

Fat Embodiment for Resistance and Healing from Weight Stigma

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The Version of Record of this manuscript has been published and is available in *Body Image* (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bodyim.2022.02.007>

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### **Abstract**

Western culture is a decidedly anti-fat culture. Thus fat people are subjected to weight stigma and confront discrimination in virtually every facet of their lives. As a result, fat people often develop a self-concept that includes the stigmatized social identity. Weight stigma is also a traumatic experience that disrupts fat people's embodiment by diminishing feelings of attunement to and appreciation for their bodies. Therefore, healing from the trauma of weight stigma may involve developing a more positive fat identity through a process of fat embodiment. Fat embodiment may improve fat people's well-being by bolstering the integrity of the self, supporting efforts to resist public stigma and heal internalized stigma. In our analysis of embodied approaches to resistance and healing, we draw on social and clinical psychology and the works of public fat scholars and activists. We describe methods of fat embodiment like embracing bodily needs, engaging with fat-positive perspectives, connecting with fat community, and embracing desire and sensual pleasure. Ultimately, we conclude that transforming a negative fat identity into a positive identity through fat embodiment can support the pursuit of justice for fat bodies, connect fat people to their bodily needs and sensations, and support increased self-care and bodily fulfillment.

*Keywords:* weight stigma; trauma recovery; embodiment; social identity; well-being

## **Fat Embodiment for Resistance and Healing from Weight Stigma**

*“I want to live where soul meets body.”*  
- Death Cab for Cutie (2005)

In their hit song *Soul Meets Body*, quoted above, Death Cab for Cutie songwriter Paul Gibbard yearns to feel connected to and attuned with his body, an experience that self-theorists call *embodiment*. This desire is understandable; beneficial even. Embodiment is an indication of psychological well-being that is associated with signs of thriving like life satisfaction, self-esteem, and agency (Piran, 2017). Unfortunately, occupying the space “where soul meets body” can be elusive for some, and this is especially true for people who have experienced body-based trauma, including, we argue, fat people who have been subjected to the trauma of weight stigma.

In this paper, we draw on social and clinical psychological theories concerning self-formation, identity, and trauma to understand fat people’s experiences of embodiment. Although we will argue that weight stigma is a traumatic process that disrupts fat people’s embodiment, we will also argue that increasing embodiment could improve fat people’s mental and physical health by bolstering the integrity of the self, transforming a negative identity into a positive identity and allowing them to resist and heal from weight stigma. Ultimately, we will conclude that fat embodiment is a potentially health-promoting practice that supports fat justice, connects fat people to their bodily needs and desires, and supports self-care and bodily fulfilment.

### **The Beginning: Public Weight Stigma Becomes Internalized**

Western culture is decidedly antagonistic towards fat bodies. These anti-fat cultural beliefs have historical roots in anti-Black racist colonialism and the Christian puritanism of 18<sup>th</sup>-Century America (Strings, 2019). By the early- to mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century such views had morphed into a full-scale diet culture, and by the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, medical practitioners preached the benefits

of dieting and thinness as a solution to myriad health problems, including the so-called sins of the flesh, like gluttony. Modern diet culture inherited this racist, evangelical-medical stance that erroneously conflates thinness with health and morality and fatness with sin. Fat people are expected to pursue weight-loss because weight is incorrectly believed to be a controllable, external sign of embodied virtue (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). Fat phobia and prejudice against fat people have subsequently been systematized as acceptable and sometimes even laudable outward displays of righteousness.

As a result of these anti-fat cultural belief systems, fat people are *stigmatized*. Goffman (1963) defines stigma as an undesired difference that isolates the stigmatized individual from society, a process that “spoils” identity and creates profound feelings of shame. Thus, *fat stigma*, or *weight stigma*, is a social process that ascribes undesired difference and negative stereotypes to fat people (e.g., lazy, stupid, uninterested in their health; Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Consequently, fat people confront discrimination in virtually every facet of their social lives: at school, at work, in medical settings, when shopping, and most painfully, from their family, friends, and romantic partners. Fat people are also bombarded with anti-fat messaging from the media, which too-often relies on exploitative images of “headless fatties” (Cooper, 2007), in which fat people’s bodies are portrayed in film and video with their heads, and thus their humanity, cropped out of the image.

It is unsurprising, then, that being subjected to this type of *public weight stigma* – that is, weight stigma that comes from other people or institutions – predicts negative physical and mental health consequences (e.g., Brochu, 2018; Hunger & Tomiyama, 2014). For example, people who self-identify as fat or who believe others identify them as fat can experience *social identity threat* (Hunger et al., 2015), a state of heightened anxiety and vigilance that is triggered

by concerns that one will be discriminated against or rejected due to a stigmatized social identity. This threat creates chronic stress and destabilizes self-regulation and executive functioning, resulting in long-term health consequences. We propose that one of the relatively unexamined consequences of being subjected to public weight stigma is that fat people develop a self-concept that includes the stigmatized identity. In other words, fat people experience *internalized weight stigma*. The process of how public weight stigma becomes internalized is not well studied, but Fredrickson and Roberts (1997) explicate the process for gender-based stigma, and we suggest that their model can be applied to explain how public weight stigma becomes internalized.

First, seemingly small and inconsequential social pressures lead people to believe negative stereotypes and associations about fatness. For example, when a child is exposed to negative stereotypes about fat people through movies such as *Inside Out*, an animated film about emotions in which the fat characters represent sadness and anger, they learn that fat people are sad, pathetic, unlovable, or angry and unpredictable. They may also learn that people with smaller-fat bodies, like those depicted in *Inside Out*, are worthy of empathy whereas people with super-fat bodies, like those depicted in another children's movie by the same studio, *Wall-E*, are worthy of scorn and disgust. In turn, this exposure is followed by a process of interpersonal identification (Stets & Burke, 2000). The self-concept develops through interpersonal interactions, such that people see themselves reflected in the opinions and feedback of others, and through that reflection, come to know who they are and what social groups they belong to. So, when parents, siblings, peers, teachers, and medical professionals bully, tease, and pressure a child to lose weight, that child begins to understand that they belong to the social group "fat people," and so they come to understand that negative things they have learned about fat people also apply to them. Finally, these beliefs are unconsciously incorporated into the child's

emerging sense of self, or, for the majority of people who become fat as adults (Serdula et al., 1993), anti-fat beliefs are incorporated into their ever-evolving self-concept. But whether someone comes to identify as fat during childhood, adolescence, or adulthood, the end result is essentially the same: Most fat people develop internalized weight stigma (e.g., Puhl et al., 2018). When public stigma is internalized, negative judgements come from inside the self, making them insidious and, perhaps, inescapable. Thus, healing from the damage caused by living in a fat-phobic world – and a racist, ableist, sexist and generally oppressive world filled with intersecting forms of stigma – is further complicated when internalized stigma resides within the self, disrupting the relationship between mind and body.

### **Weight Stigma Causes Disembodiment**

We propose that fat people are traumatized by both public and internalized weight stigma, and this trauma response disrupts essential connections between the self and the body. Our argument conflicts somewhat with mainstream definitions of psychological trauma. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, 5<sup>th</sup> Edition (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013) defines trauma as “actual or threatened death, serious injury, or sexual violence”. Further, the DSM-5 stipulates that trauma results from a single, or time-limited, life-threatening experience, and that definition is not readily applicable to the experience of weight stigma, which is chronic and long-term. However, some scholars have proposed that societal oppression can also be traumatizing, an experience that Burstow (2016) calls “insidious trauma” (p. 1296; see also Doyle, 2003). Insidious trauma wears down oppressed and marginalized people because they live in a social context wherein they are devalued, abused, and alienated. Burstow further proposes a radical understanding of trauma that includes rejecting psychiatric conceptualizations of the trauma response as a disorder. Instead, Burstow suggests

that what is currently understood as post-traumatic-stress-disorder by the psychiatric community is actually a “reaction to a kind of wound” (p. 1302). Seen from this perspective, the trauma response is an embodied experience, or an experience that is simultaneously psychological and physical, felt and expressed by the body and mind together. Moreover, trauma can occur when there is no overt physical assault, but rather, it can occur when people are robbed of their humanity through oppressive systems, including, we argue, public weight stigma.

### *Disembodiment as a Trauma Response*

Public weight stigma may disrupt the relationship between the self and the body in part because traumatized individuals often feel unsafe, ungrounded, and view the world as a dangerous place (Herman, 1992). This absence or loss of grounding can cause spatial and temporal disorientation, or *dissociation*, which can include somatic dissociation, or *disembodiment*, that separates the self and the body. This experience of disembodiment is often the result of body-based trauma, like physical or sexual violence, abuse, and neglect, or major and chronic illness. But we suggest that it may also occur as a result of public weight stigma, which is essentially an assault on the fat body.

Piran (2001) identifies three specific mechanisms that may help to explain how public weight stigma causes traumatic disembodiment. The first mechanism involves violations of bodily ownership, which can include external control of food/eating and appearance and other types of external monitoring of the body. Fat people commonly experience these violations of bodily ownership. For example, people often discuss, judge, and police fat people’s food choices and appearance (Pont et al., 2017), and fat people’s bodies are constantly monitored, especially in medical settings (Alberga et al., 2019). Piran’s (2001) second mechanism involves the oppressive invocation of the body to express prejudicial attitudes, and fat people are often

subjected to body-based slurs intended to hurt or shame. Piran's third mechanism of disembodiment involves the use of idealized images to constrain and disempower, and ultimately disconnect people from their non-ideal bodies. Fat people are flooded with idealized images of thin people or before-and-after pictures of weight-loss, and they are taught to believe that their fat body is not their real body; in fact there is a thin person inside them just waiting to emerge.

Thus, fat people experience a kind of slow burn of trauma from public weight stigma over their lifetime. Public weight stigma comes from teasing and body monitoring from family; fat jokes from their friends or the media; medical professionals who deny care, prescribe weight loss for everything from strep throat to a broken leg, and assume that fat people do not know how to care for their bodies; workplace discrimination and so-called "wellness" programs that stigmatize fat workers; unsolicited health and fitness advice by strangers, family, or friends; clothing stores that do not offer plus sizes, and when they do, larger plus sizes are only available online; airplane, theatre, and stadium seating, theme park rides, attached desks at schools and universities, and medical equipment that cannot accommodate fat bodies; or media coverage of a worldwide pandemic that disparages and punishes fat bodies. Dissociation through disembodiment can be an adaptive response to this kind of abuse because it serves to disconnect the self from the traumatic experience while it is happening. In this way, the body is the carrier of or channel for the trauma, so the self is protected, at least temporarily, by disengaging from the body.

Unfortunately, disengaging from the body can undermine health and well-being by disrupting nervous system functioning, leading to symptoms of hyperarousal, like anxiety and insomnia, and symptoms of hypoarousal, like depression and lethargy (Herman, 1992). Disembodiment can also disrupt people's sensitivity and responsiveness to hunger and satiety,

increasing the risk of all types of eating disorders (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2002). Fat people who experience these and other symptoms of psychological distress, and the mental healthcare professionals who work with them, would do well to consider the trauma of weight stigma as an important causal factor in their distress. This perspective stands in stark contrast to the usual treatment that distressed fat people receive in mental healthcare settings, where healthcare workers too-often perpetuate the weight stigma that likely drove their fat clients to seek support in the first place; for example, by assuming that a fat clients' weight is either a symptom or a cause of their distress, and by prescribing weight loss as the solution (e.g., Davis-Coelho et al., 2000).

### *Disembodiment and the Self*

Theories of embodiment also lead us to predict that fat people experience disembodiment because of weight stigma. These theories are rooted in Merleau-Ponty's (1962) philosophical theory of *phenomenology*, which emphasizes the body as the primary source of knowledge. Because the self can only access the world via the bodily senses, people's subjective experiences of the world are fully mediated by the body, and thus consciousness itself is fully reliant on, and entwined with, the body. So, if the body is a primary source of knowledge and if the body is inextricably linked to consciousness and the external world, what happens when the connection between the body and the self is disrupted? One's ability to know, to relate to and understand the self and the external world, is broken, and one becomes disembodied.

For example, Piran's (2017) constructivist developmental theory of embodiment explains how gender oppression is absorbed and expressed throughout development. Girls learn that they are externally evaluated based on their bodies and internalize this idea by coming to believe that their appearance defines their worth. In turn, this belief leads girls to monitor, or police, their

own bodies for acceptability through acts like body checking, measuring, and weighing. The external oppressor is therefore internalized into the psyche and now stands between the self and the body, directing the self to objectify and attack the body. Similarly, theories of racialization argue that the traumatic oppression of racism also causes disembodiment. Doyle (2003) argues that a group is only racialized when they are perceived as different by a dominant group, and those perceived differences usually involve the body. Thus, ethnic groups who have been racialized are defined by how their body shape and size, hair texture, skin color, and other features differ from colonial, white-supremacist ideals and norms. In turn, these differences are stigmatized as a means of reinforcing racialized, capitalist social hierarchies (Cottom, 2018). Internalizing these bodily standards means believing they are true, which may lead some members of racialized groups to attempt to alter their appearance with expensive treatments – conveniently offered by the same white-supremacist, capitalistic systems that created the need in the first place. Thus, what should be a direct relationship between the self and the body becomes a relationship that is mediated by the oppressor who, once again, directs the self to separate from and attack the stigmatized body.

Within these theories, the term *gaze* is used to denote the domineering perspective of the oppressor. In objectification theory, the oppressor is the patriarchy, so the body is subjected to the *male gaze*. In theories of racialization, the oppressor is colonial white supremacy, so the body is subjected to the *white* or *imperial gaze*. Fat studies scholars have suggested that fat people are similarly subjected to the *thin gaze* (e.g., Fuller, 2018), whereby the perspective of the oppressor – in this case, the idealized thin and “healthy” body that is valued under white-supremacist, colonial, neo-liberalism – is inserted between the self and the fat body. Fat scholars also discuss how fat bodies are subjected to the *medical gaze*, which not only separates the fat body from the

patient, but also pathologizes and problematizes fat bodies and fatness as a medical problem to be solved (Pausé et al., 2021). As a result, many fat people must go about their lives carrying an uninvited guest inside the self, a parasite of sorts, that echoes and amplifies public weight stigma. Thus, healing from the trauma of public stigma may require people to “exorcise” the internalized oppressor (Duran et al., 1998, p. 350) so that internalized stigma cannot reside unchecked within the self, guiding behavior and emotion.

### **Fat Embodiment for Resistance and Healing**

Healing from the trauma of weight stigma is sure to be a long and complex process; in part because internalized stigma may be interwoven with core aspects of the self, making them difficult to uproot, and in part because healing must take place within an unsafe social world – it is impossible to fully escape weight stigma and other intersecting forms of oppression. Thus, for many fat people, and particularly for super fat people and fat people who possess multiple stigmatized identities, the notion of full recovery from internalized weight stigma may feel like an unrealistic goal. Instead, many fat people may choose to adopt a harm reduction approach to healing, where the goal is to survive, to resist, to reduce suffering, and ideally, increase opportunities for connection and meaning and joy (for more on the complexities of trauma recovery, see Herman, 1992).

Bearing these complexities in mind, we offer a framework of embodied approaches to resisting public weight stigma and healing from internalized weight stigma, which is outlined in Table 1 and detailed in the passages that follow. Our framework centers on the premise that healing from internalized stigma involves breaking down a negative social identity and replacing it with a more fat-positive identity. Further, we suggest that because disembodiment is a feature of internalized weight stigma, reconnecting with one’s body through a process of *fat embodiment*,

defined as fat people reconnecting with and listening to their bodily sensations and needs, may be an important step towards developing a fat-positive identity.

Table 1.

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(1) Embrace Fat-Positive Identity
Bring awareness to and re-invigorate aspects of self that have been suppressed, denigrated, or overlooked due to weight stigma
(a) Embrace Bodily Needs
(i) <i>Health at Every Size</i>
(ii) <i>Intuitive eating</i>
(iii) <i>Joyful movement</i>
(iv) <i>Self-care of the body</i>
(v) <i>Seeking/demanding accommodations for fat bodies</i>
(b) Embrace Fat-Positive Perspectives
(i) <i>Engage with fat-positive scholarship</i>
(ii) <i>Participate in body liberation activism</i>
(2) Embrace Fat-Positive Community
Inhabit and create safer spaces for healing by interacting with fully-embodied role models
(a) Embrace the Online ‘Fatosphere’
(i) <i>Curate social media to be fat-positive</i>
(b) Embrace Desire and Sensual Pleasure
(i) <i>Seek sensual pleasure – massage, cuddling, sex</i>
(ii) <i>Commune with fat-positive people during meals</i>
(iii) <i>Attend fat-positive social events</i>

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**Embrace Fat-Positive Identity.** Healing through fat embodiment may involve strategies to bring awareness to aspects of the self that have been suppressed, denigrated, or overlooked due to weight stigma, because re-invigorating those aspects of self can improve well-being by increasing self-care and self-compassion (see Stinson & Swann, 2017). In line with this proposal, public weight scholars and activists often talk about the importance of rejecting self-hate and embracing self-love during recovery. As public scholar and activist, Sonya Renee Taylor (n.d.)

puts it, “All lasting, healthy growth is born of love. Your body needs you to love it today, just as it is, however it is, unapologetically” (para 7). Other activists refer to similar processes using language like “body neutrality” (e.g., Hagen, 2019), because learning to love one’s fat body can feel like an unattainable goal when internalized weight stigma is particularly engrained, or because a more neutral, un-moralized, accepting relationship with the body feels more authentic. Whatever language they use, scholars and activists often describe similar strategies for embracing fat identity through embodiment practices.

***Embrace Bodily Needs.*** An important way to build a positive fat identity is to embrace and attend to basic bodily needs, which creates the safety and stability necessary for trauma recovery (Herman, 1992) and reconnects fat people to essential acts of self-care that disembodiment may have made difficult or impossible. In contrast to restrictive dieting for weight loss, which teaches people to ignore their body’s natural cues of hunger and satiety in favour of rigid external rules (Harrison, 2019), practices such as *Health at Every Size* (Bacon, 2010) and *Intuitive Eating* (Tribole & Resch, 2020) teach fat people to respect and respond to their body’s cues. For example, tuning into feelings of hunger and fullness re-establishes connections between the mind and body and can improve physical and mental health. In contrast to weight-loss centered approaches to exercise, which cast exercise as a tool for weight loss or a way to earn or repent for forbidden foods, *joyful movement* emphasizes moving the body in pursuit of pleasure and embodiment (see Bacon, 2010). For example, Amber Karnes, a fat yoga instructor and blogger, found self-love and safety in her body through joyful movement: “...yoga practice made me sure—made me *know* in my bones—that my body was a powerful, good, and safe place to be” (Karnes, 2018, para. 20). This quote emphasizes the power of fat embodiment for learning new ways of being and unlearning harmful narratives. Additional ways of embracing

bodily needs include responding to the need for sleep, rest, and relief of suffering, and other forms of self-care of the body. Asking for accommodations appropriate for fat bodies (e.g., uniforms that fit), demanding spaces and furniture that is designed for fat bodies, and taking up space (e.g., ‘coming out’ as fat; Saguy & Ward, 2011) are also important components of this approach to fat embodiment.

***Embrace Fat-Positive Perspectives.*** Engaging with scholarship about fatness that asserts the inherent value of fat bodies may also support fat embodiment by refuting the thin and medical gaze that disrupts fat people’s relationship with their bodies. The emergence of fat scholarship from fat activism represented a radical (i.e., drastic, counter-normative, and justice-oriented) shift away from a dominant academic tradition that problematizes fatness (e.g., Pausé et al., 2021), and towards a fat epistemology that centers fat people in research (see Manokaran et al., 2020). Moreover, fat embodiment is a foundational concept among fat activists and public scholars. Asserting that fat people have a right to exist in their fat bodies and demanding that society accommodate the needs of fat bodies are both fundamental tenets of body liberation activism. Thus, to embrace fat-positivity necessarily involves the practice of fat embodiment. Herman (1992) proposes that finding a survivor’s mission is a part of trauma recovery, which can include social or political action, working with individuals who have experienced similar trauma, or pursuing justice. This mission can be empowering, but it can also be uncomfortable. According to Sonya Renee Taylor, “Dismantling oppression and our role in it demands that we explore where we have been complicit in the system of body terrorism while employing the same compassion we needed to explore our complicity in our internalized body shame” (Taylor, 2018, p. 83). Yet this discomfort can also bring necessary growth and healing.

**Embrace Fat-Positive Community.** Some fat people may avoid fat community as a means of avoiding public stigma through self-group distancing (e.g., van Veelen et al., 2020). Yet when fat people claim fat community, they can inhabit or create a safer environment for processing and mourning the trauma of weight stigma and redefining their place in the world (see Herman, 1992), both of which will encourage fat embodiment. They can also meet fully-embodied fat role models to guide their healing.

**Embrace the Online Fatosphere.** The internet has spawned an active community of bloggers who critique dominant discourses about fatness, provide support and solidarity for people seeking fat-positive community, and post photographs of their *fatshion* (i.e. fat fashion) and fat bodies. Participants cheekily call their online blogging community *the Fatosphere* (Harding & Kirby, 2009), which they perceive to be a safer space where they feel accepted, supported, and empowered to resist public stigma (Dickins et al, 2011). In turn, other fat people can follow bloggers in the Fatosphere, and in doing so, curate an online experience that exposes them to role models for fat embodiment. Over time, appreciating beautiful images of fat people and reading their life stories online can lead fat people to internalize a more positive fat identity.

**Embrace Desire and Sensual Pleasure.** Disembodiment can dampen people's desire for and ability to enjoy all manner of sensual pleasures. Thus, learning to feel desire and pleasure, especially the pleasures of the flesh like sex, cuddling, hugging, or massage can be an important step towards fat embodiment, and one that is best taken in relationships and in community with other fat people. For example, communing with fat-positive friends and family during meals can reconnect fat people to their desire for food and the pleasures of eating, free from the watching eye of the thin gaze (Kotow, 2020). Similar benefits of sensual pleasure may be found in friendships that involve hugging or cuddling, as well as relationships with physical therapists,

massage therapists, or other service providers who positively touch the fat body. Establishing sexually intimate relationships with other fat people or with fat-positive thinner people also can be healing (e.g., Gailey, 2012). Some fat people report that their sexual relationships improve after they embrace radical body positivity or fat pride, while others report that positive sexual relationships opened the door to fat pride.

For example, in her examination of Big Beautiful Woman (BBW) social events – which represent one of the main sites of fat activism in the west (Cooper, 2016) -- Kotow (2020) describes similar processes of fat embodiment through desire and sensual pleasure. BBW parties and “bashes” bring together fat people and their admirers and allies for an evening or weekend of fat-positive socializing. The events offer an opportunity for fat people to embrace desirability and sensual pleasure through touch and sex. But participating in BBW community brings other sensual pleasures as well, like eating, drinking, attending pool parties, and experimenting with revealing clothing, all of which take place in the presence of fully embodied role models who allow fat people to envision “a future filled with joy in a fat body” (Kotow, p. 184). Such imaginings represent one of the most powerful benefits of literally embracing, and being embraced by, fat community.

## **Conclusion**

*“The oppression of anti-fat hatred is sited on the body, and it is in the body that those wounds can be healed.”*

– Heather McAllister (2009, p. 311)

In her essay about fat liberation, quoted above, activist and artist Heather McAllister asserts that fat embodiment is the surest path to healing from anti-fat oppression. Obviously, we couldn't agree more. Our recovery framework is based on the notion that fat embodiment ultimately supports the pursuit of justice for fat bodies, in whatever form that takes for each

individual. For some, that might mean they form a fat rights group on their college campus. For another, it might mean they set boundaries with medical professionals and demand evidence-based care. For others, it might involve late nights of drunken dancing and smooching at a BBW bash. There are as many individual ways to resist public weight stigma and to recover from internalized weight stigma as there are individual fat people in the world. Yet the fundamental truth remains that resistance and recovery require a commitment to existing “where soul meets body” by embodying one’s humanity and asserting one’s deservingness of support and care in all things.

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