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ABSTRACT

Despite the increased use of cigarettes among college students, there is evidence to suggest that anti-smoking norms still predominate among both students and faculty. In order to assess the prejudice against college students who smoke, relative to that associated with membership in other disparaged groups, a sample of 99 college students were asked to provide personality ratings of hypothetical students who smoke cigarettes, students who are clinically obese, and students who had been repeatedly convicted of theft. Of the seven personality dimensions assessed (intelligence, hostility, judgment, artistic creativity, conscientiousness, ambition, independence), smokers were rated more negatively than nonsmokers, as negatively as clinically obese students, and less negatively than criminals. (Contains 31 references.) (Author/JDM)

The Relative Stigma Associated With Smoking, Obesity, and Criminality

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Abstract

Despite the increased use of cigarettes among college students, there is evidence to suggest that anti-smoking norms still predominate among both students and faculty. In order to assess the prejudice against college students who smoke, relative to that associated with membership in other disparaged groups, a sample of 99 college students were asked to provide personality ratings of hypothetical students who smoke cigarettes, students who are clinically obese, and students who had been repeatedly convicted of theft. On the seven personality dimensions assessed (intelligence, hostility, judgment, artistic creativity, conscientiousness, ambition, and independence), smokers were rated more negatively than nonsmokers, as negatively as clinically obese students, and less negatively than criminals.

Introduction

Overall, cigarette smoking in the United States is on the decline (Wechsler, Rigotti, Gledhill-Hoyt, & Lee, 1998). Although there is an alarming increase in cigarette use among college students, there is evidence to suggest that anti-smoking norms still predominate among both students and faculty. With the dangers of cigarette smoke widely known and accepted and the harsh stigma that accompanies the habit, counterintuitively, there has been a substantial increase in smoking among college students in recent years (Wechsler, et.al., 1998; Venuti, & Chambliss, 2000).

Nonsmokers perceive smokers less favorably than other nonsmokers on a number of dimensions, including intelligence, sophistication, consideration, conscientiousness,

ambition, judgment, health, and maturity (Gibson, 1997; Hodges, et.al., 1999; Venuti, Conroy, Bucy, Landis, & Chambliss, 2000).

Smokers are certainly not the only stigmatized group. In order to gauge the relative prejudice directed at the smoker group, it can be useful to consider the magnitude of bias against other socially outcast subpopulations. For example, the clinically obese group is often a target of discrimination. Negative attitudes toward obesity are common generally, and especially, pronounced on college campuses (Goldberg, 2000). The message conveyed by the mass media suggests that fat is disgusting. It encourages the idea that thin is attractive, and that attractive men and women are more intelligent, more successful in their marriages, more mentally healthy, less deserving of punishment, and more likely to obtain prestigious occupations than the less attractive (Czajka-Narins, & Parham, 1990).

It is hard to reverse the negative stereotypes associated with obesity. Overweight people are discriminated against in employment, educational opportunities and housing (Powers, 1996). Medical advisors have also seen obese individuals as unable to take charge of their own behavior. Their view of obesity sees fatness as a problem of weakness, laziness and gluttony (Parham, 1996). Both thin and obese people report negative attitudes toward obesity, but thinner individuals voice more negative attitudes towards obesity (Oberrieder, Walker, Monroe, & Adeyanju, 1995).

Those who have committed crimes are also negatively stereotyped. Repeat offenders have difficulties securing jobs, gaining education, and acquiring financial stability. White-collar workers are seen as possessing a greater degree of social conscientiousness and stronger psychological stability than criminals (Collins & Schmidt,

1993). This differential between white-collar workers and thieves constructs a boundary between the two.

One study shows that the United States has a greater acceptance of crime than that of Japan, and consequently has a larger percentage of theft per capita than Japan (Alshuwaikhat & Garba, 1997). This acceptance of crime, or society's lack of ambition to change it, may lead thieves to act without thinking about the consequences since it is noted as socially acceptable to commit a crime.

Rather than producing constructive change, the biases that are associated with smoking, obesity, and criminality have led many merely to try to conceal their status in order to avoid these negative social reactions.

There is a chronic nature to the problems affecting these groups. Smokers are generally unsuccessful in cessation; 90% of cigarette smokers are addicted to nicotine (Kirn, 1999). The clinically obese show a similarly small rate of success in maintaining weight losses (Stein, et.al., 1999); half of the United States' population is overweight and 18% are clinically obese (Goldberg, 2000). The recidivism rate for theft is 43% (Duffy & Wong, 1996). The discrimination against these groups leads to labeling members of these groups as derelicts, which perpetuates their problems by reducing motivation to change.

The present study was conducted in an attempt to assess differential bias directed at the three groups. A survey was distributed to an Introductory Psychology class, addressing students' perceived attitudes towards smokers and nonsmokers, obese and non-obese, and criminals and non-criminals.

Methods

Participants

This study was conducted by obtaining a sample of 99 American undergraduates through an introductory psychology course at a small liberal arts college located in southeastern Pennsylvania, which included 68 females and 31 males. Thirty of the participants were smokers, who indicated use of cigarettes within the past 30 days. The remaining participants were considered to be nonsmokers. Only one participant described herself as clinically obese. Six participants reported that they had stolen in the past 30 days. Participants' ages ranged from 17 to 22 years, with a mean of 18.67 years. All major areas of undergraduate study were proportionally represented.

Survey Instrument

The experimenters devised an 82-item questionnaire divided into four sections. The first section assessed participants' frequency of use of cigarettes, advisement to lose weight by a medical doctor, and repeated convictions for theft. Next, participants completed a 19-item survey measuring levels of impulsivity in situational contexts, derived from the Impulsivity Scale developed by Hirschfield, Sutton-Smith, and Rosenberg (1965). Participants then completed 42 Likert-format items designed to measure participants' perceptions of the three target groups (smokers, clinically obese individuals, and criminals). Using a 5-point Likert scale (1= extremely low, 2= somewhat low, 3= neutral, 4= somewhat high, and 5= extremely high), participants were asked to indicate their impressions of students who smoke, those who are clinically obese, and those who have been convicted of theft, and inversely, students who do not smoke cigarettes, those who are not clinically obese, and those who have not been

convicted of theft on seven personality dimensions (intelligence, hostility, judgment, artistic creativity, conscientiousness, ambition, and independence). Last, students described their impression of how much teachers', fellow students', and employers' discriminate against students who smoke, clinically obese, and those who steal.

Results

Summary scores on ratings of smokers, ratings of nonsmokers, ratings of obese students, and ratings of students who had been repeatedly convicted of theft were calculated for each participant by totaling the relevant directionally adjusted item values. High scores on these summary measures indicate high levels of socially desirable characteristics (high levels of intelligence, judgment, artistic creativity, conscientiousness, ambition, and independence, and low levels of hostility).

Within-subject t-tests were performed on pairs of these four summary scores. Smokers were rated significantly more negatively than nonsmokers (smokers $x = 14.53$, $s.d. = 2.88$, versus nonsmokers $x = 17.12$, $s.d. = 2.83$; $t = 6.86$, $df = 97$, $p < .000$).

No significant differences were found between overall ratings of college student smokers and clinically obese students smokers (smokers $x = 14.55$, $s.d. = 2.86$, versus obese $x = 15.01$, $s.d. = 3.28$; $t = 1.26$, $df = 96$, $p < .212$).

Student smokers' ratings were significantly more positive than overall ratings of criminal students (smokers $x = 14.53$, $s.d. = 2.88$, versus criminals $x = 10.51$, $s.d. = 4.38$; $t = 9.34$, $df = 97$, $p < .000$).

Within-subject t-tests were performed on the seven discrete personality dimension ratings of hypothetical student smokers and hypothetical students who are clinically obese. Significant differences between ratings of smokers and clinically obese students

emerged on four of the seven personality measures (see Table A). For three dimensions (intelligence, judgment, and conscientiousness), ratings of obese students were more favorable than ratings of smokers. On the dimension of independence, smokers were rated more favorably than obese students. No significant differences were observed for the remaining three characteristics.

Discriminatory attitudes among students, teachers, and employers were compared across the three target populations (smokers, obese students, and students convicted of theft). Criminals were seen as experiencing the greatest amount of discrimination from students, teachers, and employers. Participants perceived both teachers and employers to discriminate significantly most against thieves than clinically obese, and significantly more clinically obese than college students who smoke. Participants perceived fellow students to discriminate similarly against thieves and clinically obese individuals. Fellow students discriminate significantly more against thieves than students who smoke and similarly, against clinically obese more than students who smoke. When only smokers' responses were considered, smokers were similarly perceived as being significantly more immune to discrimination than students who were obese or thieves (across employers, teachers, and fellow students, smokers rated discrimination against student smokers as 2.29 on a 4-point scale; the mean ratings of discrimination against the obese and thieves were 2.90 and 3.27, respectively). Discrimination against thieves was seen as significantly higher than discrimination against the obese and smokers (in both cases $p < .001$), and discrimination against the obese was seen as significantly higher than that against smokers ($p < .05$).

Table A

	Perceptions of Smokers		Perceptions of Obese		t	df	p
	Mean	S.D.	Mean	S.D.			
Intelligence	3.02	.64	3.26	.68	2.53	97	.013
Hostility	3.22	.71	3.05	.98	1.87	97	.065
Judgment	2.85	.75	3.02	.61	1.97	97	.052
Artistic Creativity	3.10	.64	3.10	.51	.00	96	1.000
Independence	3.27	.83	2.93	.89	2.49	97	.014
Conscientiousness	2.73	.74	3.13	.98	3.49	97	.001
Ambition	2.79	.66	2.65	.92	1.60	97	.113

Discussion

The findings of this study extend those of previous investigations that have shown that perceptions of smokers are generally more negative than perceptions of nonsmokers. Here, smokers were not only viewed more negatively than nonsmokers on various personality dimensions, they were also found to be perceived more negatively than members of a widely stigmatized group (clinically obese individuals) on several dimensions (intelligence, judgment, and conscientiousness).

Given the finding that smokers were rated more negatively than nonsmokers and as negatively as clinically obese students, students who smoke in order to enhance their social image may want to reconsider their choice. Those who smoke in order to avoid becoming overweight (presumably in part to avoid the social ostracism associated with obesity in our culture), may ironically by making themselves even likelier targets of discrimination.

The fact that smokers were described less negatively than criminals suggests that while smoking may be seen as anti-social in some respects, it is not perceived to be as much of a violation of the rights of others as crimes such as theft. However, this may be of small comfort to smokers, given the generally negative personality attributions made to members of this group.

Participants' perceived little discrimination directed against student smokers by employers, teachers, or fellow students, although they did believe that students with history of theft convictions, and to a lesser extent obese students, as subject to discrimination. This may reflect actual absence of discrimination against smokers, or students' inaccurate appraisal of such discrimination. When the negative

characterizations of student smokers shown in this study and previous studies are considered collectively, it seems clear that the student cigarette smoker stereotype is very derogatory and that the attitudes toward smokers held by fellow students and faculty alike are quite reproachful. Given this, it seems likely that discrimination against students who smoke does in fact occur. The possibility that students may be minimizing the actual extent of such discrimination, and may consequently not include this in their estimations of the risks associated with smoking, deserves further scrutiny.

Since this possibility is especially relevant to students who smoke, the analyses involving this select group warrant special comment. Among the students who smoke, there was a tendency to see employers, teachers, and fellow students as not discriminating against smokers. The mean rating given by smokers indicates that most disagree that such discrimination exists. Again, this may stem from the actual rarity of such prejudicial treatment, or suggest an underestimation of the negative impact that a student's smoking status can have on their relationships with employers, teachers, and fellow students. More accurate information about the prejudiced attitudes expressed by these populations might deter some students from initiating cigarette use. Additional research clarifying the relationship effects of the negative attitudes voiced in this and other research may help college students obtain a more accurate understanding of the full social significance of their decision to smoke.

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