

Stigmatization of Fat Characters, a power play of Discourse and Hegemony: an Investigation in to the Truth

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ABSTRACT

Though the fat person in the eighteenth and nineteenth century culture usually represented wealth and prosperity, or by extension, either literally or metaphorically, greed and avarice, there was one situation in which fat people themselves were mocked and shamed. Extremely fat people were seen as a form of human grotesquery. They serve as a spectacle of oddity in fairs, circuses, vaudeville and most recently on television programs such as *'The Biggest Loser'*. In all this the fat man suffers the greatest humiliation. His body is at once exposed and undignified. The negative effect that these freaks shows had on viewers who themselves were fat, or those who feared becoming fat, or certainly on those who were themselves the object of ridicule. The stigma in this case, however, is one of oddity and uniqueness. What is clear from the historical documents, however, is that the connotations of fatness and of the fat person- lazy, gluttonous, greedy, immoral, uncontrolled, stupid, ugly, lacking in will power, primitive- preceded and then intertwined with explicit concern about health issues. Fat bodies as Foucault would say, is considered as hegemonic knowledge or stereotypes which are enforced by the authorities. Thus body size and weight can be seen and explored as a set of social meanings. The desire to raise one's social status is a key motivational force for dieting. Creation of hegemonic understanding of fatness as a problem and discursive and other practices that aim at determining normalcy can

be justifiably seen along the lines Foucault's notion of power and specifically those of Biopower and Biopolitics. According to Foucault these power works through discourses and hegemonic knowledge.

KEY WORDS

Biopower, Biopolitics, Discourse, Hegemony, Foucault, Fatness, Stigma

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Though the fat person in the eighteenth and nineteenth century culture usually represented wealth and prosperity, or by extension, either literally or metaphorically, greed and avarice, there was one situation in which fat people themselves were mocked and shamed. Extremely fat people were seen as a form of human grotesquery. They serve as a spectacle of oddity in fairs, circuses, vaudeville and most recently on television programs such as *'The Biggest Loser'*. In all this the fat man suffers the greatest humiliation. His body is at once exposed and undignified. The negative effect that these freaks shows had on viewers who themselves were fat, or those who feared becoming fat, or certainly on those who were themselves the object of ridicule. The stigma in this case, however, is one of oddity and uniqueness. What is clear from the historical documents, however, is that the connotations of fatness and of the fat person- lazy, gluttonous, greedy, immoral, uncontrolled, stupid, ugly, lacking in will power, primitive- preceded and then intertwined with explicit concern about health issues. Fat bodies as Foucault would say, is considered as hegemonic knowledge or stereotypes which are enforced by the authorities. Thus body size and weight can be seen and explored as a set of social meanings. The desire to raise

one's social status is a key motivational force for dieting. Creation of hegemonic understanding of fatness as a problem and discursive and other practices that aim at determining normalcy can be justifiably seen along the lines Foucault's notion of power and specifically those of Biopower and Biopolitics. According to Foucault these power works through discourses and hegemonic knowledge. Michel Foucault's emphasis on dietetics as a mode of self-discipline that —not only entails the forced assimilation of corporeal urges to societal pressure but also produces the parameters of individual subjectivity. The inability to regulate one's passions represents a kind of enslavement, not fitting to political participation: —The individual who cannot govern the self is unfit for other forms of citizenship (163).

This history of the meanings of the fat body tells a narrative where people have long considered fat bodies to represent deeper aspects of themselves in relation to others. Not being fat has expressed moderation, self-mastery, purity, and rationality. Not being fat has also—from the moment it was realized that the poor could also become fat—distinguished a better self from the other, an able citizen from the other and, above all, a higher class of self-regulating subjects compared to the Other. Foucault spoke of bio-power to explain what happens when the subject, in response to the processes through which —the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, started working on the self to express a heightened morality and discipline.

There are historical narratives that deviate from this one. For example, the scarcity of food throughout most of human history did, to certain degrees, attach cultural significance to the fat male body, signaling that it belonged to a person of health, prosperity, and strength. Regarding the female body, compared to today's slim ideal, a certain chubbiness was aesthetically favored well into the first decades of the 20th century. Meanwhile, stigmatization, always occurs in

contexts with a social power differential, carefully suggesting that positive image of fat men in power may have had more to do with the meanings of power than those of fatness. In the case of female chubbiness as favorable, this may well have been a matter of how bodily norms connected to beauty have shifted. While social norms are a form of structural prescriptions, a systemic stigmatization of fat people implies a directed framing and devaluation of those who fall outside the norm, hence reaching far beyond ideas of which bodily composition is more or less desired.

Tracing the historical roots of fatness aversion was deemed important because the stigmatization of fat people lands in a context with a power differential where negative images of fatness are somehow justified. An essential theme showed across the Western world epochs, a theme that could be described as a distinction between an able Self-regulating citizen and a marked immoral Other. When claiming that the stigmatization of fat people has become an important social problem, it was crucial to point to how problems can be constructed even with the best of intentions—such as when governments discover what they believe to be a new dangerous epidemic and try to reverse it. From a systemic perspective, unintended negative effects of targeting human differences need to be highlighted, at least if we want to develop a deeper self-awareness of welfare power relations. A systemic perspective can uncover the importance of always scrutinizing those in power over the knowledge production regarding human differences, to make sure that they do not just do things to people because they can.

Finally, the market of obesity entrepreneurs was deemed to play a key role in the understanding of how knowledge about fatness and attitudes toward fat people form. By commodifying aversion toward a specific trait, a compact reinforcement of the —problem is established, thus the market takes part in the construction of social problems. The influence of, for example, mass

media and social media in providing us with images of difference is morally profound, and needs to be highlighted in the systemic perspective of stigmatization.

The application of stigma is visible already in political obesity rhetoric. Fueling medical epidemiological research is the idea that human fatness should be targeted under the pretense of carrying a public health —time bomb or a —terror within with possible negative effects. Considering this heightened rhetoric, it is logical that not only do fat individuals experience stigmatization from their peers and family members, but so too do individuals who have a relationship with or are near someone who is at risk of becoming a victim of obesity stigmatization. Fatness has come to symbolize a different devalued identity where governmental approaches to health promotion have played a significant role in the social construction of the thin ideal. Health care settings are significant sources of weight stigmatization. Once a behavior or trait has been medicalized, not only the professional but also the public and private understandings of this condition will be filtered through a medical lens. Thereby, acts of stigmatization can become legitimized by the hierarchical structure built on the status, resources, and power of medicine.

Fatness as an experience had remained a “private shame” for many. As a group, fat people are subjected to discrimination in various social settings. Far reaching assumptions about persons are made on the basis of body size. It is only common to use fatness as the marker of a social category or group of people, but also to routinely refer to a group that is assumed to share similar life style choices, state of health, personality traits and morals. It is obvious that the group identity assigned to fat people has been largely defined by stigma; fat people are seen as the stigmatized other.

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