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Fat in College: A Social Overview

Kristen Crepezzi

Fat college students struggle with many social barriers both at the academy and in the greater context of society. Individuals who are classified as overweight or obese are stigmatized as lazy or out of control and are less likely than non-fat people to make it to college (Crandall 1994). Much of the prejudice directed at fat individuals is based on incorrect and ill-researched assumptions about individual responsibility for weight and the impact of weight on health. The social acceptability of anti-fat attitudes makes it less likely for fat individuals to claim group identity even though this may be their best chance for social fit.

When I decided to begin to outline the struggles of overweight women in higher education, I knew the task would be daunting. I was aware of a growing body of fat-positive fiction and non-fiction through activity online and was prepared to spend time deciphering its application to fat women in college. I spoke to some students before my initial library excursion and was astounded by the length and depth of our conversations. I was unintentionally opening a discussion that many college students never have: one about what it means, socially, to be a fat person. They told me stories to which I could instantly relate about broken chairs and dining rituals, about clothes shopping and spring break.

As a fat woman who has spent the past five years on college campuses, I have a special affinity for this topic. To preface, I call myself a fat woman, because I find the word *fat* to be least offensive and most descriptive of the possibilities. As Marilyn Wann (1998) writes in her book *Fat!So?*, “It’s time to put *fat* into the hands of people who will use its power for good, not evil!” (p. 18). I believe that euphemisms are tools to disguise what we find distasteful, “but there is nothing wrong with being fat, so there’s nothing wrong with using the word” (p. 20). I am not big-boned, or curvy, or Rubenesque, or over-weight, or chubby. I am fat, and this is my word of choice. The use of this word is strategic, political, radical, and accurate.

When I began researching this topic, I left for the library with many questions and a list of resources to locate. I was self-conscious. I was afraid that somehow people in the library would know that I was researching being fat and its social implications while carrying around my own markers of what society tells me is an obesity epidemic. As I approached the circulations desk with titles like *Big Fat Lies* (Gaesser, 2002) and *Fat: The Anthropology of an Obsession* (Kulick & Meneley,

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2005), I realized that although my search for books on being fat could be done in stealth, the person behind the counter would know what I was doing. He was my access to the literature I needed, but he would also have the power to pass judgment on me. I put my books on the desk and mentioned I had a book on recall. The thin young man behind the counter avoided eye contact when he came back to me holding a book that proclaimed the title *Fat Politics* (Oliver, 2006) in large bold letters. He looked at the book and then at me and asked, “This one?” I have never been more embarrassed in a library before. As I gathered my books to scuttle out the door, the student worker looked at me and burped, loudly and obnoxiously. I left with greater resolve, though a little less pride.

My experience represents that of a growing number of college students. Although Christian Crandall (1995) has shown that heavy daughters are less likely to have a parent-financed education and that fat people, in general, are less likely to attend college (1994), the majority of people living in the United States are considered overweight. The implications of occupying a stigmatized position can lead overweight women to low self-esteem by internalizing society’s messages about their bodies without analyzing the beliefs that underpin anti-fat attitudes. Without a positive group identity, fat women may be their own worst critics.

The Fat Epidemic: Are You What You Eat?

To be thin is to be in a coveted position in the United States (Levitt 2004). With 60% of Americans deemed overweight (Ryan, 2005) and with nearly twice as many children overweight today since 1980 (Oliver, 2006), it may seem obvious to many that the nation is facing a fat epidemic, but this language describing fatness is problematic. Instead of an acknowledgement of statistical differences among people’s body sizes or a symptom of a greater underlying health risk, obesity is categorized as a disease in its own right (Jutel, 2005). Though a high Body Mass Index (BMI) may be a warning sign of inadequate physical activity, it is often interpreted as the ultimate cause of many health ailments. The origin of the BMI, which is now used to classify individuals as overweight or obese, stems from the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company’s attempt to track deaths of its policy holders to determine risk (Oliver). The statistics generated by the insurance company and the BMI index blame many more deaths on obesity than is actually warranted. The correlation between obesity and what are considered “obesity related ailments” is clinically unproven (p. 50). Instead of working out to be fit and healthy, Americans are working out to lose weight because it is assumed that height to weight ratio reflects health (Oliver).

A belief that fat is unhealthy is not necessarily enough to translate into a dislike of fat people. Another social implication of classifying obesity as an epidemic is the belief that the fat person is at fault for their situation (Crandall & Martinez,

1996). In a cross-cultural comparison, Crandall and Martinez (1996) surveyed 406 undergraduates in the United States and Mexico on anti-fat attitudes and found that “dislike was higher in the United States, indicating that fat people were more denigrated on campus in the United States than in Mexico” (p. 1169). In the United States, weight is not only used as a measure of a person’s health, but it is also common for weight to be considered a measure of character. “If people are fat, it is only because they are too lazy or irresponsible to ‘take care’ of themselves” (Oliver, 2006, p. 6).

“As members of Western society, we presume we know the histories of all fat bodies, particularly those of fat women; we believe we know their desires (which must be out of control) and their will (which must be weak)” (Murray, 2005, p. 154). This idea that an outside observer can tell people’s character and health by their physical presence denies much scientific evidence. Not only has it been shown that one can be fat and fit (Oliver, 2006; Ryan, 2005), but the role of genetics has been drastically underplayed (Oliver) in an attempt to uphold the obesity epidemic misnomer. Moreover, studies relating body weight to food intake indicate “obese people ate the same amount or less than people of average weight” (Crandall & Martinez, 1996, p. 1174). If the overeating hypothesis is false and dieting fails 90% of the time (Oliver), fat people are being held socially accountable for forces beyond their control.

Fat Phobia

A number of studies have surfaced detailing the social stigmatization of overweight individuals. Not only are fat people less likely to make friends, get hired, or connect with others in romantic relationships, but also they are assumed to be gluttonous and slothful. Assumptions about how fat people became fat and why they remain so temper attitudes toward overweight individuals.

Robinson, Bacon and O’Reilly (1993) found that obese people are stereotyped as “undisciplined, inactive, and unappealing” and as having “emotional and psychological problems” (p. 476). These anti-fat attitudes increased when respondents had more than a high school education (Robinson, Bacon & O’Reilly), suggesting that fat students on college campuses may face more anti-fat attitudes than those in high schools. “More than a quarter of college students believe that becoming fat is the worst thing that could happen to a person” (Oliver, 2006, p. 60). This fear of fat and superiority of thinness is not only a statement about what body type is valued in the United States, but also the basis of a socially acceptable form of discrimination. There are only a small number of places where differential treatment based on weight is against the law; everywhere else in the United States a fat person has no means for legal recourse against this type of discrimination (Ryan, 2005). Weight is not protected by most non-discrimination policies, and negative

speech surrounding body size is not officially considered hate-speech (though it may be rooted in similar sentiments).

In research examining the proximity effect surrounding obese individuals, Hebl and Mannix (2003) found that “obesity appears to affect people beyond those who bear the obesity stigma” (p. 31). Specifically, average-sized men sitting next to obese women in social situations, regardless of any relationship, were judged more negatively than those who were seated next to average-sized women. This research may have some relevance to the friendships fat people make. If a friendship with a stigmatized individual will translate into negative stereotypes on the non-stigmatized individual then those friendships will be avoided (Hebl & Mannix, 2003). Furthermore, the 196 undergraduate students in the study who were asked to rate the men’s hire-ability based on similar qualifications plus photographs from the social aspect of an interview confirm a “stigma-by-association” effect (Hebl & Mannix, 2003). Such stigma effects may be at work socially at our institutions of higher education. If sitting next to an overweight woman can undermine a candidate’s qualifications for a job, it might be of interest to examine the social phenomena surrounding friends of heavy women in college.

In a study of college women, Quinn and Crocker (1998) found that women who perceived themselves as overweight were more likely to have low self-esteem and higher levels of anxiety and depression than average-weight women. The social prejudice against those who are overweight may become internalized, with the individual feeling disconnected from her body. In general, fatness is seen as a period where “one is waiting to become ‘thin’, to become ‘sexual’, waiting to become” (Murray, 2005, p. 155). “Fat people, aware of negative social stereotypes of corpulent bodies, often blame themselves and live with guilt about their body shape and about taking up too much space” (Longhurst, 2005, p. 252). Instead of acknowledging their own character and importance, fat people are encouraged to believe that their size reflects inner flaws in the composition of their personality. The negative responses that fat people encounter affect the way they respond to themselves (Quinn & Crocker).

The negative expectations of fat people can have a significant influence on how they develop and use their social skills. In a study conducted by Miller, Rothblum, Barbour, Brand, and Felicio (1990), it was suggested that social expectations can prove self-fulfilling for obese women. In ratings by college student judges with whom obese and non-obese women had telephone conversations, the obese women were considered less likable, lacked social skills, and were expected to be less physically attractive than their non-obese counterparts (Miller et al.). It seems as though there are non-physical markers, which distinguish the social interaction of the obese from the average sized. Moreover, the heavier the women were, the less interested they felt their partners would be in them. Even in non-physi-

cal environments, fat people rate themselves as more anxious and less likable. According to Miller et al., the stigmas attached to obesity and a person's lived experience of negative treatment have a limiting effect on the development of a fully functional social skill set.

"Thinness and attractiveness are highly valued in college culture" (Levitt, 2004, p. 111). The importance of an attractive body in appraising others is not limited to those with socially beautiful bodies. Crandall (1994) found that there is no relationship between one's own body size and reactions to other people's weight. Fat people are nearly just as likely to express anti-fat sentiments as thin people (Crandall). This denial of a group identity may be one of the most important and interesting pieces of weight-based judgments. Without a sense of group membership, fat people deny themselves a positive group identity, which can result in a more complete sense of self and healthier self-esteem. Since fatness is not considered to be a permanent state of identity, individuals are not often willing to classify themselves with obese others due in part to the social stigma attached to other fat people.

Fat Oppression

In her article *It's a Big Fat Revolution*, Nomy Lamm (2001) declares, "All forms of oppression work together, and so they have to be fought together" (1995, p. (138)). In a 1994 study by Christian Crandall of anti-fat attitudes of undergraduates, it was found that some kinds of oppression might not only work together but also may look similar. When rating individuals who had made a racist comment against those who made an anti-fat comment it was shown that the anti-fat comment had a much less significant effect on the rater's perception of the individual (Crandall). This type of research may suggest, given that anti-fat comments did have mild affects on ratings, "social suppression of antifat sentiment is not as strong or well-developed as the pressure to suppress racist attitudes" (p. 889).

Like other forms of oppression, discrimination based on body size rests neither on fact nor science. Beliefs that fat people are fat through their own poor choices and that weight is individually controllable have not been proven accurate but still form a basis for discrimination. This discrimination against fat people is accepted in our society, and its premises are widely shared. Changes in social acceptance of overt prejudice against women and racial minorities suggests that the anti-fat attitudes of today may be displaced over the years through movements and organizations similar to those that formed against sexism and racism (Robinson, Bacon & O'Reilly, 1993). This interpretation rests on the assumption of a group identity among stigmatized people, but,

The stigma of the overweight is a somewhat unique stigma in that many of those in the stigmatized group consider their status temporary. There

is no reason for them to develop group consciousness or attempt to change the way society views their weight because most members believe that they will be able to leave the group through weight loss. Therefore, a person may profess great dislike and disgust toward overweight others even though he or she may be overweight. (Quinn & Crocker, 1998, p. 126)

In addition, prejudice against fat people has very little social sanctioning attached to it (Robinson, Bacon & O'Reilly).

Anti-fat prejudice does not work alone. Crandall and Martinez (1996) found that anti-fat attitudes are “associated with just world beliefs, political conservatism, and a tendency to blame the poor for their poverty” (p. 1170). Fat people use compensation techniques to socially overcome the negative impact of their weight. Fat individuals are more likely to occupy lower socioeconomic statuses due in part to unchecked discrimination at every stage of the employment process (Crandall, 1994). “Fat people are often forced to squeeze into places such as seats, changing rooms and toilet cubicles that do not fit” (Longhurst, 2005). The importance of fit should not be ignored, though research on its application to higher education settings is missing. When individuals cannot physically fit comfortably in the environment, there is an important message that the needs of heavier people are not valid and that they do not belong in the seats that do not contain them adequately.

Talking Fat

Leoneda Inge-Barry articulates, “Even though I had two sisters, dozens of neighborhood girlfriends and tons of cousins, I never ‘talked fat’ with them. My fat was between me and the bathroom mirror” (as cited in Edut, 2003, p. 146). Because to be fat is to be in a severely socially stigmatized group and because fat people do not generally feel cohesion within a fat group identity, discussions about fatness are hard to find. “Debates sometimes surface about fat people taking up too many resources (such as health and medical resources), but the discrimination, marginalization, fear, loathing and ridicule that fat people often experience on a daily basis tends to remain invisible” (Longhurst, 2005, p. 252). The importance of safe spaces to talk about weight cannot be overemphasized. Some individuals have never spoken about weight publicly in a positive way. When students get to a position of comfort with their larger body, acknowledging that fat can also be fit, it is significant for them to have a place to express their new sense of self-worth.

Just talking about fat may not be enough for some; movement toward a positive group identity needs to be encouraged. There are national organizations working to allow fat people to connect with others like them in order to further their development into a fat identity. Through political action, “NAAFA [National

Association to Advance Fat Acceptance] works to stop the daily discrimination against fat people” (Murray, 2004, p. 243). It is important for average-sized administrators and fat allies to take into account the special needs of fat students who may be embarrassed or ashamed to vocalize their own needs. Because fatness is an openly stigmatized position, it is all the more important to form campus advocates for size acceptance. When groups order t-shirts it may be necessary for good advisors to step in and advocate for larger sized options in order to be inclusive of all people.

Fat role models are also an important aspect of the development of a positive fat identity. Since fat people are underrepresented in colleges and in the professional workforce it can be difficult for individuals to find themselves identifying with many of the individuals with whom they work, live, and study. Because of the detrimental effects of identifying with anti-fat attitudes while being heavy, it is important for fat individuals to see places where they can fit in the academy without being ridiculed or expected to fit size norms.

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