

The Fat Pedagogy Reader

CHALLENGING WEIGHT-BASED OPPRESSION THROUGH CRITICAL EDUCATION



Edited by Erin Cameron & Constance Russell

FOUR

Reflections on Thin Privilege and Responsibility

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The three of us profit enormously from fat hatred. We start this chapter with this personal disclosure so that readers have a better frame of reference for the ideas we discuss. Put in other terms, rampant discrimination and stigmatization directed towards fat people have made our lives, as women whose bodies conform to our cultural weight standards, much easier. We're not proud of this, we didn't ask for it, and we believe that acknowledging it is prerequisite for changing the unfair system that rewards us and punishes others. In this chapter, we illustrate ways an ideology of oppression and advantage (McMichael, 2013) harms fat people while unfairly benefiting thin people. We discuss how "thin privilege" is maintained and identify strategies through which those of us who fall within the culturally normative weight range can make responsible use of our privilege and work to destabilize hegemonic, fat-phobic beliefs. In doing so, we highlight the roots of fat phobia and suggest ways to engage with the politics of identity and professionalism in the classroom.

The Ideology and Prevalence of Fat Oppression and Thin Advantage

In recent decades there has been mounting social pressure for individuals to achieve or maintain thin bodies, accompanied by exponential growth in public health initiatives attempting to reverse or cure "obesity" (Campos, Saguy, Ernsberger, Oliver, & Gaesser, 2006; O'Hara & Gregg, 2010). This has resulted in an environment where criticality and rights are sacrificed to the unchallenged authority of pseudoscience. This culture of fat hatred has fostered an alarming growth in weight bias and discrimination, such that the incidence of weight discrimination is now on par with race- and gender-based discrimination (Puhl, Andreyeva, & Brownell, 2008). Weight bias and

discrimination are insidious, distorting almost all aspects of our lives, limiting opportunities and creating challenges for healthy growth and expression.

In education, for example, research indicates that teachers believe that fat students are less likely to succeed at work, more untidy, more emotional (as if that were a negative attribute), and more likely to suffer from family problems. Illustrating this, the U.S. National Education Association (2010) reports that “[f]or fat students, the school experience is one of ongoing prejudice, unnoticed discrimination, and almost constant harassment. From nursery school through college, fat students experience ostracism, discouragement, and sometimes violence. . . . They are deprived of places on honor rolls, sports teams, and cheerleading squads and are denied letters of recommendation” (para. 7).

Weight bias has also been well-documented in health care. Physicians ascribe the following qualities to fat patients: non-compliant, dishonest, lazy, lacking in self-control, weak-willed, unintelligent, and unsuccessful (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Thirty-one percent of nurses said they would prefer not to care for fat patients, while 24 percent agreed that they were repulsed by fatter patients (Maroney & Golub, 1992).

Bias has also been documented in many facets of the employment sector. Fat people face discrimination in hiring preferences, promotions, employment termination, and wage inequities. As an example, fat women earn 12 percent less than non-fat females (Maroney & Golub, 1992).

More pernicious are the daily humiliations many fat people endure: the looks of disgust, the cow-calls, the bullying, the blame, and the news sources reporting that their bodies constitute a horrifying public health crisis and drain on the economy. It is often hard for fat people to escape the assumptions others make about their lifestyle choices or character and the revulsion often projected. This can contribute to self-hatred and internalized fat prejudice and detract from quality of life, health, and well-being (Puhl & Heuer, 2009).

While fatter people in contemporary society are often subjected to weight-based oppression (McMichael, 2013), thin people are conversely advantaged by this system of oppression. “Thin privilege” refers to the unearned advantages conferred to thinner people. It is a key pathway through which fat oppression is maintained. Often invisible, thin privilege fundamentally shapes our lives:

- Because of thin privilege, we can eat whatever we want in public and not be subject to concerned or snide comments about our health or “willpower.”
- Because of thin privilege, regardless of our activity habits, it’s unlikely that people will accuse us of being lazy.
- Because of thin privilege, we are more likely to be labeled as “healthy,” and it’s unlikely we will be accused of lying about our eating habits because of our body size.
- Because of thin privilege, we can open a magazine or turn on the television and see people whose bodies resemble ours more widely represented.
- Because of thin privilege, we are viewed as more attractive and have access to a larger dating pool.
- Because of thin privilege, we can go into a clothing store and be treated with respect, and have a larger choice of fashions and at cheaper prices than fatter people.
- Because of thin privilege, we can be assured that wherever we choose to go—be it a classroom, a car, an airplane, the theater, the dentist’s office, a waiting room, or a restaurant—we will be able to find seats designed to accommodate our bodies.

- Because of thin privilege, we are automatically bestowed with a sense of legitimacy and objectivity when critiquing body politics, and it's unlikely that a reader will think we are making excuses for our fatness. (This list builds on the work of Peggy McIntosh, 1988.)

We could, of course, create a much lengthier list, but these few bullet points illustrate that as thin people, we reap multiple benefits from our smaller size.

It is also important to recognize that these privileges are situated within a very complex system of overlapping “intersectional” power privileges, causing a man, for instance, to experience his power and thin privilege differently from the way in which a woman might, or a wealthy woman to experience her thin privilege differently from a woman of lesser economic means. As an example, this list of thin privileges may have looked very different had it been constructed by women of color, as Jessica Wilson (2013) points out in her blog post. Many people of color are not treated respectfully in clothing stores, for example. They may have had the experience, like Wilson, of walking into a clothing store and being asked to leave their bag at the door only to find white shoppers still carrying their bags, or of being followed around a store. It is important to expand the conversation to include intersectionality, and to recognize that thin privilege is expressed differently across the weight spectrum and in different contexts.

The existence of this privilege in most contemporary Western cultures has enormous ramifications in facilitating opportunities for thin people and limiting opportunities for fat people. Consider the two examples that follow.

One of the authors (Linda) is a nutrition professor and was on a hiring committee interviewing candidates for a nutrition professorship. When it came time to discuss the lone fat candidate, one of the committee members dismissed her by saying, “Well, she really isn't the role model for someone who eats nutritiously, is she?” This assumption was based entirely on the candidate's weight. The discussion that followed made clear that had this candidate been up against a similarly credentialed thinner woman, the thinner person would have gotten the job—just by virtue of what she weighed. That's thin privilege: it limits opportunities for fat people while making career advancement for thinner people easier. Think about the many challenges this fat job candidate had probably overcome to earn her PhD in nutrition and even secure the interview in the first place. The mere act of attending an introductory nutrition course can be threatening and disempowering given the common assumptions that most nutrition instructors—and her fellow classmates—may have had about her weight and her relationship to food. It's safe to guess that she took classes taught by conventional nutrition instructors who routinely start the weight regulation section by having people calculate their Body Mass Index (BMI), which is then used as a lead-in to naming health risks for people who are in the “overweight” or “obese” categories. This is often followed by a discussion of the root causes of “overweight” and “obesity,” which are, in most nutritionists' views, overeating and inactivity, and the solutions: diet and exercise.

Another very poignant example was relayed by Kate Harding, co-author of *Lessons From the Fatosphere* (2009), about the weekend her mother was dying. Kate received a call that her mother had had a massive heart attack, and she and two siblings got to their mother's bedside within hours of the call. Their other sister took two days to get there. She could have flown coach, but she couldn't afford two seats and knew that because she was fat she might be forced either to purchase two tickets or be bumped from the flight. She also knew that even if she were

allowed to fly, there was a good chance she'd have to sit next to a resentful stranger giving her dirty looks. Rather than deal with the humiliation and unknown financial expense of flying, she chose to drive, hoping she could get there on time (Harding, 2010).

Thin Privilege: Invisibility and Construction

Despite the long list of privileges we as thinner women have, the concept is not often named and discussed. This invisibility has consequence: you can't fight what you don't see. For example, until that discussion with the hiring committee, Linda had not considered the degree to which her body size had aided her career advancement. When we consider airplane seats, we don't think about a dying mother waiting for her daughter to say a final goodbye and how thin privilege makes that opportunity more possible for some.

This limited awareness of thin privilege relates to theories of dominant group status (Doane, 2003) whereby the dominant group—thin people, who also often carry other sources of privilege—exert their ideological and cultural power by assigning meanings to fat and thin bodies. Thinness, in many contemporary cultures, is constructed as “normal”—which is ironic given population weight averages—while fatness is “othered” and constructed as “abnormal.” Thinness is viewed as morally superior, indicative of enhanced self-control, strength of character, intelligence, and other highly valued (and male-identified) attributes; fatness is viewed as inferior and reflective of (female-identified) personal moral failings.

The system of thought that helps make thin and fat morally laden categories is known as binary thinking (also called Cartesian dualism). This sort of thinking constructs a pair of opposites with one as better or worse than its counterpart. It also describes the thinking that ranks white as superior to black, male as better than female, academic knowledge as more worthy than non-academic knowledge, and so on. This moral judgment is socially constructed, not inevitable. We only need to look back in history to understand that the fat body was not always constructed negatively. Prior to the Industrial Revolution, for example, the fat body was seen as the affluent and healthy body (Farrell, 2011). Many factors have doubtless contributed to this shift: the influence of the pharmaceutical industry over weight science research is but one example.

Helping students become aware of binary thinking and sensitized to the inherent moral judgments that are attached is one of the ways we will become aware of fat (and other) bias. As the late activist and poet Audre Lorde (1984) reminds us, there are no single issue struggles: dismantling our fat bias means becoming aware of and dismantling the system of thought that sustains this and other forms of oppression. To challenge fat phobia we must engage in critical thinking, including addressing the role of binary thinking in educating students into disconnect (Gingras & Brady, 2010).

We also must look to other ways of thinking and being that sustain this system of oppression. The construction of fatness as abnormal is in part the result of the internalized dominance of thin people, or “the assumption made by those with power that everyone shares their reality; they then operate as if their perspective were universal” (Peel School District Board, 2002, p. 4). Internalized dominance results in hegemony—the dominance of those with power or thinness over those constructed as different, or fat—such that those with thin privilege dictate the social, cultural, and medical norms related to body size. Because of the essentialist, binary construction of the thin body as the “natural” and “healthy” body, people often assume heavier

individuals must be doing something wrong to fail to achieve normative status. Attention is then devoted to “curing” people of their fatness, with the argument that fat people could avoid stigma if only they lost weight. This leads us down a dangerous route of assimilation, one that contravenes standard policies on equity and diversity. The ethos of a commitment to equality is not to say that a group can have rights if they act like another group (i.e., if they assimilate). This would be tantamount to saying bisexual people should be denied equality because they could choose to live a “straight” life. Rather, fundamental human rights, such as the right to health and the right to live without stigma, should be in place for all people, not only those who are willing or able to conform to the norms of the time.

Barriers to Acknowledging Thin Privilege

Considering that thinness is constructed as the norm and thin people don't rail against daily stigmatization in a culture predicated on binary thinking, it is common for privilege to remain below our radar. Consequently, it is easy for everyone, fat and thin, to buy into the belief that our achievements are based solely on our merit, and for thin people to develop a sense of “entitlement” for what we achieve. This so-called “just world ideology” is an entrenched cognitive bias maintained by all forms of invisible privilege, one that disappears the social structures that create disadvantage and thus makes inequality appear inevitable. It is not a predestined truth that Western heads of state should be white men, it is what privilege makes most likely; it is not a course requirement that U.S. and U.K. dietitians should be thin, white, heteronormative women, it is a heady combination of classism, thin privilege, homophobia, and fat phobia that fashions this dietetic demographic. Helping our students see how the status quo is built and maintained by silence and drawing attention to the politics of representation and knowledge creation will give them a framework with which to think through the origins of disparity and the absence of fat voices speaking with agency.

If our sense of self is strongly invested in our professional identity, and that in turn is strongly invested in us being an expert, then we will likely resist ideas that contradict those we learned as we built our career. This is especially true when our sense of self-worth is tied into our accomplishments more globally. And if our personal and/or professional sense of self derives from our thin embodiment, the stakes for considering privilege and mistaken beliefs are set even higher again, more so if we have worked hard at our own body management and highly regard the values of control and restraint attributed to thin people. It would understandably be threatening to consider our success being derived in part from unearned advantages associated with thinness (and the synergistic way this impacts our experience of the world and sense of self) rather than being solely due to our merit. And we will only be able to allow for our own complicity in perpetuating oppression and peddling bad science if we can tolerate the painful feelings this engenders.

The realization that body size isn't as personally malleable as we previously believed—that the body has strong regulatory mechanisms that resist sustained weight loss (Sumithran & Proietto, 2013)—has ramifications. Not least among these are the far reaching implications for our trust in science as value free and our belief in our own objectivity.

This journey will likely only commence if we can embrace our flawed self without being overwhelmed by shame. The challenge is that when we're habituated to binary thinking our reflex response will be one of harsh self-judgment, followed by shame and disconnect. When this

occurs, we have lost the opportunity to integrate our new knowledge and sense of self in a way that enables growth. However, the shame response is not inevitable: when we are habituated to mindful thinking our response will more likely be one of self-compassion. Here, we are able to stay with the acknowledgment of our complicity, the harm caused, and the painful emotions evoked because we are practiced at being warm and understanding with ourselves even in the face of the harsh reality of our shortcomings. We remain connected and we integrate our new knowledge into an abiding sense of self that does not have to be perfect to earn respect.

A classroom space that encourages enabling “good” conflict, that requires students to recognize their situatedness through ongoing reflexivity, and that supports shame management through mirroring/teaching mindfulness and self-compassion will foster criticality. So too, helping students develop a secure sense of their professional identity rather than one precariously reliant on a very bounded claim for unique expertise means they can welcome new and critical perspectives.

Dismantling Thin Privilege

While we can't make our unearned privileges disappear, by becoming conscious of our privilege we can renounce our sense of “entitlement” and use our privilege responsibly. Three strategies, educating ourselves, undoing our own internalized size oppression, and owning our identities, can assist us in being responsible with our privilege.

Educating Ourselves

Educating yourself begins with self-reflection. Consider how your life would be different if you were fatter. Think about your daily activities, whether it's meeting a new person, ordering fast food, shopping for clothes, or speaking out on weight bias. Would others view or treat you differently? Would *you* feel more or less self-conscious about others' judgments? More or less entitled in whatever you're doing?

It is also important to educate yourself about the lived experience of being fat, and to listen to what fat people say about their lives, remembering all the while that fat people are no more a homogenous group than any other, and that while someone may be willing to talk to you, it is not the role of the oppressed to educate the oppressor (Lorde, 1984) or to be an ambassador. You can do this through respectfully broaching the subject with your fat friends, or seeking out writings from within the Fat Activist or Size Acceptance community, such as through the large body of fiction that involves fat characters (Stinson, 2009). You may be surprised to learn just how differently the world treats fat and thin people, and the implications for quality of life. There is also work available on how to become an ally (Bishop, 2002).

Next, enhance your own criticality by reading up on weight myths. When we are subjected repeatedly to images of fat people as lazy and greedy, notions that weight is completely controllable by diet and/or exercise, and that fat causes people to get sick and die early, these oppressive values become deeply embedded in our psyches. However, these beliefs are just that, social constructs, and can be challenged through educating yourself with the large arsenal of critical thought that calls the weight myths into question. For instance, were you aware that people in the category “overweight” live longer than those classed as “normal” weight? If questioning that science seems far-fetched, consider that being gay was once classified as an illness, and the belief that acid causes stomach ulcers has been disproved (they're frequently caused by

bacteria). Did you know that our diet and activity patterns account for less than 25 percent of our health outcomes? And that someone's postal/zip code is a more reliable indicator of likely longevity than his or her BMI? Bringing in social determinants moves us away from the "just world" thinking that shores up the status quo and fuels victim blaming. For a more holistic view of the science on social factors, weight, health behaviors, and health outcomes, see the book *Body Respect* (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014).

Readers may also want to educate themselves about the emerging field of fat studies that makes it clear that regardless of why people are fat, their weight does not detract from their inherent human right to respect. Through deconstructing societal norms around fat, scholars and activists reveal the oppressive consequences of harnessing fatness as a health issue and the harm thus inflicted (Wann, 2009).

Of course, because of the complexity of the factors maintaining fat oppression, education can't single-handedly eliminate oppressive internalized values. Even as we challenge ourselves intellectually and lessen the hold of these ideas, they leave their legacy, and we all, to varying degrees, continue to harbor prejudice. Holding this awareness can allow us to compensate.

Undoing Internalized Oppression

One of the more common ways this legacy may be felt is in our feelings towards our own bodies, and changing this relationship is an important aspect of dismantling the ideology of oppression surrounding fat bodies (McMichael, 2013). Fat phobia is itself a symptom of somatophobia (*soma* refers to "body"). It's an ingrained legacy from Descartes' work mentioned earlier that instigated the body–mind split at the core of binary thinking. Where reason and rationality are ranked above flesh and the non-rational, body shame thrives (Aphramor, 2005). The cultural ideas that there is something wrong with fat and that a fat body is a marker of a defective person are so deeply entrenched that we absorb them, they lodge in our psyches, and most people, fat and thin, come to believe and act as if these oppressive ideas constitute reality. Thin people often also struggle with bodily discomfort and a fear of becoming fat; we can be simultaneously oppressor and oppressed. Whatever our internal struggle, we gain from thin privilege denied fatter people.

Let's put this in real-life terms. What of the thin feminist who unexpectedly gains weight in middle age and considers dieting, despite teaching her students about the social and personal harm arising from the weight-loss agenda? Or someone of any size who, despite an intellectual allegiance to the concept, struggles with body acceptance for any number of reasons, such as chronic pain or gender identity? Despite an active political commitment to fat rights and the body acceptance this entails, feelings of body ambivalence, guilt over feeling ambivalence, and fear may still surface. Injunctions such as "Love your body" fail to account for the messiness of our lived realities and can be experienced as a brutal external code against which we measure ourselves and others. Although well-intentioned, this prescription positions our body-self as an instrument, detached from the complexities of emotion, history, and situatedness, and adds one more divisive directive to the daily artillery fire of judgment, usurping our relational authenticity. If we want to create transformative learning spaces, we will have to recognize the vital role of emotion in the classroom so that we can help our students learn in a way where real life, including embodiment, is not an afterthought or optional extra, but an integral piece in their conceptual framework. For those of us in science disciplines, it is incumbent on us to communicate the fact that traditional science is one among many ways of reaching knowledge;

otherwise, we indirectly shore up the reification of the rational and an associated devaluing of the non-rational, a hierarchy generative of fat phobia (Aphramor, 2005, 2013).

In tandem with any body shame, the thin person who gains weight has a new identity to contend with, one in which the invisible privileges awarded through thinness are thrown into relief by the material fact of fat stigma. The resilience that comes from self-care and support is called for in order for this stage of personal awakening to politicized awareness to be negotiated.

So, we arrive at the need to consider our embodied self, not least to prevent burnout. There is a huge literature on mindfulness that attests to the power of body–mind connection. Our relationship with our embodied self has a profound impact on our thought processes, and vice versa. Paying attention to our physicality will influence the way our politics are articulated by and through our embodiment. There is a circularity to how transforming our relationship with our body happens when we alter our beliefs and this alters the beliefs we hold about the bodies of others, fostering relationships of mutuality and respect. Bringing back the body also destabilizes the hegemonic valorization of the intellect and creates room for us to value other ways of knowing (Aphramor, in press).

Within thin-centric constructs, embodiment is constituted as restraint, regime, and discipline with hedonism frowned upon and desire seen as suspect (Foucault, 1991). When you begin to pay attention to body–mind, take pleasure in and through your body, and accept ambivalent feelings around physicality, you will find yourself more completely reflecting your authenticity through your embodiment. Eventually, you will begin to own your right to respect and relish its embodied manifestation, rather than viewing your appearance/body-self in terms of the degree to which you conform to a socially constructed ideal of beauty and the hidden, gendered assumption that everyone wants to be “beautiful.” This internal grounding will help you confront your attitudes towards fat in both yourself and others, and have compassion for the challenges of living in a fat, or otherwise marginalized, body. Mindfulness and body appreciation challenge the social constructs that dictate what an acceptable body is and what an acceptable body should do and support criticality through an enhanced awareness of new perspectives and ways of knowing (Aphramor, in press).

Identity Politics

Another important political tool to upset the hierarchical ordering of bodies is the act of re-assigning meaning to weight identity. We need to reject seeing thinness as normal and more desirable, and move towards seeing weight itself as morally neutral. Through identity politics we come to understand the importance of claiming one’s identity to disrupt the traditional, often oppressive, meanings assigned to different identities.

Consider the parallel to developing a positive queer identity as a way to understand this point, as illustrated in this story: when one of the authors (Linda) was in her first year of college, she had not yet accepted her sexual identity; she was ashamed that she might be a lesbian and lived in fear that others might discover her “queerness.” One day, she attended a seminar conducted by Audre Lorde; Linda didn’t know that Lorde was an activist and thought she was attending an innocuous poetry reading. Lorde began by identifying herself as a black, working-class, feminist, lesbian mother and poet. The mere mention of the word “lesbian” initiated painful inner turmoil for Linda. Much to Linda’s dismay, Lorde then called on a random audience member—Linda—to identify herself. On the hot seat publicly, Linda felt humiliated and scared—she was acutely conscious of what she couldn’t say without profound shame. She

eventually muttered something about not wanting to limit herself to particular categories, offering that she was a Caucasian woman. Lorde's (paraphrased) response provides valuable insight for understanding identity politics: "If you don't own your identity you give up your power and you allow others to control it."

Linda more recently had an opportunity to reflect on Lorde's point and the stigma of fat identity when she was reading her 9-year-old son's class work. In Isaac's school, most tests end with a question intended to help the kids clarify their values and express themselves. Recently the question was: "How would you respond if someone says: 'Your mother is fat?'" Isaac's answer began with the simple words: "So what!" Contrast that with the more common response from his classmates: "She is not!" Isaac's response illustrates that the word "fat" only has the power to shame if one believes that it is a negative identity. When we allow the dominant culture to define that identity as negative, the result is self-loathing, separation, and oppression. However, it doesn't have to be this way. When fat is viewed as a descriptive, non-pejorative term, it loses its shaming power. Through claiming our identities—whether fat or thin, or otherwise privileged and marginalized—we are able to destabilize (thin-centric) norms.

Being a Respectful Ally

As we resist a system that bestows privilege upon us, we discover that even in our resistance we have privilege. For example, many audiences attach a greater sense of legitimacy to words spoken by a thinner person—they can't write it off as a way of rationalizing fatness as they might with a fat person. This privilege of speaking out also needs to be used responsibly, and we need to take care not to inadvertently cause damage when fighting for social change. Considering that the war against fat people has been led by well-intentioned professionals (i.e., those fighting the "war on obesity"), we need to ensure that the role we play as thin people in the fat acceptance movement is negotiated through an ongoing iterative process led by fat people. We need to make sure that we don't speak *for* fat people and that our voices don't drown out the voices of fat people. We need to actively work to make their perspectives more readily heard and, when appropriate, use our voices to advance the perspectives offered by fat people. Through reaching out to the fat activism, fat studies, critical dietetics, or Health At Every Size communities, you will find guidance to help you navigate the complexities of fat oppression and avoid unintentionally causing harm. We'd also urge you to consider the personal benefits inherent in aligning yourself with any one of these communities. You don't have to feel alone in your efforts, and there's a great deal of opportunity for dialogue and support readily available.

Final Words

We can't step out of relationship so we can't ever escape or renounce the various privileges we have, whether they are based on our size, skin color, socioeconomic status, education, sexual orientation, or other attributes. But we can give a damn. By enhancing our ability to stay in connection when confronted by painful awareness, and increasing our openness to new perspectives, we are better able to acknowledge and address all forms of oppression and better placed to support others through similar growth.

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