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From the Freak Show to the Living Room: Cultural Representations of Dwarfism and Obesity[1]

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This article examines how cultural representations of deviant bodies vary based on historically informed narratives of bodily stigma. Using content analysis of 40 episodes of reality television programming, I contrast cultural representations of dwarfism and obesity. Over time, dwarfism became constructed as an identity project with the aim of bodily acceptance, whereas obesity became regarded as a body project with the goal of body transformation through weight loss. The mostly positive historical characterizations of dwarfs allowed them to easily adopt the tenets of the disability rights movement as they evolved from freak show performances to television as an educational platform. They have adopted a social model of disability, positive social identity, self-acceptance, and full social participation. By contrast, the past and contemporary representations of obesity have been overwhelmingly negative. Obese freak show performers were openly mocked, and classifying obesity as a disability has not yet gained traction as a civil rights movement. Instead, obesity is viewed through the lens of individual responsibility and limits of social participation are emphasized. Body modification through weight loss constructs an identity based on self-change. Generally, this article suggests that cultural representations as de-stigmatization projects are enabled or constrained by historical factors and the nature of the bodily stigma.

KEY WORDS: body size; content analysis; culture; disability; media; stigma.

INTRODUCTION

Although the first public displays of people with anomalous bodies for entertainment can be traced to ancient times, the freak show peaked in popularity as a feature of the traveling circus in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Bogdan, 1988).[3] Drawing on Victorian curiosity about science,

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[3] Depending on the historical time period, anomalous human bodies have been referred to by various names, such as "monsters" and "curiosities." The word "freak" was used for the first time in 1847 and eventually came to be the dominant term used by both sideshow performers and the public until it fell out of favor at the turn of the twentieth century (Thomson, 1996). This article follows the conventions of past scholarship and uses the term freak to mean a culturally constructed category of different bodied people who have been publicly displayed for profit or entertainment.

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particularly evolution, and interest in exotic cultures as exploration of the world increased, the historical freak show was a public ritual based on spectacle and collective looking (Thomson, 1996). To enhance public curiosity and interest, freak shows used elaborate promotion schemes and a number of presentation strategies that crafted the freak's public identity through imagery and symbols (Adams, 2001; Bogdan, 1988; Thomson, 1996).

The freak show declined for reasons related to institutional change and social movements (Bogdan, 1988). Medical knowledge increased, resulting in fewer abnormal births and better treatment of those conditions, and exposure to people of different cultures became more common. Further, the advent of new forms of entertainment, such as movies and television, replaced the traveling circus and live theater as the preferred leisure activity of Americans. As social movements that focused on minority group rights became prominent over the course of the twentieth century, exhibiting the mentally impaired and ethnic groups was seen as especially objectionable. As the disability rights movement emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, some disabled people publicly advocated for the end of freak shows (Hartzman, 2005). Today, there are only a handful of troupes performing under the label of "freaks," such as the Jim Rose Circus, the Bindlestiff Family Cirkus, and the Coney Island Circus Side Show.

Dwindling numbers might suggest that the presentation of different bodied people for amusement and profit is a mere relic from an ignorant past era. The legacy of the freak show, however, persists as part of contemporary representations (Thomson, 1996). Television, in the form of talk shows, reality shows, and documentaries, is the most prominent relocation of the freak show. Some scholarship likens the sensationalistic treatment of sexual nonconformity (Gamson, 1998) and lower-class people (Grindstaff, 2002) by television talk shows to the freak show. The talk show uses many conventions of the historical freak show, including the host as lecturer, the lineup of guests who have unusual personal issues, and the highlighting of transgressive sex and incongruous couples (Dennett, 1996). Lowney (1999) argues that modern-day talk shows invoke the familiar patterns of morality and public cleansing proffered by religious revivals and the circus in the nineteenth century. Fewer studies have examined the way that physical, rather than behavioral, deviance is treated in the realm of television (for an exception, see Clark and Myser, 1996).

The disability rights movement was able to transform institutional access, legal rights, and terminology for some groups, but it fell short of eliminating the freak discourse that surrounds certain extreme bodies. Cable networks featuring the "reality" genre have made physical anomalies central to their programming. Reality series and documentaries that feature body size extremes, specifically little people and obese people, dominate the schedule in first runs and repeats. Substantial ratings for these programs display strong public interest as several million Americans tune in to each show. Given this high viewership, it is worthwhile to document both the change and the stability in the cultural representations of these anomalous bodies as the freak show discourse changed venues. The growth of television programming featuring

different bodied people also raises the specter of exploitation, especially given reality television's reputation as a sensationalistic genre. Appealing to human impulses of curiosity and voyeurism, the hook of these shows is the anomalous body. In both freak shows and reality shows, disabled people purportedly choose to display their bodies through media that is more or less exploitative. Separated by a half-century and the disability rights movement, have we seen a change in the representations of anomalous bodies with the shift from the freak show to the reality show? Specifically, I investigate to what extent past cultural representations have influenced the incorporation—or not—of a disability identity by stigmatized groups in contemporary representations.

To address these questions, I contrast contemporary representations of dwarfism and obesity.[4] Using 40 episodes (23 hours) of reality television programming, I analyze two groups marked by extreme variations in body size. This analysis contributes to the sociological understanding of how contemporary cultural representations of stigmatized groups vary based on their historical legacy. The findings of this research help us better understand both the way that deviant bodies are constructed as social problems and the way public presentations of these bodies address stigma. Contrasting dwarfism to obesity indicates how extreme shortness is constructed as a disability, whereas extreme body weight remains stigmatized. I show that, over time, dwarfism became an *identity project* with the aim of bodily acceptance, whereas obesity is now largely regarded as a *body project* with the goal of body transformation through weight loss.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Bodily Stigma

Dwarfism and obesity are physical conditions that fall under Goffman's (1963) category of stigma called abominations of the body. Both conditions are immediately visible and therefore discredited stigmas. However, dwarfism and obesity differ in one key way. Dwarfism is an in-born or ascribed stigma that cannot be changed, whereas obesity is an achieved stigma that is acquired later in life and can potentially be eliminated through weight loss. While bodily stigmas are often associated with presumed character flaws, past research has found that people with achieved stigmas are judged more harshly because they are seen as culpable for their stigma (e.g., Tewksbury and McGaughey, 1997).

[4] Throughout the article, I will use the terms "dwarf" and "little people." Historically, the term midget was used to describe little people who were proportional and dwarf was used to describe those with disproportionate limbs (Bogdan, 1988). Over time, midget has become viewed as a derogatory term by those in the little people community. While some find the term "fat" to be offensive, many in the fat acceptance community object to the term obesity for its medicalized connotation. The medical community uses body mass index (BMI) to categorize weight: overweight is BMI between 25–30 and obese is defined as BMI over 30. In this article, I will use the terms obesity and fat, while acknowledging that both terms carry problematic connotations.

Goffman's work largely focused on interactional responses to stigma. Yet, he noted that nearly all stigmatized groups have organizations that provide social support, promote a certain philosophy on how to live with the condition, and create professionals who espouse this viewpoint. Further, Goffman (1963) explains that stigmatized conditions are not experienced solely through interaction, but meaning can also be produced through cultural representations.

> No matter how small or badly off a particular stigmatized category is, the viewpoint of its members is likely to be given public presentation of some kind. It can thus be said that Americans who are stigmatized tend to live in a literarily-defined world, however uncultured they might be. If they don't read books on the situation of persons like themselves, they at least read magazines and see movies; and where they don't do these, then they listen to local, vocal associates. An intellectually worked-up version of their point of view is thus available to most stigmatized person. (1963:25)

In this article, I build on Goffman's theory of stigma to argue that groups use public representations as de-stigmatization projects aimed at providing their point of view to a general audience. Broadly available cultural representations, such as those found in reality television series, can reflect and potentially resist the stigma attached to certain groups. Further, I argue that the content and form of these attempts to de-stigmatize are enabled or constrained by the way that the condition has been historically constructed. The nature of the stigma informs previous representations, which leads to whether a stigmatized group adopts a model of acceptance or change. Below, I discuss two responses to bodily difference that have emerged in modern society, and then I hypothesize the way that obesity and dwarfism fit into these options.

A Model of Acceptance: The Identity Project

The disability rights movement takes on disability as a civil rights issue rather than a medical problem (Paterson and Hughes, 2000). Similar to the identity politics and social movements that women, African Americans, and sexual minorities took part in during the twentieth century, the disability rights movement sought to change cultural meanings of collective and personal identity in order to attain greater social equality.

Challenging traditional disability discourses of passivity, incompetence, dependence on charity, and medicalization, the disability rights movement advocated for disability pride, accessibility, and awareness of institutional discrimination and social prejudice (Paterson and Hughes, 2000). Disability rights advocates emphasize the way that disability is created by environmental factors that do not take into account the needs and rights of impaired people. Impairment might be based on individual difference, but disability is produced socially due to inaccessible structures and stigma. According to the central objectives of the disability rights movement, disabled people should be free from oppression, have full citizenship and social participation, and possess a positive, nonstigmatized identity.

A Model of Transformation: The Body Project

An alternative way that the body is implicated in identity formation is through the adoption of a body project. According to Shilling (2003:4): "In the affluent West, there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity which is in the process of becoming; a *project* which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an *individual's* self-identity."[5] Body projects are the ongoing processes of people shaping and maintaining their bodies through vigilant effort with the aim of self-expression and construction of self-identity. Individual responsibility for maintaining a healthy body is one focal point of body projects. Increased interest in bodybuilding, plastic surgery, and health consciousness reflect the pressure that individuals feel to be responsible for the function and appearance of their bodies (Shilling, 2003). However, there are limits to one's control over the body, as evidenced by aging, mortality, and the difficulty that most dieters face when attempting to lose weight.

In this article, I investigate how public representations vary based on historical legacy and how cultural meanings of stigma affect a group's adoption of identity movement or body project tenets. By examining cultural representations, I attempt to show that stigma resistance exists in the form of either identity or body projects rooted in broader cultural discourses, meanings, and social movements. Using obesity and dwarfism as case studies of bodily stigma, I ask to what extent these groups adopt a model of bodily acceptance or change. Given that dwarfism is an ascribed stigma, I expect that little people were positioned to adapt to a social model of disability as their public representations evolved from freak show performances to television as an educational platform. By contrast, I expect that obese individuals have not been incorporated into the disability rights model of bodily acceptance. Because obesity is persistently viewed as an achieved stigma and therefore a matter of individual responsibility, transformation through a body project of weight loss may be the predominant narrative in contemporary representations.

DWARFISM AND OBESITY BACKGROUND

Dwarfism as an Identity Project

Historically, dwarfs have been sought as entertainers and objects of curiosity due to their unusual stature. In the twenty-first century, dwarf

[5] Some research on "fat" identity focuses on individual rather than collective identity. People use status cues to provide information that they are fat, and then they internalize a fat identity through cognitive recognition and placement (Degher and Hughes, 1999). However, this process is variable as there is a subjective component to determining when someone falls into an overweight category and people may avoid or deny changes in body weight as a coping strategy. The changeability of weight also creates identity problems for people who lose weight and may still carry a fat identity or who feel that the thin identity did not live up to their expectations (Granberg, 2006).

performers are still in demand. However, the content of their cultural representation has been subject to controversy over the last century as dwarfism entered into the identity politics of the disability rights movement.

Historical Overview of Dwarfism

From ancient Egypt through the eighteenth century, dwarfs were prized as entertainers by royalty who collected them as pets and exchanged them as gifts (Adelson, 2005). At the time, dwarfs were seen as magical and mythical creatures (Thomson, 1996). The decline of royal courts led dwarfs to seek employment through low-paying jobs or public exhibition (Adelson, 2005). Eventually, dwarfs became a popular mainstay of the institutionalized freak show. Although still part of the freak show, Bogdan (1988) argues that little people utilized an aggrandized mode of presentation that imbued them with many high-status, noble, and flattering characteristics. For example, little people were often given titles such as "General" or "Princess," and they wore top hats, evening gowns, and fur. Financial success, a grand lifestyle, high-status accoutrements, and portrayals of marriage and family were all hallmarks of the historical presentation of little people. Merish (1996) posits that their presentation style was based on aesthetic of cuteness that rendered little people as childlike. Although still viewed as curiosities, being cast as precocious and domesticated "adult children" allowed them to become more humanized and receive greater public sympathy and pity than others in the freak category.

According to Bogdan (1988), some little people merged their onstage and offstage personas to lead privileged lives of socializing with famous people and spending their performance money on fancy clothes and vacations. At the height of the freak show, some little people were further from freak categorization and closer to bona fide celebrity. One couple in particular, Tom Thumb and Lavinia Warren, were two of the most famous people in the nineteenth-century United States (Merish, 1996). Their wedding supplanted coverage of the Civil War for three days when it was featured on the cover of the *New York Times*, and Barnum reaped massive amounts of publicity because of the pairing. The lavish ceremony was attended by governors, congressmen, generals, and members of high society. Although sponsored and promoted by Barnum, the couple testified that their affection was real. The couple was later photographed and exhibited with a baby that was not their own (Bogdan, 1988). The baby hoax was meant to generate more publicity and status until the ruse became too much and the showmen told the public that the baby had died from brain inflammation. In reality, Lavinia Warren was never able to have children. However, these high jinks underscore the importance of the domestic storyline to their presentation style. In sum, dwarfs in the historical freak show were presented in largely positive ways that emphasized talent, success, domesticity, and cuteness.

Disability and the Identity Politics of Dwarfism

In contrast to other freak show performers, such as bearded ladies, conjoined twins, or the morbidly obese, dwarfs were well-positioned to take part in the identity politics of disability rights. Dwarfs have often been viewed "as a community, or even as a 'people"' (Adelson, 2005:1). Likewise, Dan Kennedy, who wrote a book about fathering his dwarf daughter, says that dwarfism is seen as "more of a social disability; it's really not a physical disability. It's almost like dwarfs belong to a different race or a different type of human" (quoted in Hedley, 2003). The idea of an already established community by nature is reflected in the creation of "midget colonies" like the short-lived Lilliputia on Coney Island from 1904–1911 (Howells and Chemers, 2005).

This sense of community positioned dwarfs to form a coalition and engage in the identity politics of the disability rights movement. The dwarf identity movement officially began with the formation of Little People of America (LPA) in 1957 (Adelson, 2005). LPA was founded by Billy Barty, a dwarf actor, and was initially comprised of mostly entertainers. Today, LPA is a nationwide association that counts 5,000 families among its members (Berreby, 1996). The LPA estimates that there are 30,000 people in the United States who have one of the 200 medical conditions that cause dwarfism (Dedman, 2007). There are 50 local chapters that have monthly meetings, and the organization disseminates information through a newsletter and website.

In addition to helping dwarf couples with adoption and counseling, LPA engages in political activism in order to make public structures, like ATMs, accessible to little people. Annual conventions bring together little people to provide social activities, athletic events, and networking opportunities. The objective is to provide social support for the special circumstances that dwarfs face and to combat discrimination that comes from a world that privileges height. Height prejudice and discrimination profoundly affect dwarfs, who are under 4′10.″ As LPA made progress in its goals as an identity movement, certain controversies have emerged that throw into question to what extent dwarfism is a disability or an identity. Similar to arguments made by the deaf community, many in LPA see their dwarfism as fate, not a defect, and they oppose genetic screening and limb-lengthening surgeries for children (Berreby, 1996).

Exploitation or Education: Contemporary Media Portrayals of Dwarfism

Today, dwarfs are still objects of cultural fascination and sought after by the entertainment industry. There is much debate within the Little People community as to what constitutes an exploitative performance by dwarfs. Participating in "midget tossing" in bars, stripping, and "midget wrestling" are largely criticized as degrading because these performances are intended to

be a spectacle that provokes audience ridicule (Adelson, 2005).[6] Other performances in the mainstream media, such as Verne Troyer's "Mini Me" in the Austin Powers series and talk show sidekicks like "Hank the Angry Drunken Dwarf" who appeared on Howard Stern's program, are also commonly evaluated as negative representations because little people are mocked for humor. Still, some in the Little People community defend participation in these controversial activities and argue that dwarfs can make an informed choice to profit from and take advantage of public interest even if it occurs in ways that are considered lowbrow (Adelson, 2005). Certain reality television shows feature little people who are involved in lowbrow entertainment. Animal Planet's *Pit Boss* features a little person in the dog rescue business who also earns money by coordinating a talent agency for little people who are hired to perform in shows, at private parties, and at corporate events. In 2010, Spike TV aired a six-part series on self-proclaimed "midget wrestlers" entitled *Half Pint Brawlers*.

For the most part, though, dwarfs are sensitive to portrayals that are negative, exploitative, or invoke freak show spectacles. Instead, they want the public to be exposed to dwarfs in humanizing, desensitizing, and educational ways. The LPA publicly supports TLC programming, such as *Little People, Big World* and the string of other shows that followed it, such as *The Little Couple*, featuring a newlywed dwarf couple, *Our Little Life*, about a little couple who has a normal-sized baby, and finally *The Little Chocolatiers*, about a married little couple who run a chocolate-making business. A representative of LPA, Gary Arnold, told a news organization: "We are pleased that reality programming on The Learning Channel portrays people with dwarfism pursuing a wide variety of professions, from doctor to business person to candy maker. We hope that such programming empowers others with dwarfism to pursue their interests and that such programming sends a message to the general public that dwarfism, something we take pride in, is just one component of who we are" (McKay, 2010:1). While there are still negative cultural representations that mock and belittle dwarfs, the rise in programming that is informed by disability activism shows the extent to which dwarfs have built on a legacy of sympathy and status that was evident in freak show presentations and the formation of a dwarf political identity. I investigate the content of the *Little People, Big World* in order to examine the way that messages pertaining to dwarfism and disability constitute an identity project.

OBESITY AS A BODY PROJECT

Obesity is a physical condition that has become more common in the general population since the freak show era. In the nineteenth century when

[6] "Midget" or dwarf tossing involves drunken individuals competing to see who can throw a harnessed dwarf the farthest onto a mattress. Little People of America successfully advocated to outlaw the activity in Florida and New York (Adelson, 2005).

obese people were displayed in freak shows, obesity was rare in the United States. Data from 1960–1962 indicate that 13% of the adult population was obese then compared to 31% of adults today (Variyam, 2005). The rising obesity rate is now viewed as a social problem, and this anxiety is reflected in the ever-growing number of television shows that focus on weight loss. However, it is important to note that only 4.7% of adults fall in the morbid obese category, meaning they have a BMI over 40 (Flegal et al., 2002). Given that freak show performers and those featured in reality shows are in the upper range of morbid obesity, their condition is still quite rare in the general population.

Historical Overview of Obesity

Like little people, the "Fat Lady" and "Fat Man" were sideshow staples. Historical records indicate that they often performed under stage names that either referenced their body size, such as "Ima Waddler," or their supposedly pleasant comportment, like "Jolly Irene." Still others prefaced their names with infantilizing titles such as "Baby Ruth." Most fat people adopted a presentation style of joviality and telling stories, jokes, or even songs that poked fun at their weight (Guyer and Roen, 1968). They tended to be seated as people looked at them. Newspaper articles featuring fat performers often focused on their romantic lives, especially when they married other freak show performers or thin people who contrasted their body size. For example, nineteenth-century performer Hannah Battersby who weighed 500–800 pounds, married a 52-pound "Living Skeleton" and they incorporated the relationship into their performance (Hartzman, 2005). Additionally, the deaths of fat sideshow performers were regularly featured in news coverage that sensationalized the adjustments needed for funeral preparations. For example, it was reported that Big Winnie Johnson's body was rolled off a bed into her coffin; 20 pallbearers were needed to lift it. Happy Jack Eckert's casket was six times the size of a normal coffin, and Robert Earl Hughes's funeral service was at the cemetery because his converted 1,100-pound pianocase casket was too large to take into a church and was lowered into the ground by a crane.

Celesta Guyer was a freak show Fat Lady whose story parallels the contemporary protagonist of the reality show *Ruby*. Although normal weight at birth, she was an overweight child and dropped out of high school weighing nearly 300 pounds. She was discovered by Baby Ruth at Happyland Carnival outside of Detroit. Her 135-pound husband was offered a job as a talker and ticket seller, while Celesta toured with Ringling Bros. and other troupes under the stage name of "Dolly Dimples." She was 4′11″ and weighed 555 pounds at her highest. In 1950, she had a heart attack at age 49 and doctors ordered her to diet. Calling herself a food addict, she lost 443 pounds in 14 months under the supervision of medical professionals. She went on to write a memoir

entitled *Diet or Die: The Dolly Dimples Weight Reducing Plan*, which recounts her life as a performer and how she lost weight.

Body Projects and the Weight Loss Imperative of Obesity

Like dwarfism, there has been a civil-rights-based movement for fat acceptance, most notably in the formation of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) in 1969.[7] This organization advocates against size-based discrimination, disseminates information through newsletters and online resources, and provides social networking opportunities at annual conventions. NAAFA also promotes a philosophy called Health at Every Size (HAES), which posits that the weight-centered approach to health is erroneous. Some argue that a paradigm shift is necessary because yo-yo dieting is actually more harmful to one's health than being overweight (Campos, 2004). In fact, most dieters regain the weight they lose and gain more (Mann et al., 2007). While a small fraction of obese people—about 3000—have joined NAAFA (Saguy and Riley, 2005), the media discourse surrounding obesity remains overwhelmingly centered on negative portrayals of fatness as a social problem and weight loss as a solution (Saguy and Almeling, 2008). The stigma of obesity has not abated despite the increased prevalence of obesity (Carr and Friedman, 2005; Puhl and Brownell, 2001). Weight is commonly viewed as an individual's personal responsibility that is controllable through behavior, and obese people are assessed negatively unless they are able to provide a medical explanation for being overweight (DeJong, 1980). The negative stereotypes regarding obesity include being seen as less popular, less active, weaker, dirtier, and as having less self-discipline than thin people (DeJong, 1993). Saguy and Gruys (2010) found that these culturally informed moral meanings influenced news coverage of obesity in ways that reinforced stereotypes and blamed individual behavior rather than framing binge-eating disorder as a condition beyond one's control like anorexia and bulimia. Thus, the efforts of the fat acceptance movement have been unsuccessful in altering the dominant discourse surrounding obesity. The predominant way that obesity is positioned in modern society is as a body project. The massive weight loss chronicled in Guyer's book and the reality show *Ruby* serve as extreme exemplars of obesity body projects.

The pursuit of thinness as a body project is based on meeting appearance expectations through strict bodily control, especially for women (Bartky, 1997; Bordo, 1993; Hesse-Biber, 2006; Wolf, 1991). Bordo argues that thinness symbolizes a "correct *attitude;* it means that one 'cares' about oneself and how one appears to others, suggesting willpower, energy, control over infantile

[7] Unlike the dwarf identity movement, the fat acceptance movement has historically been tied to another, larger movement: the feminist movement. Most notably, the publication of Susie Orbach's *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* in 1978 signaled a political link between body image and feminism.

impulse, the ability to 'shape your life'" (1993:195). Likewise, Hesse-Biber (2006) describes a cult of thinness where the slender body is equated with health, beauty, restraint, moderation, and self-control, while the obese body is equated with the ugly, moral failure, inability to delay gratification, poor impulse control, greed, and self-indulgence. The cultural narrative surrounding the obese woman's body is that "in this society everyone who sees a fat woman feels they know something about her that she doesn't herself know … the prestige of a privileged narrative understanding of her *will* (she's addicted), her *history* (she's frustrated), her *perception* (she can't see herself as she really looks), her *prognosis* (she's killing herself)" (Moon and Sedgwick, 2001:305). The cultural moralizing and stigmatizing of fatness, the medicalization of an "obesity epidemic," and the increased modern emphasis on the body as a site of control and expression of identity all lead to the dominant cultural representation of obesity through the lens of a body project based on a weight loss imperative.

Stereotype or Sympathy: Contemporary Media Portrayals of Obesity

Contemporary reality television reflects the body project of weight loss through programs featuring obese contestants in a game show (e.g., *The Biggest Loser*), documentaries that use freak show reminiscent titles (e.g., TLC's *Half Ton Mom*), or teen specials on weight loss camps (e.g., MTV's *Fat Camp*). Calling these programs "fatsploitation," some say that television perpetuates fat phobia through negative stereotypes (Harding, 2009). Those in charge of programming say that shows about very large people are popular because "there is also a demand from readers for the bizarre and the extreme. People like to read about really big people because the stories make them feel better about their own lives. The more extreme and unusual the angle, the more valuable a story is … There's an innate morbid fascination. It's the modern day equivalent of a freak show. If you put a web cam in the world's fattest man's bedroom, people would watch" (Anonymous executive, quoted in Harding, 2009).

On the other hand, some applaud recent programming that depicts the lives of overweight people. For example, the reality dating show *More to Love* was viewed by some fat activists as a step in the right direction for raising awareness that love and romance is not limited to only thin people. Dramatic shows such as Lifetime's *Drop Dead Diva*, which features a size-16 protagonist, and ABC Family's *Huge*, which takes place at a weight loss camp, have received positive reviews for showcasing obese people in nonsensational ways. The move to more sympathetic representations offsets some of the more mocking and sensational portrayals, yet weight as a problem is still central to the storylines. I investigate the content of *Ruby* in order to examine the way that messages pertaining to obesity and weight loss constitute a body project.

DATA AND METHOD

Data

The data consist of coding and content analysis of 40 episodes (23 hours) of the television series *Little People, Big World* and *Ruby*. These shows were selected because both are reality shows that feature the daily life of people with the conditions of research interest for this project. Rather than analyzing every show that features these conditions, I conducted an in-depth case study analysis of the two shows that were the first of their kind and became the most watched. At the time of data collection, *Ruby* was the first and only reality show on cable television that featured the daily life of a person with morbid obesity. While other shows featuring dwarf families and couples emerged on TLC in recent years, *Little People, Big World* was the original, longest-running, and most popular show to feature dwarfs on cable television. Despite airing on different cable networks, both shows' objectives are to provide a window into what everyday life is like for people with a physical condition that requires significant adaptations on a daily basis. Both shows also employ stylistic and content similarities that mark the reality show genre, such as voice-over narration, on-camera interviews, and live-action renditions of mundane activities, special events, and trips. The advantage of an ongoing reality show over a documentary or game show that features dwarfism or obesity is the explicit narration of the everyday, lived experience that provides rich insight into their specific constructions of bodily deviance. An additional advantage is that each show's protagonist serves as an executive producer. Therefore, the representations on the show are influenced by the person with the condition of interest rather than being represented by others.

Little People, Big World is a reality show that documents the lives of the Roloff family, comprised of two little people parents and their four children, three of whom are average size and one of whom is a little person. Premiering on The Learning Channel (TLC) in 2006, it quickly became one of the cable network's most successful shows, garnering an average of 1.5 million viewers for first-run shows. Repeats aired frequently throughout the week. The father, Matt Roloff, is a businessman who also owns and operates the 34-acre farm where the family lives. His form of dwarfism is diastrophic dysplasia, which causes him to use crutches or a motorized cart. The mother, Amy Roloff, works part time as a preschool teacher. She and their son Zach have a form of dwarfism called achondroplasia. The premise is to show how this family copes with the challenges of dwarfism.

Ruby is a reality show that features Ruby Gettinger, a woman who once weighed 700 pounds. Premiering on the Style network in 2008, *Ruby* averages nearly a half-million viewers per episode and is the cable network's most popular show. The show focuses on her efforts to lose weight as she uses advice from nutritionists, personal trainers, and psychologists. Her friends and ex-boyfriend interact with her and provide support.

Method

The data analysis is based on content analysis of television shows as cultural text. Using a grounded theory approach, I looked for themes related to the representation of different bodies with repeated viewing. Each episode of the first two seasons of *Ruby* (12 total hours of programming: five hour-long episodes and 14 half-hour episodes) and the first season of *Little People, Big World* (11 total hours of programming: one hour-long pilot and 20 half-hour episodes) was viewed three times. During the first viewing, I took notes on plot, characterization, visuals, and recurring messages about bodies, disability, and difference. The aim of the second viewing was to compare and contrast the preliminary themes of both shows that had emerged after the first viewing. Broadly, the themes that I focused on during the first two viewings were related to limitations and overcoming disability, domesticity and personal relationships, medicalization, financial issues, and morality. As my reading of historical sources and theory related to bodily deviance and disability progressed, I applied new ideas to my previous content analysis of the programs. Specifically, I adapted the theoretical concepts of a disability identity project and body project into a coding scheme. During the third viewing, I analyzed each show for instances of the themes set out in Table I.

RESULTS

Content Analysis of Little People, Big World

In line with the tenets of disability activism, *Little People, Big World* portrays the Roloff family as employing a social, not medical, concept of disability, exhibiting a positive identity, being self-accepting, and engaging in full social participation. Specifically, each episode of the series addresses disability, domesticity, success, and, often, morality in ways that align with the tenets of the disability movement. As former president of the advocacy organization Little People of America and executive producer of the series, Matt Roloff explicitly uses the show as a platform to educate the public and advocate for

Table I. Description of Coding Scheme

	Disability Identity Project	Body Project
Model of disability	Social, not medical	Medical/individual responsibility
Identity	Positive social identity	Constructed through body modification
Messages about self	Self-acceptance	Self-change
Social participation	Overcoming disability	Limitations of body modification

people with dwarfism. The opening sequence is narrated alternatively by Matt and Amy as they introduce their family and their intent for the show.

> Matt: My name is Matt Roloff and this is my wife Amy.
>
> Amy: We're Little People.
>
> Matt: When you're only 4 foot tall, you feel like you're living in a world that wasn't made for you.
>
> Amy: We have to face obstacles and challenges just to live an ordinary life.
>
> Matt: So Amy and I and our four children are making our own life on our family farm in Oregon.
>
> Amy: Three of our kids are average height and only one is little.
>
> Matt: Our oldest boys are twins, but they are definitely not identical.
>
> Amy: Because Zach is little like us, and Jeremy isn't.
>
> Matt: The one thing I wish everybody would understand about little people is
>
> Amy: We can pretty much do what everyone else does but just in a different way.
>
> Matt: And this is our story.

This introduction establishes three central themes of how dwarfism is portrayed in the series. First, the show focuses on challenges that arise due to the contrast of their "little" bodies and the "big" world. When Matt says that the world was not made for little people, images flash on the screen showing that he and his wife are clearly out of proportion with their surroundings. Second, the show portrays little people as active and resourceful in adapting to the challenges they face. The goal is to educate the audience that their disabilities do not prevent them from having an "ordinary life"; they merely must find different means to achieve the same ends as others. Finally, the opening narration provides important information regarding the family's composition of little people and average people, particularly the contrast between the teenaged twin sons. Through the introduction, they establish that the show is about the challenges and adaptations to disability within a domestic setting.

Social Model of Disability

Throughout the first season, a number of health issues and impairments related to dwarfism are highlighted. For example, Matt Roloff often refers to the mobility issues caused by problems with his joints. He must support his body weight with crutches or use a scooter to travel long distances. An entire episode is devoted to Zach's hospitalization due to his malfunctioning shunt, which is needed to remove fluid from his brain. However, health matters are not characterized in a way to suggest a traditional model of disability. Rather than being passive, incompetent, dependent on charity, and medicalized, the

Roloff family emphasizes the environmental and social factors that construct dwarfism as a disability.

One major conflict with the social environment is the challenge of dealing with objects intended for average size people. For example, Amy must either climb the shelves or ask for assistance from a stock boy in order to get items that are out of her reach at the grocery store. An ongoing narrative throughout the season revolves around the 15-year-old twins learning to drive and the adjustments that Zach needs to operate a car, such as pedal extensions. After noticing that little people use risky adaptations in hotel rooms, like standing on garbage cans or chairs with rollers in order to access a showerhead or light switch, Matt's new business venture centers on a hotel accessibility kit for little people that provides a two-step stool. In their own home, they renovate the bathroom and kitchen in order to make it safer for little people.

The remodel of the kitchen and family room becomes a confrontation with institutional discrimination when Matt is told that building code requires stair handrails to be a minimum of 34 inches tall. The community planning office tells him that it would be unsafe for guests if he built the handrail lower. Matt expresses frustration that he has to construct his house in a way that is unsafe for the little people in his family. Since the building code does not account for the needs of dwarfs, Matt's father jokes that it is "illegal to be a dwarf."

The domestic setting further provides examples of the way they overcome their disability. Living on a farm sets up an immediate conflict between their size and our ideas of agricultural labor being the domain of able-bodied workers. Farm life, with its physical labor, oversized machinery, and the vastness of fields seems as though it would be prohibitive given dwarfs' small stature. Yet, the family is shown living and working on the farm. The main crop is pumpkins, which Matt explains are good for little people to farm because they grow low to the ground. The farm also has attractions for the thousands of visitors who come during pumpkin season, including a pirate ship, a castle, and an Old West town. Although Matt must use a series of specific moves in order to climb onto a track hoe, he feels that machinery is a great equalizer because he can get in and level the ground "like a tall guy." For the tasks that he physically cannot complete, Matt has a crew of business associates and farmhands who he directs when a project is in progress.

Positive Social Identity

Every episode makes some reference to the limitations presented by dwarfism, yet these references are nearly always rebutted with an assertion of adaptation to the physical environment or good humor. The little people on the show repeatedly espouse messages of capability and acceptance. When taking her average-sized children bowling, Amy notes certain hassles such as bowling shoes that are often too narrow for little people's feet and difficulty

fitting her fingers in the ball, yet she says, "as a little person I think you better be good at improvising or kind of making do. A lot of people don't want to make do. They think I'm a little person, I should have what I, what fits me or what I need and stuff like that. But I just think sometimes there's just simple issues, or just simple things that, like, is it really worth the hassle? Just go with it, adapt, blend in, I guess."

Most of the action of the show takes place within the home, but the family talks about their struggles with the outside world. The evidence that they are treated differently is found through their narration, not through taping actual interactions of name calling or discrimination. Although never shown on camera, all of the little people in the family, as well as little people friends with whom they interact, recall events of harassment and name calling. Zach told his mother and grandparents about an incident when he ran away from someone at the grocery store who yelled, "Freakin' midget." His grandfather told him that "there are a lot of jerks out there" and, while concerned, his mother said that she hopes to instill confidence in Zach so that he can get through difficult experiences. Even when facing hostility, they are never shown as dejected or self-pitying. Instead, these experiences motivate their involvement with the support network of LPA and to give speeches to educate the public.

Molly and Jacob, the younger average-size children, report that they do not feel angry when people stare at their mother in public. Jacob says that sometimes he laughs or ignores it because "she won't get bigger so just get used to it." Amy works with young children as a preschool teacher and coach of Jacob's soccer team. While some students are nervous at first, she reports that her size is an advantage because being eye to eye with the kids makes her seem less threatening. As a coach, she makes up for her size with "passion and a loud voice." By emphasizing a positive social identity, they present values related to tolerance and espouse perseverance and resilience as a means of adapting to the challenges of their disability.

Self-Acceptance

As active members of the LPA community, the Roloffs participate in conventions and hold local meetings at their home. Matt says they take seriously their position to be role models because "it's an important responsibility as an adult little person who is well-adjusted and has self-acceptance … to pass that self-acceptance on to other people so that they can be positive in the rearing of their dwarf children." Matt is especially focused on building his dwarf son Zach's confidence and showing him the opportunities he has in life despite being a little person.

The show frequently contrasts the twins' size and personalities. Jeremy is social, outgoing, adventurous, confident, and has a girlfriend. Amy believes Jeremy is less motivated in school and athletics because things come easily to

him. Zach, on the other hand, is shy, quiet, and tends to shrink back from social situations. Matt thinks that LPA conventions are the perfect opportunity for Zach to build his social skills and gain confidence. Acknowledging that Zach may have fewer opportunities and face rejection, he encourages Zach to meet girls and develop friendships that could turn into romantic relationships. Because Matt and Amy met at a convention, Matt frequently tells Zach to look for his future wife and pressures Zach to talk to girls and ask them to dance. For his part, Zach remains hesitant to approach girls, but he admits that conventions draw him out of his shell. Additionally, Matt arranges for Zach to meet successful little people in a variety of professions, such as a law professor and a U.S. military submarine welder. After these visits, Matt says that "we had just been talking about all his career opportunities. I really had a sort of a sense of, you know, Zach, this whole world is out there for you to conquer and achieve. And not know exactly where he is going to land but know that his opportunities are endless."

Despite his shyness, Zach exhibits self-acceptance of his dwarfism. When asked if he would choose not to be a dwarf or to change places with Jeremy, he responds: "If I had a choice to pick me being small or tall, I'd probably keep it the same. Because that's just, like, life and I was made this way. Right now, I just want to show people that it is ok to be different. There's nothing wrong with us. We're still normal." Further, his future plans include "having three kids, all boys, and all dwarfs."

Full Social Participation

At an anniversary breakfast for Matt and Amy, Matt's father explains, "I think they have a lot to celebrate about them, I mean, they have four wonderful kids and a beautiful marriage, they have their struggles, but they are making a life when at first glance you might think they wouldn't have a life." Amy says that the life she is now living surpassed all of her expectations because as a child she never thought it would be possible to live her dream of being a mother. By showing that little people can have jobs and families, the show presents the Roloffs as being fully engaged with social life. They say that being a little person means that they have to work harder, but they assure viewers that success is possible. Because the show features an upper-middle-class family, it lessens the specter of exploitation and removes focus from the stigma of being a little person. Although the show presents conflict between Amy and Matt over finances, the disagreements tend to be about Matt overspending rather than serious financial struggles to make ends meet. Instead of a dwarf family who is poor and unemployed due to discrimination, the show features a family with a high quality of life.

The show's content centers around mundane suburban child-rearing activities, such as taking the children to sports practice, school shopping, and admonishing the kids to complete schoolwork. Family bonds and loyalty are

central to the storytelling. They are also Christians who say grace and enroll their children at a religious school. In addition, their personalities showcase a host of positive qualities. They are affable, charming, well spoken, good humored, and likeable. Another common occurrence is for the show to feature family vacations. Traveling to exciting places where they do adventurous things not only reinforces their ability to overcome challenges, but also underscores their privilege. By portraying themselves as a "typical" U.S. family, the Roloffs show that dwarfs can engage in full social participation despite certain physical limitations.

Content Analysis of Ruby

Unlike *Little People, Big World*, the reality TV series *Ruby* does not adhere to the disability identity project. Although Ruby herself is portrayed positively as charismatic, engaging, and good humored, obesity is represented through a medical, not social, model of disability, and impairments related to her body size are cited as preventing activity, full social participation, and a positive identity. Rather than messages of body acceptance or changing the external world to accommodate her size, the show chronicles Ruby's body project, specifically her efforts to lose weight. The series begins when doctors tell Ruby that her health and life are at risk unless she loses weight. Ruby's first narration from the series premiere reflects her personal struggle with weight, the public misconception about struggling with obesity, and the sense of personal failure and doubt she derives from her inability to achieve a normal body.

> Currently, I would assume that I weigh like 500 pounds. The world's not made for me. It's not made for the people our size at all. It's easy to point the finger at fat people or make fun of them and judge them and say, "Oh, all they have to do is go on a diet." You know, but that's not true. This is not what it's about. People look at me that are not my friends, that have never seen me before, and go, "How in the world did that girl get to be so big?" I've lived in this shell all my life since I was 8, I've lived in this shell and this is all I've known. And no matter how many times I've tried to beat it, it's like, I can't, there's some—you know, I always say there is some chip in my head that's not clicking because I can't figure out why I can't do this. I've tried, I've done thousands and millions and trillions of diets, exercises, everything, but I just can never win with it. Sometimes I do think, Is this it? Was I just meant to be overweight? This is what I want to find out.

Similar to little people, the opening narration establishes that navigating the social and physical world is difficult due to her body size. In contrast to dwarfism, she is blamed for the size of her body because people think that she could control it through dieting. She attributes her failed attempts at weight loss to a psychological defect, and she claims that the weight is a "shell" covering up who she really is. Thus, her identity is conflated with her body size. The aim of the series is not to promote acceptance of obesity, but to discover if obesity can be cured. In doing so, the show focuses on the limitations and

negative aspects of being larger and overcoming these obstacles through weight loss. The show also conceptualizes obesity as an addiction and medical problem and chronicles the impact of weight on her personal relationships, including her love life.

Medical Model of Disability and Individual Responsibility

The show regards Ruby's obesity as a medical and psychological problem. In the first episode, the doctor tells her that she is a metabolic time bomb at risk for heart attack, stroke, blindness, dialysis, sleep apnea, premature death, and "anything bad you can think of." Ruby says that she is afraid to go to sleep because she sometimes wakes up gasping for air. The doctor says something is wrong with her brain because it gives her messages that she is hungry too strongly and too often. He tells her to hand her treatment over to the professionals, and she will be able to lose weight. If she continues to eat like she was and be that heavy, she will die. Throughout the series, both in Ruby's narration and in conversations that she has with people, her weight loss is framed in language of stark mortality, such as "her life is on the line." In every episode of the series, Ruby meets with one or more members of her professional weight loss team, which includes her doctor, an obesity specialist, a nutritionist, personal trainers, and a psychologist.

Ruby repeatedly states that her overeating is an addiction, just like being an alcoholic or a drug addict. Unlike other addicts, she cannot completely give up food, so her treatment is to eat a prepackaged meal plan. She also sees a psychologist in order to obtain help for her addiction and try to uncover past memories. She does not remember most of her childhood and fears that something traumatic happened that caused her overeating. She visits her sister's house to look at pictures, returns to past childhood homes, hires a private investigator, and interviews her mother in order to make sense of her lost childhood. Although the show never provides outright confirmation, the possibility of sexual abuse is alluded to throughout the series. At one point, Ruby's mother admits that she may have overfed her daughter in order to make her unattractive to men out of fear of molestation.

Identity Construction Through Body Modification

The early episodes of the series detail everything that Ruby cannot do because of her body size. Her personal identity is completely shaped by and viewed through the prism of her weight. She describes herself as "a big girl in a little world." Ruby receives disability benefits because she cannot work due to her poor health, and she is unable to drive a car because she cannot fit behind the steering wheel. Due to her weight, she faces physical obstacles such as not being able to fit into chairs that have arms or airplane seats. She also

worries about breaking furniture and must put bricks under her bed so that the frame does not crack. She says that her dreams are things that smaller people take for granted. In the series premiere, she lists a set of dreams that she hopes to achieve after losing weight, such as riding a horse, polishing her own toenails, crossing her legs, reaching the top shelf, taking a bubble bath, sitting on someone's lap, and shopping all day without getting tired. Ruby also faces fat prejudice when people stare at her or make rude comments in public, and these events are filmed for the show, unlike the way overt discrimination was only talked about in *Little People, Big World*. In this way, she becomes an unwilling modern-day freak who is publicly gawked at and mocked in everyday life.

In some ways, Ruby is socially exceptional, regardless of size, because she has a sociable, charming, and outgoing personality. She also has a strong network of close friends who have been in her life since adolescence. Her friends are supportive and nonjudgmental, even to the point where they recognize that they had been enabling Ruby's weight gain over the years. Ruby's weight has always been a central part of her identity, and this colors the interactions with her friends. When she was gaining weight, her friends used to cook high-calorie, southern dishes for her or they brought her the food that she was craving. As her body project to lose weight begins, her friends help her learn how to cook in healthy ways, exercise, and provide social support through a group that Ruby starts called Women's Fat Night where women meet to share their body struggles.

Self-Change

Rather than messages of self-acceptance, Ruby narrates the positive aspects of self-change. The later episodes of the series, after Ruby loses 70–100 pounds, feature her doing things that she formerly could not do because of her weight. She is able to drive again, and she begins to work as a receptionist at a hair salon. In the last episode of the first season, entitled "100 Pounds of Hope," Ruby bridges her obese self and her weight loss self. The show opens with her narration that she cannot wait to do the things she dreamed of but could never do because her size was so prohibitive. For instance, she had never been camping because she spent most of her life indoors due to her weight. After losing 100 pounds, she decides to take a camping trip with two friends. Prior to the trip, they shop at an outdoor supply store. As they look at camping items, they comment on how her 383-pound body still presents obstacles. She worries that she will break a cot and cannot purchase a chair that has a 225-pound weight limit. Ruby narrates that, "even if I forget for a second that I am not fat, huge, limited, there is always something to remind me." This reinforces the continual nature of the body project. On the camping trip, Ruby is able to complete several things that she had never done before, such as fishing, hiking, and sleeping under the

stars. She is even able to get up from her air mattress in the morning without assistance. At the end of the episode, she explains that she would not have been able to camp 100 pounds ago and that as she loses weight, more of her dreams will come true.

Limitations to Social Participation

Despite an all-consuming focus on body modification, Ruby remains unable to fully engage in social participation. Several episodes focus on her struggle to stay on the restrictive weight loss plan, such as the cravings and temptations she faces. She explains that she feels isolated and punished because the rest of the world is not on her diet. When she is at parties or goes out to eat with friends, she cannot fully socially participate. While other people can treat themselves to pizza or other food that is off limits to her, she feels different because she must strictly adhere to her meal plan.

Further, Ruby faces limits to her social participation in terms of romantic disappointments and the lack of a traditional domestic life. Ruby says that she wanted to have four or five children, but she does not have that option because being pregnant at her weight would be life threatening. One narrative thread deals with her ex-boyfriend Denny, a slim personal trainer, who she dated for eight years. After telling her that if she lost weight they would get married, he eventually broke up with her because of her size. He says that the ultimatum was because they had entered a comfort zone, and she would not change if he stayed. She replies that she hopes someone will accept her for who she is, and she is not losing weight to be with him. Yet, throughout the series, Denny serves as a dramatic plot device as everyone in Ruby's life worries about whether they will get back together and if he will hurt her again. Although she is a virgin, she fantasizes about sex, romance, and being able to sit in a boyfriend's lap. Unlike the successful family in *Little People, Big World*, Ruby faces significant obstacles to leading a "normal life," both professionally and personally.

DISCUSSION

Past scholarship has evaluated the historical freak show in terms of both disability and exploitation (Adams, 2001; Bogdan, 1988; Thomson, 1996). Although Bogdan (1988) claims that the freak show disappeared over the course of the twentieth century, some argue that it persists in other cultural forms, such as television (Dennett, 1996). However, previous work has not attempted to trace the way that past cultural representations of specific stigmatized groups have influenced the incorporation—or not—of a disability identity. By comparing contemporary representations of dwarfism and obesity, I show that since the mid-twentieth century many dwarfs have adopted an

identity project based on body acceptance, whereas many obese people take part in a body project aimed at modifying their bodies through weight loss. I argue that the generally positive representations of the past allowed for little people to easily adopt the tenets of the disability rights movement. The aggrandized presentation of dwarfism in the freak show has given way to the financial and domestic success of the Roloff family in *Little People, Big World*. By contrast, the fat people of the sideshow were among the most openly mocked performers. The values of contemporary U.S. culture posit that weight is under individual control and obesity is a mark of weak will, not social or cultural factors. Therefore, *Ruby* portrays obesity as a negative, limiting condition that must be overcome through determination and concerted weight loss effort. The obese person is viewed as sympathetic and inspirational only when striving to attain a normal body.

Dwarfism and morbid obesity are both extreme conditions of body size, yet the social construction of shortness and fatness are vastly different in the discourse surrounding their stigmatization. This analysis sheds light on cultural depictions of groups stigmatized by body size. My findings suggest that social movements and historical change are weaker in transforming prejudice to acceptance for groups who have achieved conditions.

Dwarfism is an ascribed, genetic condition that is present at birth. Little people may adopt disability rights tenets of identity because they are forced to accept and adapt to their condition as there is no recourse to become taller. Ascribed statuses draw sympathy because the person with the condition is not held responsible for causing it. These factors may lead to a relatively positive self-image and a strong social movement aimed at education, tolerance, and embracing the condition as a central component of one's identity. As the Roloff family aptly demonstrates, many dwarfs wish to be regarded as modified normal people who lead fulfilling lives.

Morbid obesity, on the other hand, did not become a condition that fit into the disability rights model. Since obesity is viewed as an achieved status caused by behavior, even by those with the condition, the prevailing cultural notion is that obese people should change their bodies. Although increasing awareness of the complicated nature of obesity acknowledges the role that genetic, metabolic, psychological, and social factors may play in extreme weight gain, obesity is still seen as an individual problem and the solution is body modification, through medical intervention and dieting. Being held accountable for their body size by themselves and others, many obese people adopt a body project model of change rather than self-acceptance. Ruby illustrates how cultural discourse becomes ingrained in the individual's concept of self. Although she says that her obesity is not a choice, she does not challenge people's judgments of her or the idea that she should lose weight. Unlike dwarfs, she does not see permanence and stability in her body. Instead, she attempts to de-stigmatize through body transformation.

The proliferation of shows featuring obese people losing weight may reflect a national anxiety that extreme obesity could happen to anyone. Just as

we stigmatize the mentally and not the physically ill, obesity seems to be more of a threat than dwarfism. Because a "normal" body can potentially gain weight to become marked as obese, but a normal body cannot become a dwarf, obesity is more stigmatized and regarded negatively. Further, many people have experienced transitioning from a thin body to an overweight body over the course of adulthood. This changeability in body size may translate into a fear of spiraling into an ever larger body, resulting in extreme obesity. This suggests that the appeal of cultural depictions of the morbidly obese engaged in body projects to lose weight has to do with the need for self-protection or self-affirmation. Future research could examine the way that viewers make social comparisons between themselves and those depicted in the reality show. I expect that some viewers may look to a show like *Ruby* as an inspirational way to reinforce the notion that body weight can be controlled behaviorally or as a way to affirm their own body size by noting that they are not as large as Ruby.

One implication of the finding that *Ruby* constructs obesity as an addiction and mental illness is that a more nuanced understanding of morbid obesity is needed beyond the stigmatization and individual blame that so often accompanies public discourse surrounding obesity. At the same time, the disabling health consequences for people like Ruby who are severely overweight are far more serious than body image concerns or general fat phobia. Future research might examine how those within the fat acceptance movement negotiate the Health at Every Size position when people are immobilized and undeniably socially and physically hindered by being hundreds of pounds overweight.

This study has several limitations. First, the two reality shows selected for analysis provide only a partial view into contemporary constructions of a physical condition. There are multiple meanings and interpretations of body size available, and these shows provide a particular point of view. Both shows are admittedly sympathetic portrayals of the protagonists and their conditions. Future research could analyze the more sensationalistic performances that take place in live venues (e.g. "midget tossing" in bars) and examine portrayals of dwarfism and obesity in nonreality television or talk shows. Worthwhile studies could also examine how aspects of cultural production across genres or shows affect representations. Another possibility is to provide a more sustained analysis of the way gender influences the representations of different conditions. This research study is also limited to programming in the United States. Television shows featuring different bodied people are popular in Europe, and researchers might find interesting cross-cultural contrasts in the constructions of these conditions outside of the U.S. context. Likewise, there is little research on the construction of disability in non-Western countries where freak-show-style performances still exist. For example, a cross-cultural ethnographic project could examine the group of over 100 communally living dwarfs who made headlines last year for dressing in costume and living in mushroom houses as a tourist attraction in southern China. Finally, there are

a number of other genetic abnormalities and physical conditions that continue to attract public interest but have received little scholarly attention into the way their cultural meanings have changed over time.

In conclusion, this article has examined the evolution of the cultural institution of the freak show and representations of disability. The legacy of the freak show persists in the way that historical representations of a condition carved the way for their modern counterparts. Yet, it is difficult to discern whether contemporary reality shows are a continuation of freak show exploitation or whether they serve as educational platforms to combat stigmatization of different bodied groups. Some may argue that it is not exploitation because both Matt Roloff and Ruby Gettinger are executive producers of the shows that feature them. However, this control over content was also present for many sideshow performers who were instrumental in crafting their acts and profited from their own public presentations. Sideshow performers have long claimed that it was their free choice to reap the benefits of professional display. The reality TV stars likely feel the same way. Further, freak show acts often emphasized the educational value of learning about and looking at exotic and medically anomalous people. Today's reality shows purport an emotional education whereby the viewer gains tolerance and empathy by watching stigmatized people live their lives on a reality show.

Little People, Big World and *Ruby* are sensitive portrayals of their protagonists, but it is undeniable that these television shows exist solely because public curiosity generates profit just as the freak show once did. Freak shows may seem far more negative and distasteful because it is socially uncomfortable to stare at a disabled person on a stage in person, whereas the television screen creates a comforting space that releases tension for both performer and viewer. Whether freak show or television show, so long as there is an audience for anomalies, there will be people who capitalize on it. Representations may be influenced by social movements, as in the case of dwarfism, or they may persist due to the deep-seated cultural negativity that surrounds morbid obesity, but curiosity about extremes in the human condition will likely remain constant.

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