

Weight Discrimination as Both a Consequence and Determinant of Overweight/Obesity

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Background

Weight discrimination (WD) is unequal treatment of an individual on the basis of his or her weight and is a well-documented phenomenon in America. WD is most commonly described as negative treatment of an overweight or obese (OW/OB) individual compared to non-OW/OB counterparts. In the workplace, WD includes unfavorable hiring, promotion, and job assignment practices relative to a candidate's weight. In the present study, existing data was collected regarding WD and analyzed in the context of employment and the social opportunities of marriage and education using a variety of methods.

There are many factors related to WD and the ways in which they interact with one another are extremely complex. Factors include race, sex, income, poverty, employment, educational access and attainment, health, neighborhood, and family structure. These nine factors influence and are influenced by WD and are highly interrelated in terms of causation and sequelae. These factors are defined below in the context of the present WD research.

Definitions and Scope of Terminology

Race: the ethnic group from which an individual is descended.

Sex: male or female.

Income: wages and other money derived from employment or other sources, for the purpose of supporting a household; influenced by type and level of work.

Poverty: the state of subsisting on a low or negative cost-of-living (COL) to income ratio.

Employment: wage earning endeavors; hiring and advancement opportunities, schedules, and benefits associated thereof; measurable in level (hours) of work.

Education: geographical, financial, and other preparatory qualifications necessary to access to access, and complete different types of formal learning or training opportunities.

Health: physical and mental ability to earn income and participate in society; maintained through personal behaviors and access to and affordability of health services.

Family structure: individual and household characteristics pertaining to marital status, head of household, and numbers of household wage earners and dependents.

Neighborhood: the physical, geographically definable area around an individual's home, usually comprised of businesses, schools, other homes, roads, etc., within which the majority of the person's day-to-day activities take place.

Theory and Weight Discrimination

Research indicates that WD often results from negative stereotypes about the behaviors, personality traits, associated medical costs and/or capabilities of OW/OB individuals, but does not support the validity of these stereotypes. However, until recently, research regarding WD frequently lacked clearly articulated and/or fully-developed theoretical foundations. Recently, potential theories and models have been put forth to explain research into different aspects of WD:

Stereotypes about OW/OB Persons

1. *Figure 1* (Roehling, Roehling, and Odland, 2008)
2. "Statistical Discrimination" theory (Kristen, 2002)

Discrimination Against OW/OB Job Applicants

1. Lack-of-Fit Model (proposed for WD by Polinko and Popovich, 2001)
2. Rational discrimination theory (Roehling, 1999)
3. Processes and Motivation Leading to Weight-Based Discrimination in Employment Model, *Figure 2* (Roehling, 1999)

Implications for WD and Health

1. Perceived Discrimination-Health Relationship, *Figure 3*, (Pascoe and Richman, 2008)
2. Individual and Public Health Consequences of WD, *Figure 4*, (Puhl and Heuer, 2010)

These models help illustrate the ways in which WD can act as both a consequence and determinant of OW/OB.

Legality of Weight Discrimination

The status of OW/OB as a protected disability under state and federal law has not been definitively established yet. Few anti-WD lawsuits have found in favor of the plaintiff(s). Generally, WD claims made under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have only been successful when they are able to prove that discrimination occurred on the basis of a *perceived* disability. Theoretically, WD could be made under the disparate treatment or impact clauses of Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1991. However, Employment Opportunities Commission (EEOC) regulations state that "except in rare circumstances obesity will not be covered." Few state or local laws provide OW/OB job candidates additional protections.

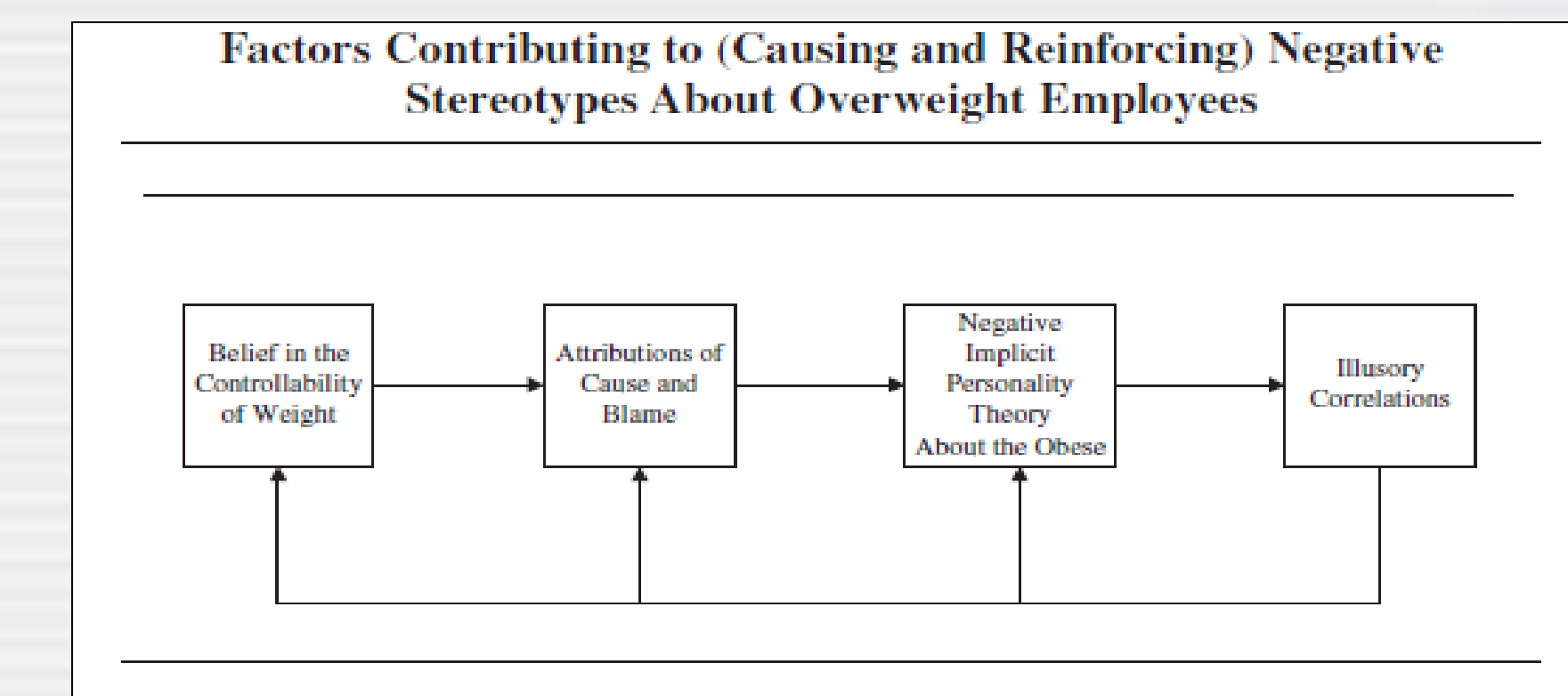


Figure 1: A proposed model for understanding and predicting OW/OB stereotypes

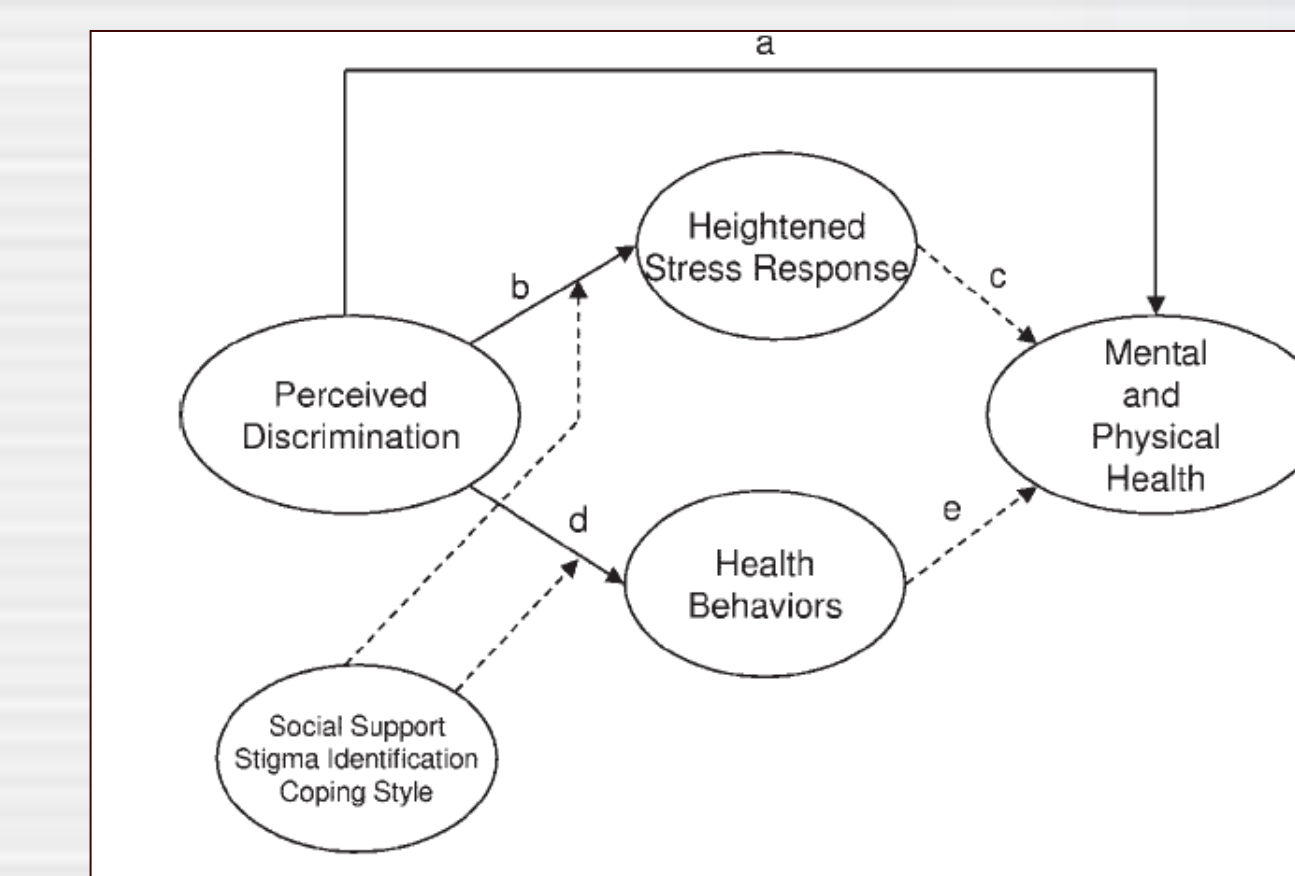


Figure 2: A model for understanding the health effects of perceived discrimination

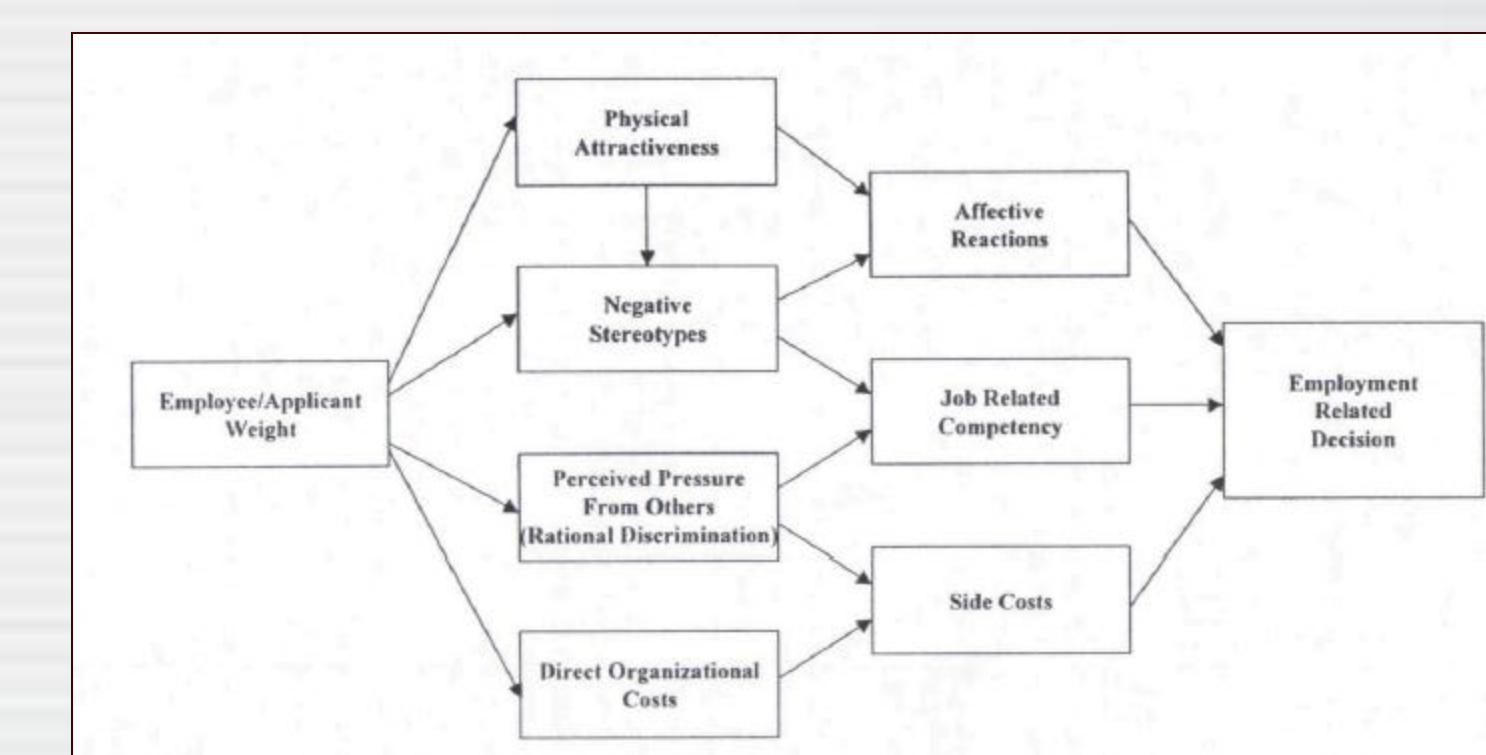


Figure 3: A model of the processes and motivation leading to WD in employment

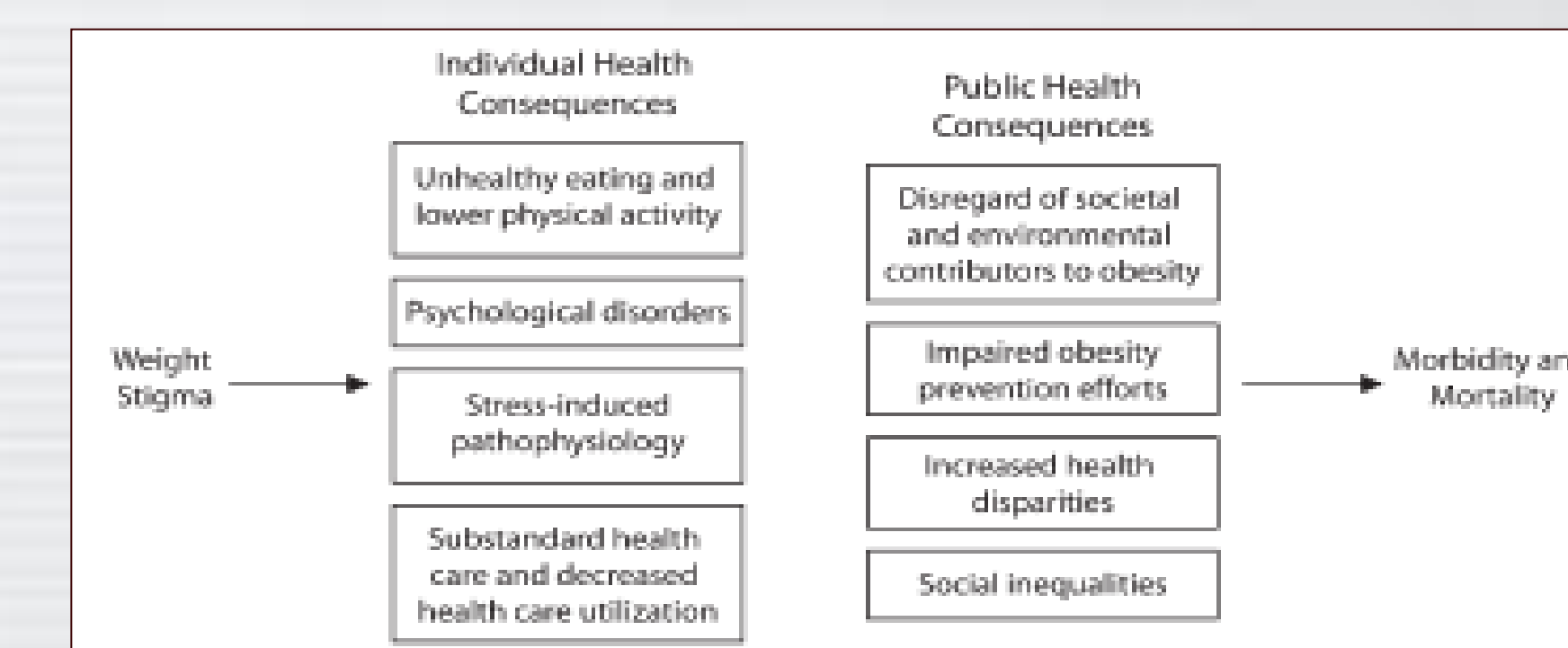


Figure 4: A model illustrating the individual and public health consequences of WD

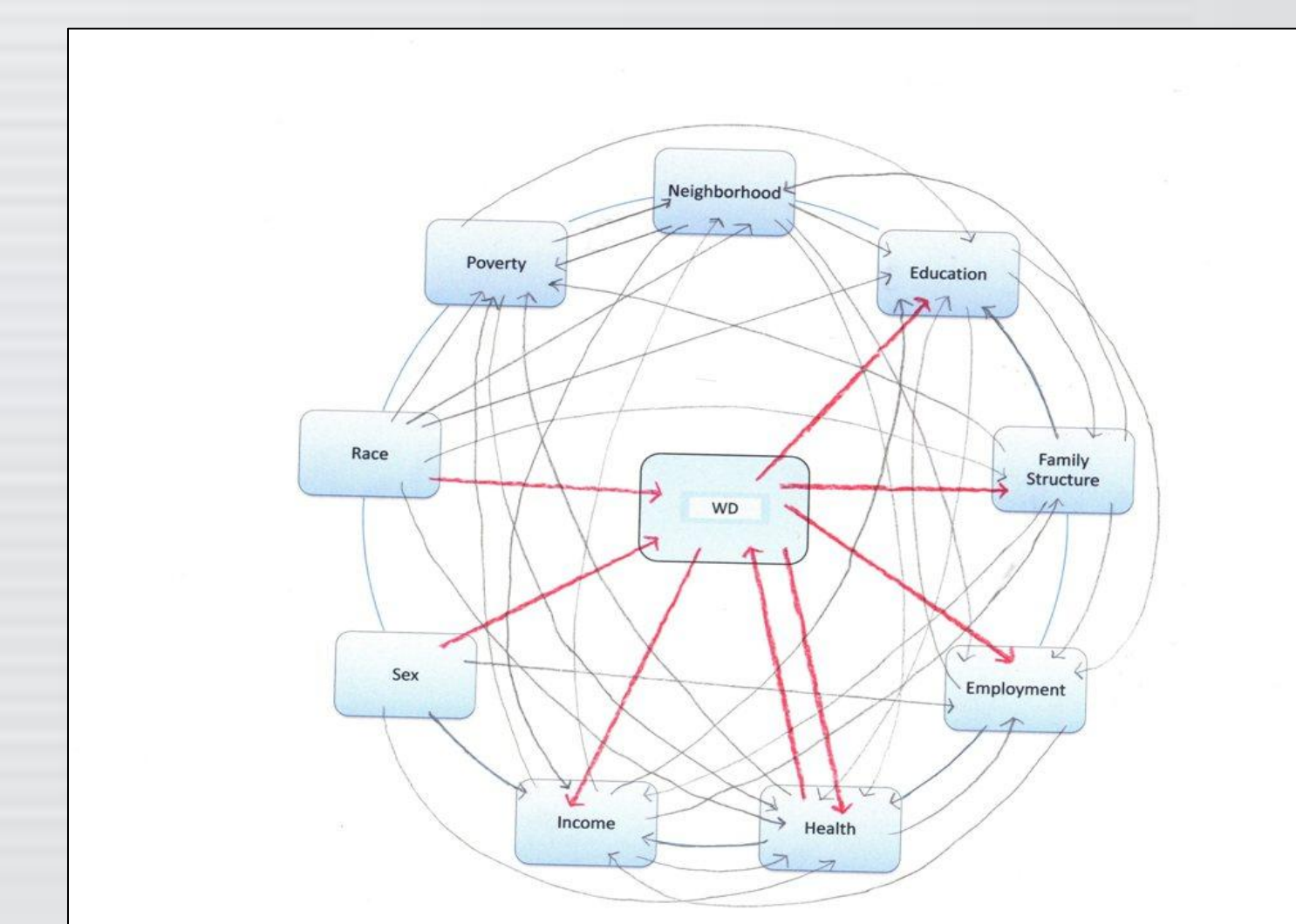


Figure 5: Interactions between WD and socioeconomic and health determinants

Cyclical Effects of WD

Weight and WD reflect multifactorial interactions (Figure 4). Because WD can occur before, after, or during employment its effects can be cyclical, leading to, intensifying, and/or reinforcing socioeconomic and other risk factors related to the development of OW/OB. The below examples of how the factors in Figure 5 directly influence one another illustrate the interrelatedness of WD, OW/OB, and demographic, socioeconomic, and health factors.

Poverty: *health* (ability to purchase food, affordability of health services); *neighborhood* (COL considerations); *education* (access to, affordability of, and preparation for opportunities)

Neighborhood: *education* (access to, affordability of, and preparation for opportunities); *health* (access to healthy foods and health services, ability to practice healthy behaviors); *employment* (regional opportunities); *poverty* (influences COL)

Education: *family structure* (spouse choice, # of kids, age at first pregnancy, etc.); *health* (engagement in risk behaviors); *employment* (opportunities/promotions)

Family Structure: *employment* (types of opportunities and level of work pursued); *income* (# of household wage earners, level of work); *education* (ability to access/complete opportunities); *poverty* (affects COL); *neighborhood* (community choice, when available)

Employment: *income* (type/level of wage earning/advancement opportunities); *education* (affordability, on-the-job learning opportunities; employment as qualifying experience for higher education); *health* (insurance benefits)

Health: *employment* (type/level of work possible); *income* (level of work); *poverty* (health costs affect COL); *WD* (susceptibility)

Sex: *income* (inherent wage disparities; wage/advancement penalties for family leave); *employment* (type of occupation, promotions); *health* (predispositions, treatment disparities); *WD* (severity, susceptibility)

Race: *poverty* (likelihood of birth therein); *health* (susceptibility and treatment disparities); *education* (type/access/completion of opportunities); *family structure* (likelihood of marriage, # of kids,); *neighborhood* (community choice, when available); *WD* (severity, susceptibility)

WD: *health* (psychology, stress and sequelae); *income* (decreased wages, advancement and assignment opportunities; decreased likelihood of marriage); *employment* (decreased hiring opportunities, lower performance evaluations, harsher discipline); *education* (decreased academic support and opportunities); *family structure* (decreased likelihood of marriage)