

Abundantly Invisible:
Fat Oppression as a Framework for Sexual Violence Against Women

Introduction

“I need feminism because people tell me I should be thankful that my rapist wanted to have sex with me.” - Submission, Who Needs Feminism? project 2011

In the spring of 2012, 16 women in Professor Rachel Seidman’s Women in the Public Sphere course at Duke University began a campaign to raise awareness of the contemporary need for feminism. The project began online and eventually went viral. Many institutions took part in the project and submitted photos of the reasons that feminism is applicable to them. The quote above is one of the many submissions to this project. It was submitted by a young, fat woman in response to the intense victim-blaming that exists in addition to the violence and abuse of fat women. This attitude has led to the formation of fat studies as a discipline, and fat acceptance activism.

Fat studies is new and it is radical. It is a field that has recently emerged in academia and addresses the challenging social issue of how an increased understanding of sizism as a critical intersection with sexism is essential to begin to dismantle discourses that surround violence against women. A feminist dialect is the most appropriate framework to commence this type of academic work, as feminism provides a foundation for the study of power structures, privilege, and hierarchies that constitute oppression. This paper will start by addressing the constitution of contemporary bodies and accountability of fat women’s personal responsibility to health and it will identify sexism and sizism as intersecting oppressions, and consider the double bind that represses fat women’s sexuality. It will address how partner abuse is unique for fat women and how this contributes greatly to the systemic marginalization that affects fat women. Finally, this paper will discuss the roots of fatphobia in youth harassment and abuse, and will finish by

considering the emergence of the fat acceptance movement. Increasing the understanding of sizism as an intersectional oppression enhances the current fat acceptance movement, and also contributes to the growing discipline of anti-violence feminist theory.

Contemporary Bodies, Capitalism, and Resistance

A common rhetoric when considering fat studies as a discipline is a personal responsibility narrative. Women are constantly being held accountable for their bodies, especially when bodies are deviant from the status quo. Thus, fat women are constantly being cautioned to consider their health, since fat bodies are deemed inherently unhealthy in contemporary society. There has been a lot of excellent work in the study of health at every size that debunks this myth¹. There is a lot of valuable, scientific information that supports bodies of all size in terms of health which is helping to transform the mainstream ideas that surround body politics and fitness. Evidence of health, particularly scientific work, is a very convincing type of activism and thus, it is important for this type of work to be continued in the future. For fat people specifically, this work can be very empowering and liberating in itself. This paper, however, will not devour into details about these types of arguments and activism, as health, weight, diet, and the amount of exercise a person participates in is not relevant to fat body acceptance. Fat bodies can be healthy bodies, but it is also important to understand that a person's personal health and diet information is not grounds for discrimination or judgment. To fully support this type of movement, all bodies must be embraced, the healthy and the unhealthy.

¹ Linda Bacon, PhD is one of the leading researchers of Health at Every Size. Dr. Bacon has multi-disciplinary training, including graduate degrees in physiology (specializing in nutrition), psychology, and exercise science. She is committed to educating people on the scientific evidence that underlies our understanding of weight and to furthering social justice.

To begin the discussion of sexual violence and abuse against fat women, it is important to identify the contemporary construction of embodiment and body politics, regardless of health.

Julie Guthman is one of the leading scholars studying the neoliberal capitalist framework for which contemporary bodies are constituted. Through her work, Guthman is able to identify how the anxieties around obesity contribute to the marginalization of fat people. Guthman uses discourses that surround the “obesity epidemic” panic as an example of Foucauldian biopolitics. Her main concern is why obesity must be reevaluated in a contemporary context as a social problem, “The particular ways in which “obesity is problematized, often through rhetorics attributing rising health-care costs, falling worker productivity, and even lax military readiness of fat people, suggest broad anxieties about citizenship and nation” (194). For Guthman, this neoliberal governance not only disciplines people in relation to their bodies, but produces the anxieties that surround deviant bodies. This is where biopolitics becomes a significant factor. Foucault discusses how biopolitics emerged with the industrial revolution and required able-bodied workers. His point in this example is that governance was aimed at the good of the population, despite the penetration of social welfare. This utilitarian ideology is the basis for norms and averages being fetishized as powerful regulation indicators and established a sense of citizenship and nationhood (194). Guthman considers biopolitics to be the constitution of normalized bodies, which evolves continuously based on these standards (194). This is important as it is the foundation for marginalization. When theorizing the contemporary prejudice and harassment that affects fat individuals, capitalist ideas that enforce neoliberal agendas must be considered. The extent to which neoliberal capitalism shapes the social and economic implications of “obesity” creates cultural Others that are subjected to oppression in a hierarchal power structure.

Intersecting Oppressions: Sexism & Fatphobia

While fat oppression subjects people of all genders to be criticized and discriminated against, there is a specific anti-fat bias that affects gender minorities. This section will primarily discuss the intersecting oppressions of sexism and fatphobia as they affect women, and it is important to note how complex this bias is for trans* individuals. It is important to consider how cis privilege, a concept deeply ingrained into the foundations of our society, can affect gendered discussions of oppression, including fat oppression. Feminist rhetoric is a valuable place to begin the discussion of fat oppression as it contains a critical analysis of power structures and privilege. By incorporating fatphobia into a feminist discourse, the effect of body size on women's marginalization can be dissected and discussed. For fat women specifically, they are forced to be content with unrealistic beauty standards and societal expectations of what constitutes appropriate womanly appearance. Since women are often idealized into a realm of fragility and petiteness, the fat woman's deviance from this norm instigates extensive consequences. Quite often, fat women are deemed lazy, dirty, and de-feminized.

The parallels between fat oppression and transphobia is evident in the way that each existence is challenging a norm. Dylan Vade and Sondra Solovay provide a critical discourse on the similarities between the fat struggle and trans* struggle. Just as well as a trans* individual challenges gender norms by being proud of being trans*, a fat person is challenging body norms by being proud of being fat and not wanting to lose weight (173). The intersection of these identities becomes especially complicated when a person is fat and trans*, because they are challenging two different structural norms.

Anti-fat misogyny does not simply affect fat bodied women, the fear associated with fatness affects all women. The reason that women are afraid of weight gain extends far beyond

body image, it's a removal of power and privilege. The unique nature of fat oppression resides in the malleability of fatness. It is possible to become thin and it is possible to gain weight. Everyone has the potential to be fat, and that concept alone creates a lot of fear. When someone has the potential to become fat, they have the potential to become oppressed and thus, lose privilege and power.

The Fat Women's Dilemma & "Coming Out" Discourse

Fat women's sexually is threatened in an inescapable dichotomy of inherent lack of sexual desire and fetishization. Fat women, similar to disabled women, women of colour, and trans* women, are often put into a category of fetishization when considered sexually. An example of this marginalization exists in porn culture, when mainstream pornographic imagery that involves fat bodies is placed into a category of the Other that is labelled accordingly and this is also noticeable for other minority groups. For fat women specifically, fetishization exists through a phenomenon called "hogging" which is a practice of heterosexual men preying on fat women, despite finding the women unattractive, as a sort of guilty sexual pleasure.

Fat women, as seen in the eyes of the men practicing "hogging", are easy targets. Hogging is a practice that revolves around fat women's vulnerability to assist men in re-enforcing and maintaining their masculinity. Hogging has been theorized by very few scholars thus far, and it is important to note here that due to the under-exploration of hogging as a scholarly discipline, academics must take caution and be aware of the limitations in this research. That being said, hogging is just one of many ways that fat women are fetishized, and since there is ample research² to prove that this fetishization does, in fact, exist, hogging is a worthwhile

² Viren Swami and Martin J. Tovee present a scientific data collection in this scientific article to prove the nature of fat female fetishization acted out by male fat admirers

argument to present as an example of this. Ariane Prohaska and Jeannine Gailey are two of these theorists and they have presented a concise treatise on the practice of hogging. Prohaska and Gailey have drawn out two very important conclusions from the male practice of hogging:

(1) men view fat women as “easy targets” for sexual encounters, which gives men status in their peer groups; and (2) men use hogging as an “excuse” for either their insecurities about their ability to date thin women, their drunkenness, or their attraction to fat women. (164)

When men objectify fat women, it is a representation of their own fear of deviance. For the men who are attracted to fat women, this attraction is often only expressed through fetishization or blatant denial, as admitting to this sexual desire would be a threat to their masculinity. Men are expected to be attracted to thin women. It becomes embarrassing and deviant in itself for men to have feelings for people that are considered a sexual taboo. The implications of this rhetoric are even more devastating for the women involved, and this plays an important role in the development of fat, female heterosexuality.

For queer women, fat identity plays a prominent role in the coming out process. This concept is best formulated in Ashley Mack’s paper, *Closets of Power*. Mack outlines the similarities between fat women’s self-acceptance to a queer person’s coming out process. Regardless of sexual orientation, Mack believes that fat women experience a certain type of “coming out” when they no longer deny their fat bodies and begin the journey to self-acceptance:

Unlike the fat body, the queer body establishes visibility for an “invisible” sexual orientation when coming out - which at least holds the possibility of being somewhat subversive because they have something to lose by making their sexuality an object of knowledge. On the contrary, the fat body is always visible - the only people that we persuade into acceptance of fat bodies are ourselves. (16)

What is especially interesting about Mack's "Coming Out Discourse" is that in both cases, it can be argued that coming out is "speaking ourselves into existence" which can be both very empowering but also very limiting as it is speaking out to a world that is heteronormative, patriarchal, and materialist. In terms of abuse, the fat woman's coming out experience, straight or queer, initiates her sexual vulnerability. The discourse surrounding fat women's sexuality is aggressive and harmful in that it places fat women in a position to be thankful for any type of sexual attention, even if it is unwarranted or unwanted. The blatant denial of fat women's sexuality enables abusers to objectify and assault fat women. It also produces a rhetoric that enables society as a whole to excuse violence against fat women and blame these women for their deviant bodies by emphasizing how fat women should be thankful for any type of sexual attention, since they are so unworthy of it.

Fat Women & Partner Abuse

The existence of abusive intimate relationships is one primary example of dominance exercised over fat women. Relationships can be vulnerable situations for anyone. It is likely for the vulnerability to increase when an individual is living in oppression. Tracy Royce, a fat studies scholar specializing in fat oppression as a form of violence against women, theorizes this intimate partner abuse of fat women along a continuum, "abusers employ a variety of tactics to control their victims and impede their ability to leave the relationship" (152). Not all abuse is violent, often time abusers use fear-mongering tactics like fatphobic name-calling or try to control their fat partner's diet and exercise regimen.

In *The Strange History of Suzanne LeFleshe*, Susan Koppelman offers a perspective about how abuse is conceptualized and perpetuated through fat women's position in society:

In a society with a general penchant for punishing difference, and an excessively high regard for bodily appearances as cultural markers, it makes perfect sense that fat bodies will be abused in a variety of ways. In fact, it often does not matter if a woman is really fat: if she lives in a fat-fearing, fat-hating culture and she is in an intimate relationship with an abuser she is likely to be told she is fat, scolded and punished for being fat. (258)

Punishment is a systemic exercise of power. This punishment narrative is an indicator of the foundations of abuse. When a subject deviates from what is considered normative and desirable, the status quo is threatened. Because of this, oppressors try to enforce the anxieties that surround this deviance through violence and abuse. What must be considered, as discussed in Koppelman's text above, is that not all abuse is physical and that most abuse stems from hateful, fear-mongering culture.

Royce argues that, "all rhetoric that vilifies fat people is abusive, fat women's narratives suggest that heterosexual male partners routinely critique their fat partners' bodies, even in relationships not conventionally thought of as abusive" (153). Culturally speaking, communicating hateful ideas is a primary way to perpetuate hate speech. The reason that partners routinely get away with this verbal abuse is that it is socially acceptable to deem it as helpful discourse. It's easy for an abuser of a fat woman to consistently shame her for her body because society not only tolerates these attacks, but celebrates them.

Youth Fatphobia: Trapped In An Inescapable Cycle

In the same way that many other types of oppression begin to plant their foundations in children from a very young age, fat oppression and stigmatization begins in childhood. Youth bullying is one of the first ways that children experience discrimination directly and the

consequences for this are very detrimental³. The current research in weight-based bullying of youth shows how much more common it is for fat children to be teased for their appearance. In an article presented by Jacqueline Weinstock and Michelle Krehbiel, *Fat Youth as Common Targets for Bullying*, critical research was found:

In Hayden-Wade, Stein, Ghaderi, Saelens, Zabinski, and Wilfrey's study of the prevalence of teasing experience in a sample of seventy children categorized as overweight and eighty-six children not so categorized, the children in the overweight category reported significantly more teasing or criticism about some aspect of their appearance (78% vs. 37%). (121)

As discussed in previous sections of this paper, language is a main means of perpetuating dangerous rhetoric. For children, the effects are long lasting and very harmful. This shapes the confidence and vulnerability of fat individuals and can lead to the construction of abusers based on the cultural enablement of fat oppression. For fat women specifically, this vulnerability shapes the objectification and fetishization that they face every day. Beginning in childhood, fat girls are denied a critical aspect of their adolescent sexual development, by not feeling worthy of sexual desire. This continues as fat girls reach adulthood, even if they are no longer socially considered "fat". The childhood effects of fatness are long-lasting. For fat girls that grow into fat women, the bullying experienced in youth intensifies with age, as they become an adult member of the structural hierarchy that oppresses them. Through this structure, it is possible for fat women to be subjects of abuse from their partners and even from strangers.

In order to prevent neoliberal bully discourse from emerging, it is crucial to acknowledge bullying for the power structures that constitute it. Racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, ableism, fatphobia and classism are some examples of these power structures. Acknowledging

³ Youth bullying is now recognized as a serious problem with long-term negative effects as according to a psychological study performed by W.M. Craig & D.J. Pepler (2003)

them could spare children from being affected by them. Not acknowledging such structural oppressions, would leave no chance for youth to challenge the intolerance that is rooted within them or start fighting these oppressions.

The Emergence of Fat Resistance: Education & Community

There is strength in narratives and there is a strength in numbers. Fat people aren't rare. Fat people are able to rationalize their own oppression. Even individuals who are not fat, particularly women and girls, are constantly struggling with fatphobic rhetoric that initiates fear-mongering and body hatred. Taking all of this into consideration, it's difficult to comprehend why fat resistance hasn't become a response to anti-fat attacks. Goffman has pointed out that the worst consequence of cultural stigmatization is the internalization of these negative connotations⁴. This consequence places fat people in a position of self-hatred, and can often lead to victim-blaming attitudes being spread amongst fat people themselves. It is impossible for fat people not to feel responsible for their own discrimination. Bugard, Dykewomon, Rothblum, and Thomas identify this concept in *Are We Ready To Throw Our Weight Around?* as an institutional problem:

Every institution in our culture — schools, health-care organizations, media, marketing— promotes a propaganda of weight control, so that it is nearly impossible for individuals not to believe that “fat is bad.” Even when we can overcome this indoctrination, organizing around fat oppression is to open ourselves up to ridicule. (337)

For women specifically, fatness is an extension of a bodily hatred that affects everyone. Women are systemically conditioned to hate their bodies for a number of different reasons. This concept

⁴ Erving Goffman, one of the most influential sociologists of the twentieth century, explains a devastating consequence of stigmatization is that the stigmatized group comes to believe and accept negative evaluations.

alone creates a political challenge. While the politics of fat embodiment might seem plausible, these politics will always be up against personal, visceral emotions.

While fat oppression is similar to many other types of stigmatization in that it is an inescapable part of a person's identity, it is crucial to identify the intersectionality of fatness as part of a classist, racist, and sexist framework. For women in particular, as they have much higher beauty standards than men, socio-economic class affects the prevalence of fatness (338). For women who are fat by diet, there are no healthy alternatives available for underprivileged women who rely on cheap food with no nutritional value, that is produced in a Western capitalist system. For women who are fat regardless of diet, they do not have the privilege or economic flexibility to take part in expensive weight loss regimens or surgeries. In many cases, thin women are a product of economic stability and class status. Paul Campos argues that fat oppression can be considered an indirect extension of racism and classism, when poor people are often fat and people of colour are often poor (45).

To create fat communities, there must be fat resistance. This might be easier to politicize than to personally rationalize, as fat resistance takes a very radical stance on common medicalized beliefs that perpetuated in every part of society. To pursue fat studies, one must challenge narratives of personal responsibility, must dismiss internalized beliefs that fat people are capable of ending their oppression by losing weight, and must try their very hardest to fight the roots of anti-fat rhetoric and stray beyond the social bias of fat as undesirable and disgusting. This is not easy work especially since Western society is founded on principles of the subjugation of women's embodiment and there are very few communities to contrast these foundations.

Theory needs activism to flourish and grow. In the words of Marilyn Wann, “There is more than enough fat studies work for all of us to do: connections to make, freedom to envision, liberation to embody, and implications to comprehend. Welcome to the revolution!” (xxii).

Conclusion

The constitution of contemporary bodies and accountability placed on fat women to be personally responsible for their health is one of the contentions of beauty standards that women face and represents sexism and sizism as intersecting oppressions. While men definitely experience prejudice for their weight, and can be ridiculed and abused in many of the same ways that women are, it is important to acknowledge how in many ways fat oppression is gendered oppression. A fat woman’s experience, and many other gender minorities, experience detrimental double binds that represses their sexuality. When fat women’s sexuality is repressed in this way, it becomes easy for society to enable victim-blaming attitudes towards fat survivors of sexual assault. Fat women’s experience with abusive partners is unique in the sense that fatness can be used as grounds for harassment and ridicule that often leads to violence against them.

The roots of fatphobia are evident in childhood harassment and abuse. This is commonly referred to as weight-based bullying. It is arguable that the classification of this abuse should be referred to in literal terminology, so that children are able to understand systems of oppression at a young age. This better prepares them to potentially resist these oppressions, and it also places more responsibility on the perpetrator of such “bullying” to create a safer world. Increasing the understanding of sizism as an oppression, that is not only gendered but intersectional in many other levels, enhances the current fat acceptance movement, and also contributes to ongoing research for the dismantling of violence against women.

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