

RUNNING HEAD: FAT IS A FEMINIST ISSUE

We agree: Fat IS a feminist issue! Response to Commentators

Abstract In our review of the literature on women and weight bias (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011), we attempted to cull findings from multiple disciplines that demonstrate the impact (social, educational, and financial) of the stigma of women’s weight. We undertook this for two purposes: the first was to address a gap in the weight bias literature, which tends to make only a side note mention that fat women suffer worse penalties than do fat men; the second, to raise the point that feminist scholars, though highly attuned to pressures on women to be thin, have spent less time discussing the disparate impact for women of being fat, despite the mounting evidence of how much weight bias impacts women. We offered some of our own thoughts on the persisting neglect of this topic among feminist writers, despite previous calls to action (Rothblum, 1992; 1994). Given the dearth of attention to what has become one of the most frequent types of discrimination against women (Puhl, Andreyeva & Brownell, 2008), we asked: “*is fat a feminist issue?*” We were delighted with the response from the commentators and the thoughtful exploration they devoted to our question and to this issue within feminist scholarship. Here, we briefly summarize some of the main themes identified by these writers, offer our own thoughts on these themes and repeat their call to action for further study of this important area of women’s lives.

Keywords: fat women, feminism and weight, weight-based stigma, weight bias, women and weight, Fat Studies

Introduction

Patricia Roehling (2011), Abigail Saguy (2011), Joan Chrisler (2011), Maureen McHugh and Ashley Kasardo (2011) and Christine Smith (2012) all provided thoughtful analysis and further exploration of the question we raised in our paper, “Is fat a feminist issue?” (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011). Our review of the literature attempted to highlight findings from a number of studies being conducted across various disciplines demonstrating the impact of weight stigma in women’s lives. We also wished to call attention to the relative scarcity of feminist scholarship that directly addressed fat women’s lived experience. The commentators for our paper tackled the cultural and methodological reasons for why this disparity exists in the first place, as well as laying out their own ideas as to both why fat has *not* been a feminist issue to date and why it should be. We identified some of the main themes of their pieces and offer here our own thoughts.

Why is the bias against women stronger?

Several commentators explored the theme that a woman’s weight is inextricably linked with physical attractiveness. Given this, Roehling (2011, this issue) states that it is not surprising to find that “women are ‘punished’ more than men for violating societal standards of beauty.” Chrisler (2011) expands further on the importance of a woman’s weight in the (current) ideals of feminine beauty and argues that, for women, this ideal has become a standard against which increasing numbers of women are being (unfavorably) compared. This movement from an ideal to a standard means that fat women will not simply be judged as unattractive, but also as unacceptable. Smith (2012) also suggests that the findings on fat women’s lower earnings and lower rates of marriage may simply be an expression of the bias against the physically

unattractive. However, she goes on to acknowledge that prejudice toward fat individuals extends beyond the perceived impact on attractiveness.

Research conducted by Crandall and colleagues (Crandall, 1994; Crandall et al., 2001) has demonstrated that bias against fat individuals is linked to the perceived controllability of body weight and presumed failure on the part of the fat individual to control their stigmatized appearance. Here, we would suggest, is the point at which the bias against fat women becomes especially insidious. If women suffer disproportionately from fat bias than they also suffer more from a bias that is considered justified in the minds of many individuals (both those who perpetuate it, as well as those who are subjected to it) who see fat as not only undesirable but as a trait that a person could change if so desired. Discrimination that is perceived as justified may be more openly expressed, more intense, and more difficult to oppose on the part of the victim (Crandall & Eshleman, 2003). The physical trait that is probably the most salient for male attractiveness, height, is generally not viewed as controllable and thus, bias associated with it would likely manifest less openly and with less negative impact. Along the same lines, the use of weight as a proxy for health (discussed below) means that fat women may receive the message that they *can* and *should* wish to control body weight, whereas the bias against a short man would not intersect with these kinds of moral overtones.

Chrisler (2011) cites this heightened emphasis on “self-control” for women as a potential explanation for fat women suffering worse discrimination than fat men. Anti-fat stereotypes paint a picture of someone who is weak-willed, lazy and undisciplined (Crandall, 1994). If women are placed under greater scrutiny for keeping themselves “under control” (Chrisler, 2008), then a woman who is fat is not simply defying standards for physical attractiveness, she is (presumed to be) flouting the mandate that she keep herself under careful watch. Finally, an

alternative explanation for the findings of this discrepancy in fat bias between genders was pointed out by both Roehling (2011) and Saguy (2011), having to do with the use of Body Mass Index (BMI) in the research on weight bias. Roehling (2011) points out that, because BMI does not control for body composition, a BMI in the “overweight” range could represent a man with higher muscle mass. Because the standard of physical attractiveness for men includes a more muscular build, it’s possible that many more men than women who are have greater muscle mass but who are not “fat” land in the “overweight” category of BMI. Thus, the finding of “overweight” men not experiencing weight bias could be because this category actually includes men who meet this standard of male physical attractiveness. We agree that research that seeks to truly examine differences between men and women in fat bias should use a measure of fatness less problematic than BMI to control for this difference.

Why has the topic received so little attention?

As Roehling (2011) states, Third Wave Feminism arose in part because women of color, lesbians, poor women, women in developing countries, and young women coming of age in the 1980s did not feel that the Women’s Liberation Movement of the late 1960s and 1970s represented them. In fact, our review of the literature (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011) indicates that it is White women, heterosexual women, and women in high-prestige occupations who are more affected by norms about thinness. Conversely, this implies that fat women and girls are denied access to elite colleges, prestigious jobs, romantic relationships with successful partners, adequate health care, and, similarly to members of other stigmatized groups, rarely see themselves portrayed positively in the media.

Chrisler (2011) describes the similarities between fat women and feminists. Both groups have been stereotyped as ugly, unfeminine, and unattractive to men (e.g., Twenge & Zucker, 1999), and so Chrisler asserts that feminists may distance themselves from fat women. Yet, somewhat in contrast, Saguy (2011) states that lesbians have been at the forefront of the fat rights movement. How did lesbians, who are also stereotyped as ugly and unfeminine, as well as hostile and disagreeable (Dew, 1985; Laner & Laner, 1980; Unger, Hilderbrand & Madar, 1982) embrace the fat acceptance movement? It is possible that women who are in romantic and sexual relationships with men feel greater pressure to conform to appearance norms, and consequently have more to lose when associating with fat-affirmative politics, than do lesbians. Some feminists have argued that whenever society eases some restrictions on women (e.g., access to prestigious jobs, admission to medical school), restrictions on women's physical appearance become tighter (c.f., Wolf, 1991). Chrisler (2011) highlights this point when she describes the pressures on her female college students to be successful while still maintaining their femininity and attractiveness.

Given that feminists have strongly criticized the stringent ways that women are oppressed by beauty standards, it would be important to include fat acceptance in this equation. McHugh and Kasardo (2011) discuss the ethical and political implications of feminist therapists counseling women to lose weight, and they urge therapists to examine their own fat oppressive attitudes. We would also encourage instructors to include fat-affirmative material in their undergraduate and graduate courses (see Watkins and Farrell, in press, for an overview of university courses on Fat Studies), use textbooks that portray dieting and weight accurately (see Rothblum, 1999, for discussion of how "obesity" is covered in abnormal psychology textbooks),

and ensure that classroom chairs and desk accommodate students of all sizes (see Hetrick & Attig, 2009).

Looking forward

We believe that two new areas of scholarship have the potential to move forward a full feminist analysis of fatness. The first is the Health at Every Size© (HAES) model, which advocates enhancing health for everyone, regardless of weight (Bacon, 2008). As Saguay (2011) notes, some women's studies scholars have highlighted "obesity" as a feminist issue because it disproportionately affects poor women and women of color. However, this focus on body weight as the most important indicator of health and thus, the target of intervention, has been criticized as both stigmatizing and ineffective (Burgard, 2009). Further, the "war on obesity" approach has the potential to create an artificial divide between those that wish to avoid stigmatizing women based on weight and those seeking to work toward supporting and enhancing women's health. The HAES approach eliminates this tension by focusing on the development of health-promoting *behaviors* for all persons and taking a weight neutral approach. There is increasing evidence to support this approach in enhancing the health and well-being of individuals and it has been endorsed by a number of professional organizations of health care professionals (Bacon and Aphramor, 2011). McHugh and Kasardo (2011) recommend that health practitioners incorporate principles of the HAES, which maintains that people of all sizes deserve access to health care, nutritious food, fun movement activities, social support, and adequate sleep. In the U.S. it is more privileged people who have access to health insurance and thus preventive health care (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011). As our review has shown, discrimination against fat people in employment, education, and interpersonal relationships

results in downward social mobility (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011). Thus, fat people tend to be poorer, with limited resources for health, medical care, nutrition, and exercise, as well as discrimination and poorer services from medical and mental health professionals. Implementing a national health care system, providing nutritious food in schools, and improving workers' rights would go a long way to providing HAES for all people.

In addition to HAES, the new field of Fat Studies focuses on the meaning of weight and fatness in society, and advocates for equality for all people regardless of body size. Fat Studies incorporates not just health and biomedical research but disciplines such as the social sciences, popular culture, history, literature, and the arts, among others (c.f., Rothblum & Solomon, 2009; Wann, 2009). Fat Studies scholars ask who is affected by weight-based discrimination, and also which industries and organizations profit from this (e.g., the dieting industries, diet food companies, diet cookbook publishers, women's magazines, bariatric surgery clinics, etc.). In this regard, Fat Studies seeks equal rights and social justice for fat people just as feminism does so for women. Fat Studies scholars and activists seek to understand the intersection of body weight with gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic class, and sexual orientation.

Although the term "Fat Studies" is quite recent (three conferences used this term in 2006 for the first time) it arose as the result of the size acceptance movement in the late 1960s and 1970s, a time of liberation movements including the Women's Liberation Movement (Rothblum, 2011). The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance was founded by William Fabrey in 1969, followed by the Fat Underground, a group of fat women in Los Angeles who protested negative treatment by the medical profession and who wrote the Fat Liberation Manifesto (Freespirit & Aldebaran, 1983). In the 1980s and 1990s, researchers in the health-related disciplines began to study and criticize the health risks of fatness and the ineffectiveness of

dieting (Rothblum, 2011). Now, in the 21st Century, research on fat oppression has become more interdisciplinary and the new journal *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* focuses on theory, research, and policies related to fatness.

Given these developments, and the thoughtful explorations of our commentators, we believe there exists a strong platform for feminist study of fatness and its impact on women to move forward. Several of our commentators raised important questions for future research and we hope that our review and these intriguing commentaries will serve as a call to action.

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