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ENGL 1101 Composition and Rhetoric

3 November 2024

Examining Weight Bias In Our Thoughts And Actions

We all have biases, whether we realize it or not. Sometimes these biases affect how we treat others based on different factors. Implicit bias plays a critical role in shaping perceptions and behaviors toward others, often functioning outside of conscious awareness. This essay examines the results of the Harvard Weight IAT I conducted comparing a participant implicit bias outcome with my initial hypotheses, pre-test interview data, and post-test reflections detailing how implicit biases influence certain attitudes and behaviors toward individuals based on their weight. The primary aim is to highlight how various factors influence implicit bias and shape societal attitudes toward weight.

In the pre-test interview, the participant was asked about the role of media in shaping societal biases and stereotypes, as well as how implicit bias influences decision-making in workplace and educational settings. The participant claimed that social media creates algorithms that align with our individual beliefs, reinforcing existing biases. She also stated that implicit bias can result in unfair decisions, leading to a lack of acceptance or employment for individuals who do not have similar beliefs or share their interests. This proves how our social environment can shape our views and beliefs, showing the importance of being aware of these influences. Weight-based stereotypes, such as associating obesity with laziness or lack of control, contribute to

discrimination in multiple areas of life, including healthcare and employment, and perpetuate systemic disadvantages (Puhl & Heuer, 2010).

The participant took the weight IAT test online, where she categorized words and images related to weight. The test looked at how quickly she associated positive or negative words with images of thin versus overweight individuals. Her results showed a slight preference for thin people. This reveals a gap between what she consciously believes and her underlying attitudes, indicating her unconscious views are influenced by societal standards that she sees thinness as a sign of health and attractiveness.

After the IAT test, the participant reflected on her experiences and results in a post-test interview, exploring her feelings about the differences between her explicit and implicit attitudes. She felt with her results stating, “I always thought I was open-minded, but seeing these results makes me question my true feelings.” This realization shows the conflict between her conscious and unconscious attitudes.

Aspect	Pre-Test Prediction	IAT Results	Post-Test Reflections
Implicit Bias Level	Expected to be neutral or minimal bias toward body weight	Showed a slight preference for thin individuals	Surprised by results; expressed concern over hidden bias

In examining the dynamics of weight bias, it is important to differentiate between our conscious and unconscious biases, as both shape our societal attitudes. Conscious beliefs are the views that people can express and reflect on; for instance, many individuals might advocate for

body positivity and fairness. However, these beliefs can exist alongside unconscious biases that reveal negative stereotypes about people with higher body weight. This can lead to behaviors that contradict their stated beliefs. Internalized weight bias can lead to low self-esteem, depression, and eating disorders, highlighting the severe personal impacts of societal stigma (Vartanian & Smyth, 2013).

Both conscious and unconscious biases are shaped by societal norms and cultural attitudes, particularly regarding body image and social standards. These influences often intensify the feelings of social anxiety among individuals who don't meet these societal expectations, as the study notes: "A nuanced understanding of the etiological processes and varying manifestations of social anxiety across diverse individuals (e.g., persons suffering from stigma, marginalization, and/or discrimination) could lead to more targeted and, consequently, more effective prevention and treatment efforts" (Kaplan et al., 2023). Additionally, stigmatizing weight contributes to stress and mental health issues, further reinforcing stereotypes through a cycle of stigma and weight gain (Tomiya et al., 2018). This highlights that while expected beliefs can be measured through surveys, unconscious biases are often revealed through behavioral tests like the Implicit Association Test. Understanding the relationship between expected beliefs and unconscious biases is crucial for addressing weight bias effectively. By recognizing the gap between what people consciously believe and the biases that may influence their actions, we can work to reduce stigma and discrimination associated with body weight. This awareness can help inform strategies aimed at fostering more inclusive attitudes and behaviors in society.

Expected beliefs and unconscious biases regarding weight bias differ significantly in their expression and awareness, yet both contribute to the stigma faced by individuals with obesity.

Expected beliefs are articulated, conscious attitudes that individuals openly acknowledge, such as the notion that "obese children are less healthy" (Lydecker et al. 785). In contrast, unconscious biases operate at a subconscious level, influencing automatic reactions and judgments that individuals may not recognize. For instance, implicit measures like the Implicit Association Test (IAT) reveal how quickly people associate negative traits with obesity, highlighting biases that manifest without conscious intent. Despite their differences, both expected beliefs and unconscious biases share a common impact on behavior, leading to discrimination and reinforcing societal stereotypes about weight. These biases can shape how children with obesity are treated in various settings, ultimately affecting their mental and physical health. Thus, understanding both forms of bias is essential in addressing the stigma surrounding obesity and promoting a more supportive environment for affected individuals.

The findings of this study highlight the significant role of implicit bias in shaping societal attitudes toward weight, revealing a disconnect between conscious beliefs and unconscious preferences. The participant's results from the Harvard Weight IAT showed a subtle preference for thin individuals, challenging her self-image as open-minded and illustrating how societal norms around body image can influence attitudes even among well-intentioned individuals. This duality underscores the necessity for greater awareness of implicit biases, particularly in contexts like workplaces and educational settings where decisions can negatively impact those who do not conform to societal ideals. By recognizing the social influences that perpetuate these biases and addressing both conscious advocacy and hidden prejudices, individuals and institutions can develop strategies to reduce weight stigma, ultimately fostering a more inclusive society that embraces diversity in body types.

Works Cited

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