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Perception of people with excess body weight in Polish labour market

Doctoral dissertation entitled *Perception of people with excess body weight in Polish labour market* consists of seven chapters: first five chapters concern theory and methodology while two final chapters present performed research and results.

The part dedicated to the theory and methodology begins with an introduction followed by five chapters, whose content leads the reader through topics related to body, bodily control, particularly in relation to the weight; the reasons and effects of excess weight gain; stigmatisation caused by increased weight; as well as functioning of such people in Polish labour market. For the sake of the clarity of this dissertation, each of the aforementioned chapters has been divided into subsections. Given the time of writing of this paper, it seemed logical to take into consideration the impact of SARS-CoV-2 pandemic on the discussed topics. Chapter 1: *Body and control – theoretical approach* presents the body from a socio-cultural perspective, as a social construct. Corporeality, neglected in the conceptions of classical sociologists, holds a high position in social studies nowadays. The topics of „body management” were presented by B.S. Turner and A. Frank, who built upon the concept of “the father of body sociology” and supplemented it with four types of corporeal control. The topic of bodily control from the perspective of power as well as self-disciplining, in the process of individualization, persons has proven to be not without significance for the subject matter. Following the slogans “change yourself” and “accept yourself”, there appeared a whole range of activities used to discipline the body (exercises, diets, pharmacotherapy, aesthetic medicine), as well as stress relieving, like psychotherapy, social media content and lifestyle magazines. The differences between cultural models of male and female bodies, sanctions resulting from complying or not complying with them, and finally *slim/fit* culture, in which excess weight constitutes an anti-model, have become the starting point for the next chapter.

Chapter II: *Excess body weight – scale, reasons and effects of the phenomenon* presents the ways of defining overweight and obesity together with the most popular (applied also in the research described in chapter V) indicator used to estimate the risk of diseases related to excess body mass – BMI. It is not an ideal tool, however given the standards of body evaluation unified by WHO based on this indicator, it is possible to monitor humans’ body weight worldwide. A person is overweight when their BMI is equal to or greater than 25, and obese when their index is 30 or higher. Quoted statistics show that the problem is valid not only in the world but also in Poland. The reasons behind this phenomenon are grouped in three categories: social,

biological and psychological. The first ones have been discussed most thoroughly because of the subject matter. Amongst them there can be outlined: stress connected with the hectic pace of life, mass change of the nature of work, minimal physical activity and the prevalence of food of questionable quality. Ubiquitous overweight in highly developed countries carries serious consequences, including the particularly devastating strain on the healthcare systems' budgets. People affected by this problem are at risk of lower self-esteem and the reduction of social interactions. As a result, people with excess body weight are discriminated against and stigmatized by the society. It is worth mentioning, however, that the upward trend of BMI index is contrary to the standards promoted by the media and culture. Increased number of people with higher BMI in the society leads to the increased number of such candidates in the labour market, which is key for this dissertation.

Stigmatisation and discrimination against people with excess body weight is the subject matter of Chapter III: *Stigmatisation – stereotypisation and discrimination due to excess body weight*. The starting point is the explanation of terms stigmatisation, stereotypisation and discrimination. Next, there are outlined the dominant stereotypes related to overweight and obese people, amongst which there can be found laziness, lower intelligence quotient, lack of control over their own life, immoderation in eating. The stigmatisation afflicts these people in different areas of social life – from family home, through health centres and shopping malls. *Weightism* concept has been introduced together with the signs of its presence – criticism of looks, the way of living and nutrition – also in the workplace. A separate subsection has been dedicated to *weightism* in the labour market, where it has been proven that the increase in the number of people with excess body weight has real consequences for the labour market. It appears that the people afflicted by overweight/obesity have more problems finding work, have lower productivity and earn lower incomes. A self-perpetuating mechanism with financial matters at its core is exposed here – lower income means a limited access to the tools for fighting extra kilograms (sports clubs' memberships, healthy food, dieticians, personal trainers, etc.). The environment of work has then a real impact on the development of overweight and obesity, and the diseases that are the results of extra kilograms impact the increase of labour cost through the decrease of employee's efficiency, more frequent use of sick leaves or premature ending of professional careers. Reports and research conducted by research organizations – GUS, OECD, CBOS illustrate the above. This data is complemented with the statements made by Polish internet users, which show the attitude towards overweight/obese people as well as the other way round – provide experiences of stigmatisation and discrimination against people with BMI above the norm. This chapter is finished with a general overview of helpful legal paths for

people experiencing stigmatization and discrimination due to excess weight. It is worth emphasizing that no European legal system accommodates overweight/obese people separately, which can be related to the lack of social acceptance for obesity as a disease (despite of it being listed as a disease entity in International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems by WHO). It is worth mentioning that regardless of the above, since 2013 in Poland there has been an institution of the Advocate for People with Obesity Disease Rights in Poland and OD-WAGA Foundation, which monitors, among others, the signs of discrimination against people with overweight and obesity. An important point is the fact that even though the problem concerns more than half of Poles (as per GUS data from 2019) there is no specialized help unit in case of experiencing weightism in a workplace. The end of the chapter is dedicated to body positivity, the movement promoting self-acceptance as well the acceptance of other people's bodies. It is vital to underline that this movement does not negate the necessity of taking care of one's body but creates a safe haven from social pressure, serving also an educational purpose.

Chapter IV: *Polish labour market and people with excess body weight* is dedicated to the reality of the national labour market with the emphasis placed on the elastic forms of employment and time schedule as well as the functioning of overweight/obese people in it. There have been outlined the factors that can lead to binge-eating; desk work and shift work also contribute to the increase in body weight. There is also no denying the significance of interpersonal relationships in a company – people with BMI above the norm are often treated in a worse manner than their slim counterparts. It needs to be underlined that it is in the employers' interest to ensure the reduction of factors affecting the problem of increased body weight, which has a direct impact on the company's finance situation as it generates costs.

Chapter V: *Methodological assumptions of own research* presents the justification of the choice of the subject, the aim of the dissertation, fundamental research questions, hypotheses, conceptual apparatus, the choice of study sample and general study population's characteristics, research techniques and tools (which in this case are nondirective interview and internet survey). It is a fact that there is a lack of Polish research on the situation of people with excess body weight in the labour market, while in the light of growing BMI index in the country, the problem seems urgent and worthy of scientific study. The affected people's own perspective but also the perspective of managers, HR representatives and coworkers shall help to highlight common stereotypes along with the consequences they cause in the society, which is the overall objective of this work. As far as the specific goals are concerned, there need to be mentioned the following: 1. definition of who is regarded as a person with excess body weight; 2.

characteristics of common stereotypes; 3. identification of differences in perception of people with excess body weight in the labour market with regards to the sex of both the perceiving and the perceived; 4. analysis of stereotypes' influence on the situation of people with excess body weight; 5. analysis of stereotypes' impact on the psychosocial functioning of people with excess body weight; 6. analysis of available and postulated methods of preventing discrimination in the workplace in relation to excess body weight; 7. identification of coping strategies of people with excess body weight discriminated against in the workplace. In order to present a broader analytical perspective, the reflections and conducted research combine qualitative and quantitative sociology.

The dissertation is based on three research hypotheses:

- **H1. The percentage of respondents claiming that it is easier to find a physical job for people with excess body weight is higher than the percentage of respondents claiming that it is easier to find an intellectual job for them.**
- **H2. Overweight and obese people have a higher tolerance level when it comes to labelling someone as a person with excess body weight.**
- **H3. People with excess body weight exhibit lower level of satisfaction with their professional situation than slim people.**

Conclusions are based on the answers from quantitative research – internet survey, which was completed by 541 respondents, of which 82,8% were women and 17,2% were men. The most numerous groups of respondents were people aged 25-34 years, citizens of cities with more than 500 thousand of inhabitants, with higher education, married. The qualitative study in the form of nondirective interview was conducted 31 times using nonprobability sampling – it was key to use the experience of people who deal with recruitment and/or assessment of employees' efficiency professionally on a daily basis. The majority of respondents were 25-34 years old, slightly less 35-44 years old.

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