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Weight Bias as a Function of Personality, Attributions and Contact Experiences
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Introduction
The number of obese adults and children in the United States has risen dramatically over the past few decades (Centers for Disease Control, 2011). As a result, there has been increased attention given to how overweight people are perceived and treated (Crandall, et al., 2001). There is clear evidence that overweight people tend to be more negatively evaluated and stereotyped than their normal weight counterparts (Lieberman, Tybur & Latner, 2010). This is a form of prejudice referred to as weight bias.

We conducted a study to examine the psychological determinants of weight bias, with a focus on:
• The “Big 5” personality traits (Neuroticism, Extraversion, Openness, Agreeableness, and Conscientiousness)
• Attributional complexity (the extent to which people prefer to consider multiple causes for people’s behavior or prefer to make simplistic, internal attributions about behavior)
• Contact experiences with overweight individuals, including frequency of contact and quality of contact

From a person x situation model of prejudice (Jackson & Poulson, 2005), we hypothesized that expressions of weight bias would be inversely related to the personality traits of Openness (tendency to be imaginative, intellectually curious, and nonconforming) and Agreeableness (tendency to be friendly, cooperative, and sympathetic), and that these relationships would be mediated by attributional complexity and contact experiences with overweight individuals.

Method
Participants were 166 PSY 120 students who completed an online survey for partial course credit (62 males, 104 females; 143 European American, 9 African American, 4 Asian, 6 Hispanic, and 4 biracial or other). The survey included the following:
• The Big 5 Aspects Scale (DeYoung, Quilty, & Peterson, 2007). This 100-item scale was used to assess Neuroticism (e.g., Get angry easily), Extraversion (e.g., Make friends easily), Openness (e.g., Like to solve complex problems), Agreeableness (e.g., Sympathize with others’ feelings), and Conscientiousness (e.g., Carry out my plans).
• The Contact Experiences Scale (Fletcher, et al. 1986). This scale consists of 26 items. Responses were made on a 7-point scale, with higher scores indicating greater preference for complex explanations for behavior (e.g., I really enjoy analyzing the reasons or causes for people’s behavior).
• The Attributional Complexity Scale (Tzeng & Jackson, 1994). This 15-item scale measures the frequency and quality of contact experiences with group members (e.g., I have frequent contact experiences with overweight individuals; My contact experiences with overweight individuals have been mostly pleasant). Responses are made on a 7-point strongly disagree – strongly agree scale.

As shown in Table 1, as expected, Agreeableness and Openness were the only personality variables that were significantly associated with weight bias. As predicted, these traits were also significantly associated with attributional complexity and the frequency and quality of contact experiences with overweight individuals.

Results
A regression analysis was conducted using Agreeableness, Openness, Attributional Complexity, Frequency of Contact, and Quality of Contact as simultaneous predictors of weight bias. In this analysis only quality of contact emerged as a significant predictor of weight bias (β = -.25, p = .03).

Next, we conducted Structural Equation Modeling analyses on the data (maximum likelihood method of estimation). The model shown in Figure 1 was an good fit to the data (GFI .95, NFI = .94, RMSEA = .08).

Discussion
Our hypotheses were supported. Openness and Agreeableness were significant predictors of weight bias, and these relationships were mediated by attributional complexity and contact experiences. Positive contact with overweight individuals was an especially strong predictor of attitudes toward overweight people as a group. This is consistent with previous studies linking contact to ethnic prejudice (Pettigrew & Troop, 2006).

Our finding provides empirical support for a theoretical model that integrates personality approaches and social psychological approaches to prejudice. This is an important step given the persistence of historical divisions between these perspectives. As recently noted by Hodson (2009), “Nowhere is the theoretical divide between person and situation more evident than the domain of prejudice research.” Such fractions are not empirically justified and may, in fact, hinder our scientific understanding of the determinants and dynamics of prejudice, one of the most pervasive and important problems facing our species.