

# Obesity and compliance\*

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Obese and normal-weight Ss were tested to determine whether obese and normal-weight people differ in motivational strength, self-esteem, and compliance. Results showed no differences between obese and normal-weight Ss on any of the measures. Findings suggest that psychological disturbances associated with obesity are not pronounced in young university populations.

There are now many studies demonstrating significant differences in the laboratory behavior of obese and normal-weight Ss (Nisbett, 1968; Rodin, 1973; Singh, 1973; Singh and Sikes, 1974; Schachter, 1971). However, in none of the reported studies was any attempt made to rule out factors such as differential motivational strength, self-esteem, or emotional reactivity. It is quite likely that obese Ss consider themselves as deviant in this culture. Stunkard and Mendelson (1961) reported that obese patients have an overwhelming preoccupation with their obesity. Obese patients feel that they are grotesque and loathsome, and they feel that others must look upon obese people with horror and contempt. Such feelings should affect the self-esteem of the obese Ss and induce in them a greater need to comply with the Es. Such differences, if they indeed exist, can explain at least some of the reported performance differences between obese and normal Ss.

## METHOD

### Subjects

The Ss were undergraduates (age range 19-21 years) taking introductory psychology courses at the University of Texas. Age, height, and weight were recorded for all Ss. Those who participated in body contact sports were excluded. Ss were classified as obese or normal on the basis of the norms published by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (1959). All Ss were administered a test for self-esteem (Helmreich, Stapp, & Ervin, in press).

### Procedure

Initially, each S was asked to draw a series of circles and then draw a triangle inside each circle. Ss were told that it was crucial that they work on this task *only as long* as they really wanted to. They were informed that the purpose of this test would be revealed only after they had completed it. After the drawing, Ss were randomly divided into two groups: in one group, Ss were asked if they would like to volunteer for an experiment which involved some slightly painful electric shock; Ss in other groups were asked to volunteer for an experiment involving no electric shock. The E was a young female of normal weight.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The main findings are shown in Table 1. As is evident, obese and normal groups did not differ significantly on any measure. Both groups had approximately identical

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Table 1  
Mean Self-Esteem Score, Number of Figures Drawn, Time Taken to Draw Figures, and Percentage of Subjects Volunteering for Experiment Involving Shock or No Shock

Percent Over-weight	Self-Esteem Score	Number of Figures Drawn	Time to Draw Figures (Min)	Percent Shock Test	Percent Non-shock Test
Obese Group (N = 64)					
28.7	73.1	53.2	11.7	26.0	49
Normal Group (N = 62)					
-1.0	76.0	58.6	13.1	22.2	51

scores on the self-esteem test and spent about the same amount of time on a boring task (drawing triangles inside circles). Neither group differed in need to comply with the E; both obese and normal Ss volunteered for the experiments employing no electric shock and electric shock.

It appears that young university students represent a special population in which psychological disturbances associated with obesity are not evident. Therefore, reported behavioral differences between obese and normal Ss in previous studies employing university populations cannot be attributed to psychological or personality characteristics of obese Ss.

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