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Body weight and socioeconomic status

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Summary:

With the rising prevalence of obesity in Western countries in recent decades, questions about the social consequences of high body weight have gained prominence in the social sciences. Numerous studies can show that people have negative attitudes towards individuals with high body weight and discrimination may occur. However, high body weight can also be associated with health impairments and have an impact on the opportunities of those affected. Previous studies have shown that people earn less and are less likely to be employed because of their high body weight. However, most of the studies were conducted in the United States of America and the results cannot easily be transferred to the German context. This study therefore addresses the question to what extent high body weight influences the socioeconomic status of adults in Germany.

The theoretical framework builds on the counterfactual model of causal inference, which assumes that the individual causal effect cannot be calculated but the average causal effect can be estimated across a population. Therefore, an explanatory model is established that builds on several theoretical arguments. With the help of Bauman's idea of liquid modernity, Foucault's concept of technologies of the self, Bourdieu's concept of capital and the introduction of body capital, and theories of stigma and discrimination, it is considered to what extent high body weight in modern societies can lead to disadvantages in socioeconomic status.

To answer the question as comprehensively as possible, two different data sets and three different methods of causal analysis are used. First, data from the Robert Koch Institute (RKI) are used, which allow a longitudinal analysis for almost 4000 individuals. This is supplemented by analyses using the Socio-Economic Panel (GSOEP), which can compensate for various disadvantages of the RKI data, but which itself also has limitations for the research question. For the analyses, propensity score matching, fixed-effects estimators, and difference-in-differences estimators are used to identify the causal effect. The combination of these different causal research methods serves to strengthen the results, but also provides different perspectives on the causal effect of body weight on socioeconomic status.

All results of the different analyses performed indicate that there is no causal effect of body weight or obesity on socioeconomic status for adults in Germany. No significant causal effect was identified in the various subgroup analyses either. On the one hand, this may be due to specifics of the German labor market, as this result differs from findings from other countries such as the United States, however, on the other hand, limitations to the data may also contribute to this result. Further research in this area is needed for Germany.