



Obesity, job satisfaction and disability at older ages in Europe



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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the interaction between obesity and disability and its impact on the levels of job satisfaction reported by older workers (aged 50–64) in ten European countries (Denmark, Sweden, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy and Spain). Using longitudinal data from the Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement in Europe for the years 2004, 2007 and 2011, we estimate a job satisfaction equation which includes a set of explanatory variables measuring worker's obesity and disability status (non-disabled, non-limited disabled, and limited disabled). The results show that, after controlling for other variables, obese workers are more likely to be satisfied with their jobs as compared to those workers with normal weight (0.066 points). In addition, being limited disabled or having poor health contribute to reducing (by 0.082 and 0.172 points, respectively) this positive effect of being obese on job satisfaction. However, we do not find any differential effect of obesity on job satisfaction by disability status, except for those underweight individuals who are not limited in their daily activities. Overall, these findings support the hypothesis of lower expectations about jobs for obese workers, especially if they also have poor health.

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1. Introduction

The level and trends of overweight and obesity rates worldwide have become a major public health concern. According to the World Health Organization, 35% of adults were overweight in 2008 (i.e. Body Mass Index (BMI) ≥ 25 kg/m²). The worldwide prevalence of obesity has nearly doubled since 1980 (World Health Organization, 2010). In developed countries more than half of the adult population is overweight or obese. Even in countries where overweight rates are much lower (e.g. Japan, Korea, France or Switzerland) compared with others (e.g. USA, New Zealand, Australia, Canada, UK and Ireland), they have been increasing during the past

decades (OECD, 2013). Obesity and being overweight lead to adverse metabolic effects on blood pressure, insulin resistance, and cholesterol and triglyceride levels (World Health Organization, 2010). As a result, the risk of a number of non-communicable diseases increases with BMI. The most important ones are cardiovascular diseases (mainly heart disease and stroke), type 2 diabetes, musculoskeletal disorders (especially osteoarthritis) and various types of cancer (e.g. endometrial, breast, and colon) (World Health Organization, 2000). At a basic level, obesity is the result of consuming more calories than one expends over an extended period of time. In her survey of the factors behind this rising phenomenon, Rosin (2008) explores the range of possible causes, from biological characteristics to behavioural aspects, to changes in transport, working conditions and the food industry which together foment an obesogenic environment (Swinburn et al., 1999).

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Alongside its adverse effects on health, numerous studies have found that obesity is negatively correlated with both the psycho-social well-being and the socio-economic prospects of individuals, also affecting negatively the economic productivity of the workforce (Sassi, 2010). Particularly in older adults, the presence of obesity is related to increased disability (Samper-Ternent and Al Snih, 2012) and, consequently, to increased probability of early retirement (Renna and Thakur, 2010). However, the interaction of these variables warrants further investigation in order to expand the evidence on the causal relation between obesity, disability and labour market outcomes. Cawley (2000) concludes that there is no evidence of body weight causing disability, so the observed correlation might be explained by the other two alternatives, that is, disability causing an individual to be overweight or unobserved factors causing both. Nonetheless, Burkhauser and Cawley (2004) find some evidence that body weight increases the odds of having health-related work limitations. In order to obtain better information on the impact of obesity and disability and their interaction on labour outcomes, we focus on a variable that has been surprisingly neglected within this literature on obesity: job satisfaction.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the impact of obesity and its interaction with different forms of disability (i.e. those individuals who are limited in their daily activities and those who are not) on job satisfaction among older people in ten European countries (Denmark, Sweden, Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Italy and Spain). For this purpose, we will test the three following hypotheses: (a) overweight people have a lower level of job satisfaction than people with normal weight independently of the degree of severity of the disability; (b) overweight people without disabilities experience more job satisfaction than overweight people with disabilities, and (c) the degree of limitation in the daily activities of people with disabilities significantly affects the levels of job satisfaction of overweight people.

As for the first hypothesis, some studies (e.g. Pronk et al., 2004; Park, 2009; Sassi, 2010; Cawley and Meyerhoefer, 2012) have concluded that obesity in the workplace has important economics costs in terms of productivity (e.g. more frequent and lengthier work absences), job performance (e.g. higher levels of stress and fatigue, especially if the job requires a good deal of physical effort) and higher medical costs, among others. As a result, we expect a negative relationship between obesity and job satisfaction for all workers. This negative effect of obesity on job satisfaction scores may be even higher for workers with disabilities due to the fact that disability steals time, i.e., people with disabilities need more leisure time to rest, obtain medical care, and accomplish everyday activities (Oi, 1991). Furthermore, time consumed by transportation to and from work may be longer. Therefore, the combination of obesity and disability may have a stronger negative effect on the levels of job satisfaction reported by overweight people with disabilities as compared to overweight people without disabilities (second hypothesis). In addition, we expect that the degree of severity of disability also affects the relationship between obesity and job satisfaction among workers with

disabilities (third hypothesis). On the other hand, we have to take into account that Böckerman et al. (2014) find, using data for the Finnish population (aged 30 years and over) and different comprehensive measures of body composition such as waist circumference, body fat percentage, and lean body mass along with BMI, that the negative association between obesity and subjective well-being tends to disappear when we control for health and functional capacity. In our case, we are analysing the relationship between obesity and job satisfaction, but we are able to obtain empirical evidence in the same or a similar way to Böckerman et al. (2014). In this study and from two questions included in the SHARE questionnaire, we use a measure of disability based on the social model of disability, which is not a traditional diagrammatic model like many psychological and sociological models, but rather a progressive political concept that opposes the medical model commonly used in the health professions. In this sense, disability refers to the social effects of physical or mental impairment requiring a change in society's values and practices in order to remove the barriers to participation that result in discrimination against people with disabilities.

Our first contribution is to investigate how obesity affects job satisfaction more strongly if obesity goes along with a limiting disability. To our knowledge, this interaction has not been previously analyzed, and thus this study fills an important gap in the existing literature. Furthermore, the possibility to differentiate within the disabled population those individuals who are limited in their daily activities from those who are not allows us to control for productivity differences in our job satisfaction equations (Pagan and Malo, 2009). We have an important body of literature on job satisfaction for older people in general (e.g. Eichar et al., 1991; Groot, 1999; Jung et al., 2007; Blanchflower and Oswald, 2008), but only a few studies have focused on the existing relationship between disability and job satisfaction (e.g. Burke, 1999; Renaud, 2002; Uppal, 2005; Pagan and Malo, 2009; Pagan, 2011, 2012). The relationship between BMI and general life satisfaction were analyzed and found to be negative in the works of Oswald and Powdthavee (2007), Stutzer (2007), Katsaiti (2012), and Böckerman et al. (2014), although only in the first and last of these studies some measure of disability is considered as a control. Muenster et al. (2011) analyze the relationship between being overweight/obese and perceived job insecurity, which might be considered a major source of stress and lack of job satisfaction. In addition, we have to bear in mind that the European countries included in our sample have markedly different disability policy models. For example and according to the classification elaborated by OECD (2010), Denmark, The Netherlands, Switzerland, Germany and Sweden belong to the “social-democratic” policy model (generous benefits and strong employment integration programs). The rest of the countries from our sample belong to the “corporatist” policy model (not so generous benefits and weaker integration policy). Among them, Spain and Italy have the less well developed employment and rehabilitation policies, whereas Austria and Belgium have a stronger employment orientation. Our second contribution is that our results can contribute to designing and implementing

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