Introduction

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Fat Is Bad

Isn’t it odd that people deeply divided on almost every important topic can so easily and seemingly organically agree on the above assertion? Isn’t it similarly strange that countries significantly divergent in culture, attitudes, and approaches apparently share the fat-is-bad sentiment? In fact, according to the popular media, one of the few disagreements that exists is which country is hardest hit by the so-called “obesity epidemic.”

Consider the following contradictory statements:

“Somewhere along the way, [Americans have] supersized ourselves into becoming the fattest nation on earth” (MSNBC, 2003).
“Australia has become the fattest nation in the world, with more than 9 million adults now rated as obese or overweight, according to an alarming new report” (Stark, 2008).
“Canadian adults, both men and women, are the most obese in a survey of 63 nations that raises new health warnings for our country” (Spears, 2007).
“Fat German citizens—the fattest in the European Union?” (Müller-Nothmann, 2008).
“Now heavyweight Brits are the fattest people in Europe” (Macrae, 2008).

Regardless of which country is actually the “fattest nation on earth,” the United States quickly declared a “war on fat” with the support of former U.S. surgeon general C. Everett Koop (Koop, 1997). The World Health Organization (O’Hara, 2006) data on “obesity” in adults indicate that the United States ranks twentieth, Australia thirty-fifth, and Canada thirty-seventh in global rates of “obesity.” Ranking ahead in weight are a number of nations in the Pacific (e.g., Fiji, Samoa) and the Middle East (e.g., Kuwait, Jordan). Countries that have the greatest number of “obese” children include a number of nations in eastern Europe (e.g., Albania, Armenia) and some African nations (e.g., Algeria, Lesotho; see O’Hara & Gregg, 2006.)
What Is Fat Studies?

Fat studies scholars found the opinions about fat suspicious and began conducting research to examine these claims. Building on this foundation, a few decades later the field of fat studies emerged. In the tradition of critical race studies, queer studies, and women's studies, fat studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body. The field of fat studies invites scholars to pause, interrupt the everyday thinking about fat (or failure to think), and do something daring and bold. Learners must move beyond challenging assumptions; they must question the very questions that surround fatness and fat people. They must not be satisfied by noting that people diet and asking why—they must ask why we continue to expect people to diet. Who is oppressed by that pattern? To whom, and to which industries and organizations, do the resulting privileges flow? Fat studies requires approaching the construction of fat and fatness with a critical methodology—the same sort of progressive, systematic academic rigor with which we approach negative attitudes and stereotypes about women, queer people, and racial groups.

Fat studies scholars can begin to explore the relevant categories and construction via three crucial intellectual steps. Examples related to children, the most innocent victims of the war on fat and the U.S. export of anti-fat sentiment, are listed below, though the steps work equally well for all affected groups.

First, be suspicious of any non-neutral policy, attitude, or procedure where a line is drawn between fat and thin. Be especially skeptical when people are treated differently, rights are denied, or an action is motivated by the desire to “help” a group that falls on either side of the line. (For example, be suspicious of school-based exercise programs that are mandatory for fat children, or cheerleading or dance programs where fat students are categorically excluded.)

Second, be aware of and alert to seemingly neutral policies that have different effects on groups based on their weight. (For example, a policy requiring BMI [body mass index] to be listed on report cards, or a science teacher who weighs all children during class and has them calculate their BMI as an assignment, is neutral but will have a different impact on fat children than thin children.)

Third, keep the actual lives of fat people at the heart of the analysis. (For example, fat children in the United States have repeatedly been taken out of loving homes and away from caring, capable parents based on nothing but the child’s weight, yet no general civil rights agency has provided legal assistance when asked to, let alone created a task force to focus on this discrimination. When policies are made to help fat people, are they addressing the issues that affect fat people? If not, how is the agenda being set?)

Some readers may find their critical inquiry interrupted by a rush to frame the weight discussion through the health discourse that dominates popular culture (where there is nothing to be gained from any fat endeavor except when the goal is fighting fat); they should consider where we stand with regard to unpacking “obesity” in comparison to the critical theory more established in academia. For example, today we
do not stop our analysis after noting that people are treated differently based on race, nor do we stop after asking what race is. The field is well established and the deeper questions about the social construction of race come reasonably naturally—for example, how and why did we establish categories of race as known today, how have they changed, and why do we continue to use them? But in earlier stages of the field’s development those questions were likely to be buried behind the distracting public discourse of the time. This moment in fat studies provides us with the rare chance to experience the development of a critical studies field while propaganda is at its peak; we must make our own paths. This is quite a reward—one that only scholars studying at a particular crossroads can experience—and one that provides a unique window into our own ability not just to see outside the box, but also to first see and experience the box for ourselves.

The assumption that fat people are unhealthy is so ingrained in western society that it is hard to get people to face the facts. The research on weight and health is vast, and merits an entire Fat Studies Reader itself. For readers needing to tame the pressure of the current public health view of fat to open themselves to the social and historic construction of fat and fatness, start with Marilyn Wann’s preface and then turn immediately to part 2, “Fat Studies in Health and Medicine.” Pay special attention to Glenn Gaesser’s chapter (which addresses the long-term failure of weight loss) and Deb Burgard’s chapter, which explains the Health at Every Size model (HAES) and its focus on current best practices regarding weight-neutral approaches to health. It will also be of interest to realize that weight in North America is strongly related to income. Fat people are poorer than thin people, and this is especially true for women. The general public usually assumes that poverty causes fatness (for example, they will point out that poor people cannot afford “healthy” foods such as fruits or vegetables, or that health clubs are expensive and thus out of reach to poor people). Paul Ernsberger makes the groundbreaking case that fatness causes poverty due to discrimination, and Bianca Wilson in “Widening the Dialogue to Narrow the Gap in Health Disparities” explains how the U.S. obsession with weight affects Black lesbian and bisexual women; these chapters help transition from the health-concern framing of fatness to the deeper intersectional issues.

Why The Fat Studies Reader? And Why Now?

The Fat Studies Reader is the first comprehensive anthology that maps the contours of this emerging field. The Reader brings together essays that identify key issues in the field, including intersectionality (the intersection of oppressions), health, and international and legal issues, as well as history, literature, and popular culture. After decades of independent study focused on the body, weight, and fat, the past few years have seen an exponential growth in the organization, communication, and focus of professionals and academics working and researching in fat studies. Multiple fat studies courses have been offered in numerous universities for several years. The year 2006 marked the tipping point—it was the first time that three national conferences were held to address
fat studies! Undergraduate students at Smith College hosted “Fat and the Academy,” focusing on the experiences of fatness and academia for college students, faculty, and staff. Later in the year, the Popular Culture Association and the American Culture Association joint conference featured a separate area in the field of fat studies. Finally, the Association for Size Diversity and Health Conference promoted the critical analysis of weight-related health matters for, and with an emphasis on the needs of, professionals.

It may come as a surprise, but questioning the appropriateness of discrimination based on height and weight was actually on the national radar in the United States, at least to a minor degree, during the 1960s. That period of time was profoundly important for the U.S. civil rights movement. Central to the movement was the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and the U.S. Congress vigorously debated that legislation; Senator Hubert Humphrey’s remarks during those debates demonstrate awareness of body size discrimination even during that time: “[I]f we started to treat Americans as Americans, not as fat ones, thin ones, short ones, tall ones, brown ones, green ones, yellow ones, or white ones, but as Americans. If we did that we would not need to worry about discrimination” (110 Cong. Rec. 5866, 1964). Several years later, a few courageous individuals began to protest the inhumane treatment of fat people and fat bodies. In 1969 William Fabrey founded NAAFA, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (it was originally called the National Association to Aid Fat Americans). NAAFA continues to be a major source of fat advocacy cited in U.S. and international media. It has established a Declaration of Health Rights for Fat People, works to dispel myths about fat people, publishes a newsletter, and holds an annual convention (see http://www.naafa.org).

From 1973 to 1977 in Los Angeles, the Fat Underground group asserted that fat women are powerful, take up space, and are feared for their strength and sensuality (Fishman, 2001). Members included Aldebaran (Sara Fishman), Reanne Fagan, Sheri Fram, Gudrun Fonfa, Judy Freespirit, Lynn Mabel-Lois (Lynn McAfee), and Ariana Manow, among others. They viewed the effort to eradicate fat people via weight loss as a form of genocide perpetrated by the medical profession. The Fat Underground was influenced both by feminism and by radical therapy, a type of treatment that put the focus of change on society, not on individuals. In the words of Gudrun Fonfa, “By refuting the dogma of the diet industry and rejecting the aesthetics of the patriarchal culture, [we made] activists out of each individual fat woman who liberated herself from a lifetime of humiliation” (Fishman, 2008).

The early 1970s was a time of liberation movements, such as the women’s liberation movement, the gay liberation movement, and the Gray Panthers. In 1973 two members of the Fat Underground, Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran, wrote “The Fat Liberation Manifesto.” In that work, they stated that fat people are fully deserving of human respect, demanded equal rights for fat people, and viewed the struggle to end fat oppression “as allied with the struggles of other oppressed groups against classism, racism, sexism, ageism, financial exploitation, imperialism and the like” (Freespirit & Aldebaran, 1973). It specifically mentioned the diet industries as harmful to the health of fat people, and ended with the following statement in all capital letters: “FAT PEOPLE OF THE WORLD, UNITE! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE.”
In keeping with the goal of introducing the broad scope of the field of fat studies in a manner that facilitates the reader’s ability to suspend the dominant conception of fat to see the full picture, and recognizing fat as the historically dependent social construction that it is, the Reader is divided into six sections. As mentioned earlier, The Fat Studies Reader begins with descriptions of the social and historical construction of fatness via the preface and part 1, and then continues by promptly providing the fat studies take on the dominant public health discourse in part 2.

Part III: Fatness as Social Inequality

Most recently, fatness is framed as a health problem, yet it is stigma and prejudice (and their consequences) that inspire much of the extensive research in the field of fat studies. Consequently, a number of chapters focus on fatness as social inequality. Topics highlighted in the Reader include mother blaming, race/class and the “epidemic of childhood obesity,” bullying, mandatory weight reduction for children in Singapore, personal “choice” and responsibility as the focus of a neoliberal interpretation of fatness, gender privilege relating to size, fatness in gay male communities, violence against women, and “hogging.”

As of publication time, only five locations in the United States had laws that prohibit weight-based discrimination; as a result, fat people often rely on disability law and the premise of “accommodation.” Sondra Solovay, Dylan Vade, and Joyce Huff incorporate the idea of accommodation in their chapters on fat and transgender law and the debate on airplane seats as contested spaces. Ashley Hetrick and Derek Attig continue the seating discussion in the education context by examining the discomfort of classroom desks for fat students. Additional chapters focus on education, showing how fat becomes a topic in the literature classroom (Koppelman) and how fat educators face stigma that carries consequences for their careers (Escalera).

Part IV: Size-ism in Popular Culture and Literature

The fat studies discipline has spread to all genres in literature, poetry, theatre, popular culture, and performance. The Reader contributors write about fat fiction (Stinson), “chick-lit” (Frater), fat queer zines (Snider), representations of fat and Hispanic masculinity (McCrossin), fat female characters on television (Giovanelli and Ostertag), and fat women in theater (Jester). Fat studies has also exploded in its focus on the visual. Amy Farrell looks at the way that tourist postcards portrayed fat women in the early twentieth century. Beth Bernstein and Matilda St. John describe the phenomenon of fat female television celebrities losing weight as they achieve success. Wendy Burns-Ardolino’s chapter is about the “big butt” in American popular culture, and Katharina Mendoza describes the occurrence of “fat suits” in the movies.
Parts V and VI: Fat People on the Move and Starting the Revolution

Ironically, fat people are urged to exercise but then hindered due to lack of available exercise clothing, ill-fitting exercise equipment, or degrading responses from exercise staff and others. Nevertheless, fat people have always been and continue to be physically active. The *Reader* includes coverage of fat people moving, dancing, and engaging in physical exercise.

Lacy Asbill observed fat burlesque dancers and audience members. Heather McAlister, founder of the all-fat burlesque troupe Big Burlesque, writes about fat embodiment: “The fastest way to fat liberation is physical. We will never have our freedom if we live only ‘from the neck up,’ yet that is the way many fat people live, even, or especially, the activists and academics among us.” Jenny Ellison describes aerobics for fat women, and Dana Schuster and Lisa Tealer share their experiences creating the Women of Substance Health Spa, a health club for fat women. The *Reader* concludes by reiterating the call to revolution and challenging whether that revolution is uniquely a U.S. phenomenon or can truly be an international effort.

Getting Respect

*The Fat Studies Reader* contributors include established professors, writers, researchers, and activists, as well as rising stars. Many of the leaders in the field have encountered significant obstacles and academic disapproval for focusing on this topic of inquiry. When Sondra, studying law at a “top ten” law school, attempted to find an adviser for her project on weight discrimination and the law, she was forced to petition the school to allow an adjunct faculty member to supervise her—only her “Sexual Orientation and the Law” professor understood the importance of this critical legal inquiry and would agree to sponsor the project. Years later, with her book *Tipping the Scales of Justice* (the first book to thoroughly document weight discrimination as a civil rights issue in several legal fields) firmly in hand, Sondra attended a conference addressing the lack of “women and minorities” in legal academia. She recalls the easy dismissal of her work by a key conference speaker as “not a real topic.”

When Esther submitted her research about weight and stigma to academic journals in psychology, the reviewers were often dieting researchers. For example, one reviewer commented, “I do have several suggestions for improving this paper. First, the tone is a bit strident and accusatory. The field of obesity research is cast as sexist, short-sighted and misdirected. There are, of course, flaws in some of the research and the public view of obesity is often not supported by the evidence, but I do feel the paper would profit from more objectivity and from using a less angry tone.” Another wrote, “One concern I have with this paper is that some of the myths it debunks (such as the notion that dieting is ineffective) are not views currently held by psychologists. These views may be held by nonpsychologists; however, even the popular press has challenged them. For example see, ‘Why smart women don’t diet’ (*Glamour* Magazine, November, 1987) and ‘A woman’s body in a man’s world’ (*Shape*, October,
The phrase “strident and accusatory” is reminiscent of critiques of research done by feminists not too many years earlier, and it is highly unusual for an academic colleague to cite popular magazines such as *Glamour* or *Shape*!

Despite intense community and even public support for the *Reader*, along the way we encountered significant institutional resistance. Most notable was the response from Harvard University Press. The senior editor for behavioral sciences and law rejected the *Reader*, explaining, “I think I’d have trouble at various stages of the review process with a book that discounted, or seemed to discount, the health risks of obesity.” According to Harvard, not only can we not question research about the “health risks of obesity,” but we must avoid even the *appearance* of such an inquiry! In a world where appearances matter, we are proud to present a fat book about fat issues! Welcome to the field of fat studies.

**References**


