That is, although the JSM provides a framework for understanding when prejudices will be expressed, it does not discuss how prejudices will be expressed. Recent advances in discrimination research suggest that the manifestation of discrimination has changed (Dipboye & Colella, 2005). Therefore, it is critical to consider how prejudice is expressed when justifications are presented in organizational contexts.

### Discriminatory Behavior

Contemporary discrimination research contends that although the incidence of major discriminatory acts and overtly prejudiced attitudes have dropped considerably, these actions and attitudes have been supplanted by everyday discrimination or more covert

forms of prejudice that manifest in subtle, indirect discriminatory behaviors (e.g., Crosby, Bromley, & Saxe, 1980; Deitch et al., 2003; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1986; Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; McConahay, 1983). Researchers suggest that social norms (e.g., Blanchard, Crandall, Brigham, & Vaughn, 1994; Sechrist & Stangor, 2001; Stangor, Sechrist, & Jost, 2001) and political correctness concerns (Dovidio, Gaertner, Kawakami, & Hodson, 2002; Evans, Garcia, Garcia, & Baron, 2003; Judd, Park, Ryan, Brauer, & Kraus, 1995; Plant & Devine, 1998) have motivated this shift in the way in which prejudice and discrimination are expressed. Although this everyday discrimination is subtle, it is frequent and is as damaging to targets as overt discriminatory actions (e.g., Deitch et al., 2003; Stone, Stone, & Dipboye, 1992).

This shift in the manifestation of discrimination has complicated its assessment. In response, researchers have begun to develop measures of subtle discrimination and implicit prejudice, such as the Implicit Associations Test (Greenwald, McGhee, & Schwartz, 1998), priming measures (Dovidio, Kawakami, Johnson, Johnson, & Howard, 1997), and measures of interpersonal nonverbal behaviors such as social distance (Word, Zanna, & Cooper, 1974), facial expressions (Ruscher, 2001), eye contact (Dovidio et al., 1997; Jones & Cooper, 1971; Kleck & Nuessle, 1968), eye blinking (Amodio, Harmon-Jones, & Devine, 2003), and smiling (Biernat & Vescio, 2002). Nonverbal behaviors have received considerable attention because of their tendency to leak out and influence an interaction (e.g., Babad, Bernieri, & Rosenthal, 1989; Barr & Kleck, 1995; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995). Furthermore, there is a discrepancy in actor and target perspectives, such that actors tend to focus only on their own overt behaviors, whereas the targets in these interactions tend to focus both on actors' overt and nonverbal behaviors. Thus, perceivers often unknowingly communicate negative nonverbal behaviors that are more readily recognized by stigmatized targets (Dovidio et al., 2002).

Accordingly, Hebl and colleagues (Hebl, Foster, Mannix, & Dovidio, 2002) recently conceptualized discrimination found in organizations in terms of both *formal discrimination* (biases prevented by laws or organizational policies) and *interpersonal discrimination* (biases that tend to be nonverbal and are more covert). This framework focuses on nonverbal behaviors as identifiers of prejudice in face-to-face interactions. In organizational interactions, formal discrimination (traditional, overt manifestation of discrimination), such as refusing to greet, help, hire, or train stigmatized customers and employees, should be less common because this form of discrimination is often prohibited by contemporary law and can be the basis for employee termination. However, interpersonal discrimination is not subject to the same regulations. Although customer service representatives, for example, are not legally permitted to turn away a customer on the basis of a stigmatized attribute such as race or age, discrimination may persist in forms such as decreased eye contact, decreased smiling, and increased rudeness.

In order to effectively combat contemporary forms of discrimination, it is critical to consider the mechanisms that most successfully remediate subtle discrimination. Until about 50 years ago, majority group members felt inherently justified in expressing their prejudices. More recently, according to the JSM, justifications for discrimination vary as function of perceived norms, stigma type, and context. Thus, the development of techniques to

remediate contemporary forms of discrimination may need to target the mechanisms that directly justify harboring negative affect toward a particular group. We propose that the integration of the JSM with theories of formal and interpersonal manifestations of discrimination will provide a valuable framework for understanding and remediating subtle forms of discrimination. Drawing from the JSM, when prejudice is justified in the mind of the perceiver, prejudice is most likely expressed. Therefore, addressing a perceiver's justifications for prejudice may serve as an effective way in which to decrease the amount of covert prejudice or interpersonal discrimination.

### Discrimination and Customer Service

A customer service paradigm is used to test this conceptualization of discrimination and its remediation. We chose a customer service paradigm because one of the most dramatic changes occurring in today's U.S. workforce is the increase in jobs in the service sector (Nease, 1999; U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002), with large numbers of employees (a record 95 million in 2001) being hired primarily to service others. A major percentage of these jobs involves directly helping consumers purchase or obtain information about products of interest (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2002).

Although the poor treatment of one individual may not significantly alter overall organizational revenue, service biases against an entire class of individuals who are stigmatized may be disadvantageous to organizations. Indeed, being treated well is one of the most significant predictors of customers' satisfaction with the product and company, customers' loyalty, and customers' repeat business (Athanasopoulos, Gounaris, & Stathakopoulos, 2001; Clopton, Stoddard, & Clay, 2001; Leung, Li, & Au, 1998; Sharma, 1999). A number of individual-differences variables (e.g., customer gender) have been identified as influencing the customer service relationship (see Rafaeli & Sutton, 1990; Stiles, 1995). However, no known studies have investigated how the weight of the customer affects this relationship. With 61% of American adults classified as overweight (Flegal, Carroll, Kuczmarski, & Johnson, 1998; Wadden, Brownell, & Foster, 2002) and 27% of American adults classified as obese (Mokdad et al., 1999; Wadden et al., 2002), discriminatory actions against heavy customers may be problematic because of the sheer number of potential clientele who fit into this category. Simply put, retail has an annual sales revenue of about \$188 billion (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 1999), and heavy consumers comprise a significant percentage of the customer base. From an organizational perspective, these customers are a valuable contribution to sales revenues, and discriminatory treatment may have negative implications for organizations' bottom lines (see Moynagh & Worsley, 2002).

### The Stigma of Obesity

A growing body of research has demonstrated that the stigma of obesity is pervasive and unyielding (Crocker, Cornwell, & Major, 1993). Obese individuals are viewed to be less qualified for jobs (Pingitore, Dugoni, Tindale, & Spring, 1994; Roehling, 1999), less likable as patients (Allon, 1982; Hebl & Xu, 2001), and less desirable as interaction partners (Fallon, 1990; Miller, Rothblum, Felicio, & Brand, 1995) than are their average-weight counter-

parts. Additional studies have found that in comparison with average-weight managers, overweight managers are rated as less desirable and less worthy of recognition (Decker, 1987). Similarly, overweight salespersons are rated as less punctual, enthusiastic, well-mannered, and trustworthy than are average-weight salespersons (Zemanek, McIntyre, & Zemanek, 1998) and are assigned to less important and desirable territories than are thinner sales representatives (Bellizzi & Hasty, 1998).

Some consider the stigma of obesity to be one of the most noxious stigmas (Allon, 1982; Crandall, 1994; Crandall & Eshleman, 2003) because those who are obese are often perceived to be entirely responsible for their condition (Weiner, 1995). Extant literature on the stigma of obesity suggests that a significant component of stereotypes surrounding the stigma of obesity are perceptions of controllability, culpability, personal responsibility, and willpower (e.g., Crandall, 1994; Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998; DeJong, 1993; Rothblum, 1992; Weiner, Perry, & Magnusson, 1988). Consistent with this argument, the stigmatization of obesity has been closely linked with social ideologies that stress the value of hard work and self-determination (e.g., belief in the just world, authoritarianism, the Protestant work ethic; Crandall, 1994). As suggested by the JSM (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003), the attribution that an individual is responsible for his or her stigma may serve as a justification that results in increased discrimination (e.g., Anderson, 1992; Crandall & Moriarty, 1995). Despite mounting evidence that obese individuals face some form of discrimination, little research examines manifestations of discrimination against obese individuals or strategies by which this form of discrimination may be remediated.

Furthermore, although researchers have expressed the importance of capturing more subtle forms of discrimination in the organizational environment (Dipboye & Collela, 2005), very little research outside of the laboratory has attempted to measure and evaluate these more covert forms of prejudice (see Hebl et al., 2002; Hebl, Glick, Kazama, Singletary, & King, 2006). In fact, Dipboye and Collela (2005) argued that a severe limitation of previous research in this area is its reliance on obtrusive, laboratory-based studies with "paper people." Thus, over three studies, this research aims to inform the JSM by integrating covert forms of discrimination in addition to examining the tangible, financial implications of interpersonal discrimination. In the first study, we examined contemporary manifestations of prejudice toward obese individuals in customer service contexts. Additionally, we used the JSM framework to identify a mechanism that results in the justification of modern forms of discrimination (interpersonal discrimination) directed toward obese individuals. Specifically, we targeted perceptions of the controllability of obesity. In the second study, we replicated and extended these findings, considering a more direct operationalization of controllability of weight. Finally, in the third study, we explored the experiences of actual customers with covert and overt forms of discrimination and their associated purchasing behaviors. It is crucial to note, however, that although this research tests a mechanism potentially responsible for discrimination directed toward obese individuals by manipulating behaviors of the obese individuals themselves, we discourage any interpretation that the burden of discrimination reduction should lie with its victims. By manipulating the behaviors of obese individuals, our goal was to identify the specific mechanism that serves as a justification for those discriminating

against obese individuals, thereby suggesting an avenue for developing remediation and intervention strategies targeting the stigmatizers' beliefs and actions.

## Study 1

### *Overview and Hypotheses*

The JSM (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003) proposes that prejudice is often justified and consequently expressed if a stigma, like obesity (e.g., Crandall, 1994), is perceived to be controllable or if an individual can be deemed responsible for his or her stigma. However, contemporary literature regarding the nature of discrimination contends that formal acts of discrimination (e.g., blatant refusals to help) should rarely exist (e.g., Gaertner & Dovidio, 1986; Hebl et al., 2002). Thus, we did not anticipate that sales representatives would demonstrate formal discrimination toward obese customer confederates. Contemporary literature regarding the nature of discrimination also suggests that discrimination subsists in the form of more subtle behaviors (e.g., decreased eye contact; Hebl et al., 2002). Therefore, Study 1 examined formal and interpersonal manifestations of discrimination toward obese and average-weight individuals in a situation in which prejudice justifications were enhanced or removed. We predicted the following:

*Hypothesis 1:* Confederate customers who are obese, in comparison with those who are average weight, will experience a greater degree of interpersonal discrimination.

Following the tenets of the JSM (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003), we suggested that covert forms of discrimination directed at obese individuals may be reduced by implementing a technique targeted at removing perceiver justifications for these prejudices. That is, specifically targeting the stereotypes that suggest that obese individuals have the power to take responsibility for their weight should, following the JSM, enhance or reduce justifications for prejudice against the obese and subsequently enhance or reduce discrimination. Previous research and anecdotal evidence supports the notion that attire is an important component of image (Ligos, 2001) and that dress is a controllable aspect of appearance that is influential in customer service contexts (Fussell, 1983; Krapfel, 1988). Thus, in order to remove perceptions that obese customers were not taking control of their weight and appearance, we manipulated the clothing worn by customer confederates and assessed overt and covert forms of discrimination directed toward the customer confederates. It was expected that discrimination toward obese confederates would diminish when the justification for prejudice was removed (when obese confederates wear professional attire). We anticipated the following:

*Hypothesis 2:* Attire will moderate the effect of weight on interpersonal discrimination, such that (a) obese individuals in casual attire (high justification for prejudice) will receive the highest levels of interpersonal discrimination, whereas (b) obese individuals in professional attire (removed justification for prejudice) will receive levels of interpersonal discrimination comparable with average-weight customers.

## *Method*

### *Participants*

*Customer confederates.* Given that research consistently shows that women are judged and stigmatized on the basis of weight and appearance more so than men (e.g., Jackson, 1992; Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Roehling, 1999), we focused our investigation on women only. Ten female confederates (all Caucasian, 19–28 years of age) played the role of customers. In order to participate as customer confederates, the women had to be average weight for their height, have somewhat round faces, and look natural in a size 22 professionally constructed prosthesis.<sup>1</sup> These specifications permitted each customer confederate to portray all four experimental conditions: (a) an average-weight shopper in casual attire, (b) an average-weight shopper in professional attire, (c) an obese shopper wearing an obesity prosthetic underneath casual attire, and (d) an obese shopper wearing an obesity prosthetic underneath professional attire.

All confederate customers remained blind to the study's hypotheses. Although confederates were never explicitly informed of the hypotheses, it is likely that confederates intuited some of the study's purposes (see Kleck & Strenta, 1980). However, because of the predicted differentiation between formal and interpersonal discrimination and the predicted interaction with the manipulated variables, we believed that it would be difficult for confederates to determine the exact pattern of results. Furthermore, we attempted to circumvent experimenter bias through training and observer report. Each customer confederate memorized a standardized script and underwent formal training to ensure that she had committed the script to memory. All confederates were instructed to use their normal interpersonal mannerisms and shopping behaviors consistently across all of their trials. During training, confederates were presented with different scenarios in order to prepare them for different shopping mall contingencies (e.g., laughter, suspicion about their prosthesis). All confederates practiced the full procedure four times. A final training period, conducted immediately prior to data collection, allowed confederate customers to become accustomed to the prosthesis, minimize the novelty of the experience, and assure standardized behavior.

*Observer confederates.* Ten additional female confederates (7 Caucasian women, 1 Black woman, and 2 Asian women, aged 19–28 years), blind to the hypotheses, acted as observers for the customer–salesperson interactions. Confederate observers were used to ensure that differences in service reported by the customer confederates were due to store personnel and not confederate bias. Additionally, observers provided consistency ratings of the customer's in-store behaviors across all trials according to the training session and scripted instructions. Thus, the observers monitored the customers' and salespersons' behaviors. Observers were trained to record aspects of the interaction unobtrusively. Observers attended all customer confederate training sessions in order to familiarize themselves with the scripted behaviors. During these training sessions, observer confederates were given behavioral examples of each rating dimension in addition to practicing rating interactions on these dimensions. Observer practice sessions continued until all observer ratings were consistent.

*Participating stores and sales personnel.* There were a total of 160 stores in a large mall available for data collection. We chose not to use department stores (known for their hands-off policies), restaurants, or

<sup>1</sup> To ensure the credibility of the confederate as a person who is obese, we took photographs of confederates in the obesity prostheses and asked 125 independent raters to evaluate the photographs and rate the believability of the manipulations (see Figure 1 for exemplars). Not a single individual suspected that the target was wearing a prosthesis nor did anyone suspect that the photos were of anyone wearing a costume. A series of 2 (size: average–obese)  $\times$  2 (justification: high–low) ANOVAs revealed the predicted main effects for weight and clothing, and no significant interactions emerged.

establishments that catered solely to petite sizes, large sizes (there were none), baby apparel, or menswear. We could not use the data from eight stores because the script could not be followed (e.g., one store clerk could not assist because it was his first day, a clerk was alone at the register helping another customer, a confederate saw friends she recognized in the store), but these trials were equally distributed across conditions. In sum, there were a total of 152 stores included in the data set, 110 of which involved female sales personnel, 41 of which involved male sales personnel, and 1 in which the gender of the salesperson was not reported.

All interactions were tape-recorded, and the sales personnel in these stores served as participants. Similar to previous studies that have solicited data from organizations without the consent of participating employees (see Hebl et al., 2002, 2006) and to ensure that we did not violate the American Psychological Association's standards of ethics, we met with university lawyers to ensure the legality of conducting this research, received approval through the Institutional Review Board, spoke with colleagues, and discussed this research with individuals who had done previous work of this kind. To respect the stores and the sales personnel, we coded all data to hide the identities of the participating stores. Furthermore, we eliminated any association between stores and trial number so each participant and participating store remained anonymous.

### Materials

A professional costume designer sewed five obesity prosthetic devices, complete with a bodice, shoulders, and a padded pair of pants. These prosthetics were designed to be worn by a woman who fit into clothing in the approximate size range of 6–10 and resulted in the costumed-individual appearing to be a size 22 (see Figure 1). We used four sets of clothing: (a) casual average weight, (b) casual obese, (c) professional average weight, and (d) professional obese. Confederates in the casual condition wore navy blue stretch pants, gray turtleneck shirts, and generic-brand, loose-fitting, green sweatshirts. Confederates in the professional condition wore dark blue tailored suits. For the purpose of recording the interactions, customer confederates carried handheld tape recorders in their purses.

### Procedure

All confederates convened in the mall at a control station set up by the experimenter. A customer confederate was paired with an observer confederate, and the two were assigned to a specific sequence of 16 experimental trials. For each trial, the customer confederate was randomly assigned to one of the four conditions. The observer entered each store 2

min before the customer. The observer kindly declined all offers of help and busied herself by browsing through merchandise near the side of the wall where she could be relatively unobtrusive but still observe the interaction. The customer confederate turned on the tape recorder in her purse and then entered the assigned store. Once the customer passed the threshold of the store, the observer began timing the service lag time (time between the customer confederate's entrance and a salesperson's offer of help) with the stopwatch function of her wristwatch. The customer browsed in a central location of the store for 3 min in order to allow the salesperson time to approach her. If 3 min elapsed without help, the customer progressed through the store directly toward a salesperson.

Once the customer confederate made contact with a salesperson, the confederate explained that she was looking to buy a gift for her sister who "was celebrating her 20th birthday and liked traditional and feminine things." This information was vague enough to suit merchandise in every store and allowed the confederate to standardize the conversation. In an attempt to extend the interaction and assess whether the salesperson performed the formal requirements of his or her job, the customer always asked for a second recommendation. The customer confederate then thanked the salesperson, said that she needed to shop more before making a purchase, and left the store. She returned to the control station and immediately completed a questionnaire rating her experience. The observer lingered in the store for 2 min after the customer confederate's departure and then returned to the control station where she filled out a questionnaire rating the interaction and recording the interaction length and lag time. Customer–observer pairs were instructed to complete their questionnaires separately and not to discuss trials or potential study hypotheses with each other.

### Measures of Formal Discrimination

Three items were used to assess the extent to which sales personnel displayed formal discrimination toward customers. These items are behaviors that are mandated for sales personnel (see Berry, 1995) and include (a) greeting the customer, (b) recommending a first item upon request, and (c) recommending a second item upon request.

### Measures of Interpersonal Discrimination

*Confederate and observer ratings.* Five items were used to assess the extent to which sales personnel displayed interpersonal discrimination toward customers. These items were generated from previous research on salesperson behavior (Ford, 1998) and interpersonal discrimination (Hebl



Figure 1. Photographic stimuli of the different shopper conditions.

et al., 2002) and include (a) the extent to which the salesperson smiled at the customer (reverse coded), (b) the extent to which the salesperson exhibited friendliness toward the customer (reverse coded), (c) the extent to which the salesperson made eye contact with the customer (reverse coded), (d) the extent to which the salesperson was rude to the customer, and (e) the extent to which the salesperson ended the interaction prematurely. To make these ratings, customers and observers used a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored at 0 (*not at all*) and 6 (*very much*).

*Time.* For each interaction, and in accordance with Walters and Curran (1996), observers recorded the lag time (amount of time it took for the salesperson to approach the customer) and interaction time (amount of time the salesperson interacted with the customer).

*Language analyses.* Each interaction was transcribed for a language content analysis to assess the verbal component of interpersonal behaviors. A language assessment offers another independent assessment of the interaction. Confederate shopper communication was removed before the transcriptions were analyzed. The content of the interactions was analyzed using a computer text analysis program, the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) program (Pennebaker, Francis, & Booth, 2001). The LIWC program analyzes text files and computes the percentage of words from that file that fall into each of 74 possible linguistic categories, such as negative emotion, self-reflection, causation, and physical issues. The program dictionary is composed of 2,300 words and word stems and was developed using emotion rating scales (e.g., the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule; Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988, *Roget's II: The New Thesaurus* (American Heritage Dictionary, 1995), and standard English dictionaries. Each word or word stem was scored as belonging to each relevant category. For example, the word *cried* is part of four word categories: sadness, negative emotion, overall affect, and past-tense verb. Consistent with our measures of interpersonal discrimination, the LIWC program was only used to assess negative emotion (e.g., hate, worthless).

### Results and Discussion

In general, we predicted that obese customer confederates would encounter heightened levels of interpersonal discrimination compared with their average-weight shopping counterparts. However, we expected this effect to be moderated by a prejudice-reducing technique aimed at enhancing the belief that the obese shopper was controlling her weight by trying to positively alter her appearance. That is, we expected that confederates in the obese-high-justification condition (casual attire) would experience higher levels of interpersonal discrimination than confederates in all other conditions.

#### Hypothesis 1: Tests of Discrimination

As expected, we did not find evidence of formal discrimination. Separate binary logistic regressions were computed on the three dichotomous formal discrimination items: greeting the customer, recommending a first item, and recommending a second item. None of these variables demonstrated a significant main effect, nor was there a significant interaction of clothing and weight.<sup>2</sup>

We hypothesized that tests of interpersonal discrimination indicators would reveal discrimination based on weight. In the subsequent analyses, we will address this hypothesis by first reporting the expected main effect of weight on the interpersonal discrimination dependent variables. The second hypothesis pertains to remediating these effects by challenging justifications perceivers hold for the stigmatization of obesity. Thus, tests of the hypothesized moderation of discrimination will follow the report of all main effects.

*Confederate and observer ratings.* In order to test for differences in confederate and observer reporter responses, a 4 (condition: average weight-high justification, average weight-low justification, obese-high justification, obese-low justification)  $\times$  2 (viewpoint: customer-observer) repeated measures analysis of variance (ANOVA), with condition as a between-subjects variable and viewpoint as a within-subjects variable, was conducted on each of the five interpersonal rating measures. Because condition did not interact with viewpoint on any of the dependent variables (all  $ps > .09$ ), we collapsed across viewpoint. A principal-axis factor analysis on the five measures of interpersonal discrimination yielded one factor accounting for 70.1% of the variance (loadings  $> .73$ ). Accordingly, we created a composite consisting of the five dependent measures to form one measure of interpersonal discrimination (coefficient  $\alpha = .89$ ).

We conducted a 2 (size: obese-average)  $\times$  2 (justification: high-low) ANOVA on the interpersonal discrimination composite. As predicted by Hypothesis 1, the ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of size,  $F(1, 148) = 5.43, p = .02, \eta^2 = 0.04$ , such that those customers who were average weight encountered lower levels of interpersonal discrimination ( $M = 1.95, SD = 0.83$ ) than those who were obese ( $M = 2.34, SD = 1.25$ ; see Figure 2).

*Time.* Of the 152 interactions examined, a total of 144 cases had data on the length of the interaction ( $n = 33$  for average-weight business,  $n = 39$  for average-weight casual,  $n = 36$  for obese business,  $n = 36$  for obese casual). The eight missing cases were due to observers forgetting to use their stopwatches. A 2 (size: average-obese)  $\times$  2 (justification: high-low) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of size,  $F(1, 140) = 4.90, p = .03, \eta^2 = .03$ . Specifically, interactions with obese customers lasted for a significantly shorter period of time ( $M = 2$  min 8 s,  $SD = 1$  min 18 s) than interactions with average-weight customers ( $M = 2$  min 36 s,  $SD = 1$  min 10 s).

Of the 152 interactions, a total of 134 cases had data on the lag time with which the sales personnel approached the customer ( $n = 33$  for average-weight business,  $n = 36$  for average-weight casual,  $n = 32$  for obese business,  $n = 33$  for obese casual). In 18 sessions, observers forgot to look at their stopwatches (these errors tended to occur in earlier sessions). The 2 (size: average-obese)  $\times$  2 (justification: high-low) ANOVA revealed no significant main effects (all  $ps > .32$ ). That is, regardless of customer size and clothing, customer confederates were approached with relatively similar time delays. In retrospect, this is not surprising. Nearly every store employed a salesperson to remain at the entrance with the sole purpose of greeting each entering customer, thus creating little variability in lag time.

*Test of negative affect.* Of the 152 interactions, a total of 104 sessions were transcribed and analyzed using the LIWC program. One hundred and two of these transcriptions had data for negative

<sup>2</sup> To examine the possibility that salesperson gender might moderate the reactions toward the obese confederate customers, a 2 (size: average-obese)  $\times$  2 (justification: high-low)  $\times$  2 (viewpoint: customer-observer)  $\times$  2 (gender of salesperson: male-female) ANOVA was conducted on the interpersonal measures, and a 2 (size: average-obese)  $\times$  2 (justification: high-low)  $\times$  2 (gender of salesperson: male-female) ANOVA was conducted on both length and lag time of the interaction. No significant differences on any of these gender analyses emerged (all  $ps > .10$ ); thus, we collapsed all subsequent analyses across salesperson gender.

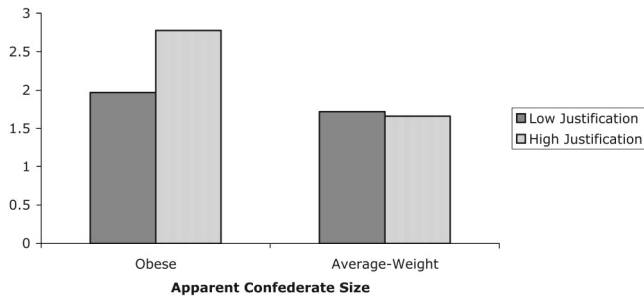


Figure 2. Interpersonal discrimination as a function of enhanced (casual attire) or reduced (business attire) justification for the stigma of obesity (Study 1).

emotion ( $n = 29$  for average-weight business,  $n = 28$  for average-weight casual,  $n = 20$  for obese business,  $n = 25$  for obese casual). Consistent with the hypotheses, a 2 (size: average–obese)  $\times$  2 (justification: high–low) ANOVA revealed a significant main effect of size, such that interactions with obese customers ( $M = 0.21$ ,  $SD = 0.5$ ) yielded a greater percentage of negative affective language than interactions with average-weight customers ( $M = 0.07$ ,  $SD = 0.4$ ),  $F(1, 98) = 5.12$ ,  $p = .03$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ .

In sum, Hypotheses 1 was partially supported. Observer and customer confederates reported greater levels of interpersonal discrimination directed at obese customers in comparison with average-weight customers, as measured by an index of interpersonal nonverbal behaviors (a composite consisting of smiling, eye contact, friendliness, rudeness, and ending the interaction prematurely), shorter interaction time, and higher levels of Negative Affect. However, we further predicted that the effect of confederate weight would depend on confederate attire.

### Hypothesis 2: Clothing as a Moderator of the Obesity Stigma

We anticipated an ordinal interaction between the size of the customer and the clothing worn by the customer, such that obese customer confederates in the high-justification condition (casually dressed) would receive the greatest amount of interpersonal discrimination, and obese customer confederates in the low-justification condition (professionally dressed) would encounter levels of interpersonal discrimination equivalent to levels directed at average-weight shoppers. According to Strube and Bobko (1989), the most appropriate way to test for an ordinal interaction is in a hierarchical fashion. Thus, a three-step hierarchical test of planned contrasts was conducted on each of the dependent variables.

**Confederate and observer ratings.** The first step in Strube and Bobko's (1989) test is to examine the absence of one hypothesized null effect on the measure of nonverbal interpersonal discriminatory behaviors. We expected that casually dressed average-weight shoppers would be treated similarly to professionally dressed average-weight shoppers. As predicted, interpersonal discrimination did not differ between the casually dressed average-weight shoppers ( $M = 1.96$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) and the professionally dressed average-weight shoppers ( $M = 1.94$ ,  $SD = 0.78$ ,  $F < .001$ ). Because this contrast was not significant, the two means are

combined for the subsequent contrast—a test of the second hypothesized null finding (the mean of the average-weight shoppers in comparison with the mean of the professionally dressed obese shopper). As predicted, interpersonal discrimination did not differ between average-weight shoppers ( $M = 1.95$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ) and professionally dressed overweight shoppers ( $M = 2.02$ ,  $SD = 1.11$ ),  $F(1, 148) = 0.10$ ,  $p = .75$ . Because this comparison also did not reach significance, all three means are compared with the remaining mean (casually dressed obese shoppers). As hypothesized, this contrast yielded a significant effect,  $F(1, 148) = 12.72$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .08$ , such that obese shoppers in the high-justification condition received the greatest amount of interpersonal discrimination ( $M = 2.68$ ,  $SD = 1.32$ ) out of the four groups (mean of the other three groups:  $M = 1.97$ ,  $SD = 0.92$ ; see Figure 2).

**Time and affect.** The same hierarchical procedure was conducted on the time and negative affect variables (lag time was excluded from this analysis because all customers were approached within approximately the same amount of time). These variables did not pass Strube and Bobko's (1989) hierarchical test.

In sum, we found partial support for Hypothesis 2: Justification for prejudice (operationalized in type of clothing worn by customer confederates) moderated the relationship between the size of the customer and some of the measures of interpersonal discrimination. Specifically, the results of confederate and observer ratings of interpersonal discrimination indicate that the treatment of professionally dressed obese customers, or those for whom the justification for prejudice was removed, did not differ from average-weight customers. In contrast, casually dressed obese customers, or those for whom the justification of prejudice should be enhanced, received the greatest amount of interpersonal discrimination.

We did not find support for the hypothesis that justifications for prejudice moderate interpersonal discrimination as measured by the length of time spent with the customer and the negative affect expressed toward the customer. However, the range of these measures was inadvertently restricted as a function of the scripted nature of the interactions in this study—all customer confederates followed a behavioral and conversation script in which each of the confederates asked for two items. Furthermore (and consistent with our expectations regarding the limited occurrence of formal discrimination), there was limited variability in sales personnel compliance on these requests. Thus, the script and compliance rates may have reduced the opportunity for variability in interaction length and verbal affect.

In sum, by addressing cues that justify prejudice expression, specifically by changing customer attire such that obese customers appeared to be taking control of their appearance, we found that interpersonal forms of discrimination were successfully reduced on the self- and observer-reported interpersonal discrimination measure. An advantage to the use of clothing as a remediation tactic is that there is high ecological validity: It is common to find both professionally dressed and casually dressed shoppers in a mall. However, a limitation of this type of manipulation is that the independent variable lacks construct validity. The manipulation of clothing is an indirect manipulation of controllability; we cannot be sure that we manipulated perceptions of the shoppers' desire to control their appearance. Thus, a stronger test of the JSM and of the reduction of covert forms of discrimination through the mech-

anism of controllability would be to use a more direct manipulation of controllability of weight. Hence, Study 2 was designed to conceptually replicate Study 1 and to clarify the role of perceptions of weight controllability as a potential stigma remediation mechanism.

## Study 2

### Overview

Following the JSM (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003), Study 2 was designed to replicate and extend the results of Study 1 by addressing justifications for prejudice as a potential discrimination remediation tactic. In order to clarify perceiver justifications as the mechanism targeted in Study 1, we conducted a pilot test of 16 undergraduate respondents' ratings of the extent to which several behavioral examples demonstrated an obese individual's attempt to control his or her appearance. Using a 7-point Likert-type scale anchored at 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much*), we found that a repeated measures ANOVA revealed that participants perceived "dressing professionally" ( $M = 4.68$ ,  $SD = 0.95$ ) as being less prototypical of attempts to control obesity than "dieting" ( $M = 5.69$ ,  $SD = 1.18$ ) or "exercising" ( $M = 5.85$ ,  $SD = 1.41$ ). Furthermore, the combination of "both dieting and exercising" was perceived to be the best example of controlling obesity ( $M = 6.46$ ,  $SD = 1.27$ ),  $F(3, 15) = 14.01$ ,  $p < .01$ . These results are consistent with previous research by Amato and Crocker (1995), which shows that the stigma of obesity has more negative consequences when obesity is presented to be controllable through diet and exercise than when it is presented to be a function of genetics and external means. Thus, Study 2 aimed to utilize a stronger manipulation of desire to control one's weight: diet and exercise.

Replicating the methodology of Study 1, we examined the customer service treatment of confederate customers interacting with sales representatives at a local mall. On the basis of the results of Study 1 and previous research on contemporary manifestations of discrimination (e.g., Deitch et al., 2003; Dovidio et al., 2002; Hebl et al., 2002), we did not anticipate that sales personnel would demonstrate formal discrimination when interacting with obese customer confederates. However, we did anticipate the following:

*Hypothesis 1:* Customer confederates who are obese, in comparison with those who are average weight for their height, will experience a greater degree of interpersonal discrimination.

However, following the predictions of the JSM, we anticipated that the extent to which obese customers are the targets of discrimination will depend on the presence or absence of a justification for prejudice. Consistent with pilot testing, the justification of discrimination mechanism of weight controllability was operationalized in Study 2 through diet and exercise habits. Confederate shoppers in the high-justification condition drank a visibly high-calorie beverage and commented that they had not recently performed an athletic activity (providing information that the confederate was choosing not to control or take responsibility for her weight), and the confederates in the low-justification condition drank a visibly calorie-free beverage and commented on recent athletic activity (providing information that the confederate was

choosing to control or take responsibility for her weight). Therefore, we expected that individuals who removed the justification for discrimination of controllability (i.e., were on a diet and exercised) would experience less interpersonal discrimination than those who enhanced this justification (i.e., were not on a diet and did not exercise). In other words, we predicted the following:

*Hypothesis 2:* Justification for discrimination will moderate the relationship between weight and interpersonal discrimination, such that (a) obese customers in the high-justification condition will report the highest levels of interpersonal discrimination, and (b) obese customers in the low-justification condition will experience similar amounts of interpersonal discrimination as the average-weight shoppers.

### Method

#### Participants

Seven women (aged 19–24) played the role of customer confederates (6 Caucasian women, 1 Hispanic woman). Seven additional individuals (aged 18–22), four male and three female, were paired with customers and participated as confederate observers in this study. Each pair was assigned to enter 12 stores, matched according to the type and price of merchandise sold. Because of unpredicted changes in store locations and closings, each pair was unable to find approximately two of their assigned stores. Therefore, the results are based on a total of 66 interactions.

#### Procedure

The procedures of Study 2 are identical to those of Study 1. Confederates participated in a thorough training session to standardize the interactions. Mirroring the script used in Study 1, customer confederates in each condition asked for assistance in finding a birthday present for a sister. In the high-justification condition, customer confederates carried an ice cream drink into the store. After asking for help, participants called attention to their drink by stating, "This Dairy Queen Blizzard is just so good! I hope you don't mind me drinking it in here." They continued by saying, "Thank goodness I am not on a diet. I have these friends who just did a half-marathon. . . . Good gosh, I could never do that. Anyway, back to your suggestions." In the low-justification condition, customer confederates carried a Diet Coke into the store. After asking for help, confederates mentioned their drink by stating, "This Diet Coke is just so good! I hope you don't mind me drinking it in here. I am on a diet." They also mentioned exercising by saying, "I just did a half-marathon with my friends. . . . Good gosh, it felt great. Anyway, back to your suggestions." Confederates in this study wore the casual clothing so that the effects of exercise and diet would not be confounded with attire. As in Study 1, all interactions were tape-recorded in order to obtain an objective measure of the negativity of the interaction. Measurement of formal and interpersonal discrimination was identical to Study 1.

### Results and Discussion

In general, we predicted that obese customers would experience greater levels of interpersonal discrimination than average-weight customers. However, we predicted that this relationship would be moderated by perceived justifications for prejudice against obese individuals—specifically, beliefs in the controllability of weight. We predicted that providing evidence that an individual chose to control her weight (drinking a calorie-free beverage and exercising) would remove justifications for discrimination, resulting in similar levels of interpersonal discrimination as average-weight



customers. In the subsequent analyses, we will address this hypothesis by first reporting the expected main effect of weight on the interpersonal discrimination dependent variables, followed by the test of the second hypothesis of perceiver justifications as a moderator of interpersonal discrimination.

### *Hypothesis 1: Tests of Discrimination*

As in Study 1, we did not find any evidence of formal discrimination: Separate binary logistic regressions revealed no effect of weight or justifications on the formal discrimination variables, including greeting of the customer, recommending a first item, and recommending a second item. However, we hypothesized that obese customers would face higher levels of interpersonal discrimination than would average-weight customers.

*Confederate and observer ratings.* Consistent with Study 1, a composite composed of the five dependent measures represented the interpersonal discrimination measure (coefficient  $\alpha = .91$ ). A 2 (size: average–obese)  $\times$  2 (justification: high–low) ANOVA on the interpersonal discrimination composite yielded a significant main effect of size,  $F(1, 62) = 7.02, p = .01, \eta^2 = 0.10$ , such that average-weight customers ( $M = 1.69, SD = 1.01$ ) received less interpersonal discrimination than those who were obese ( $M = 2.41, SD = 1.12$ ).

*Time.* A 2 (size: average–obese)  $\times$  2 (justification: high–low) ANOVA was conducted on the length of the interactions. Although the pattern of data supports our hypotheses, such that sales personnel spent less time with obese customers ( $M = 1 \text{ min } 45 \text{ s}, SD = 1 \text{ min } 5 \text{ s}$ ) than they did with average-weight customers ( $M = 1 \text{ min } 57 \text{ s}, SD = 1 \text{ min } 8 \text{ s}$ ), these patterns were not significant ( $F < 1$ ).

Of the 66 interactions, 63 cases had data on the lag time, which is the length of time between the customer confederate's entrance into the store and being approached by a salesperson ( $n = 18$  for average-weight diet–exercise,  $n = 14$  for average-weight no diet–no exercise,  $n = 14$  for obese diet–exercise,  $n = 17$  for obese no diet–no exercise). A 2 (size: average–obese)  $\times$  2 (justification: high–low) ANOVA did not reveal the predicted pattern: Although there tended to be a greater lag time for obese customers ( $M = 67.10, SD = 80.59$ ) than average-weight customers ( $M = 45.84, SD = 30.07$ ), this pattern was not statistically significant,  $F(1, 59) = 1.93, p = .17, \eta^2 = .03$ .

*Negative Affect.* Of the 66 interactions, a total of 50 transcriptions ( $n = 13$  for average-weight diet–exercise,  $n = 12$  for average-weight no diet–no exercise,  $n = 11$  for obese diet–exercise,  $n = 14$  for obese no diet–no exercise) were analyzed for negative emotion using the LIWC program (the remaining 16 interactions were either inadvertently erased or incomprehensible because of poor sound quality). Consistent with our hypotheses, a 2 (size: average–obese)  $\times$  2 (justification: high–low) ANOVA revealed a significant size main effect, such that interactions with obese customers ( $M = 0.39, SD = 0.83$ ) yielded a greater percentage of Negative Affect than interactions with average-weight customers ( $M = 0.09, SD = 0.29$ ),  $F(1, 46) = 4.26, p = .05, \eta^2 = .09$ .

In sum, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported: Obese customers experienced higher levels of interpersonal discrimination as measured by observer and customer report of nonverbal behaviors and

a word analysis of the transcript between the customers and the salesperson.<sup>3</sup>

### *Hypothesis 2: Justification as a Moderator of Discrimination*

We anticipated an ordinal interaction between the size of the customer and the dieting behaviors disclosed by the customer, such that obese customer confederates drinking the high-calorie drink (high-justification condition) would experience the greatest amount of interpersonal discrimination, and obese customer confederates engaging in exercise and consuming a diet drink (low-justification condition) would encounter levels of interpersonal discrimination equivalent to levels directed at average-weight shoppers.

*Confederate and observer ratings.* We tested the interaction between size and justification on the confederate and observer ratings of interpersonal discrimination in a hierarchical fashion (Strube & Bobko, 1989). The first step tested the reported interpersonal discrimination experienced by average-weight shoppers across the justification conditions. As predicted, interpersonal discrimination did not differ between the average-weight shoppers drinking the high-calorie beverage ( $M = 1.72, SD = 0.85$ ) and the diet beverage ( $M = 1.66, SD = 1.15$ ),  $F(1, 62) = 0.03, p = .87, \eta^2 < .001$ . Thus, these means were combined and compared with the mean of the obese shopper drinking the diet beverage. As predicted, interpersonal discrimination did not differ between average-weight shoppers ( $M = 1.69, SD = 1.01$ ) and overweight shoppers drinking the diet beverage ( $M = 1.97, SD = 1.03$ ),  $F(1, 62) = 0.72, p = .40, \eta^2 = .01$ . Accordingly, the three means were combined and compared with obese shoppers drinking a high-calorie beverage. As hypothesized, this contrast yielded a significant finding, such that obese confederate shoppers in the high-justification condition received the greatest amount of interpersonal discrimination ( $M = 2.78, SD = 1.09$ ) out of the four groups (mean of the other three groups:  $M = 1.78, SD = 1.09$ ),  $F(1, 62) = 11.98, p = .001, \eta^2 = .16$  (see Figure 3).

*Affect and time.* The Negative Affect variable did not pass Strube and Bobko's (1989) hierarchical test. Time variables were excluded from this analysis because there was little variability in lag time and time helped.

Consistent with results of Study 1, obese customers in Study 2 encountered more interpersonal discrimination than did their average-weight counterparts, as measured by the self-reports and observer reports of nonverbal discriminatory behavior. However, these effects depended on whether a justification for prejudice was emphasized. That is, the remediation mechanism of perceiver justifications for discrimination against people who are obese—perceptions of the controllability of weight—was successful in decreasing interpersonal forms of discrimination. However, mea-

<sup>3</sup> In order to ensure that shoppers' behaviors were standardized across sessions and that the results were not being driven by experimenter effects, we had observers indicate how much the shopper (a) smiled, (b) was approachable, (c) was friendly, (d) made eye contact, and (e) acted consistently with reference to the training session. A 2 (size: average–obese)  $\times$  2 (justification: high–low) ANOVA on the observers' ratings of confederate customer behaviors yielded no significant interactions or main effects on any of the variables.

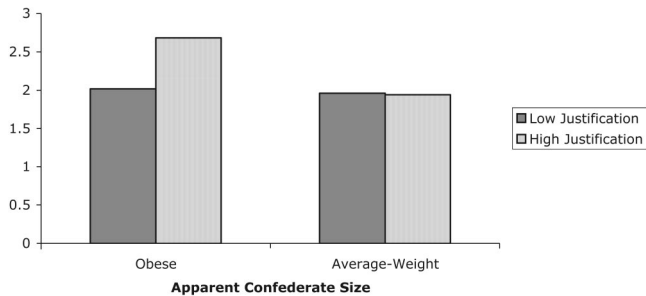


Figure 3. Interpersonal discrimination as a function of enhanced (no dieting behaviors) or reduced (dieting behaviors) justification for the stigma of obesity (Study 2).

asures of time spent with customers and lag time did not support our predictions. As discussed, this may be a result of the standardization of customer scripts and the restriction of range in our measures of sales personnel behaviors.

These studies demonstrate that, consistent with modern theoretical conceptualizations of prejudice, discrimination was manifested in covert, interpersonal forms rather than in traditional or overt forms. These studies inform Crandall and Eshleman's (2003) JSM by demonstrating that the justification mechanism operates with regard to subtle manifestations of prejudice. In addition, these results offer theoretical and practical implications for the development of strategies for the remediation of interpersonal discrimination. However, it remains uncertain whether there are any bottom-line consequences for businesses when their customers experience interpersonal discrimination. This is a particularly critical question in the context of forms of discrimination that are legal; because litigation does not exist as a motivation for the remediation of interpersonal discrimination, it is essential to examine the effects of interpersonal discrimination on another motivating force: profit. Thus, the third study addressed this concern by surveying actual shoppers and assessing the relationship between the experience of interpersonal discrimination and buying behaviors.

### Study 3

#### Overview

The results of Studies 1 and 2 demonstrate that when justifications for discrimination can be identified, obese individuals receive more negative interpersonal treatment than average-weight individuals. The results further suggest that when justifications for prejudice held by perceivers are targeted and removed, manifestations of interpersonal discrimination directed at customers and/or employees can be curbed. However, the incentive for organizations to endeavor to remediate these interpersonal discriminatory behaviors is unclear. In other words, are there tangible, financial reasons for salespeople and their employing organizations to avoid engaging in interpersonal discrimination? More specifically, are the buying behaviors of real customers influenced by interpersonal discrimination? Study 3 attempted to answer these questions by investigating the effects of interpersonal discrimination on the buying behaviors of actual shoppers. Consistent with the results of Studies 1 and 2, we did not expect obese individuals to experience formal discrimination. However, we expected the following:

*Hypothesis 1:* Obese individuals will experience more interpersonal discrimination than will average-weight individuals.

We further expected that the discrimination encountered by shoppers would influence their purchasing behaviors. As previously mentioned, existing research demonstrates that treatment of customers by salespeople is an important predictor of customer behaviors (e.g., Athanassopoulos et al., 2001; Clopton et al., 2001; Leung et al., 1998; Sharma, 1999). Therefore, interpersonal discrimination will likely have consequences for customer purchasing behavior. It follows:

*Hypothesis 2:* The extent to which individuals experience interpersonal discrimination will be negatively related to their buying behaviors.

### Method

#### Participants and Procedures

The participants for this study were 191 Caucasian women recruited from an outdoor shopping arcade in the Houston metropolitan area. The average age of participants was 31.56 years ( $SD = 13.57$ ). A team of approximately 20 research assistants individually approached and asked customers exiting stores to fill out an anonymous short survey about their shopping experience. Consistent with the previous two studies, we chose not to collect data outside stores selling food or services or from retail stores catering to plus-sized women. The response rate was approximately 76%. Once the participants had completed the survey and exited the immediate premises, the experimenter evaluated the body size of the participant without looking at participants' ratings.

#### Measures

Except where otherwise noted, all measures were based on 7-point Likert-type scales anchored at 1 (*not at all*) and 7 (*very much*).

*Formal discrimination.* Because the amount of assistance requested was not controlled across participants as in the first two studies, the measure of formal discrimination that was included in this study was whether the salesperson greeted the customer.

*Interpersonal discrimination.* Using the same measures of interpersonal discrimination as the first two studies, participants indicated the extent to which the salesperson demonstrated the following behaviors: eye contact (reverse coded), smiling (reverse coded), friendliness (reverse coded), rudeness, and premature ending of the customer-agent interaction (coefficient  $\alpha = .75$ ).

*Time spent.* Participants approximated the number of minutes they shopped at the store.

*Potential for store profit.* Participants reported the amount of money they had planned to spend in the store and the amount of money they actually spent in the store. A difference score was computed between planned and actual purchasing in order to represent purchasing behaviors as a function of the interaction experienced.

*Future patronage.* A composite of three items was created to assess customers' future buying behaviors. These items included "Did the customer service interaction make you want to return to this store to shop?" "How likely is it that you would recommend this store to a friend, based on the customer service interaction you just had?" and "How likely is it that you will come back to purchase items from this store in the future?" (coefficient  $\alpha = .75$ ).

*Body type.* Research assistant observers recorded each participant's weight on the Body Image Inventory (adapted from Stunkard, Sorenson, & Schulsinger, 1983) by circling one of nine different body types increasing

in weight. For comparability with the first two studies, the body type rating was dichotomized so that the largest three figures were used to represent obese individuals ( $n = 22$ ), and the bottom six figures were used to represent average weight ( $n = 166$ ).

### Results and Discussion

Descriptive statistics, reliability coefficients, and intercorrelations for all variables are reported in Table 1. As expected, a chi-square analysis revealed no differences in formal discrimination between average-weight and obese shoppers.

#### Hypothesis 1

We tested the generalizability of the results revealed in Study 1 and 2 by conducting an independent samples  $t$  test to assess whether there was a significant difference in the amount of interpersonal discrimination that obese and average-weight participants reported receiving. As expected, obese individuals reported more interpersonal discrimination ( $M = 3.08$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ) than did average-weight individuals ( $M = 2.48$ ,  $SD = 1.03$ ),  $t(165) = -2.51$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $d = .56$ .

#### Hypothesis 2

To examine the effect of discrimination on buying behaviors, we assessed the relationship between interpersonal discrimination and the following dependent variables: potential for store profit, the amount of time spent in the store, and the measure of future patronage. Supporting the hypothesis that interpersonal discrimination would have negative financial consequences for an organization, the results indicated that potential for store profit (the amount of money spent relative to the amount intended) was negatively correlated with interpersonal discrimination ( $r = -.26$ ,  $p = .01$ ;  $R^2 = .07$ ), indicating that customers were less likely to spend money in stores in which they experienced interpersonal discrimination. Although the correlation was not significant, the relationship between interpersonal discrimination and time spent in the store was in the expected direction ( $r = -.13$ ,  $p = .08$ ;  $R^2 = .02$ ). Moreover, and in support of the second hypothesis, the composite variable of future intentions to shop at the store was strongly negatively correlated with interpersonal discrimination ( $r = -.60$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $R^2 = .36$ ), indicating that the higher the level of perceived interpersonal discrimination, the less likely shoppers were to indicate they would return to the store in the future.

In sum, the findings of Study 3 confirm and extend the findings of the first two experimental studies with survey data from actual customers: Obese customers reported greater levels of interpersonal discrimination than average-weight customers. Furthermore, reports of greater interpersonal discrimination were related to spending less time in the store, spending less money than originally intended, and ultimately indicating that one was less likely to return to the store in the future.

### General Discussion

The current research addresses three primary issues. First, this research informs and extends a recently advanced model of prejudice expression, the JSM, by integrating the JSM framework with theory of overt and covert forms of discrimination. Across two separate studies, we found converging evidence that when justifications for prejudice expression existed, prejudice was expressed toward obese shoppers in covert, interpersonal forms. Similarly, in a sample of actual shoppers, obese individuals were more likely than average-weight individuals to report interpersonal discrimination. Second, using the JSM framework, we found that perceptions of controllability of weight acted as a mechanism for increased or decreased interpersonal discrimination directed toward overweight women. The results of Studies 1 and 2 suggest that strategies targeting and removing specific justifications for prejudice held by a perceiver can reduce interpersonal discrimination. Lastly, tangible, financial implications for organizations were found to be associated with the expression of interpersonal discrimination. We will now discuss these findings and their implications in more detail.

The current research makes important theoretical contributions to the JSM, to the development of discrimination-reducing strategies, to conceptualizations of discrimination in the workplace, and to research on the stigma of obesity. First, the JSM currently conceptualizes prejudice expression in terms of dueling desires to express genuinely prejudiced attitudes while maintaining one's values and self-concepts that conflict with prejudice (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). However, although the JSM provides a framework for understanding when prejudice will be expressed, it does not address how prejudices will be expressed. The current studies clarify this aspect of the JSM by integrating theory on the covert and overt manifestations of discrimination with the JSM framework. Consequently, this research advances the JSM's explanatory power and increases the JSM's generalizability and applicability to subtle discrimination in organizational contexts.

Table 1  
Means, Standard Deviations, Internal Consistency Reliabilities and Intercorrelations for Study 3 Variables

| Variable                        | <i>M</i> | <i>SD</i> | 1      | 2      | 3    | 4   | 5   | 6     |
|---------------------------------|----------|-----------|--------|--------|------|-----|-----|-------|
| 1. Interpersonal discrimination | 2.82     | 1.02      | (.75)  |        |      |     |     |       |
| 2. Formal discrimination        | 1.28     | 0.45      | .38**  | —      |      |     |     |       |
| 3. Body type                    |          |           | .18*   | -.08   | —    |     |     |       |
| 4. Potential for store profit   | 39.76    | 66.13     | -.26*  | -.10   | -.04 | —   |     |       |
| 5. Time shopping                | 19.68    | 14.14     | -.13   | -.03   | .02  | .05 | —   |       |
| 6. Future patronage             | 4.00     | 1.67      | -.60** | -.32** | -.06 | .16 | .07 | (.75) |

Note.  $N = 190$ . Cronbach's alphas are in parentheses.  
\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

These studies also make a theoretical contribution to the development of discrimination-reducing strategies. We are aware of no previous research that examines how to combat the expression of covert discrimination. The present research utilizes the JSM to identify and test a mechanism capable of decreasing the amount of expressed interpersonal discrimination directed toward obese individuals. Thus, these findings suggest that interventions aimed at reducing the amount of interpersonal discrimination should target justifications for prejudices. Furthermore, when specifically targeting the discrimination experienced by overweight individuals, interventions should aim to reduce perceptions of controllability. Although these specific strategies may not be directly applicable to all interactions between stigmatized and nonstigmatized individuals, these results demonstrate that, following the JSM, strategies targeting specific justification mechanisms may indeed reduce discrimination. This implication, however, should be interpreted with caution, as we do not believe and would not advocate that the burden of discrimination reduction should lie with its victims. Instead, we believe the most effective intervention strategies might target the perceptions of the prejudice holder.

In addition, these findings have theoretical implications for the way in which discrimination is assessed in organizations. Measuring only formal displays of discrimination may conceal other potentially harmful covert forms of discrimination. However, because of its subtlety, interpersonal discrimination poses a measurement challenge. Measures such as the Implicit Associations Test (Greenwald et al., 1998) have been used to assess similar effects in controlled laboratory settings. However, in organizational environments, it is more difficult to evaluate discrimination using such measures. The present studies offer one of the first empirical evaluations of overt and covert discrimination in a face-to-face organizational interaction, demonstrating that the experience of these behaviors leads to negative outcomes for both the organization and the individual. Therefore, these studies suggest that interpersonal measures of discrimination can and should be incorporated into the measurement of discrimination in organizations. Thus, these findings have implications for the development of customer and employee satisfaction surveys, recommending that the inclusion of behavioral items that tap interpersonal discrimination should provide organizations with a more accurate assessment of the discrimination that is produced and experienced by those affiliated with their organizations.

Additionally, the current findings offer two primary theoretical contributions to understanding the stigmatization of obese individuals. First, evidence in the stereotyping literature suggests that obese individuals face stigmatization; however, little research has articulated the form that actual discrimination takes against these targets. The present studies demonstrate that, consistent with general conceptualizations of modern discrimination (Crandall, Eshleman, & O'Brien, 2002), obese individuals face interpersonal discrimination when justifications are available for prejudice expression. Over three studies, both actual obese shoppers and confederates posing as obese shoppers in high-justification conditions reported experiencing interpersonal discriminatory behaviors, such as decreased eye contact, rudeness, and decreased smiling. Second, this research provides behavioral evidence of the importance of perceived controllability of stigma as a contributing factor to the stigma of obesity. The current research offers the justification mechanism of perceived controllability of weight as

an avenue by which organizations may reduce discrimination directed toward obese individuals.

In addition to its theoretical contributions, the current research also has several pragmatic implications. In particular, from an applied perspective, these findings have implications for combating discrimination in the workplace. There is an emerging concern regarding the ramifications of workplace incivility (see Pearson, Anderson, & Porath, 2000), antisocial behavior, and harassment (see Cortina, Fitzgerald, & Drasgow, 2002; Schneider, Hitlan, & Radhakrishnan, 2000) because of its potential damage to organizational productivity. Incivility and harassment have the capacity to psychologically harm the target, increase discomfort, and ultimately lead to a departure from the organization. Discriminatory customer service behaviors may have similar repercussions, as poor customer service is inversely related to product and company loyalty. Often, behaviors that constitute interpersonal discrimination go unnoticed by the actor, despite their consequences for the target (Dovidio et al., 2002), potentially leading to an unsatisfied customer, client, or employee and subsequent decreases in sales or productivity or higher rates of employee turnover. Thus, the present findings are important for customer interactions in addition to intraorganizational interactions, such as trainer-to-trainee or supervisor-to-employee interactions. Although organizations may successfully eliminate the more obvious manifestations of discrimination by prohibiting formal discrimination, the more subtle interpersonal behaviors may lead to reductions in employee self-efficacy and performance (e.g., Shapiro, King, & Quiñones, in press). Even worse, if interpersonal discrimination does lead to these lowered achievement outcomes, the result may be a falsely justifiable reason to terminate employment, demote an employee, or fail to promote an employee, potentially leading to higher numbers of minority turnover and lower levels of minority advancement. Additionally, employees who experience subtle discrimination may infer a more hostile or harassing environment (see Cortina et al., 2002; Pearson et al., 2000; Schneider et al., 2000), potentially resulting in an employee choosing to terminate employment (King, Hebl, George, & Matusik, 2006).

Consistent with this body of discrimination research, the results of the present studies suggest that beyond the legal repercussions that motivate organizations to protect against formal discrimination, organizations should be concerned with the bottom-line consequences of expressing interpersonal discrimination (see also King et al., 2006). In Study 3, and consistent with Studies 1 and 2, a survey of actual shoppers revealed that obese customers reported experiencing higher levels of interpersonal discrimination. Furthermore, interpersonal behaviors were negatively related to buying behaviors, such that as interpersonal discrimination increased, customer purchasing decreased. The results of Study 3 highlight tangible, financial reasons for organizations to consider ways to limit the expression of more subtle forms of prejudice. Given the increasing incidence of obesity in American culture (e.g., Wadden et al., 2002), obese individuals make up a larger percentage of the adult and therefore customer population. Consequently, organizations should strive to create training programs and diversity policies that prevent both interpersonal and formal discrimination.

In spite of the strong theoretical and applied contributions of the current research, there are several potential limitations to consider. One limitation is the use of standardized scripts in Studies 1 and 2. By scripting the behaviors and the conversations of the confederate

shoppers, we were able to examine the behaviors of the sales personnel across conditions. However, by limiting the confederates' conversations and behaviors, we inadvertently restricted the range of interaction length and content. This limitation may have contributed to a lack of power in the assessment of negative affect and of the time variables. Future research should strive to measure intergroup interaction without formal scripts in order to develop a comprehensive understanding of work and social interactions.

Another potential limitation is the single-source, cross-sectional nature of the data in Study 3. Although common method variance and causal ambiguity are potentially problematic, we believe that these concerns are mitigated by the second-source measurement of body size and by the measurement of an objective dependent variable (i.e., money spent). A final potential limitation of this research is that the effect sizes detected in these studies ranged from small to moderate (.03 to .16). However, research by Martell, Lane, and Emrich (1996) using computer simulations demonstrated that discrimination effects as small as 1% can, over time, accumulate into large intergroup disparities. Thus, the effect sizes detected in the current research may account for substantial disadvantage when compounded over time.

### Conclusions

The focus of the present research was to examine discriminatory actions in the workplace toward obese customers and to test a strategy by which these actions may be reduced. The results revealed that although customer sales personnel do not formally discriminate against obese customers, they do discriminate in subtle, interpersonal ways when justifications for prejudice expression are apparent. Accordingly, contemporary models of prejudice expression should be extended to address covert forms of discrimination. In addition, the results suggest that remediation strategies targeting commonly held beliefs about the controllability of obesity may be effective in reducing the amount of interpersonal discrimination faced by obese individuals. Finally, the results show negative financial outcomes associated with subtle forms of discrimination and thus provide sound rationale as to why such discrimination should be investigated and avoided.

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