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'Um, err, ahh...' Careers practitioners' perceptions of weight: A thematic analysis

Corinne Holden, Christian van Nieuwerburgh & Julia Yates

With 61% of the UK population being overweight, it is likely that career professionals will encounter overweight clients. Even though being overweight is thought to be potentially detrimental to career development, there is little theory or advice to help career practitioners have productive conversations about the issue. This paper reports the findings of a small-scale qualitative study exploring the experiences of six career coaches discussing issues of weight with clients. Results show participants felt deeply uncomfortable with the topic, and were ambivalent about the appropriateness of discussing it within career conversations, despite acknowledging that being overweight can impact negatively on employment.



Introduction

Global obesity rates are rising and 61% of the adult population are now overweight or obese (defined as having a body mass index (BMI) >25). Furthermore, obesity in the UK population is considerably above the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) average (OECD, 2019). People who are overweight or obese are the subject of discrimination in our society. Obesity is perceived as a character flaw (Finkelstein et al, 2007) with the overweight seen as unattractive, emotionally impaired, introverted and incompetent. They promote feelings of disgust (Levine & Schweitzer, 2013) and are considered worthy of blame because of the perceived self-inflicted nature of the condition.

Being overweight or obese has a detrimental effect at every stage of the employment process. The negative

stereotype of being overweight occurs throughout the working world (Roehling, Roehling & Odland, 2008), and is set to continue as millennials (those born between 1981 and 1994) have been shown to hold stereotypical and discriminatory views of overweight people when it comes to employment (Ilan, Edgar, & O'Kane, 2016). People who are overweight are more likely to be the subject of teasing, perpetuating a cycle leading to further bias and stereotype reinforcement (Teachman, Gapinski, Brownell, Rawlins & Jeyaram, 2003). Indeed, reinforcement of stereotypes can also be exacerbated through company health promotion initiatives (Tauber, Mulder & Flint, 2018). Weight discrimination is prevalent throughout the employment cycle from hiring onwards (Agerstom & Rooth, 2011), with the overweight being given, for example, lower ratings at job interviews (Finkelstein, Frautschy, Demuth & Sweeney, 2007) and having reduced earnings potential (Judge & Cable, 2011).

Responding to the growing challenges faced by people who are obese and overweight in society, the European Court of Justice (2014) ruled that obesity could be treated as a disability. Yet although parallels can be drawn between weight and other characteristics which lead to discrimination, weight is a complicated issue and not directly comparable with disability, race or gender. One key difference is that weight is deemed controllable and changeable over time (Rooth, 2009). Another is the evidence that weight has a real impact for employers and employment costs (Judge & Cable, 2011). Evidence shows that overweight people are prone to absenteeism (White et al., 2015), with the link between raised BMI correlating progressively with a reduction in work ability (Andersen, Izquierdo & Sundstrup, 2017) and productivity (Morris, 2007). This could be because of the link between obesity and health conditions including diabetes, heart disease, stroke and raised blood pressure (Morris, 2007). There

is also evidence for a link between weight and mental health conditions (Rao, 2010), though this has been disputed (da Luz et al., 2017). The rate of absence is higher for women than men (Melsom & Mastekaasa, 2017), with an overall cost to the UK economy of £21 billion in 2011 (Gallup, 2018).

Weight is clearly a complex issue. Those who are overweight or obese face discrimination both within society and within the workplace, yet there is no legislation in the UK to prevent unfair discrimination (Flint et al., 2016) and the arguments to be made to employers who are choosing, consciously or not, to reject overweight and obese job applicants are complicated.

The nuances and complexities of this topic have the potential to place career practitioners in challenging situations. Weight has an impact on career development and employment opportunities, and as such could arguably constitute a legitimate topic for discussion in career interventions. Given the complexity of the topic and the sensitive nature of these conversations, practitioners must feel confident in their boundaries and skilled at using the right strategies, to ensure that the conversations are appropriate and valuable for their clients. Yet despite the apparent significance of the topic, limited research has been conducted on the topic and few guidelines are available to help practitioners to navigate this sensitive but important subject.

This study takes its starting point from the work of Yates, Hooley and Bagri (2017) and Yates and Hooley (2018) on 'career image' who in their research explored career practitioners' views about various aspects of appearance and identified that their participants found the issue of weight a particularly difficult one to deal with. Whilst their participants acknowledged that weight can have an influence on career paths and employment success, they were not all confident that the topic was an appropriate one to raise with clients and lamented the lack of guidelines for practice to underpin their conversations. The authors called for further exploration of this topic, and in this paper we present the findings of a qualitative study which specifically explores the experiences and views of career practitioners on discussions about weight with clients.

Method

This study explored the views of six career coaches (four women and two men) who work for a large outplacement company based in the City of London. All names have been anonymised. Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews based at the career coaches' workplace. The study aimed to gather rich, in depth data about the practitioners' experiences, beliefs and opinions, and as such it was thought that a qualitative methodology would be most suitable. One to one interviews were considered the most appropriate method of data collection as it was felt that participants might be more comfortable discussing this potentially sensitive topic individually.

Once ethical approval was obtained, an email was sent to all career coaches in the organisation inviting them to take part in the study and six agreed to get involved. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and the data were analysed using a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This is a systematic and rigorous approach to data analysis which allows for the identification, analysis and description of themes, trends, relationships and phenomena by the examination of detailed meanings and concepts within the data. With the analysis an inductive, bottom up approach was taken whereby phenomena were observed, recorded and analysed through to abstract concept, with coding closely joined to the collected data.

Interviews were transcribed and re-read multiple times to facilitate familiarity with the data (Willig, 2013). Coding of themes was conducted in a structured and succinct fashion that was pertinent to the research topic, followed by further organisation and collation into the identified themes. Throughout this process the data was constantly revisited to ensure accuracy and each theme analysed to ensure range, focus and narrative consistency in a back and forward process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and an attitude of healthy scepticism adopted. Close supervision, researcher reflexivity and a commitment to staying close to the data ensured methodological rigour.

Findings and discussion

Three themes emerged from the data analysis: (1) how you look has an impact on your career; (2) it is

uncomfortable to talk about your client's weight and (3) it is better to focus on the factors clients can influence. These findings will now be described, illustrated by quotations from the participants, and discussed in the light of the existing literature. Pseudonyms have been used to preserve participant anonymity.

Theme 1 – how you look has an impact on your career

The career coaches in this study recognised that looks are significant when it comes to work, summed up by Isla's comment that 'Unfortunately, people are very much judged on first impressions of what they look like'. Participants were aware of the stigma of being overweight and believed that this affects the attitudes of employers. Practitioners believed that better looking employees are more likely to be rewarded in the workplace, as Isla explained 'More attractive people are going to be successful.' Although the participants acknowledged this reality (Little & Roberts, 2012), they found it unpalatable and wished that the world were different:

'Much as we would all like to pretend that we are not in any way affected by it, I genuinely believe that yes, it [appearance] does have an impact on people's career prospects' (Harry).

Prejudice by employers against workers who are overweight has been well documented in the literature (Bartels & Nordstrom, 2013; Roehling, Roehling & Elluru, 2018). The participants in this study all acknowledged the existence of the phenomenon and linked this prejudice mainly to the hiring process suggesting that the interview was a critical moment when first impressions counted. They reported a belief that being overweight leads to employer assumptions: 'if people don't take reasonable care of themselves they wouldn't be as committed to looking after their career' (Harry) or 'they are more likely to be ill' (Isla) and the participants felt that even those employers who would not consciously discriminate could suffer from unconscious bias, particularly, as Emily noted, 'in the selection process'. These views are supported by the empirical research which suggests that those who are overweight are subject to unconscious prejudice within the workplace (Chamberlain, 2016).

Theme 2 - it is uncomfortable to talk about a client's weight

Practitioners felt the topic of weight was difficult to discuss with their clients. Tom explained that even the language itself made him feel uncomfortable: 'Personally, I feel guilty just saying the word "fat" or "overweight" or "obese"' and Harry illustrated the degree of the taboo associated with weight, suggesting that even 'sexuality is an easier topic to discuss now than weight'. The participants' responses to talking about weight with their clients were visceral in some cases: 'even thinking about it makes me feel uncomfortable' (Harry), but the participants regretted not being able to talk about it as openly as they would like, describing it as 'taboo' (Emily). This difficulty was expressed with many pauses, stutters and attempts at using appropriate and correct terminology when discussing the topic within the research interviews.

Some participants felt that there were circumstances in which they could see themselves discussing weight with clients but felt that the topic would have to be initiated by the client: they felt that only this would assure them that the clients would react positively to the topic. Yet it is interesting to note that two of the participants who felt that they would in theory discuss weight with their clients, had not broached the topic to date.

Four participants felt that weight was 'inappropriate' for a careers discussion as it was outside their remit or expertise and there were concerns raised about whether these discussions would be able to have a positive impact on their clients, particularly given time constraints. Coaches feared the conversation may 'unleash things' (Isla) that they were ill-equipped to deal with, such as mental health issues. The practitioners' concerns are not without foundation, as clear links have been established between obesity and mental ill health (Simon et al., 2006) This adds to the weight of evidence that practitioners need further guidelines on how to handle these issues in their practice.

Career coaches work hard to be reflective (Schön, 1983) and, with training, this is key to the identification of their own individual preconceptions. A core value of many career coaches is unconditional positive

regard for their clients (Yates, 2014) and this may have made it particularly hard for the participants in this study to appear judgemental. The participants in this study did not want to make assumptions about clients' desire to lose weight but some assumptions could be discerned in their interviews, with participants commenting that overweight clients came with 'baggage' (Tom) or emotional issues. This could indicate the importance of training for career practitioners to help them first to identify their own assumptions and prejudices, and then to support their clients as they deal with the assumptions and prejudices of others.

The practitioner's own body relationship influences how they feel about discussing weight with their clients (Brown & Thompson, 2007). This notion was introduced by practitioners with comments such as 'As you can see, I'm not so slim myself' (Olivia) or 'The client may think "Oh well, it's alright for you!" I mean I am not super-thin but I don't have issues with my weight!' (Emily). Although polar opposites, both Olivia and Emily felt unease because of their own body shape and how clients may react to it and again this suggests that practitioners need further guidance in the most effective ways to broach the subject with clients.

Practitioners reported feeling anxious that talking about weight may cause offence, with politeness and etiquette making the discussion difficult. The working alliance with the client is imperative for the success of a coaching intervention (Masdonati, Massoudi & Rossier, 2009), and coaches feared that a discussion of weight might risk damaging rapport, client self-esteem or confidence, which would render the coaching ineffective and leave the individual less equipped for employment. It was perceived that the overweight individual would already have awareness of their weight and to talk about it could be deeply insensitive. This echoes the findings in Yates et al. (2017), and indicates that there is a need for further research to identify whether these fears are justified.

Theme 3 - it is better to focus on factors that clients can influence

To some degree, people are in control of their own weight, but it is not always an easy thing to change, and the participants were conscious that advising their clients to lose weight may have limited impact:

'If someone is on a 3-month programme...how are they going to change their weight over that period of time?' (Isla). But whilst the career coaches found the topic of weight difficult to raise and were unsure whether it fell within their remit of legitimate career coaching, the participants were eager to support their clients in other, related ways. Career coaches explained that they felt comfortable discussing other aspects of appearance, including dress for interview (Subhani, Hasan, Azmat & Osman, 2012), body language and how the client should present themselves to 'make the most of what they have got' (Olivia). Coaches were also quite willing to discuss lifestyle, well-being and fitness as a gentle, indirect way to induce the client to think about image. The coaches felt that these conversations in themselves could be difficult but indicated that their empathy for their clients enabled them to maintain a strong client relationship. Group sessions were suggested as an alternative strategy through which information could be passed on without singling out individuals and by working on constructs such as personal branding, participants found that some clients gain self-awareness in a less direct way. These strategies were strikingly similar to those identified by the participants in Yates and Hooley's study (2018).

Limitations and directions for future research

There are a number of limitations associated with this study which should be kept in mind. As a qualitative study, the study does not aim to be generalisable, but with a small sample size, we should exercise caution in how we interpret the findings. The participants volunteered to get involved in the study which could suggest that they had a particular interest in this topic and therefore might mark them out as different from a typical career coach. The participants were all working with adult clients many of whom were working within the City of London. As such their client group and the employers their clients might be seeking to work with could be considered atypical.

There is no literature for careers practitioners with regard to managing a discussion on weight, nor is there any theory to back up practice, meaning that there is very little to support careers practitioners

who wish to engage in this topic collaboratively with their clients. This study offers further support to the calls in Yates et al. (2017, 2018) for further guidance for practitioners as they navigate these tricky waters. Further research could usefully focus on exploring and evaluating the approaches that career practitioners use when discussing weight with clients, and could examine the topic from the perspective of the clients, identifying the kind of approaches and advice that they themselves would find useful.

Conclusion

This study has explored the attitudes of careers professionals to their overweight clients. The topic clearly made the career coaches in this study feel uncomfortable. From a professional perspective, they were unclear of where their boundaries should lie, and there was no consensus on whether the topic is an appropriate one for career conversations, nor a common understanding of the techniques which might allow for effective and supportive discussions with clients. On a personal level, the participants themselves shared the prevalent societal views that weight is a taboo topic and one which made them feel personally embarrassed.

The practitioners in this study echoed the views of those surveyed in Yates and Hooley (2017) that they struggle with the tension between wanting to support their clients yet not quite knowing how best to address the topic. There is widespread acknowledgement both from this study and in previous literature that appearance has an impact on career development and employability, yet there are no guidelines to help practitioners understand where the boundaries should lie, and no guidance to support the facilitation of these discussions. As with the participants in Yates and Hooley's study, these career coaches are clearly strongly motivated to help their clients and have developed their own individual strategies for deciding where to draw the line, and how to ensure that the conversations are effective and positive.

Here, practitioners in conversations with overweight clients find a paradox. They believe their clients are uninformed about the issue of weight discrimination but, as professionals, are unable to address this

because of societal constraints and fear of causing offence. Despite being empathetic to their clients and their clear ethical imperative to support the clients in their career endeavours, the participants in this study found the subject of weight too difficult to discuss at individual level and lack any strategies for doing so. The participants also reported the desire for a change in society where being overweight is more acceptable, with one participant calling for a kinder terminology to be adopted, which has been echoed in a recent article calling for a new narrative for those living with obesity (Ralston et al., 2018). By highlighting this issue, it is hoped to increase awareness of this phenomenon and encourage debate. Ethical guidelines, theories and training would help in working towards lifting the taboo on weight in employment, facilitating practitioners to engage with the topic for the ultimate benefit of their clients and of society at large.



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For correspondence

Corinne Holden,
Independent Researcher and Careers Practitioner
holden168@btinternet.com

Christian van Nieuwerburgh,
Professor of Coaching and Positive Psychology,
University of East London
c.j.vannieuwerburgh@uel.ac.uk

Julia Yates,
Senior Lecturer in Organisational Psychology,
City, University of London
julia.yates.1@city.ac.uk