National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health

Centre de collaboration nationale des déterminants de la santé

Mind the Disruption

PODCAST EPISODE TRANSCRIPT & COMPANION DOCUMENT

SEASON 1 | EPISODE 5

Disrupting Food Insecurity & Fat Phobia

Episode released on:
January 24, 2023

Mind the Disruption is a podcast about people who refuse to accept things as they are. It's about people pushing for better health for all. It's about people like us who have a deep desire to build a healthier, more just world.

The first season of Mind the Disruption focuses on Cultivating Creative Discontent: what it means to look around, see something that needs to be changed — something that is unfair and unjust — and then take bold action despite the resistance we might face.

This episode companion document, available in English and French, provides a new way to engage with the podcast. It includes a written transcript of Episode 5 as well as highlighted powerful quotes and related resources to prompt further reflection and exploration.

EPISODE 5
JANUARY 24, 2023

SEASON ONE

HOST

BERNICE YANFUL

Bernice Yanful is a Knowledge Translation Specialist with the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health (NCCDH). Bernice is also a PhD candidate studying the intersections between school food and food security, and she has worked as a public health nurse in Ontario.

PODCAST GUESTS

PAUL TAYLOR

Paul Taylor is a lifelong anti-poverty activist and a champion for the right to food. Paul was the executive director of FoodShare Toronto until January 2023. Growing up materially poor in Toronto inspired Paul to commit his life to doing what he can to dismantle the systems of oppression that cause and uphold food insecurity and wealth inequality, including neoliberalism and White supremacy. Alongside his colleagues at FoodShare, Paul worked to support community-led food infrastructure with the collective vision of a Toronto where everyone can feed themselves, their loved ones and their communities with dignity and with joy. Paul's experience also includes executive director roles at Gordon Neighbourhood House and the Downtown Eastside Neighbourhood House. He has chaired the British Columbia Poverty Reduction Coalition and served on the board of directors of the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives and as vice-chair of Food Secure Canada. Paul teaches courses at Simon Fraser University.

LILLIAN YIN

Lillian Yin is of East Asian descent with roots in Taiwan and China. As a registered dietitian and diabetes educator, she has been privileged to serve in spaces across the spectrum of life, from infancy and pregnancy through adolescence and older adult years, and in various areas of the health system ranging from acute and primary care to community and public health. Recently, she joined the Health Promotion Team at Vancouver Coastal Health Authority as Team Lead. Her principles of care are framed by social justice, equity, strength-based approach and cultural safety. Driven by her passion to advance social justice and achieve health equity within the wider system through collective action, she is currently pursuing a Master of Public Health at Johns Hopkins University.

EPISODE DESCRIPTION

Paul Taylor, the former head of FoodShare and a life-long anti-poverty activist, dismantles the barriers — including fat phobia and weight bias — that constrain people's access to food on their own terms. Listen to or read this episode to learn about Paul's story of challenging the status quo with integrity and a deep commitment to the communities he works with. Learn about Paul's work with FoodShare, Canada's largest food justice organization, why food justice is critical for addressing food insecurity, and why and how FoodShare has committed to body liberation and fat acceptance to advance its food justice mission. Later in the episode, you'll learn from Lillian Yin who reflects on what this means for public health and dietetics practice. Lillian is a registered dietitian and was working with Vancouver Coastal Health's prenatal outreach program at that time. She discusses the health harms of attitudes and systems that discriminate against people living in larger bodies and her desire to contest weight bias and discrimination through her work. In speaking with Lillian, we explore the role public health can play in advancing body liberation as a vital piece of advancing food justice in Canada.

BERNICE YANFUL (NCCDH)

Hi. Welcome to Mind the Disruption. I'm Bernice Yanful. I'm a PhD student and public health practitioner working to move knowledge into action for better health for everyone.

On this podcast, I chat with community organizers, public health professionals, academics and more who have a key thing in common: they're disruptors. They're people who refuse to accept things as they are. Passionate about health for all and are pursuing it with a tenacity, a courage and a deep conviction that a better world is possible.

In Season 1, we're talking about creative discontent. What it means to look around us, see something that needs to be changed — something that is unfair and unjust — and then taking bold action despite the resistance we might face.

In each episode, we hear from a disruptor who has done just that in different areas: work, food, Whiteness, migration and much more. And we hear their personal journeys.

Then we dive into a reflective conversation about what all this means for public health. Wherever we find ourselves — in research, policy or practice — how do break from the status quo and move forward with boldness?

REBECCA CHEFF (NCCDH)

This podcast is made and brought to you by the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. We support the public health field to move knowledge into action to reduce health inequities }in Canada.

We're hosted by St. Francis Xavier University. We're funded by the Public Health Agency of Canada, and we are one of six National Collaborating Centres for Public Health working across the country. The views expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect the views of our funder or host.

We are located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq People.

PAUL TAYLOR

There's been an injustice that's occurred, and that injustice or a series of injustices have allowed some people to have food and allowed other people to struggle for access to food. So, if we're going to respond to this issue, we must also acknowledge, respond and dismantle the oppressive organizing principles that impact people's ability to eat.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

That was Paul Taylor, our main guest for today's episode. Paul is an anti-poverty activist, teaches at Simon Fraser University and is the co-founder of Evenings & Weekends Consulting. From 2017 until January 2023, he was the executive director of FoodShare Toronto, Canada's largest food justice organization, working to advance access to food for all.

The work FoodShare does is vast. It supports urban farms. It works to increase access to affordable produce through good food markets. And it advocates for the right to food at local and national levels among many, many other things. All underpinned by a desire to dismantle the barriers that constrain people's access to food on their own terms, especially for groups most affected by food insecurity and poverty, including Black and Indigenous Peoples, people of colour and people living with disabilities. During Paul's time with the organization, it became further cemented as an innovator known for its pathbreaking work.

In my conversation with Paul, we talk about one such way that FoodShare has challenged the status quo through its Body Liberation and Fat Acceptance statement. In a non-profit world where food-based organizations may feel pressured to implement programs focused on body size and weight as a condition of receiving funding, FoodShare has gone in a different direction. It affirms that all bodies are worthy and have a right to exist as they are, and refuses to participate in projects that suggest the opposite — those rooted in health-harming narratives and practices around fatness and a thin ideal.

FoodShare's stance reflects who Paul has been as a leader: resolute, firm in his values, and with the larger picture in mind — the well-being of the communities with whom he works. My conversation with Paul, which was recorded prior to him leaving the organization, explores his journey in becoming the executive director of FoodShare, how the Body Liberation and Fat Acceptance statement came about, and its connections to the organization's larger mission of food justice.

Then, for the reflective conversation, I speak with registered dietitian Lillian Li Yin. Lillian and I discuss the health harms of attitudes and systems that discriminate against people living in larger bodies and her desire to contest weight bias and discrimination through her work.

Together, Paul and Lillian show that food justice is not just about who has access to food and in what quantities but is so much more. It is about the relationships we hold to food, our bodies and our cultures as well as our relationships with each other and the world around us. It is about working to dismantle systems of oppression, including colonialism, racism and White supremacy, that shape not only how food is produced, distributed and consumed but also the value we assign to ourselves and others based on body size and weight.

Ultimately, food justice is about social justice. It means advancing everyone's right to a dignified life in which access to food that enables people to thrive is an essential resource for living and critical to public health.

Paul told me about how his early life experiences created a lifelong commitment to advancing equity and justice.

BERNICE

You've written extensively about growing up materially poor in Toronto and how that shaped a desire in you to challenge different forms of oppression. I'm wondering if you can tell me a little bit about that. How did your early experiences influence what you aspire to do and who you hope to be?

PAUL

For me, it wasn't until I was about 13 years old, when I was living in Ontario — I still am — a premier was elected, Mike Harris, under the guise of the Common Sense Revolution. One of the things he did that had an impact on our family was he cut welfare by 22%. And for me, as a 13-year-old, raised by a single mom, a powerful Black woman, for me it was really transformative. That was the first time I saw my mother cry. Shortly after that cut, we lived without electricity, without heat, without hot water for large portions of my childhood.

I think the one thing that I took from — well, I took many things from that experience — but one thing that I took from that experience was recognizing that actually it wasn't something that my mother had done. It wasn't something that I had done. It wasn't something that poor families had done to deserve less food or to navigate the kind of pressure that they were forced to navigate. But it was a political decision: living in poverty. That's what really opened my eyes to the systems that control and impact so many of our lives.

So I think it's from that point on that I really started to try to understand and seek opportunities to challenge those systems that not only cause people to be poor and hold people in poverty but that tell them that they are bad and less deserving.

BERNICE

So you grew up in circumstances that made you see the injustice at the root of those circumstances, and, as you said, it kind of propelled you to want to do something about them. And so what did those early opportunities or that early work that you were engaged in look like?

PAUL

I would say the early opportunities came for me in the classroom in the fact that I wasn't treated like a lot of other Black boys that looked like me. And I think that had a lot to do with the way that I spoke. And it's a real reminder of the kind of deeply embedded oppression that exists within systems like education.

But I had some privilege. And what that meant was that teachers saw me. Teachers saw that I had potential. Teachers saw that I had capacity. And ultimately, it meant that they taught to me. Unlike people who had all of the same things, capacity, potential and brilliance, but didn't get taught to because of the messaging that those teachers are told about Black boys and about what's possible for us.

So I think that's where some of those opportunities came for me as a result of some privilege but also as a result of the hard work of a Black woman, my mother. This is work that many Black women, especially the parents of Black boys, have to take on. Challenging the low expectations that society bestows on Black children and in particular Black boys. So those for me — having a mother that recognized and was willing to challenge that consistently, having teachers that, as a result of my privilege, taught to me — those were some of my early experiences that led me to believe that I could do things and that my experience was valid and valued.

BERNICE

And can you tell me a little bit more about that privilege? You had mentioned it's because of the way that you spoke that was different from the other Black boys in your classroom.

PAUL

I grew up just off Lansdowne in the west end of Toronto where people were coming from all over the world. And I also had a babysitter that liked to watch soap operas. So, at an early age ...

BERNICE

Which one?

PAUL

I think it was Young and the Restless … yeah, Young and the Restless. So I grew up, one of my teachers being Victor Newman and all of the other cast of characters on the Young and the Restless as I sat with my babysitter. And I realized in retrospect that was also a classroom for me. I learned how people were speaking. I learned how people were moving through the world. And it invited me into a way of moving into the world that is largely the way I think privileged White folks move through the world. And with an invitation to do so.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

Paul went on to become a classroom teacher inspired by early experiences tutoring young Black boys in his school who, he told me, were celebrated for their basketball skills but often forgotten and ignored in the classroom, their academic potential going unrecognized.

For Paul, teaching has always been about creating spaces where people feel centred and like they belong. And while Paul loved teaching, he also had a desire to tackle the wider systems producing inequities and recognized that he could support learning in many different ways.

So he decided to pursue other work. Before becoming the executive director of FoodShare, he worked at a shelter for youth experiencing homelessness in Toronto and two neighbourhood houses in B.C., where his curiosity in how systems could be redesigned to promote equity grew. This curiosity eventually brought Paul to FoodShare, a decision driven largely by his interest in tackling poverty.

PAUL

I often admit that food — although I like to eat it, I like to cook it, I like to buy it, I like to touch it — it's not the thing that gets me up in the morning, although sometimes it feels like it is with coffee. But really my passion is around anti-poverty, challenging the existence of poverty and the inequities that are deeply embedded in our society. And I feel like food has provided a really interesting opportunity to engage in conversations about inequities, about poverty and about the ways in which these things have been poorly misunderstood, poorly diagnosed, or we've collectively responded in ways that are not ultimately the most helpful, and truly what can be done.

BERNICE

And so what drew you to FoodShare in particular? Did you see it as an opportunity to use food as a tool to address some of those issues that you were passionate about?

PAUL

Exactly. I would say FoodShare is an organization across the country and maybe even beyond that has an incredible reputation for innovation, for developing food-based programs, community- based, food-based programs and initiatives and models. But I actually was curious about FoodShare because I was curious about FoodShare's approach to lead with food. When, for me, these were issues that were not about food and that I personally feel leading with food can be a bit of a distraction. A distraction away from the systemic issues that affect who has food and who doesn't. Things like anti-Black racism, colonialism, ableism, White supremacy. So for me, what really interested me in FoodShare was the ability to have deep conversations and be curious about food and how we use food as an organization.

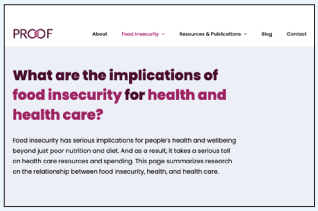
I think we've been able to collectively be curious in a way that shifted our approach in that, yes, we deal with food, but we're always talking about the systems around food that cause people to either have food or not.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

And in Canada, many households lack access to food. According to Statistics Canada data, approximately 16% of households were food insecure in 2021.

What are the implications of food insecurity for health and health care?

PROOF. [2023].



Household food insecurity is a serious public health problem that is linked with adverse physical and mental health outcomes beyond poor nutrition. This research summary from PROOF outlines the evidence on the relationship between food insecurity, adverse health outcomes and health inequities in Canada.

Meaning they lack the ability to afford food at some point during the year.

Across the country, the burden of food insecurity is not distributed equally. Some groups, including Black and Indigenous Peoples, racialized groups and people with disabilities, are made more vulnerable to food insecurity due to the combined and interacting effects of systemic racism, exclusion from food policy decision-making, and economic oppression among other factors.

Studies show that food insecurity is an important determinant of health with serious implications for health and well-being.

According to research summarized by PROOF, an interdisciplinary research program studying household food insecurity in Canada, food insecurity increases vulnerability to poor oral health, various infectious and chronic diseases, and depression and anxiety disorders among a host of other conditions, making food insecurity an urgent public health.

For FoodShare, a focus on food justice is central to addressing food insecurity because it's not only about a lack of food but the unjust systems that create food insecurity in the first place. I asked Paul to expand on what food justice means to him and what it means for the work of the organization.

BERNICE

I wanted to shift a little bit and talk about FoodShare's approach to food justice. I've done a little bit of teaching around food and food systems, and in my courses we spend a lot of time talking about terminology and how the language we use is not just semantics, it has important implications for how we understand the problem we're trying to address as well as possible solutions. So I'm curious, FoodShare positions itself as a food justice organization. Can you tell me a little bit about that? How do you understand food justice?

PAUL

That at the root of this issue around food insecurity is an injustice. That's where I begin. That there's been a series of injustices that have allowed some people to have food and allowed other people to struggle for access to food. So, if we're going to respond to this issue, we must also acknowledge, respond and dismantle the oppressive organizing principles that impact people's ability to eat.

> *"there's been a series of injustices that have allowed some people to have food and allowed other people to struggle for access to food. So, if we're going to respond to this issue, we must also acknowledge, respond and dismantle the oppressive organizing principles that impact people's ability to eat."*
>
> **PAUL TAYLOR**

So it opens up a whole host of conversations when we have a justice lens around who should be designing the interventions, who should be leading the interventions, who should be paid and resourced to be able to test things, try things, dream.

In this country, we see the largest organizations doing work around food are headed by White folks. And, if they have really, really, really big budgets, well, then they're headed by White men. And for us, that is a reflection of the injustice that seems to have been baked into society.

We want to work with people who understand the urgency of these inequities and the lived reality of navigating these inequities so that they can be resourced to lead.

BERNICE

Absolutely. A lot of what you're saying reminds me of the book *Black Food Matters*. Have you read that book before?

PAUL

Yes, I'll admit that I haven't gotten through the entire book, but I do have it on my shelf.

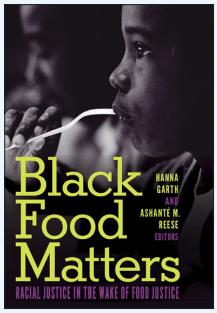
BERNICE

Yeah, it's fantastic. And one of the things that I found most interesting is in a chapter by Hanna Garth. She distinguishes between three different approaches to food justice:

- A punitive approach, being interventions that are often rooted in a charity model and this notion of helping the poor. So, for example, efforts to improve the nutrition of particular groups that teaches often low-income people how to eat, what to eat, when to eat, etc. And often demonizes foods that have cultural significance.
- Then there's a policy-oriented approach that seeks to create kind of incremental change by working within existing food systems and promoting policies that help move towards a more healthy, affordable and sustainable food system.

Black food matters: Racial justice in the wake of food justice

Garth H, Reese AM. [2020].



This collection of essays centres Blackness in its exploration of food, equity and justice. Written primarily by Black and other racialized writers, these essays look at Black food culture, the factors that threaten it, and the Black communities fighting for its survival.

- And finally, there's a more radical, grassroots justice approach that really seeks to address the underlying forms of structural violence and oppression creating a lack of access to food in the first place, and seeks to connect to issues beyond food.

I'm curious, how does the work that FoodShare does, how is it positioned among those different approaches?

PAUL

That's a good question. I think it's a complicated question in that FoodShare is a charity.

BERNICE

Sure.

PAUL

So there are still external forces, factors, policies, laws that affect how we do our work.

As an individual, I can say I'm not interested in the first two descriptions that you described. I'm not interested in any type of activity that tries to teach low-income people how to cook. That's a huge miss and offensive. Low-income people, we all know this, but just because someone's low income doesn't mean that they don't know how to cook. They just can't buy the food that they need.

I also think a lot of policy conversations, whether it's basic income or what have you, are all go-forward approaches, and only some of us in society have the privilege of a go-forward approach. It's like developing a policy that says from this point on we're going to have a basic income for everybody. That's all fine and well, but what about the intergenerational, long-lasting harm that's been caused by systems that caused, for example, Black and Indigenous folks to get paid less, have less food. The costs and the impacts of those things are real.

We can't just say, let's move forward doing this. We need to have some reconciliation before we can say let's go forward in how we address poverty and food insecurity. So I'm not interested so much in go-forward approaches that don't talk about things like reparations and other forms of restitution because, for me, those are the only ways that we can move forward.

I'm not interested in policy windows because I think they are smoke and mirrors. We can focus on trying to advocate for a basic income while the whole time what we're seeing is housing prices skyrocket. We're seeing food prices skyrocket. So we can fight for a $2,000 basic income all the while the forces that are extracting the most profit from us, they are continuing to do so — so much so that the amount that we've been fighting for is no longer effective. So I'm interested in frameworks that advance a decent quality of life for us all.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

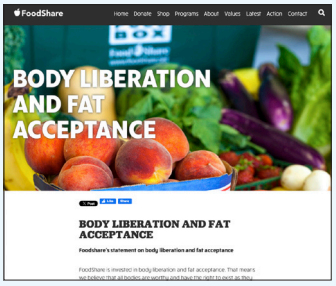
Next, I ask Paul about FoodShare's Body Liberation and Fat Acceptance statement that outlines its commitment to affirm all bodies in its work.

BERNICE

I wanted to move to discussing FoodShare's Body Liberation and Fat Acceptance statement. Where did the idea and the felt need for such a statement come from?

Body liberation and fat acceptance

FoodShare. [2021].



Rejecting fatphobia in all forms is an important pillar in food justice, which recognizes how access to food is shaped by systems of oppression. This statement from FoodShare puts forward its commitment to body liberation and fat acceptance in its organization and programs. The statement includes examples of individual and organizational actions to advance body liberation and fat acceptance.

PAUL

This is something that many of my colleagues have been championing within the organization for a long time. I think the impetus, one, encouraging by our colleagues to say we need a public stance on this, and there's an opportunity for us to help inspire organizations to also be critical of these kinds of harmful narratives.

But also recognizing that we're doing work around food and that people are reaching out to us all the time with sometimes really wild requests. And we don't want to leave it to the facilitator of a program to feel like they have to make a decision for the organization on some of these things that can be really, really harmful.

So we decided to take a public stance on not wanting to do work inspired by trying to change people's bodies, not wanting to do work based on ideas, science that has already been acknowledged as causing disproportionate harm to the communities that are also the communities that are most likely to experience food insecurity. The communities that are navigating systems that exclude them from access to food. So, if our allegiance is to those communities, this is the kind of position that makes sense for FoodShare to be taking.

And what we've found is that a number of organizations are really interested in food work, food justice work from a body liberation and fat acceptance lens. Originally, we used to call this body positivity, but it's not about being positive about our bodies. It's about being liberated from the kind of oppressive ways that, whether we're doing food work or not, that society talks about fat people.

"Originally, we used to call this body positivity, but it's not about being positive about our bodies. It's about being liberated from the kind of oppressive ways that, whether we're doing food work or not, that society talks about fat people."

PAUL TAYLOR

BERNICE (NARRATION)

The statement released in 2021 reads in part:

Carolina Jimenez (reading FoodShare statement): "As a food justice organization that believes in body liberation and fat acceptance, we do not support fatphobia in any of its forms, including where it intersects with systems of oppression such as White supremacy, settler colonialism, colourism, ableism, ageism, misogyny, queerphobia, classism, etc. Because we know that access to food is shaped by these systems, as well as people's current material conditions and their lived experiences, we respect people's choices on the foods they eat. We are challenging the idea that foods are 'good' or 'bad,' or that people are good or bad for eating certain foods."

BERNICE

Can you talk a little bit about how this statement connects with the larger mission of FoodShare to advance food justice? What do you see as the connections between this type of statement and food justice?

PAUL

Well, I think the big one is recognizing that it's not about changing bodies and that all bodies have a right to exist as they are. And I think lots of organizations will go into the doing of stuff that they think they ought to do, especially around food, whether it's community kitchens, compost, workshops and the like, without that really clear bird's eye view of the systems that affect our work.

And we know that fat phobia and ableism are systems that affect our work. And if we're not able to shine a light on those things and then design our interventions in a way that mitigates the harm that has been caused, well, then we're not designing effective programs.

BERNICE

And you mentioned the term fat phobia. How do you understand fat phobia?

PAUL

I think about it as the harm that our society, and individuals within it, causes to people with bigger bodies. I think about it in the ways that, when many of us are watching movies, how fat folks are positioned as the joke in the movies or positioned as hapless. You know, these are all really, really harmful things.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

As Paul is saying here, many popular films and TV shows often portray fatness as a moral failing, make characters living in larger bodies the butt of the jokes or advance harmful stereotypes related to laziness and a lack of intelligence.

But fat phobia, sometimes referred to as anti-fatness, not only exists in movies. It is embedded in our everyday lives, our policies and systems, including in public health. For example, in anti-obesity campaigns that promote weight loss focused on individual behavior change. Campaigns that research shows may have negative impacts on eating behaviors.

Later, Lillian and I chat further about the potential health harms of such forms of bias and discrimination.

PAUL

The assumption that somebody who has a bigger body is trying to have a smaller body, that is a harmful assumption. The idea that we would say to someone "Oh my goodness, you look so great" because they've lost weight is based on an assumption rooted in fat phobia, this fear and hatred for fatness. This permeates our society, and I think there are so many ways that we use language to reinforce fat phobia. So that's how we see it and that's how we think about how important it is to acknowledge, respond and dismantle it.

BERNICE

Absolutely. And connected to that statement, you have a policy for partnerships and funders that explicitly states, as an organization, you will not participate in projects or coalitions that track or reference body size. What has been the reaction to this policy from your funders and from other potential partners?

PAUL

Some folks lean in and want to be a part of that. Most folks lean in and want to be a part of the conversation or seize an opportunity to learn. Some folks, I'm sure, think we're out to lunch, but those are the folks that we have no time for. They can do the things that make them happy and donate to the places that make them feel good.

And then others who we've been a little shocked by in that they have been invited into the conversation, we've reached out to them to say, "We can't work with you despite your request because of these things," we've initiated a desire to work with them around challenging fat phobia within their organization and the way that they're designing programs, and some groups just demonstrate that their allegiance is to their profiles, building larger organizations and their funders. Because even though they are hearing that this is harmful stuff, they are deciding to prioritize the funder that feels like it's a good project. So that part has been really disappointing for us in the space. And I've seen some really close partners or folks that we hope to work closely with double down on practices that we know are fat phobic and that are not in line with our body liberation and fat acceptance stance.

So we've had to withdraw from coalitions. We've had to decline funding. We have had to decline partnerships, decide not to apply for funding because this is just so important to us because it's so important to the people that we have an allegiance to.

BERNICE

And what has been the impact of that? Having to, like you mentioned, withdraw from coalitions, decline funding. Has that threatened the health or the sustainability of the organization or have you been able to find other ways to make sure that you can continue?

PAUL

Nope, it hasn't because we just keep it moving. There's lots to do, we can't work with everybody on everything. And what it has done, I think, has made our organization more sustainable and stronger, again because the people that we have an allegiance to are seeing that we have an allegiance to them. And not just listening to them on an ad hoc basis but actually taking the things that we're hearing and applying that to all of our work.

BERNICE

And you also mentioned that, as an organization, you've offered to provide some sort of training or information around these issues that concern you, so fat phobia, anti-fatness, etc. Have organizations, partners, potential funders taken you up on that offer?

PAUL

Yeah, yeah. My colleagues have hosted workshops that have been incredibly well attended, lots of positive feedback, lots of good conversation, and a real desire from, I would say, the vast majority of organizations to continue to seek opportunities to embed principles of body liberation and fat acceptance into their own work, and to seek guidance from us and from the internal task force that we struck of staff and board members that looked at body liberation and fat acceptance and helped us come up with our statement.

BERNICE

So it sounds like maybe you've had to decline some funding, some partnerships, but new opportunities have come up in their place?

PAUL

Absolutely, and the only thing that we've missed out on sometimes is money, but it's just money after all.

BERNICE

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I wanted to get into a little bit of the language of the actual policy, and something that struck me is a section where it says that FoodShare will proceed with caution when funders state their work is about healthy choices or good health. What is it about that type of phrasing that gives you and your team pause?

PAUL

Because when a funder is defining good health, especially a funder or an organization that's White led or predominantly White, we've got to proceed with caution if they are starting to define what good health means. You know, we are the experts in our bodies, and we are the ones who can best describe what good health is for us. So definitely having some pause and caution when there's an organization or institution purporting to want to focus on good health. Especially if they haven't had conversations with individuals navigating poverty and food insecurity around what good health means to them.

BERNICE

So kind of these externally imposed ideas of what good health is?

PAUL

Yeah, and often when these groups think about health, they prioritize physical health. But for us, we recognize, hey, if somebody is thousands of miles away from home and they want to eat something that's deep fried and delicious because it makes them feel more closely connected to home, and that's going to have a huge impact on their mental health — eat that deep fried deliciousness. You know, kale chips, kale is not the solution to all the things and for all the people.

So recognizing that food is cultural, food is about more than nourishing our bodies. It's about a whole host of other things that are important to consider, that people are considering when they're thinking about what to eat and what not to eat.

BERNICE

And I think a lot of the interventions that tend to be most conventionally implemented with respect to healthy eating are based on assumptions that people don't know what's healthy for them or they can't make their own decisions. And it's all of these false stereotypes or stigmatizing language that really does not serve to tackle what's at the root of the issues and some of the different forms of oppression that are operating.

PAUL

It's so true. And I think about how no more evident is it than in Canada's most recently released Food Guide where they stress the benefits of eating fruits and vegetables. They talk about water over sugary soft drinks. Nothing about boiled water advisories. Nothing about access, that fruits and vegetables, the price of those things are going up faster than the costs of meat, making them more and more inaccessible for folks.

It feels strange. To me, it's like telling Canadian folks across the country to make sure you wear a seatbelt in your car while you're driving, but your car doesn't have a seatbelt, you know?

So what we need is to make sure our governments are doing what they can to make sure that people can make healthy choices for themselves and keep safe.

BERNICE

How does this notion of health figure into the work that FoodShare does? And so you're cautious about seeking funding where funders are talking about promoting good health, etc., but for you as an organization, how do you understand health and how does that connect to the work that you do?

PAUL

I don't know if I've had an organizational conversation about how we think about health, but I know for me as an individual, I think the way that we've been taught to think about health is deeply problematic. I think what we allow to be called health care is actually a sick care system. A sick care system that stops at your neck. If you have problem with your eyes? Sorry, eyes don't count. Teeth? Sorry. Mental health care? Sorry. So to call it a health care system is like the most gigantic stretch I've heard in a long time.

The way that I think about things like food and food justice is that's health care. Health care shouldn't be divorced from access to affordable, culturally appropriate, nourishing food. It shouldn't be divorced from access to housing. That's health care.

I would love to see health care strategies and frameworks that include housing for all, food for all, and all of those pieces, not this preoccupation with policy windows and single policies that in vacuums can actually end up doing nothing.

When I was fortunate enough to go to Rome to the Food and Agriculture Organization, to be a part of consult around the right to food and what the right to food looks like in Canada, I will never forget sitting next to a boss, the delegate from Sierra Leone, who, after I spoke, he looked at me almost thinking I was lying. He thought I was talking about food insecurity in Canada, a rich country, saying, "How could this exist?" I told a story about one of my neighbours going through garbage bins and finding some cooked chicken wings that he then ate. And he was just stunned. Like how could this be in one of the richest countries in the world? What are we working towards? What are we trying to do if that's what's happening in the rich countries — is that what we want to be?

We're not living up to our potential. And to me, our potential is about making sure that we can all thrive.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

And this desire to enable everyone to thrive is the main driving force behind all the work FoodShare does, including with the release of the Body Liberation and Fat Acceptance statement. The statement recognizes that the fat phobia and anti-fatness permeating popular culture, health and wellness spaces and so much more is an issue of injustice, and that a commitment to food justice requires that they be dismantled and body liberation be advanced in their place.

You can learn more and read the full statement by visiting the FoodShare website foodshare.net. The website also provides links to additional resources on advancing body liberation and fat acceptance in various spaces including public health.

Amid the challenging work Paul and the organization as a whole have done to confront the status quo, including through the statement and beyond, I wanted to learn more about how he handles the pushback he receives. He tells me about the importance of acting with integrity and keeping the bigger picture at the forefront of everything he does.

PAUL

I try to always act with integrity and ethically. I try to do what I think is the right thing to do. I try to create space to listen and hear from others. And certainly, willingness to change course if I'm learning that something that I've been involved in a decision around is not helpful.

But ultimately, I don't have a lot of time for pushback that isn't centred on advancing equity and justice. So, for example, organizations — from what I've heard, FoodShare included at one point —unwilling to have pointed conversations about White Supremacy and its impacts. That unwillingness to have conversations about White Supremacy and its impacts is not work that I need to take on.

BERNICE

Sure.

PAUL

White Supremacy is real. Its impacts are far reaching. So I'm going to keep it moving with that understanding. I'm really thoughtful around how my energies are going to be used, and that's not how I'm going to use my energy.

So if there are people that don't think that we should be paying for interviews for whatever reason, I know that we're doing this work because we're valuing people's labour whether they work for us or not. And that, what we've heard from our colleagues, our prospective colleagues is that is the right thing to do.

That's a really important piece for us when it comes to acting ethically and integrity. It's who do we have an allegiance to? Is it our donors? Is it large institutions that may provide us funding? No, it's not. They are just providing one of the inputs to the work.

And when I get emails from one of our members of our advisory committee, where we prioritize people with lived experience in poverty, that says, "Why are we doing this?" That is far more important than any email from a funder that says anything. Because it's about who we're working for and how we keep that front and centre in all that we do.

BERNICE

I love that. I think for me, I scare a little bit too easy. I think sometimes in the face of pushback or resistance, I'm a little too quick to change course. So it's really interesting to hear you speak about the importance of having that larger picture in mind about who you're working for, who you're working with, and making sure that's at the forefront of the decisions that you're making, rather than being beholden to the desires and wishes of your funders. I think that's so important.

PAUL

It's easy. Because it can be scary, you know, it can be scary. Those calls from funders or they're saying they want this or they want to see that. And we've actually said no to funding. We've said no to funding because we just didn't feel like it aligned with our work.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

And finally, I asked Paul to reflect on the journey he's had with this work and what advice he would lend to others looking to challenge the usual ways of thinking and doing in the spaces in which they find themselves.

BERNICE

I'm curious to hear from you, what has surprised you the most during your journey? So from a teacher, anti-poverty activist, a food justice leader, what has been surprising to you in this work?

PAUL

I think how little support there is for, one, for Black leaders, for racialized leaders who are now being called to lead organizations as a result of what some have described as a racial reckoning. A lot more racialized leaders are being tapped to run organizations. But what we don't always think about is that these organizations are deeply, they have deep histories of hurt, of trauma, of White Supremacy, of all kinds of things that now racialized leaders are not only inheriting, but there's a new expectation. There's an expectation that organizations are shifting. And we're asking the people who have been most harmed by systems to know how to shift the systems that we didn't create, that we don't benefit from. And there's a lot of pressure to do that.

BERNICE

When you transitioned into the role of executive director, did you feel like you got the support that you needed?

PAUL

Oh, definitely not. No. I worked really hard to connect with others working in the food space who were racialized. I brought together racialized folks working in this food space without an agenda, just to get together. And that to me was one of the most healing and important things that I ever did because we got to recognize that we're not the only ones going through this nonsense, you know? And really build community around that and to some extent build power. So that for me has been and continues to be one of the most helpful and beneficial things that I've ever done in my leadership at FoodShare. And I hope that it's had the same impact for others.

Hungry for change: Paul's activist manifesto

Taylor P. [2021].

"Remember, nothing is fixed. Anything and everything can change for the better." Food is a fundamental human right, and bringing a rights-based framework to food insecurity work can be transformative. In this piece, Paul Taylor writes about the importance of grounding his food justice work in a rights-based framework, collective action and a sense of curiosity.

BERNICE

I wanted to ask you a little about advice you might have for other folks who are looking to challenge the status quo in whatever spaces they find themselves. I was reading your activist manifesto online, and in it you mentioned the importance of starting with curiosity rather than a goal. Can you talk a little bit about that?

PAUL

Yeah, that's a good one. Why I say lean into curiosity is that I've just consistently asked myself questions. My mother, she taught me that it was okay to say why. Much to her chagrin maybe and everybody else's now. That it's okay to ask why. Why, why do we do this? Why is this like this? Does it have to be like this?

And just that curiosity is what's going to lead to greater understanding, which is going to lead to hopefully change, the more power we're able to access or inspire.

I see a lot of what some would call well-intentioned White folks jumping onto some of this kind of work and some of the language. And sometimes it feels like they are just doing that to be disruptive or they're just doing that to demonstrate their wokeness or connection to Blackness and Indigeneity. So, I think curiosity is the thing that I've found most useful.

BERNICE

In addition to being curious, do you have any other advice for people who are looking to challenge the way things are being done?

PAUL

I guess I would say take care of yourselves. That is so important. And again, we are the best at knowing what we need to be healthy. So I encourage people to take care of themselves. This work can be draining. This work can be lonely. It can be isolating. It can be risky. So make sure you are prioritizing the things that you need to take care of yourself. Don't wait until you're ill.

And recognizing that we can't respond to all the things. We can't do all the things for all the people and be everything to everyone. I hear from so many people that they really struggle with that one, especially racialized leaders in this space who have so much expectations placed on them around change.

I think it's okay to be curious and to recognize when you uncover something, the work that we uncover is not always our work. It's somebody's work. But I think it's important to recognize that it's not always our work and certainly not always our work to do alone.

REFLECTIVE CONVERSATION

LILLIAN YIN

In my culture, I think there's a saying that food is the sky. And so everybody depends on food as livelihood. It's what sustains us, but it's also so much more. It's our sense of identity. It's what connects us to previous generations, to grandfathers and grandparents we haven't met, and to our future.

"In my culture, I think there's a saying that food is the sky. And so everybody depends on food as livelihood. It's what sustains us, but it's also so much more. It's our sense of identity. It's what connects us to previous generations, to grandfathers and grandparents we haven't met, and to our future."

LILLIAN YIN

BERNICE (NARRATION)

That was Lillian Li Yin describing the significance food holds for her. Of East Asian descent with roots in Taiwan and China, Lillian grew up with grandparents in the food and beverage industry. As she grew older, she began to see how food helps connect her to her family history and her culture. Eventually her passion for food and science led her to pursue a career as a registered dietitian.

Today, Lillian works for the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority supporting teens at a prenatal outreach program as well as in a specialized clinic providing support around chronic disease management.

In our conversation, Lillian reflects on what we heard from Paul and how food is so much more than the sum of its nutrients. And when we implement practices steeped in anti-fatness, weight bias and discrimination, we ignore its broader value and significance.

BERNICE

Paul and I talked about the statement that FoodShare has released on body liberation and fat acceptance and how it's taking a stand against weight bias, weight stigma, fat phobia. And it really came out of being attuned to the needs of the community and the requests that were coming into FoodShare that they saw as very harmful practices. How do you understand fat phobia, weight bias, weight stigma? And how have you seen them show up in the work that you?

LILLIAN

That's a really good question. Well, fat phobia, my exposure to that really came about when we were talking about fat acceptance and justice and people reclaiming what fat is. And kind of reshifting our understanding of that. We often see in media or in internalized bias that fat is a negative thing. There's so much negative connotation attached to it.

But the way I talk to folks is imagine if you had to stand or do your work or go on a walk without fat pads underneath your feet. How painful that would be. And so we all need fat. And fat is the basis of cholesterol, is the basis of what forms our hormones, our signaling pathways, and that regulates our whole body with our appetite system but also our mood and so many other things that allow us to function on a day-to-day basis.

Fat is a very neutral thing, and it's the discrimination and the bias that perpetuate the harm and how that's perceived or how that's thought of.

So stigma and weight stigma and discrimination to me is about those biases and how that comes into people's experiences and how that interplays with the way they receive care.

Weight bias: A call to action

Alberga A, Russell-Mayhew S, von Ranson KM, McLaren L. [2016].


COMMENTARY Open Access

Weight bias: a call to action

Angela S. Alberga[1*], Shelly Russell-Mayhew[2], Kristin M. von Ranson[3] and Lindsay McLaren[4]

Abstract

Weight bias is prevalent, it has adverse health consequences, and it is a manifestation of social inequities. Public health interventions can cause harm by perpetuating weight bias. As such, the public health field has a role in taking upstream action on weight bias and ensuring interventions do not perpetuate weight bias. This article published in the *Journal of Eating Disorders* emphasizes the importance of carefully thought-out public health interventions to address weight bias and provides examples of promising population health-level interventions.

It could be, for example, on an individual level, when you're sitting down in a chair and, depending on the size of the chairs, it could be uncomfortable for folks living in larger bodies. And how that internalizes to validate that fat is not a good thing, that it's my fault for being too fat, when we know that's not true.

Or in the interface between health care providers and patients or individuals, I hear a lot of folks telling me, "You know, I'm trying really hard to focus on health not weight," which is a lot of the stance that dietitians are now really trying to encourage, that health-not-weight approach. And I get folks coming back to me saying, "I'm trying really hard to do what we were talking about in our conversations, Lillian, but when I go back out there, I hear 'You've got to move more, you've got to eat less.' I keep hearing that messaging. I keep getting weighed at my appointments, and it makes it really hard for me to make progress in this."

And so I think what Paul was speaking to is that stance of making it very clear about fat acceptance. That's all to put all of those things, those harmful practices outside and leaning into what people need and want. And that's saying, "If my weight has nothing to do with whatever you're assessing at this appointment, maybe we don't get weighed." Or having those frank conversations about how does this relate to my goals or my wants?

And I think it's really important that we continue to have these conversations as care providers because in medical science there's been so much, and then even in dietetics, it's rooted in colonial ways and that approach has embedded in it. Like BMI has taken off so much in medical science, and now we're starting to unlearn and undo some of that harm. But it takes time for systems to change.

Unfortunately though, each time an individual comes into contact with a health care provider and has a negative experience or experiences it in a punitive approach, as Paul mentioned, that's harm. And that creates distrust or that perpetuates other issues. Like on the other spectrum of things we see disordered eating or eating disorders, that's because of weight bias or discrimination, stereotypes.

> *"Fat is a very neutral thing, and it's the discrimination and the bias that perpetuate the harm and how that's perceived or how that's thought of."*
>
> **LILLIAN YIN**

BERNICE

Can you talk a little bit more about that? What are the health harms of implementing practices that are steeped in weight bias and weight discrimination. So disordered eating and then can you expand on that a little bit?

LILLIAN

Yeah, our relationship with food and our identity and the way we navigate the world around us. Food is such an integral part of who we are as human beings.

It connects people, it connects us through time and through space, like we mentioned before, connecting us with our heritage and with our future generations.

But also as you come into a new community, food is always there during celebration. It's such an integral part of who we are. And a lot of the times that weight bias and discrimination, it also devalues cultural foods. It perpetuates false stereotypes, and that can cause a lot of harm in terms of our physical, emotional, mental well-being when we think about are four aspects of self that I've been so privileged to been taught by the Indigenous Elders that I've had a chance to work with. And food connects all those four pieces: the mental, emotional, physical and spiritual.

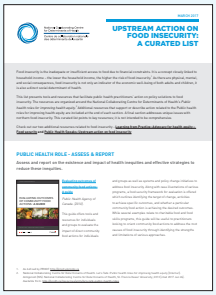
There was one friend of mine who's a teacher in one of the local school boards, and she had posed a question during the pandemic to her 4-5 class of "What would you like to be?" And a good handful of students said that they don't want to be fat. And hearing things like that breaks my heart because it shows how pervasive and how harmful language, media could be and how much more work needs to be done. Because these are young folks navigating their identity, and it's happening in schools.

And then you think about, well, who usually is experiencing so much more? And we think about household food insecurity and how that shapes the types of foods we have access to, and our food environment and the policies that exist that support or don't support us in making choices like that. And so it shows that there's a lot of work to be done.

"a lot of the times that weight bias and discrimination, it also devalues cultural foods. It perpetuates false stereotypes, and that can cause a lot of harm in terms of our physical, emotional, mental well-being"

LILLIAN YIN

Upstream action on food insecurity: A curated list
NCCDH. [2017].



Upstream action is needed to address the roots of food insecurity. This curated list from the NCCDH includes resources for public health practitioners to use to design program and policy interventions to address food insecurity, organized by four public health roles for improving health equity (assess and report, modify and orient interventions, partner with other sectors, participate in policy development).

BERNICE

Absolutely, absolutely. I used to work in elementary schools as a public health nurse. I was on the school health team. And a lot of the work we would do would be around healthy eating, physical activity, mental wellness, rooted in a kind of health promotion framework.

And just being in schools, we encountered a lot of instances where either classroom teachers or principals would actually engage in food policing of student lunches. And so the classroom teacher would go through each student's lunch and then tell them what they were allowed to eat and not eat.

And so part of our conversations that we would be having in the schools is what kinds of harms are we perpetuating when we're framing certain foods as bad, certain foods as good? And then it's also we're not considering the larger, systemic and contextual and cultural factors that shape what's in a student's lunch bag. So I think there are so many examples of things that we still need to be really working on and really talking about.

Do you see tension in your practice between wanting to promote health — and therefore people are talking about weight and it's steeped in kind of that weight bias, weight stigma type of language — and then also a movement towards this health not weight, for example. Do you see that tension live out in the areas in which you're working?

LILLIAN

Yeah, very much so. Even words like obesity and overweight, and I hear it from folks that live in larger bodies, two sides of things as well. And there's not one side of thing that is more valid than the other because it's their experience. But I've heard folks say, "No, I want to be named because my experience of discrimination because of my chronic disease I'm living with has really impacted things, and the language affects my access to medication, to support and things like that." Whereas obesity and overweight, it has negative connotations. So a lot of folks I hear will say, "Well, you know, I don't like that term. It makes me feel gross."

BERNICE

So how do you navigate that? Is it based on the client's needs and wants with that respect?

LILLIAN

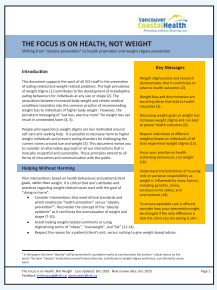
I struggle a little bit working in this space, navigating that language myself. And when I reflect on this in the context of things, where I find most comfort is falling back onto my duty as a care provider and doing no harm. If I just listen in, what is the language that they're most comfortable with?

And sometimes asking open-ended questions, that really gets you the farthest with an individual. Asking "We've got this much time together today. I'm here to support you around any of these things. What brings you to this office today? What brings you to this appointment?"

And a lot of the times, it's not so much about the weight but it's around "Well, I really struggle with night-time eating" or "I really struggle with emotional eating.

The focus is on health, not weight

Vancouver Coastal Health. [2019].


THE FOCUS IS ON HEALTH, NOT WEIGHT

This document from Vancouver Coastal Health outlines guiding principles and resources that public health and health care staff can use when developing and modifying interventions and communications to reduce weight stigma and provide equitable, weight-inclusive services.

And I'd like to build some more skills around that and navigating, you know, having some other coping skills." Maybe they don't have the language to describe exactly that, but that's often what I hear. And when I reframe it and I summarize what I'm hearing, they're like, "Yes! Yeah, please!"

You know, coping with food is totally okay, but sometimes when we talk about like our toolbox and our home, if our body is our home and we've only got one tool in our toolbox, it can only get us so far before something else happens. And we need to become familiar with a variety of tools. It just really helps us in feeling more capable with dealing with a variety of different challenges that might come our way.

So one thing that I really ensure I do when I chart, for example, is documenting things like we had a conversation around the importance of that health-not-weight approach and their relationship with food. And so the rest of the team, they really begin to understand what it is that I'm doing with my time with the individual and the folks I'm serving and understanding the context. Why are some of these things important? Because it has to do with that long-term health. And when you frame it that way, I think it resonates really well with the rest of the team. Because at the end of the day, we're seeking improvements in health outcomes.

However, if someone is always living in fear and they're calorie counting and they're stressed about what foods they can or cannot eat, or they're turning to food for

comfort and that's their only coping mechanism — and we've shamed them for that and how much harm that does and how little that actually improves their quality of life — I would say that we're failing in our work as health care providers and in our mission and our values. And so really understanding what it is we're trying to do when it comes to providing care. What does that really mean, and framing the language that way, I think, resonates with other care providers in terms of what we're trying to do.

BERNICE

So 10 years down the road, for you, what does dietetics look like, feel like, sound like? What would you like it to look like, sound like and feel like?

LILLIAN

Like your favourite food that your grandmother cooked. I think it feels wholesome. And that's how I described social justice is that sense of wholesomeness. And I think our conversation today is very much about social justice.

And it just makes you feel warm. It feels right. Everything just seems to fall in place. It's comforting, it's nourishing in all the ways, and it touches us in those four aspects of self we talked about — the physical, emotional, spiritual and social. And it connects us through space and time.

BERNICE (NARRATION)

It was such a pleasure to chat with Paul and Lillian. What they shared has important implications for the field of public health. A commitment to justice, including food justice, is critical to health and well-being. And our work in these areas needs to be driven by the needs of the communities with whom we work.

When we assign value to foods based on their nutrients alone and focus unduly on body size and weight in the name of promoting health, we can do significant harm. Instead, we should pursue strategies that honour the dignity of every human being and advance the right to food that helps people thrive according to their needs.

REBECCA

Thanks for listening to Mind the Disruption, a podcast by the National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. Visit our website nccdh.ca to learn more about the podcast and our work.

This episode has been produced by Carolina Jimenez, Bernice Yanful and me, Rebecca Cheff, with technical production and original music by Chris Perry. If you enjoyed this episode, tell a friend and subscribe. We have more stories on the way of people challenging the status quo to build a healthier, more just world.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Document prepared by Rebecca Cheff, Knowledge Translation Specialist, Caralyn Vossen, Knowledge Translation Coordinator, and Katherine Culligan, Student Research Assistant, at the NCCDH.

Episode produced by Rebecca Cheff, Bernice Yanful and Carolina Jimenez, Knowledge Translation Specialists at the NCCDH.

The NCCDH is hosted by St. Francis Xavier University. We are located in Mi'kma'ki, the ancestral and unceded territory of the Mi'kmaq people.

Please cite information contained in the document as follows: National Collaborating Centre for Determinants of Health. (2023). *Podcast episode transcript & companion document: Disrupting food insecurity & fat phobia* (Season 1, Episode 5). Antigonish, NS: NCCDH, St. Francis Xavier University.

ISBN: 978-1-998022-38-0

Production of this document has been made possible through a financial contribution from the Public Health Agency of Canada through funding for the NCCDH. The views expressed herein do not necessarily represent the views of the Public Health Agency of Canada.

This document is available electronically at www.nccdh.ca.

La version française est également disponible au www.ccnds.ca sous le titre *Transcription de l'épisode du balado et document d'accompagnement : disruption en matière d'insécurité alimentaire et de grossophobie* (saison 1, épisode 5).