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Weight Discrimination Might Be Deadly

By Jesse Singal



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Humans are very sensitive to what other people think of them — a fact that’s been made depressingly clear in studies that show, for example, that **being bullied has a long-ranging impact**

(<http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2014/05/when-youre-bullied-it-doesnt-alway-get-better.html>) on one’s physical well-being. Other research has zeroed in specifically on weight discrimination, suggesting that it leads to a range of bad **physical**

(<http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2014/09/fat-shaming-doesnt-work-is-mean.html>) and psychological outcomes.

Now researchers have decided to ask a straightforward question about the combined effects of all of this: Can weight discrimination be linked not just to health and psychological problems, but to a heightened overall risk of mortality?

In a new study

(<http://pss.sagepub.com/content/early/2015/09/29/0956797615601103.full.pdf+html>) in *Psychological Science*, a team led by Dr. Angelina R. Sutin of the Florida State University College of Medicine looked at two survey data sets that track people over time, making for a combined total of more than 18,500 respondents. Data was gathered both about people’s demographic and physical and mental health, and, most important, how often they felt like people treated them unfairly. They were then given a bunch of categories to choose from as to *why* people treated them unfairly — they could choose as many items as they liked from a list including age, race, physical disability, and weight, among other things. Researchers also kept track of who among the respondents had died by the time the paper was written.

The researchers were curious whether there would be a correlation between weight discrimination and an increased risk of mortality once you controlled for other factors that might *also* be associated with a heightened risk of dying — things like depressive symptoms and body-mass index, for example. Sure enough, that’s what they found — controlling for other factors reduced but did not eliminate a statistically significant link between weight discrimination and early death: All else being equal, respondents who said they felt like they’d been discriminated against on the basis of their weight were about 31 percent more likely to have died.

One possible hiccup here might revolve around the question of what personality and situational traits make someone more likely to feel that they’ve been discriminated against. Some people are keenly aware of such treatment; others are more likely to ignore it or not vigilantly keep an eye

out for it (it also goes without saying that some forms of discrimination are way more overt than others). It could be, in other words, that given what we know about the link between optimism and resilience and good health, the tendency to perceive discrimination (again, all else being equal) is itself a sign that someone has certain psychological tendencies that are *themselves* linked to mortality. That said, the self-reported item on depressive symptoms would likely cover at least some of this — but it might leave stuff out, too.

Either way, it's still noteworthy that the perception of discrimination, on its own and controlling for a bunch of other stuff, predicted mortality. Not that we needed any more evidence on this front, but this is just another sign that it's **not good to make fun of people based on their weight** (<http://nymag.com/scienceofus/2015/09/lets-all-remember-that-fat-shaming-doesnt-work.html>) .