THE ROLE OF PHYSICAL APPEARANCE IN MANAGERIAL DECISIONS

Michael L. Klassen
University of Northern Iowa

Cynthia R. Jasper
University of Wisconsin-Madison

Richard Jackson Harris
Kansas State University

ABSTRACT: This study was designed to examine stereotypical beliefs about the physical appearance of employees and the effects of these beliefs on decision-making. Current stereotypes about obese and very thin people were assessed, and the effect of beliefs about obese and very thin people on subjects' evaluations of employee performance was measured. The findings indicated that subjects used information about employees' weight and body build differently, depending on whether they were responding to questions about discipline, the likelihood of recurrence of behavior, or their desire to work with certain employees. Overall, the results suggest that subjects exclude nondiagnostic aspects of employees (e.g., weight and body build) in some types of work decisions.

This study examines the role of stereotypical beliefs about physical appearance in the evaluation of employee performance. Within the context of psychology, behavioral researchers have shown increasing interest in social judgment and behavior associated with stereotypical beliefs (e.g., Wyer & Srull, 1990). In recent years social judgment and perceptions based on stereotypical beliefs regarding employees' appearance are of increasing interest to men and women in business, particularly because the Americans with Disabilities Act, passed by the U.S. Congress in 1990, arguably prohibits discrimination against employees based on appearance ("Facial Discrimination," 1987; McAdams, Moussavi & Klassen, 1990). This interest has been associated with research interest in the question. Recent studies have examined the extent to which stereotypes related to appearance affect relationships within the occupa-

The present study focuses specifically on stereotypical beliefs, perceptions, and evaluations of very thin and obese employees. A number of stereotypical beliefs and attitudes about obese and very thin people exist, and they tend to be generally strong and negative (Klassen, 1987). This is particularly true for obese people, who are often seen as blameworthy, weak-willed, guilt-ridden, untrustworthy, and incompetent (DeJong, 1980; Lerner, 1969; Staffieri, 1967; Young & Powell, 1985).

EFFECTS OF STEREOTYPES ON DECISION-MAKING

In previous studies, as in this study, stereotypes are seen as generalizations about social groups that are inherently biased, logically faulty, or less accurate than other kinds of cognitive generalizations. For example, evidence suggests that employees who are considered obese are judged more negatively than other workers (Jasper & Klassen, 1990a; Kennedy & Homant, 1984). In a recent study, Bellizzi, Klassen, and Belonax (1989) observed that subjects were more likely to assign obese, in contrast to normal-weight salespeople, to low volume, low competitive sales territories. In addition, the prejudice against obese employees appears to be particularly strong for obese female workers (Orbach, 1982).

The means by which some studies on stereotypical beliefs influence judgments appears to be embedded in information-processing strategies. For example, BodenHausen and Wyer (1985) found that when an employee’s transgression was consistent with a stereotype, subjects used the stereotype heuristically to explain the person’s behavior and ignored other relevant information about him or her. Furthermore, differential recall of other relevant information was considered only when the infraction was inconsistent with or irrelevant to a stereotype. However, when the behavior was consistent with the stereotype, this information was ignored. This fact suggested that when the employee’s transgression was consistent with a stereotype, subjects used it to explain his or her behavior.

ATTITUDES TOWARD PEOPLE WITH EXTREME BODY WEIGHTS

Obesity and thinness were chosen as the focus of this study for several reasons. First, previous research on stereotypes has focused mainly on people whose membership in the stereotyped group was not chosen, such as members of various ethnic and racial groups, or, simply, men