

Weight in a Just World: an Interview with Dr. Rebecca Pearl
by Margaret Eby

Can belief in a just world influence our ability to manage our weight? Rebecca Pearl, MPhil, a researcher in Department of Psychology at Yale University, has been studying how personal belief in fairness can affect motivation to exercise. Her study “Experiencing Weight Bias in an Unjust World: Impact on Exercise and Internalization,” concludes that threats to belief in a just world could result in negative outcomes for health behaviors and psychological well-being among people who have experienced weight bias and believe it to be pervasive. That is, people who believe the world is fair are more likely to take action to successfully achieve and maintain a healthy weight.

Dr. Pearl, who has previously published studies on obesity, public policy, and weight bias, sees this link between personal experiences with discrimination and its impact on internalization and exercise as key policy tool. “The idea that when belief in a just world is threatened... is actually impairing exercise motivation and intentions, as well as creating more body dissatisfaction and internalized stigma, has implications for policy in terms of prohibiting weight-based discrimination.”

While there is legislation forbidding gender- or race-based discrimination, there is no federal legislation and scattered state legislation concerning weight-based discrimination. Dr. Pearl hopes that establishing formal protective policies for individuals with overweight and obesity could reduce discrimination, as well as buffer against the negative psychological consequences of experiencing social injustice. “When discrimination happens once or is rare it can be dismissed as a fluke,” says Pearl, “but when it’s happening perpetually it creates more of a vulnerability for loss of belief in a just world.” Although not explicitly researched in this recent study, there might be further implications for youth or adolescents suffering from weight-based bullying. Dr. Pearl notes that there is evidence that weight-based stigmatization can actually cause more weight gain over time, moving from the overweight to obese category. “I imagine that this playing out for adolescents too, especially if it’s happening early in life-- weight prejudice is the leading reason for bullying among adolescents.” Part of weight bias is the widely held belief that weight is a personal problem, and an inability to manage it denotes laziness and incompetence.

If blame is toxic to those already struggling to manage their weight, where can it be eliminated? Blame, says Pearl, can come from many directions-- from peers, parents, even healthcare providers. The media also emphasizes personal responsibility when discussing obesity-- “Some of the work I’ve done has looked at the kinds of images in the media, and how those really perpetuate weight based attitudes. The pictures that always come with these articles are of people engaging in stereotypical behaviors; sitting on the couch, eating unhealthy food,

you see those unflattering close-ups of body parts or with the head chopped off, it's very dehumanizing... In one study we even found that these images made people more likely to support discriminatory medical policy." These attitudes impair support for anti-discrimination policy initiatives as well as movements trying to create a healthier environment, because "if people are blaming the individual, they're losing sight of the broader social and environmental factors that make obesity such a difficult problem to deal with."

Rebecca Pearl and John Dovidio's research can be accessed in the November 17th online issue of "Health Psychology." Dr. Pearl will receive her doctorate in clinical psychology in May 2015.