Prejudice and discrimination are widespread in sport, negatively affecting sport organization employees and limiting their opportunities. Scholarly attention has followed, with a numbers of researchers examining bias expressed toward women, racial minorities, and LGBT individuals, among others (for a review, see Cunningham, 2015). Interestingly, critical examination of weight discrimination is comparatively lacking, both in sport and the wider management literature, too (Ruggs et al., 2013). Those in larger bodies are often that target of harassment, staring, and unsolicited advice or commentary (Puhl & Latner, 2007). Unfortunately, the stigma of body weight is particularly strong in the physical activity context, which often leads those in larger bodies to avoid participating (Schmalz, 2010, Vartanian & Shaprow, 2008). Further, fat individuals are often seen as unfit and incapable in fitness settings (Boero, 2007).

The current study aims to examine the dynamics of weight stigma as it relates to physical activity instructors, who we believe face the same body-related stigmas as their participants. In particular, we will use an experimental design to test participant evaluations of yoga instructors of varying body size, including measures of competence, quality of the exercise itself, and repeat participation intentions. Further, we will test the effects of two possible moderating variables, participant body mass index (BMI) and athletic identity, in changing the overall evaluations of the program.

Literature Review and Theoretical Background

Weight stigma, or the negative evaluation and reduction in social standing of individuals based on body weight alone, has a number of well-documented negative effects on its targets- fat individuals. These include reduced self-esteem, negative psychological affect, depression, avoidance of medical care, anxiety about public health choices, and physical activity avoidance (Vartanian & Shaprow, 2008). The current study seeks to examine, in particular, the ways that weight stigma affects evaluations of fitness instructors, given that physical activity spaces are often a hostile space for those in larger bodies. For example, fitness trainers and physical education teachers often exhibit high levels of anti-fat bias (Dimmock et al., 2009). Further, fat individuals are perceived as incapable, unfit, and largely unwelcome in physical activity spaces (Boero, 2007).

The assumptions about the relative fitness of fat individuals also disadvantage them in seeking positions as fitness instructors, largely due to the lack of perceived person-job fit (Sartore & Cunningham, 2007). This is consistent with the match-up hypothesis (Kahle & Homer, 1985), which notes that in sponsorship relationships, a product spokesperson must appropriately match the product to see benefits of the relationship. This logic has been extended to service products as well, in that individuals perceive a service product more positively when those delivering the product represent the product’s ideals (Koernig & Page, 2002). Given the weight-loss and ideal body type focus of the fitness industry, it follows that participants would expect that a fitness instructor must be thin themselves.

Similarly, attribution theory (Weiner, 1995) notes that individuals attempt to explain outcomes through readily observed causes. In the fitness setting, then, individuals would likely attribute the body type of the instructor to the activity that they present. That is, a thin individual would be seen as having earned their thinness through regular engagement with the activity. Given the beliefs that individuals may hold about the causal link between regular participation and thinness, and the modern-cultural obsession with attaining a thin body, it follows that individuals would likely choose to participate in activities with instructors that model the thin body themselves. That is, the prevailing beliefs surrounding the causal link between the instructor’s participation and hers or his body type, would lead individuals to believe that they, too, can achieve a certain body type through regular participation.

Given this review, we propose a series of hypotheses for testing. First, we suggest that participants in a fitness activity will perceive a fat instructor as less competent than a thin instructor (H1). Further, we hypothesize that individuals will perceive a workout with a thin instructor to be more rigorous and effective than one delivered by a
fat instructor (H2) and that individuals will be more likely to continue participating with a thin instructor than a fat instructor (H3). Further, given that individuals engage in a series of self-categorizations and feel most comfortable with in-group members (Tajfel & Turner, 1979), we propose that participants that are fat themselves will more positively evaluate a fat instructor than thin participants (H4). Finally, given the particularly hostile climate of athletic and sporting contexts for those in larger bodies, we hypothesize that one’s athletic identification will lead to lower evaluations of fat instructors (H5).

**Method**

We will collect data from 250 students enrolled in yoga physical activity classes at a large public university in the US. Participants will be randomly assigned to one of two test conditions, in which they will be provided a short yoga video online, presenting a workout to complete that is taught by either a fat or thin instructor. To control for variation in instructor styles, both instructors will follow the same script, presenting the same pre-programmed workout, which will include the same movements and timing as the other. After completing the workout video, participants will then be asked to complete a short questionnaire providing demographic information, including height and weight of the participant, an assessment of instructor competence, assessment of the quality of the workout, a scale of intention to repeat participation, (adapted from Walker & Kent, 2009), and a scale of athletic identity (adapted from Randall and Jaussi, 2003).

**Data Analysis**

We will examine hypotheses 1-3 using analysis of variance, with post hoc contrasts comparing the three outcome variables across each of the treatment conditions. We will use regression analysis to examine hypotheses 4 and 5, with participant BMI and athletic identification as independent variables and the quality measure of the video serving as the dependent variable for each.

**Discussion**

We expect to find that, consistent with previous literature, fat individuals face high levels of prejudice in the fitness context. In particular, we expect to find that instructors in larger bodies, regardless of actual instruction quality, will be perceived as less competent than their thinner counterparts. Further, we expect that participants will view a workout with a fat instructor to be less rigorous, irrespective of the content of the workout itself, and be less likely to continue participating with that instructor. We also expect that thin individuals, defined by lower BMI, will exhibit higher levels of prejudice against fat instructors, rating them lower than fat participants would. Finally, it is also expected that those that identify most with athletic culture, which has particularly strong anti-fat biases, will also rate fat instructors poorly compared to those that do not. Through the current research, we aim to discuss the ways that body stigma influences perceptions of competence for instructors and continue the conversation of fitness and fatness in physical activity settings.