Stigma and Social Power: Expecting to Interact with an Obese Person Activates Power in the Self-concept

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People’s sense of power is often a more crucial determinant of their behavior than their actual level of power. In this paper, we suggest that individuals may perceive themselves as more powerful when anticipating interaction with a member of a stigmatized out-group than with a member of a nonstigmatized group. Normal weight participants (N = 77) expected to have an interaction with a target randomly identified as obese or thin. Participants were quicker to endorse words describing themselves in terms of traits associated with power when the target was obese than thin. They were also likely to expect greater interpersonal power, to endorse more negative attitudes towards obese people and to form more negative impressions, if the target was obese rather than thin. These findings suggest that a perception of empowerment is spontaneously activated prior to interaction with an obese person.

Keywords: Behavioral confirmation; Obesity; Power; Prejudice; Stigma.

What makes people feel powerful? Considering that perceptions of power exert a greater influence on individuals’ behavior than their actual power (Smith, Wigboldus, & Dijksterhuis, 2007), the importance of this question should not be underestimated. In the present study, we shall be interested in precisely how membership of one’s interaction partner in a stigmatized group (i.e., the obese) may influence perceivers’ sense of power.

Where Does Power Come From?

Social power can be defined as the extent to which one individual has the possibility of influencing another individual (French & Raven, 1959). According to a recent
review of the social psychological literature on this topic (Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003), research has been guided by three main questions: Where does power come from? What are the correlates of power? What are the consequences of power? Although much research has addressed the latter two questions (Keltner et al., 2003), comparatively little attention has been devoted to how such a sense of empowerment emerges (Baldwin, Kiviniemi, & Snyder, 2002; Smith et al., 2007).

In essence, power is a relational concept. It refers to a specific relationship between several agents (e.g., individuals, groups, nations). Nevertheless, although power can be considered as a property of specific relationships, it can also be psychologically represented among these agents (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). Thus, people can form internal representations of their power in relation to others. This internal representation may or may not match the perception of other agents involved in the relationship or of those belonging to outside observers. Such a sense of power, that we call empowerment, has been found to be contextually dependent: It can be activated by memories of past situations in which one was powerful (Galinsky, Gruenfeld, & Magee, 2003) by merely priming the concept of power (Bargh, Raymond, Pryor, & Strack, 1995; Chen, Lee-Chai, & Bargh, 2001), by encouraging people to think in abstract terms (Smith et al., 2007) or by manipulating control in a resource allocated to another person (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006). Even a simple expectation about one’s interaction partner’s personality seems sufficient to trigger such an empowerment. Baldwin et al. (2002) manipulated whether a perceiver had an expectation regarding the personality of a target (who was thought to be uninformed about the perceiver). Prior to this interaction, they measured the perceiver’s feeling of empowerment on a set of scales based on French and Raven’s influential taxonomy (French & Raven, 1959). They found that perceivers who had received an expectation experienced a greater degree of informational power (power based on controlling the information needed by others in order to reach an important goal); indeed, they possessed information (i.e., knowledge of the target’s level of extraversion) that could prove crucial to the conduct of a smooth interaction (which was the implicit purpose of the upcoming task).

Empowerment may guide individuals’ behavior in their social interactions (Galinsky et al., 2003). Research in both social and developmental psychology actually suggests that people enter interactions guided by social schemas, or cognitive representations of relationships that may “guide expectancies, affect and interaction” (Bugental & Lin, 2001). In their review, Keltner et al. have suggested that high power drives approach tendencies whereas low power tends to elicit inhibition tendencies. Obviously, the link between an objective property (power) and specific behavioral tendencies needs to be mediated by psychological processes. Empowerment (i.e., this internal representation of their power), may play an important role in this respect: If power is not psychologically represented, it is unlikely to drive such massive effects on behavior.

Besides studies specifically addressing individuals’ sense of power (Anderson & Galinsky, 2006; Smith et al., 2007), an independent strand of research has investigated the emergence of power within dyads or small groups in which no formal power differential existed a priori. A recurrent finding can be identified in this literature: Individuals who ascend to power in such groups are more likely to belong to relatively high-status rather than low-status groups. Thus, a power differential at the social structural level is reproduced within groups or dyads. Such an effect has been shown for several types of social categorizations, such as gender (Ridgeway &
Smith-Lovin, 1999), ethnicity (Katz & Cohen, 1962; Riches & Foddy, 1989) and physical disability (Kleck, Ono, & Hastorf, 1966), for example.

Why does this happen? Research informed by expectation states theory (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972) has suggested that the prestige of one's group outside the small group or dyad functions as a “cue” signaling more competence on the part of the more privileged group member. This is thought to happen even on tasks that are not stereotypically associated with one of the two groups. Hence, members of the more privileged group behave in a dominant manner whereas members of the low-status group respond in a subordinate manner thereby leading to a stable dominance hierarchy. This dominance hierarchy is then legitimized by consensual beliefs (Ridgeway & Berger, 1988).

If such expectations of greater competence are present when members of a privileged group interact with members of a stigmatized group, they may also induce expectations of greater power. That is, if they believe themselves to be more competent, they will also feel more powerful (e.g., French and Raven call this “expert power”). Hence empowerment may be activated when members of a high-status group expect to encounter members of a low-status group. Such a process can be cumulative, such that if the nonstigmatized have repeated experience of interactions with the stigmatized in which they assumed a powerful position, such a sense of power may become learnt and habitual and therefore become triggered each time one anticipates interacting with a member of the stigmatized group, even in unstructured exchanges not involving a specific task. For example, Richeson and Ambady (2001) have observed that, in dyadic interracial interaction, people showed a lowering in self-esteem if roles were mismatched with traditional expectations (i.e., Caucasians as high status and African Americans as low status), thereby suggesting that participants expected roles consistent with their group status. Such a finding is in line with Galinsky et al.’s observation that remembering past experiences of power makes people feel more powerful (Galinsky et al., 2003).

According to this logic, empowerment may also manifest itself in the self-concept. Although self schemas are, by definition, relatively stable, the accessibility of different self-descriptive traits can vary as a function of the social context (Markus & Wurf, 1987). At any given time, only parts of the self-concept will be accessible.

Many self-descriptive traits are likely to be directly or indirectly related to power (Rudman, Greenwald, & McGhee, 2001). If, as we suggest, interacting with members of a stigmatized group induces an explicit belief that one will exert more power than one’s partner, perceivers may also develop stronger associations between the self-concept and power-related traits in such situations. Haines and Kray (2005) found a similar effect of power on the self-concept, such that participants of a stigmatized group (women) were less likely to implicitly associate the self with power than members of a privileged group (men). In later studies, they observed that an experimentally induced power implicitly influenced the self-concept. However, these studies do not demonstrate unequivocally that such an association could appear spontaneously (i.e., independently of a formal power differential).

If, as we propose, expecting to interact with an obese target produces a sense of empowerment in the perceiver, the “working self-concept” is also more likely to include traits related to power (e.g., “powerful”, “certain”, “self-confident”) and less likely to include traits related to powerlessness (e.g., “weak”, “submissive”, “indecisive”) in such situations.
In this paper, we address this issue with respect to interactions between obese ‘‘targets’’ and normal weight ‘‘perceivers.’’ In line with our ‘‘empowerment hypothesis,’’ we suggest that perceivers may anticipate an interaction with an obese target with the expectation that they will have more influence on the target than the target will exert on them.

To address this question, it is crucial to consider the perceived social status of obese people in American (and, more generally, Western) society. In comparison with normal-weight people, overweight and obese individuals have devalued social status (Puhl & Brownell, 2002). In addition, an individual’s weight tends to be viewed as under personal control and therefore obese individuals are credited with a ‘‘characteriological stigma’’ (Dejong, 1993) of the incapacity to regulate one’s behavior. Such an attribution is often seen as justifying obese persons’ lower social status (Crandall & Martinez, 1996; Crandall & Schiffhauer, 1998), and, indeed, may induce feelings of power for normal-weight individuals expecting to interact with obese persons. Such attitudes are frequently translated in actual behaviors during interactions between obese and normal-weight individuals (Puhl & Brownell, 2003; Puhl & Latner, 2007). For example, obese children are more likely to be teased (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002) and to be bullied than normal-weight individuals (Janssen, Craig, Boyce, & Pickett, 2004). In light of these observations, it seems relatively clear that the obese can be considered as a stigmatized group and that this stigma may have consequences at an interpersonal level (Miller, Rothblum, Felicio, & Brand, 1995).

In this research, we are also concerned with other consequences of the anticipation of an interaction with an obese target. The first is the devaluation of the target: Will an obese target be devalued a priori, before the participant has a chance to interact with him/her? Scores of studies on impression formation suggest that, indeed, once an individual is categorized in a stigmatized group, stereotyping influences impression relatively automatically (Fiske, 2002; Fiske & Neuberg, 1990).

A related question is whether, and to what extent, the appraisal of an interaction with an obese person influences perceivers’ attitudes and beliefs towards obesity. This is not a trivial matter, as the perceptions of stigmatization and prejudice that exert strong influences on low-status group members’ self-views and behaviors (Crocker, Major, & Steele, 1998) may actually be influenced by the actual attitudes and beliefs of nonstigmatized perceivers during their interactions with them. Thus, these perceptions may be induced from the perceivers’ actual level of prejudice in these interactions. Negative attitudes towards stigmatized groups can be triggered by the simple activation of an exemplar member of the stigmatized group (Castelli, Zogmaister, Smith, & Arcuri, 2004; Fazio, Jackson, Dunton, & Williams, 1995; McCall & Dasgupta, 2007; Richeson & Ambady, 2003). This is particularly true if the stigmatized group member has a low power role (Guimond, Dambrun, Michinov, & Duarte, 2003; Richeson & Ambady, 2003). We may therefore expect such a form of prejudice to coexist with feelings of empowerment.

With respect to anti-fat attitudes, one of the most direct determinants of prejudice seems to be the endorsement of beliefs about the controllability of weight (Crandall, 1994; Crandall & Schiffhauer, 1998). Obese people are perceived negatively to the extent that their condition is viewed as of their own doing. Hence, in line with earlier work on the spontaneous activation of prejudice, one of our purposes in the present study was to examine whether the simple anticipation of an interaction with an overweight person might in and of itself activate such beliefs.
Finally, the effects of the target’s membership in a stigmatized group on perceived empowerment and endorsement of negative beliefs about weight controllability might be a function of the target’s conformity to stereotypical perceptions regarding the stigmatized groups. Several prominent (and otherwise quite divergent) models of intergroup perception (Fiske & Neuberg, 1990; Kunda & Thagard, 1996; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) suggest that members of stigmatized groups are more likely to drive reactions based on their group membership (including negative attitudes and impressions) to the extent that they are viewed as typical members of the out-group. It is therefore conceivable that prejudice, stereotyping and empowerment will be most influenced by a target’s membership in a stereotyped group to the extent that this target is presented as possessing stereotype-consistent traits. Such an effect of stereotype consistency may be due to purely cognitive factors (i.e., automatic reactions deriving from “categorical fit”), but also to more motivational-based factors (Bourguignon, Seron, Yzerbyt, & Herman, 2006; Kunda & Oleson, 1995). For example, perceivers may feel more justified in experiencing a sense of empowerment to the extent that the target is a typical member of the stigmatized group.

Overview and Hypotheses

In the present study, normal-weight participants were led to believe that they would interact with a person shown to be either obese or nonobese (i.e., by a photograph). Participants also received a short “autobiographical” profile purportedly written by the target. Half the participants viewed information about the target consistent with the cultural stereotype of obese people, such as impulsivity and lack of self-control. The remaining participants viewed profiles without this kind of information. This manipulation was intended to help us examine whether the influence of the target’s weight could simply be driven by the expectation that she (in this case) would possess traits thought to be stereotypical of obese people (i.e., regardless of her actual weight).

Finally, participants reported their expectations, feelings, and attitudes prior to the interaction, which actually did not take place. Using this procedural paradigm, we predicted the following outcomes:

1. Self-views denoting high power should be more accessible, and self-views denoting low power less accessible, when participants expect to interact with an obese rather than a normal-weight target (Hypothesis 1).
2. Participants should experience a greater level of social power in relation to the target when expecting to interact with an obese target, but not with a normal-weight target (Hypothesis 2).
3. Participants should perceive an obese target more negatively than a normal-weight target (Hypothesis 3).
4. Participants should view weight as more controllable when expecting to interact with an obese target than with a normal-weight target (Hypothesis 4).

Method

Participants

A total of 77 undergraduates at the University of Minnesota participated in exchange for course credit. They were randomly assigned to one of four conditions: (1) Obese photograph with stereotype-consistent information (i.e.,
consistent with stereotypes of obese persons); (2) obese photograph with neutral information; (3) normal-weight photograph with stereotype-consistent information (i.e., consistent with stereotypes of obese persons); or (4) normal-weight photograph with neutral information. Hence the design of the study was $2 \times 2$ with Stereotype Consistency (consistent, neutral) $\times$ Target’s Weight (obese, normal). Participants were 60 women and 17 men with a mean age of 20 years ($SD = 3.50$). Data from three overweight participants (i.e., with Body Mass Indexes greater than 30) were excluded from analyses.

Materials

This study took place in a small laboratory furnished with a desk and laptop computer. We used Macromedia Authorware 7.0 to create an interactive computer program, which had the appearance of a “life-like” computer network, such that participants were easily convinced by our cover story. For example, participants viewed a photograph and profile of their interaction partner, which was purportedly sent via the wireless network. Moreover, it provided a convenient data-collection tool, such that participants entered their responses to several dependent measures directly into the “online” surveys.

Pretesting of photographs. Twenty photographs of women (10 obese, 10 normal weight) were taken from a variety of public websites, mostly from online personal advertisements posted by college-age women not living in the Midwest. A group of 29 undergraduate students (20 females, 9 males) evaluated the women in these photographs using a 5-point Likert scale (i.e., 1 = not at all characteristic, 5 = completely characteristic) on the following traits: lazy, attractive, sloppy, outgoing, likeable, has self-control, 18–22 years old, and overweight. In general, participants seemed to evaluate the obese photographs more negatively (i.e., obese women were perceived as being lazy, unattractive, sloppy, and lacking self-control, as compared to normal-weight women). These ratings provided evidence that our stimuli would likely evoke the stereotypes of obese people. However, for our study, we selected two obese and two normal weight photographs from the 20 pretested because they were rated similarly on age (i.e., all four women in these photographs were perceived as being 18–22, or college-age; $M = 4.49$ and 4.62, respectively) but, more importantly, they were rated very differently on obesity (i.e., the photographs of obese women were perceived as being more obese than the normal-weight photographs, $M = 4.42$ and 1.44, respectively).

Procedure

Cover story. Participants (i.e., the perceivers) arrived at the laboratory with the expectation of having a “getting-acquainted” conversation with another student (i.e., the target). Upon their arrival, the experimenter directed them to a small laboratory room and then proceeded to convey the cover story. Briefly, participants were led to believe that their interaction partner was stationed in another room and that they would both complete a short computer session prior to having their conversation. During the computer session of the experiment, participants responded to questionnaires designed to assess their thoughts and expectations regarding the upcoming interaction. In addition, and “just as it could happen in ordinary circumstances,” participants were told that they would be given
information about their partner that their partner would not receive about them. This information included a photograph of their partner (i.e., the target), which was taken with, and downloaded to the computer from, a digital camera just minutes before they (i.e., the perceivers) had arrived. To enhance the believability of this manipulation, the experimenter also took a photograph of each participant, but clearly explained that this was only for control purposes, and that, in fact, their picture would not be shown to the other participant.

Next, participants were led to believe that they would receive autobiographical information from their interaction partner. Again, to enhance the believability of this manipulation, participants began the computer portion of the study by responding to a few questions relating to their interests, hobbies, and other personal background inquiries. Once again, participants were clearly informed that this was only for control purposes, and that, in fact, none of this would be shown to the other participant. After responding to these questions, participants uploaded their partner’s profile via the wireless network, which we made realistic by including a flashing hourglass icon while participants waited for the upload to complete.

Manipulation of independent variables. The photograph that the participant received was one of the four previously pretested photographs (in 3 × 5 format)—either one of the two “obese” photographs or one of the two “normal weight” photographs. Then, participants received profile information, presented sequentially to maximize participants’ processing of this information, regarding their partners’ interests, hobbies, and other personal background data (i.e., responses to the “background” questions participants had just completed). For the stereotype consistency condition, we included information consistent with stereotypes of obese persons. This manipulation was independent of the target’s actual weight. Specifically, for each profile (stereotype consistent and neutral), there was information for “Things that I’m good at” and “Things that I’m not very good at.” For all profiles, responses were: “playing Backgammon” and “studying,” respectively for the “very good at” and “not very good at” information. For the stereotype-consistent profiles, the same information was included plus “telling jokes” (for the “very good at” information) and “controlling how much I eat; going to the gym” (for the “not very good at” information).

After studying their partner’s profile, participants responded to the “self-concept” measure and then completed several inventories designed to measure variables of interest, such as their upcoming orientation towards the conversation, e.g., “I would be more comfortable if I/my partner lead(s) the conversation”, participants’ empowerment, perceptions of their partner, and finally questions collecting personal weight/height information. Next, participants were informed that they had just participated in a “pilot” study, that they would not be having an interaction (i.e., their “interaction partner” did not exist), and that their feedback regarding the believability of our cover story would be greatly appreciated. Before doing this, however, participants completed one final questionnaire assessing their beliefs and attitudes toward obese people. Finally, participants were fully debriefed about the nature of our study and asked not to share their experiences with anyone who might also participate.

Measurement of Dependent Variables

Empowered self-concept. To test the prediction that perceivers experience an empowered self-concept when expecting to interact with an obese target (i.e.,
Hypothesis 1), but not with a normal-weight target, participants completed a reaction time “me/not me” self-concept task. Specifically, participants judged as quickly as possible whether presented words were self-descriptive or not self-descriptive. These words included traits saturated (positively or negatively) on the “potency” factor of Osgood’s semantic differential (Osgood, Suci, & Tannenbaum, 1967): dominant, certain, strong, decisive, self-confident, powerful, indecisive, weak, submissive. The other traits were related to sociability/warmth: friendly, unfriendly, outgoing, warm, shy, cold. Thus, for each word and for each participant, we have a response (i.e., me/not me) and response latency (i.e., reaction time).

Power. To test the prediction that perceivers experience a greater level of social power when expecting to interact with an obese target than with a normal-weight target (i.e., Hypothesis 2), participants completed 18 items (overall Cronbach’s alpha = .85) measuring empowerment toward their future interaction partner (Baldwin et al., 2002). This measure of power (see Appendix) includes questions that assess the six forms of power described by French and Raven (1959): Reward Power (e.g., “I could make the interaction enjoyable for my partner”); Coercive Power (e.g., “I could make the interaction difficult for my partner”); Legitimate Power (e.g., “My role gives me the opportunity to control the conversation”); Referent Power (e.g., “I expect that my partner will like me more than I like him/her”); Expert Power (e.g., “I am more socially skilled than my partner”); and Informational Power (e.g., “Knowing what I know about my partner may allow me to take charge of the interaction”). Participants reported the extent to which they agreed with each statement using a 9-point scale (1 = not at all, 9 = completely agree).

In order to assess the psychometric properties of this scale, we performed a principal component analysis on the 18 items, but without restricting us to the present sample, which was too small to allow reliable analyses on such a number of variables. Thus, we included data collected on samples belonging to the same population by Baldwin et al. (2002) thereby achieving a total sample size of 340 participants. This analysis yielded a 3-factor solution with all items but two (items 2 and 14, see Appendix) loading on the first factor (Eigenvalue = 8.20, 45% of the variance explained). As these two items (measuring coercive power) did not have loadings above .30 on this factor (for all other items, loadings were > .50), a single scale was constructed by averaging scores on these 16 items (Cronbach’s alpha = .91 and .87 on the whole and restricted samples, respectively).

Perceptions of partner. To test the prediction that perceivers judge a greater level of impression negativity when expecting to interact with an obese target (i.e., Hypothesis 3), but not with a normal-weight target, participants completed a semantic differential task with the instruction to judge their upcoming partner on several traits. These included 15 traits relevant to major dimensions of social judgment: sociability (e.g., “hostile vs. friendly”); intellectual competence (e.g., “ignorant vs. educated”) and capacity for self-regulation (e.g., “self-controlling/not capable of controlling him- or herself”). There were 9 points in between each anchor (e.g., lazy – – – – – – – – – hardworking) and each point represented a score of 1–9, such that the higher the score, the more participants judged their partner as possessing the trait indicated on the right side of the continuum.

Items with the following anchors (if necessary, appropriately reversed) were averaged, yielding a negativity index: unintelligent, irrational, socially unskilled, emotionally inexpressive, incapable of controlling herself, irresponsible, controlled,
calm, lacking a sense of humor, discreet, lazy, ignorant and hostile (Cronbach’s alpha = .84). This combination of items was selected after conducting a principal components analysis on all impression items that revealed a strong first factor (explaining 37% of the total variance).

**Beliefs about obese persons.** To test the prediction that perceivers endorse higher levels of prejudice when expecting to interact with an obese target, but not with a normal-weight target (i.e., *Hypothesis 4*) participants completed 8 items designed to measure their beliefs and attitudes toward obese people (Beliefs About Obese Persons, BAOP; Allison, Basile, & Yuker, 1991). Sample items for this measure included, “Most obese people eat more than non-obese people” and “Most obese people cause their problem by not getting enough exercise.” Participants reported the extent to which they agreed with each statement using a 7-point scale (1 = not at all, 7 = completely agree). Four items were reversed scored so that for all items higher scores indicated the belief that weight is under obese persons’ control (i.e., obesity is due to lack of willpower and self-control), a central aspect of anti-fat prejudice (Crandall, 1994). The items were summed to form a single scale (scores could vary between 0 and 42), after excluding one item that contributed negatively to the scale’s reliability (Cronbach’s alpha = .67).

**Results**

Unless otherwise noted, all ANOVAs tested main effects of gender and the main effects and interactions involving stereotype consistency and target’s weight. No interaction involving gender was investigated due to the low number of males.

**Manipulation Check**

As expected, participants perceived an obese target as more overweight than the normal-weight target (Ms = 7.19 and 2.81, respectively, SD = 1.31), F(1, 69) = 208.30, p < .001.

**Hypothesis 1: Self-perception**

In order to evaluate the accessibility of “powerful” self-views, we followed Markus’ (1977) approach to this task and averaged reaction times on “me” and “not me” responses separately for three categories of items (for each category, the number of valid cases—i.e., participants providing the relevant response to at least one of the items—is reported). Reaction times are reported in seconds:

- Items referring to a “powerful” self-concept (saturated on the “potency” factor of Osgood’s semantic differential; Osgood et al., 1967): dominant, certain, decisive, powerful, self-confident, strong (for “me” responses, 71 valid cases, Cronbach’s alpha = .69; for “not-me” responses, 62 valid cases, alpha = .44).
- Items referring to a “powerless” self-concept: weak, indecisive, submissive (for “not-me” responses, 70 valid cases, Cronbach’s alpha = .62).
- Items referring to “warm” traits: generous, funny, warm, friendly, outgoing (for “me” responses, 74 valid cases, Cronbach’s alpha = .63).
The two remaining categories ("me" responses to powerless traits and "not-me" responses to warm traits) included too few cases ($n < 35$) to yield adequate analyses.

To ensure that these measures were not biased by different rates of "me" responses as a function of condition, we first analyzed response frequencies by counting "me" responses in each category and submitted them to ANOVAs. No effect reached significance, which indicates that the actual endorsement of these traits was not affected by the manipulations.

We then submitted the response latency scales to univariate ANOVAs. No effect emerged for "not-me" responses to powerful items and for "me" responses to "warm" items (all $F$s < 1, ns, and < 1.2, ns, respectively). By contrast, for "me" responses to powerful traits, a main effect of the target's weight was observed, $F(1, 67) = 4.07, p = .048$, with shorter latencies for obese ($M = 1.06, SD = 0.32$) than for thin targets ($M = 1.30, SD = 0.57$). For "not-me" responses to powerless items, the ANOVA also yielded an effect of the target's weight, $F(1, 65) = 6.25, p = .015$, with longer reaction times if the target was thin ($M = 1.26, SD = 0.51$) rather than obese ($M = 1.02, SD = 0.24$). The two latter findings are consistent with Hypothesis 1.

Hypothesis 2: Empowerment

We submitted the power scale to a univariate ANOVA, which showed a significant effect of gender ($M_{\text{female}} = 5.23, SD = 0.11$, $M_{\text{male}} = 5.80, SD = 2.20$), $F(1, 70) = 5.43, p = .023$. As hypothesized, participants also expected to feel more powerful when the target was overweight ($M = 5.70, SD = 0.15$) rather than thin ($M = 5.30, SD = 0.16$), $F(1, 70) = 4.68, p = .034$. Two additional items assessed the extent to which participants felt more comfortable leading the conversation or leaving this role to the target. Univariate analyses yielded an effect of weight on the first item only ("I would feel more comfortable leading the conversation"). That is, participants expected to feel more comfortable leading the conversation in the obese condition ($M = 5.22, SD = 1.70$), than in the normal weight condition ($M = 4.27, SD = 1.73$), $F(1, 69) = 6.48, p = .015$.

Hypothesis 3: Perception of the Target

An ANOVA on the negativity index revealed a main effect of gender with males holding a more negative impression of their partner ($M = 3.84, SD = 1.10$) than females ($M = 3.10, SD = 0.89$), $F(1, 69) = 12.48, p = .001$. More importantly, a main effect of the target’s weight was also present, $F(1, 69) = 10.41, p = .002$, with obese targets generating more negative impressions ($M = 3.87, SD = 0.92$) than normal-weight targets ($M = 3.17, SD = 0.87$), which is in line with Hypothesis 3. Finally, stereotype-consistent targets generated less negative impressions than neutral targets ($M = 3.70, SD = 1.03$ and $M = 4.10, SD = 0.83$), $F(1, 69) = 4.27, p = .042$.

Could the influence of the target’s weight on self-perceptions be mediated by the negativity of the target’s impressions? In other words, could a more powerful self-perception have been activated as a form of contrast effect ("I don’t like her, therefore I feel more positive about myself"). According to this line of reasoning, the negativity of the impressions should predict powerful self-perception when the target’s weight is controlled (Baron & Kenny, 1986). We tested this condition on the three power-related variables on which a significant effect of weight had been
observed (mean reaction times on “me” responses to powerful items and on “not-me” responses to powerless items, and to the power scale) by entering this variable as a covariate. In all instances, the effect of this variable proved largely nonsignificant (all $p s < .30$) thereby suggesting that the observed effects were not simply mediated by an undesirable impression of the target. Nonetheless, for two of the three variables the influence of the target’s weight became nonsignificant when this covariate was entered, $F_{rt\_yes\_powerful}(1, 65) = 2.35; p = .13; F_{rt\_no\_powerless}(1, 63) = 5.02, p = .029; F_{power\_scale}(1, 69) = 2.50, p = .12.$

**Hypothesis 4: Beliefs About Obese People**

After excluding an extreme outlier ($Z > 3$), this analysis revealed a main effect of the target’s weight, $F(1, 68) = 6.06, p = .017$. Participants reported more positive beliefs (and, more precisely, stronger beliefs in obese people’s lack of responsibility for their weight) when expecting to interact with a thin ($M = 19.75, SD = 4.67$) rather than with an obese target ($M = 17.11, SD = 4.67$).

**Discussion**

We set out to conduct this study to examine the ways in which perceivers’ expectations regarding an upcoming interaction with a person could be affected by this person’s membership in a stigmatized group (in this case obese people). The present findings suggest that anticipating an interaction with an obese target influences normal weight participants at several levels.

First, and in line with Hypothesis 1, the reaction-time data suggest that aspects of the working self-concept emphasizing powerful traits were more accessible when expecting to interact with an obese than with a normal-weight target. Indeed, in the obese condition, reaction times were quicker with “me” responses to powerful traits and “not-me” responses to powerless traits. Importantly, the absence of effect of weight on the “warm” traits suggests that expecting an interaction with an obese target does not, in and of itself, make positive traits more or less accessible. Thus, the effect of the target’s weight on the accessibility of traits related to power does not seem to be due to a general tendency to “feel good about oneself” when interacting with an overweight person. However, future research should address potential mediators of this effect. In line with expectation states theory (Berger et al., 1972), participants’ feeling of empowerment when interacting with an obese person may be based on the activation of obese people’s status in American society today. The perception of this lower status may have been used as a “cue” triggering a perception of empowerment by the perceiver.

It is also noteworthy that, whereas participants’ reaction times on the trait-endorsement measure were influenced in line with our expectations, the actual endorsement of these traits was relatively unaffected. This pattern of findings may indicate that our manipulations were not sufficient to influence the content of the self-concept per se (which may not be all that surprising), but rather were sufficient to influence the accessibility of traits related to power.

Second, perceivers expected to have greater social power during an interaction with an obese, rather than with a normal weight, partner (Hypothesis 2). Since this measure of empowerment is comparative, the latter effect may either be due to the perceivers’ feeling that their level of “empowerment” will be higher when the target is stigmatized or to the feeling that the level of “empowerment” of a stigmatized target
is lower. Conceptually, however, it seems inappropriate to consider empowerment as a perception that is absolute and independent of the social context. That is, power is always defined in relation to others in the social context (French & Raven, 1959). Moreover, it is worth noting that the self-concept measure did not include an explicit comparison to the target and was closer to measuring a so-called “absolute” sense of empowerment, and yielded very similar results.

Third, participants who expected to interact with an obese person viewed weight as more controllable than those who expected to interact with a normal-weight partner. To the extent that perceptions of controllability are closely associated with anti-fat prejudice (Crandall, 1994), this finding seems particularly meaningful. For, it seems at odds with studies (Lowery, Hardin, & Sinclair, 2001) showing that implicit prejudice can be attenuated when expecting to interact with an out-group member. However, these studies differed from the present one in that such a reduction in prejudice level occurred only when the out-group member had higher power than the perceiver. For example, Richeson and Ambady (2003) used the implicit association test (Greenwald & Banaji, 1994) to demonstrate that European Americans who expected to interact with an African American target exhibited a higher level of racial bias if this target had less power than themselves, as opposed to if this target had the same level of power. In such a situation, it may be particularly functional (and rewarding) to display positive attitudes towards the target’s group. In our study, by contrast, we found that participants, despite being formally as powerful as the target, perceived themselves as more powerful. In such a situation, tuning one’s attitude to the anticipated target may be less rewarding, which may explain why the prospect of a social interaction did not thwart the influence of the exemplar’s group membership on the activation of negative beliefs and attitudes (Castelli et al., 2004; Dasgupta & Greenwald, 2001; Fazio et al., 1995).

Fourth, and finally, we should emphasize that the addition of stereotype-consistent information did not seem to amplify any of the effects of the target’s weight, which suggests that an interaction with an obese target can, in and of itself, drive these effects even if no stereotype-consistent information is clearly available. If the stereotype of obese people is activated automatically when interacting with an obese target (Devine, 1989; Lepore & Brown, 1997), this finding may be expected.

Limitations and Perspectives

A possible limitation of the present study resided in the gender composition of the sample, which predominantly included female participants. Although we did find some gender effects on power, these were of little theoretical interest as our sample was too small to address possible interactions between the target’s weight and the perceiver’s gender. Earlier studies involving social interactions (e.g., Snyder & Haugen, 1994, 1995) between (supposedly) obese and non-obese targets have often relied on mixed-gender pairs (with the target being female and the perceiver male). Future research should address possible interactions between the target’s weight status and the perceiver’s gender. Participants’ sense of empowerment may be more driven by social comparison in same-gender pairs (given preferential comparison with similar others; e.g., Festinger, 1954) than in mixed-gender pairs (where other factors, including desire and willingness to develop a relationship with normal weight rather than obese individuals, may play a role). More generally, perceivers may experience a lower level of empowerment in non-romantic rather than in
potentially-romantic pairings, suggesting that a would-be relationship partner indeed has “reward” power in such circumstances.

A criticism that may possibly be leveled against the present study is that the target induced a sense of empowerment because she was perceived as unattractive rather than because she was obese per se. Note that targets were correctly categorized as thin vs. obese, which rules out the possibility that they actually were judged as attractive or unattractive rather than as thin or obese. Nevertheless, it is possible that targets were seen as both attractive/unattractive and thin/obese; moreover, since participants’ perceptions of the attractiveness of the target was not measured in this study, we cannot exclude the possibility that, if we had statistically controlled for perceived attractiveness, the effect of the target's weight on perceptions of empowerment might have vanished. However, the logic of this criticism, and of this analysis, rests on the assumption that attractiveness is an absolute property of the target that is conceptually independent of her body size, just like “being a good cook” is conceptually independent of “being Italian.” This argument is misleading in our view: Attractiveness is always relative to culturally defined societal standards including those that govern body size. Obesity is stigmatizing, in part, because it is a criterion that serves to define unattractiveness, just as other social categorizations (e.g., age, ethnicity, social class, body size, and handicaps) are used for this same purpose. Hence, they are so closely linked that it is misleading, in our view, to consider any statistical covariance between the two variables as a “confound.”

Another aspect of the present study that may deserve further elaboration lies in our choice of the self-descriptive traits. Although some of these traits are associated with potency in Osgood’s system, they could be seen as addressing quite distinct aspects of the self-concept: Some were related to power per se (e.g., “dominant”, “powerful”) whereas others were related to assertiveness and agency (e.g., “decisive”, “self-confident”). Agency can be viewed as a consequence of empowerment (“I can be assertive because I am powerful”). But agency can also be considered as an aspect of individuals’ self-construal that may affect the way power is actually exerted and the goals people set for themselves when empowered. For example, Chen and her colleagues (Chen et al., 2001; Chen & Welland, 2002) have found that, when endowed with power, people with an “independent” self-construal pursued more self-interested goals and less other-oriented goals than people with an “interdependent” self-construal. In this view, interacting with an obese person may not only activate people’s self-views as powerful, but their self-construal (e.g., independent vs. interdependent), and thereby their interaction goals.

More generally, the present findings yield two major theoretical implications. First, the emergence of legitimate status systems observed by Ridgeway (1991) in dyads and in groups including both stigmatized and nonstigmatized individuals could be partially due to the latter’s sense of empowerment in such interactions. Indeed, when expecting to interact with obese individuals, normal-weight perceivers in our study believed it would be more likely and more suiting if they had more power over the interaction. This belief may promote behaviors aimed at controlling the interaction. If targets defer to such treatment, as they often do (Ridgeway, 2001; Ridgeway & Berger, 1988; Snyder, 1992; Snyder & Haugen, 1994), the emergence of a consensual status system within the dyad should emerge.

Second, the psychological dimensions affected by the mere anticipation of interacting with an obese person are all relevant to behavioral confirmation (Snyder & Klein, 2005; Snyder & Stukas, 1999). The psychological states of perceivers who
feel empowered, hold negative attitudes towards the target’s group, and view the
target in negative terms are all likely to facilitate behavioral confirmation (see Klein
& Snyder, 2003, for a review) and thereby to contribute to maintaining the
stereotypes of obese people.

Turning now to the practical implications of these findings, our study indicates a
generally negative orientation towards an obese target. In light of obese peoples’
reactions to negative treatment, these findings take on particular significance. In
particular, obese people’s feelings of self-worth are particularly likely to suffer from
such treatment as they often fail to attribute it to prejudice, a self-protective strategy
commonly used by members of other stigmatized groups (Crocker, Voelkl, Testa, &
Major, 1991). Obese targets may resort to other strategies toward dealing with
maltreatment, such as displaying extreme levels of warmth and friendliness (Miller
et al., 1995). The present study invites further research concerning whether such
strategies effectively counter the perceiver’s sense of empowerment or simply abide
by it, thereby potentially facilitating behavioral confirmation.

To conclude, it seems that when perceivers are aware of their upcoming
conversational partner’s membership in a stigmatized group, their frame of mind
resembles in many ways that of an individual who has been endowed with formal
power (e.g., when expecting to encounter one of his or her subordinates). Spontaneously
then, privileged persons (i.e., nonstigmatized individuals), when
expecting to encounter members belonging to a stigmatized group, feel quite natural
in taking charge of the interaction, as well as in considering the target in stereotypical
traits and in experiencing prejudice towards the target’s group.

Notes

1. Within each weight condition, the identity of the target presented did not exert any
effect on the dependent variables. This factor was therefore ignored in the analyses.
2. Paradoxically, both “controlled” and “incapable of controlling herself” contributed
positively to the scale. This can be explained by the opposite anchors, which were
positive in both cases (spontaneous and capable of controlling herself), which yielded
a negative connotation to the other anchor.
3. These Cronbach’s alphas are computed only on participants responding “no” (or yes)
to all items. Contrary to the other scales (in which there were at least 10 such cases),
there were only 6 in the present instance, which makes the (low) alpha relatively
meaningless.
4. These items were negatively correlated ($r = -.63$). However, averaging them
yielded a bimodal distribution in spite of their having each a relatively normal
distribution.

References

power in anticipated social interactions*. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the
American Psychological Association, Chicago, IL, USA.
An automatic power → sex association and its consequences for sexual harassment and


APPENDIX

Items of the social power scale organized by each base of social power

Reward
1  I could bring things to the interaction that my partner will see as beneficial.
7  I could make this interaction enjoyable for my partner.
13 I could influence my partner because of the good qualities that I bring to the interaction.

Coercive
2  I could make the interaction difficult for my partner.*
8  I could influence my partner by being able to take control of the topics of conversation.
14 I could make my partner feel uncomfortable during our interaction.*

Legitimate
3  My role gives me the opportunity to control the conversation.
9  My partner should defer to me in the conversation because of my role.
15 My role in the interaction gives me the opportunity to influence my partner.

Referent
4  My partner will be more interested in further interaction with me than I will be with him/her.
10 I expect that my partner will like me more than I will like him/her.
16 I could influence my partner because of my level of interest in further interactions with him/her.

Expert
5  I expect to be better at getting-acquainted conversation than my partner is.
11 I expect to be more socially skilled than my partner is.
17 I could influence my partner because of my social skills.

Informational
6  Knowing what I know about my partner may allow me to take charge of the interaction.
12 Knowing what I know about my partner could be useful to me in the interaction.
18 I could influence my partner because I know things about my partner that he/she doesn’t know about me.

Note: Item numbers refer to their order of presentation. *Not included in the final scale.