

Fat Body Politics

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Fat, in terms of body size and composition, is one of many stigmatized identities. The stigmatization of fat is insidious in that it is not only the state of being fat that entails stigma, but the concept of fat. Fat is subjective, or socially constructed. While obesity is a “condition” that can be diagnosed, fat is often a position acquired by comparison. Society at large disparages people who can be classified as “obese” or even “overweight”, and within smaller social circles, the “fat” friend (by comparison) suffers the stigma (Nauert, 2011).

Since stigmatizing attitudes can be conditioned, ostracism may not be a conscious action. At the same time, conscious efforts of inclusion can still come off as insensitive, especially considering the framework and intricacy of fat stigmatization along with the complexity of actually existing in a fat body in a size discriminatory society. Fat stigma and ostracism can also be self-inflicted, usually by comparison and also unconsciously. Perhaps it is the stigmatization that many fat individuals do to themselves that contributes to the discrimination they face. Internal stigmatization can be devastating, but external stigmatization is truly harmful (Hope, 2011).

Occupying a stigmatized, or deviant, space dictates external manifestations of other non-deviant statuses (Butler, 1990). In the same vein, people may consider themselves qualified, based on their non-deviant status, to give unwarranted advice to those within deviant spaces. People take it upon themselves to make warnings, counsel, guide, or commend fat individuals, without solicitation, based on assumptions, merely because they are fat. Perhaps people police the bodies of fat individuals because they fear the deviancy of fat and all the negative associations with fat in themselves (Hope).

Shame does not effectively push people back into the acceptable limits of the hierarchy. Shame is more closely linked with issues like eating disorders and, yes, obesity, than it is of a healthy lifestyle. Someone subjected to bullying or even discrimination due to being fat is considered deserving of the harassment because their body is deviant and considered shameful (Koppelman, 2004). Another dichotomy can be constructed, this time with shame and comfort. The space defined by shame also encompasses confusion and embarrassment, while the space occupied by comfort also includes respect and positive esteem. This dichotomy can apply to anyone, including people who are not fat, just like how the concept of fat rather than an actual state of being evokes stigma (Murray, 2005).

The word “fat” itself has come to represent a variety of negative traits, such as undisciplined, ignorant, lazy, and ugly, etc. This is how it is possible for the concept of fat to evoke stigma. If someone perceives her/himself to possess the negative traits associated with fat, she/he may wrap all the negative traits into a neat package called “fat” without regard to body size or appearance. Using “fat” as a self-deprecating comment reinforces the “fat = bad” stigma, which can in turn debase the experiences of anyone larger than whoever uses “fat” against themselves in a negative tone (Giovanelli, 2009).

Furthermore, so many terms to describe fat exist that it is often conceptualized in the same way our society deals with sex – with both shame and fascination. Just like the countless euphemisms for genitals and sex, the adjectives used as synonyms for “fat” also function either as misrepresentations of reality, or as pretenses. The synonyms may try to exaggerate reality in either direction, or act as complete masks. At the same time, synonyms for fat give us a variety of terms and allow us to choose a term in which we find comfort and positive esteem to describe our bodies (Lamm, 1995).

The shame and stigmatization surrounding fat enables a disconnect between the body and mind of someone who is or perceives her/himself as fat. In other words, body-shaming and attacks on fat foster disassociation from the body. Bodies become things rather than a part of us and we lose bodily awareness. Instead of someone feeling safe in their body, instead of appreciating positive aspects of their physical being, they may regard their body with resentment (Garland-Thomas, 2001).

The intersections of fat and sex, and fat and violence, bring up deeper issues. The denial of the sexuality of fat individuals by society, along with the stigmatization and deviancy of a fat body provoke and construct taboo status around the intersection of fat and sex. Society also rejects the autonomy of fat individuals and devalues their bodies, which can result in making light of violence against fat individuals, especially sexual violence (Koppelman). Fat individuals are expected to be grateful for any attention they receive.

Fat and Health

The relationship between fat and health is often assumed to exist as a spectrum with the factors “fat” and “health” falling on opposite ends. In reality, fat and health are not opposite ends of the same spectrum. If only it were that simple. Society wants us to believe it is easy to direct our attention away from all the factors involved in being fat towards other behaviors such as diet and exercise.

There is more to weight than behaviors, but that is not to say that behaviors do not contribute to weight. Insisting that weight implies behaviors like poor diet and lack of exercise insinuates that other physical characteristics can imply related factors, such as genital size implying sexual activity, or nostril size implying how much someone picks their nose. The link between physical features and behaviors relates to stereotypes. The visual recognition of certain

physical features, such as height, perceived gender, skin color, and even hair color can signal stereotypes related to behaviors. Physical features may correlate to behaviors, but not exclusively (Giovannelli).

Likewise, the assumed inverse relationship between fat and health is inherently flawed on multiple levels. This concept reveals itself as obvious when the idea of “thin *and* unhealthy” comes into play, because we all know that it is possible to be thin *and* unhealthy. The funny thing about “obesity” and health is that many of the negative health issues related to obesity are merely correlations. While fat may exacerbate some health conditions, and it can serve as an indicator of others, not a single study has shown true causation in the sense that fat was the absolute sole cause of ill health (HBNS, 2007). Poor nutrition and lack of exercise cause health problems in all people, but body size does not determine health.

Health initiatives based on weight instead of health itself are also inherently flawed, not to mention they invariably fail. These health initiatives prioritize appearance and the confines of social acceptance over health, which can lead to more health issues rather than health fulfillment (Garland-Thomas). The focus on thin appearance as superior to fat creates a hierarchy in which fat is both synonymous with and indicative of bad health despite reality. This in turn sets up thin as superior no matter the circumstances, even if thinness is the result of an illness. If a thin person faces health issues because *they are too thin*, the dichotomy stands: at least they aren't fat (Shenin, 1997).

Concurrently, a person who engages in disordered behaviors like self-starvation, excessive exercise, or general body and self-hatred is not considered worthy of help for their disordered behaviors if they are fat. A fat individual engaging in potentially dangerous or disordered behavior regarding their body and weight receives support in their attempts to change

their body. These behaviors, which can ruin a person's long-term health, redeems the fat individual in the space they occupy (HBNS).

Factors other than behaviors that contribute to both weight and health include genetics, knowledge and education, class status, the food industry, surplus, leisure, and the government. Genetics contributes to almost every physical characteristic. If a thin person were to claim, "I can eat and not exercise, and still not gain any weight", many people would believe this claim without a doubt. Just as there are naturally thin people, there are naturally fat people. Bodies have points of homeostasis, given adequate nutrition and activity, including fat bodies (Shenin).

The factors raised here that police or ridicule fat bodies all intersect in such a way that sometimes makes each factor indistinguishable from another. Our society has evolved into a creature characterized by a substantial food industry with an output of surplus also subsidized by the government to produce select products for a price cheaper than their true cost. The government and industry play off one another to maintain a class system in which people occupying lower class spaces are forced to subsist off subsidized products. Sadly, such products end up being unhealthy impositions, more often than not, chosen as a consequence to time constraints and/or inadequate resources to cook healthy options at home, and lack of access to information about alternative choices. Social constructions of "fat" identity, and fat body politics that stigmatize "fat," further trouble this phenomenon.

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