DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 7: REBECCA PUHL – FOUNDATIONS OF SIZE DISCRIMINATION: SIZE DIVERSITY PART 1

Phil Wagner

Hi, friends. Welcome to Diversity Goes to Work. First, a simple admission podcasting is weird. This started as a labor of love, and we are super thankful for continued traction and engagement. But like any new endeavor, we've definitely learned some things along the way. There's something different about this episode because actually, it's not really an episode at all, but rather a series of three episodes. We started a conversation with three experts, and honestly, we couldn't stop talking, so we decided to release a three-part arc focusing on a very important topic, size bodyweight. This is not a topic that I think we often factor into our diversity and inclusion conversation but should. This is a topic that is inherently personal to me, as someone who's been through a significant weight loss journey, having lost over 135 pounds since 2013. I know full well just how ever-present anti-fat stigma is. I felt it at almost 400 pounds in 2012, and I feel it now almost a decade later, even though my body has changed drastically. So because this isn't a conversation, we often factor into our diversity and inclusion discussions. That's precisely why we're having it here. And I'm delighted to be able to host three prolific voices on this topic. Over this three-part arc, you'll hear from three folks who are out there doing the work of body positivity, either through academic research or boots-on-the-ground advocacy. I hope that you enjoy. Hello from the halls of the Mason School of Business here at William & Mary. I'm Phil, and this is Diversity Goes to Work. Buckle up because we're getting ready to take a deep dive into the real human lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity work in the world of work. Should be fun. Welcome, welcome. Well, this episode, in particular, is personally meaningful to me and not just because of the topic, but because in academia, there are sometimes these very rare moments to speak with those people who have shaped and molded your own work. And today, I'm excited to be able to feature on this episode that person for me. As I talk about size diversity as we talk about size diversity, we would be remiss if we did not acknowledge the incredible work that today's guest has done on the issue of obesity, stigma, and body acceptance. Doctor Rebecca Puhl is a widely cited researcher who currently serves as the Deputy Director for the Rudd Center for Food Policy & Obesity at UConn, where she's also a professor in the Department of Development and Family Studies. Her work over the past 15 years has been monumentally impactful in addressing weight-based bullying, weight stigma in healthcare and media, and the impact of weight stigma on emotional and physical health. She's a national expert on the issue and someone I am so delighted to speak with on today's episode.

Phil Wagner

Rebecca, thanks so much for joining us for this episode on Size Diversity. As I've expressed a big fan of your work, and we're really excited that you can bring a research-oriented framework to size diversity for our focus on D&I. So we've got a series of questions for you today. We are delighted to speak with you. First things first, you've done a lot of work surrounding terminology in weight discourse. You've even published on the issue. Before we begin, can you tell us how should we talk today? Should we say fat? Do we say obese? Do we say overweight, what lingo should we use, and what lingo should we not use? Got any insight?

Rebecca Puhl

This is such an important question, and body weight is a very emotionally charged topic for many people. So how we talk about it is important. You're absolutely right. And people have very different and strong preferences and reactions to the language that we use when we talk about body weight or when we talk about obesity. So, for example, in the medical field, medicalized terms like overweight and obesity that's the language that is commonly used. And there is a movement kind of happening right now in the medical field to use people-first language in the context of obesity, which means referring to a person who has obesity rather than referring to someone who is an obese person. So that kind of approach to talking about obesity focuses on identifying the person first rather than identifying a person by his or her weight. But having said that, there's a number of people who don't like the word obesity who feel more comfortable with terminology like people of higher body weight or people in larger bodies. And we've done a series of studies examining language preferences both in adults and adolescents. And what we find pretty consistently is that people prefer neutral language when we talk about weight, especially in the context of how healthcare professionals talk to patients or in public health messaging. And so, by neutral, I mean words like weight or high body weight or even BMI. The words that have the most negative reactions are words like fat or obese. Now there are some people who embrace the word fat. And again, this is a personal preference. But the reality is that the word fat continues to have negative societal connotations and stereotypes associated with it. So it's challenging to separate this. And I think that's one of the reasons why a lot of people have a negative reaction to that word. And we're kind of at a place right now where we don't have a universally accepted phrase or word that everyone is comfortable with to talk about bodyweight. So it is important to really respect the diversity of preferences that do exist. And I think we really need to avoid using language that can be viewed as stigmatizing. So I would default to neutral terminology like body weight or people with higher weight when talking about weight. But then, if you're in a one-on-one interaction with someone, you can ask them what words or language do they feel most comfortable using in those kinds of discussions, especially when you're in that more intimate one on one conversation with a person.

Phil Wagner

I love that because, as I've expressed, our goal is a humanity-oriented perspective on D&I work, and we like rules, and we like checklists and do say this, don't say that. But I think that puts the responsibility on us to be attentive and to be present in those interactions and to

maybe even ask in some situations to put that person's needs and preferences at the forefront. That's great advice. So, Rebecca, we're both researchers and academics, and researchers and academics think everything that they do is super cool, but we rarely get the opportunity to tell the world about it in sort of a publicly translatable way. Tell our audience what's the coolest thing, or maybe the most important thing that you have found in your research on weight and size.

Rebecca Puhl

There are a lot of different things I could choose in response to this question. But I do think that a particularly important finding of our work is evidence that weight stigma is not only a social injustice but it's also a public health issue. And what I mean by that is that the harms of weight stigma are very real and long-lasting when it comes to health. So if a person experiences weight stigma, it's harmful to their emotional wellbeing. It can lead to increased depression or anxiety or low self-esteem, or even suicidal behaviors. And it also impacts physical health. So weight stigma leads to higher physiological stress, like cortisol levels. It leads to disordered eating behaviors like binge eating. It actually predicts weight gain over time and also negatively affects quality of health care. And all of this is important because, in our society, there remains a perception that maybe stigma or maybe shame will motivate people to lose weight or provide them with an incentive to lose weight. But what we see in our research is the opposite is true. It's actually contributing to poor health and weight gain. And so, I think a message of this research is that we need to be addressing the issue of weight stigma, both on a social justice level but also a public health level.

Phil Wagner

That's really good. And when we think about stigma, this is a little bit of a loaded question. Do we know stigma when we see it? Is stigma that sort of shame-based fat discrimination? Or is stigma maybe in the context of work, like a wellness program that encourages a collective amount of calories lost by a group? Like, how do we know stigma when we see it?

Rebecca Puhl

So stigma is both of those things. It is both overt and it's subtle. And with weight stigma, we see both of those things in virtually every societal setting. We see this in health care, in educational institutions, certainly in the workplace, which we'll talk more about. We see it in the media. We also see it, unfortunately, in close interpersonal relationships with family members and friends. And so it can be overt in your face. It can be more subtle. It can be microaggressions. It can be exclusion. It can be rejection. With children, for example, weight stigma happens there, too. Weight-based bullying is one of the most common reasons that kids are bullied. But some of that bullying involves something called relational victimization, which is being ignored and excluded and avoided. So there are many forms that this takes, and I think it's helpful to think about this as almost a chronic stressor that many people experience in different domains of their life.

Phil Wagner

And that's so key to, I think, the world of work, too, because as an employee bringing any of those traumatic or trauma-based experiences into the world of work, you don't just get to clock in your nine and five and forget the trauma, the experiences that come with. So I think when you look at the sources of weight-based discrimination, I think the top three are family and then social relationships, and then the world of work is third, and that discrimination happens on so many levels. So it's a really great point there as it relates to size and weight. We like to think that we've made so much progress. There's people like Lindy West, and Shrill has made it big both as a book and then as a Hulu production. You've got people like Roxanne Gay, who wrote Hunger and Bad Feminist, really taking this message to the masses. You've got comedians like Amy Schumer and reality TV stars like Whitney Way Thore really owning body positivity in a public way. Have we really come so far, or do we still have far to go?

Rebecca Puhl

So this is a really complex issue, and I would actually say both. We have made important progress, but we also have a long way to go. So the emergence of things like the body positivity movement that has certainly helped to increase public awareness that people deserve to have a positive body image, regardless of how society dictates what the thin, ideal physical appearance should be. That's helped to empower people of different body sizes and also challenge societal ideals of what the body should look like. We're certainly seeing more diverse body sizes reflected in television and film, and entertainment media. And so these kinds of things are helping to challenge and kind of really dispel harmful stereotypes about weight. However, at the same time, weight stigma and fat-shaming continue to be very present and, in some cases, pervasive in our society. So fat-shaming is rampant on social media, and both children and adults continue to be mistreated because of their weight. And I think maybe one of the broadest indications of this is that it remains perfectly legal in our country to discriminate against someone because of their weight. There are no federal laws that prohibit weight discrimination. Where we are currently right now is Michigan is the only state that has a state law, and that was passed a long time ago in the 1970s. There are maybe a handful of cities across the country that have passed local laws to prohibit weight discrimination. But the bottom line is that almost everybody who has been unfairly treated because of their body weight or size does not have legal protection or legal recourse. We have been doing some research on the policy aspect of this for really over a decade, and what our national studies are showing is that there is substantial public support as much as 80% for introducing and passing these kinds of laws to make it illegal to discriminate on the basis of weight. And where we see that kind of support highest is for laws that would specifically address us in the workplace. So to make it illegal for an employer to do something like refuse to hire someone because of their weight or to fire them for that reason. So we are seeing progress, but there is a lot of work to be done still.

Phil Wagner

So going to the other side of the spectrum, critics tend to rebut with, well, yeah, but you're just not healthy, and we know that that health label or health ideal has been used as a discursive

tool to promote the thin ideal for decades. Does your research give us any insight into how we can truly promote health at every size?

Rebecca Puhl

We know that shame and stigma are not effective motivators for health behavior change, especially when it comes to weight or obesity. We also know that there are a lot of different factors that contribute to health in addition to weight. Whether it's nutrition or stress or sleeping habits or cholesterol levels, substance use, there's so many things that come into play. Now, that doesn't mean that a person can necessarily be healthy at every single BMI level or every size. But it means that stigmatizing people about their weight only causes harm and that other factors, in addition to body weight, need to be considered when we're talking about health, and I really feel like the goal should be focused on promoting health behaviors for all people, regardless of their body size and really supporting them in those health behaviors. The aim is to improve health for everyone. And we've done some research to look at how Americans react to kind of obesity-focused health messages and public health campaigns targeting obesity. And interestingly, what we see is that when messages focus on engaging in specific health behaviors, like maybe replacing soda with water or eating more fruits and vegetables, that people report being much more motivated to engage in those behaviors, and they have much higher intentions to do this than if the message is focused on weight or obesity or the number on the scale. So what this tells us is that we can focus messages on health and health behaviors and not make this conversation only about the number on the scale, and we can make these messages relevant for everybody, not just people who have higher weight.

Phil Wagner

So numbers play a central role in this conversation. Of course, there's a number on the scale, but there's that big number, the one that's really used a lot, and that's the BMI. Does your research speak to the utility of the BMI in conversations like these in any way?

Rebecca Puhl

I think that the best way to think about BMI is that it is one indicator. It's one indicator that is part of a conversation about health, but it is not the only determinant, and it's very important that we don't use it as the only marker of health. I think we oftentimes see messages that just want to be simplified. And we're used to seeing these very oversimplified messages. But the reality is that body weight regulation, and obesity are extremely complex. They involve multiple factors, multiple contributors, not just personal behavior, but genetics, biology, environment, agriculture. And so those are not the kinds of messages we see in society, right. We see oversimplified messages that focus on personal responsibility for weight and personal willpower and discipline. And so I think the way that I tend to frame this is if we imagine body weight or obesity, either one as a complex jigsaw puzzle. Personal behavior is one of the pieces in that puzzle. That's legitimate. Our choices our behaviors are one piece, but they're only one piece. There are many other pieces in that puzzle that focus on factors that are largely outside of personal control. And if we don't focus on all of these other pieces, this puzzle will never be

solved or completed. So I think it's really easy for people to get wrapped up in personal responsibility and BMI, and we just have to recognize that this is a much more complex issue.

Phil Wagner

Very multi-dimensional, that's excellent, thanks, that's great insight. So we're focused on this podcast, specifically on D&I within the world of work. From your research or from your perspective, Rebecca, what are some of the most common forms of weight-based stigma or discrimination that you see playing out in the world of work.

Rebecca Puhl

So in our research, we find that about a third of people who have experienced weight stigma are being stigmatized about their weight from an employer. And more than half of people say that this is happening from co-workers. And what we know is that weight stigma occurs at virtually every stage of the employment cycle, from getting hired to getting fired. And research from psychology, I think it's particularly important here. So, for example, a lot of experimental studies have been done where study participants, like hiring managers, are randomly assigned to one of two experimental conditions. And in both of those conditions, participants will read the job application or resume of a qualified applicant that has a picture of that person attached. But in one condition, the applicant is pictured as a person with higher weight, and in the other condition, that person has a lower weight and consistently, the studies show that the participants are less likely to hire the higher weight person, and in some cases, when they kind of vary characteristics across conditions, they're less likely to hire the higher weight person even if they have better qualifications than the thinner person. So not getting hired because of weight, I think, is one of the most common ways that weight stigma exists in the workplace. And unfortunately, it's something that is really difficult to quantify because those are reasons that don't get reported right. Employers aren't saying that this is a reason why they did not consider someone for a job. Now, even if someone does get hired, weight stigma also occurs in many ways in the workplace setting. So people often face criticism or teasing, or fat jokes in the workplace from co-workers. They may be more likely to be denied promotions. There's some evidence, although it's kind of mixed, about the impact of this on salaries compared to people who are thinner. And we also know that people are more likely to be terminated unfairly because of their weight. And that seems particularly true for jobs that require more social, face-to-face kinds of interactions like sales positions. And we also see that in cases, women seem to be more likely to experience these kinds of penalties because of their weight compared to men. So the world of work is a place where weight stigma is very present. Again in some workplaces as it's more explicit and overt, and in other places, it's more subtle, but it's still there.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. I think it's the subtlety that brings about some of the most complexity here.

Rebecca Puhl

Exactly.

Phil Wagner

Rebecca, you've done some great work on the intersections between weights and other identity elements that might relate to the conversations we have in the D&I sphere, like sexuality, race, ethnicity. How do you see weight scaffolding into that larger framework of intersectionality that we always involve in effective D&I work?

Rebecca Puhl

Yeah, this is such an important issue. I've heard over the years that I've done this work that weight stigma seems like it's just a white woman's issue, and it doesn't really apply to other groups. This is not accurate at all. So we know that weight stigma is experienced by people across different racial and ethnic backgrounds and across different sexual and gender identities. As one example from our work, we recently did a study with over 17,000 sexual and gender minority adolescents. And what we found it's very high percentages of these teens reported being teased about their weight at all body sizes, not just if they had a higher body weight. And we also found that teens who had these weight teasing experiences were more likely to have psychological distress again things like depression, but also more likely to turn to drugs and alcohol and unhealthy eating. And so the idea here is that when people have multiple stigmatized identities like being stigmatized for their weight and their sexual orientation or their weight and their race. This can really compound and worsen the health consequences that arise from stigma. So we really do need to include bodyweight in discussions of intersectionality, and it's an issue that often gets left out of the conversation, or it's just not on the radar. But we're really missing an important opportunity to be discussing it.

Phil Wagner

That's fantastic—such great insights. I have one final question for you, and unfortunately, no magic wand exists in the realm of D&I work. But if you had a magic wand and could wave it, what's one thing you'd like to see the world of work do to make itself a more inclusive place for people of varying sizes? What's that big fix?

Rebecca Puhl

Well, I wish there was a single big fix, but what I will say is that many workplaces have diversity training for employees, but it is rare to see bodyweight included in diversity content or in education or in messages in the workplace. And I would really like to see that change. So we need to be treating weight stigma on par with and as legitimate as other forms of stigma that we see in our society. Our research says that about 40% of Americans say that they've experienced some kind of weight stigma in their lives. We also know that two-thirds of Americans are affected by overweight or obesity. So why isn't this part of education and training in discussion and the employment setting? Diversity training is an important place to be addressing weight stigma, and by leaving it out, it communicates to employees that it's permissible to stigmatize their co-workers about weight, even if it's not okay to do that when it comes to race or gender. And I think that's just unacceptable. We need to have a higher

standard than this. People need to feel like they can go to work and be treated with respect and dignity and equal treatment, regardless of what their body weight or size is.

Phil Wagner
That's fantastic. Rebecca Puhl, thank you so much for making time to speak with us. Such great insight, such great research. We appreciate it.

Rebecca Puhl
Thanks so much for having me.

Phil Wagner
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