

ANTI-FAT BIGOTRY

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The promotion, creation, implementation, and perpetuation of laws, policies, practices, narratives, norms, and state and institutional actions that: (1) deny the value, dignity, liberties, and opportunities of people based on their perceived membership in a social or socially-constructed group or on a human characteristic that has historically been subjected to oppression and subordination; and (2) drive and are driven by expressions of animus, including shared symbolism and hateful vocabulary, verbal and physical assaults including hate crimes, and exclusion which serves to entrench power in privileged insiders.

—Antibigotry Convening’s working definition of bigotry

Fat Studies and fat activism sit at the precipice of an emerging world, one where fat bodies and their liberations cannot be disaggregated from the liberation of all oppressions.

Cat Pausé and Sonya Renee Taylor²

Definition

Anti-fat bigotry is a deeply embedded form of bigotry that spans centuries of Western history. Rooted in the histories of 18th and 19th century race science and concepts of “civilization,” anti-fat bigotry today often hides behind a cloak of “health concern” that works to legitimize processes of discrimination and oppression of fat people. While everyone feels the effects of anti-fat bigotry, larger-bodied women, people of color, and poor people particularly bear the brunt of its negative consequences, which work in tandem with many other forms of oppression. The ill-effects of anti-fat bigotry get played out in every arena of life: health care, housing, education, business, and interpersonal and family relationships. Today, anti-fat bigotry is kept in deep-seated and often invisible anti-fat ideology that works in tandem with a diet and weight loss industry that tops almost \$80 billion a year in the United States.

History

Anti-fat bigotry has a very deep-seated history within the West. Indeed, scholars like Susan Hill and R. Marie Griffith have carefully detailed how anti-fatness manifested itself within the ancient world and within the development of Christianity.³ As scholars like Amy Farrell, Margaret Robinson, and Sabrina Strings have all demonstrated, however, anti-fatness developed into a powerful ideology during the

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²Cat Pausé and Sonya Renee Taylor, eds. *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies* (Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2021).

³Susan E Hill, *Eating to Excess the Meaning of Gluttony and the Fat Body in the Ancient World* (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2011); R. Marie Griffith, *Born Again Bodies: Flesh and Spirit in American Christianity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004).

Enlightenment, with the construction of race science, theories of evolution and civilization, and the advancement of eugenics.⁴

Cultural concern about fatness far preceded medical concerns. Indeed, the “father” of what became known as the diet industry was William Banting, a British businessman who was fed up with his heavy weight and facing a lack of concern by his physicians. In 1863, he published *Letter on Corpulence*, a dieting tract that became an international bestseller and that described fatness as a “parasite of barnacles” and a “crying evil.”⁵ His description of fatness as an affront to “civilization” is unsurprising as by this time in history white European and American philosophers and scientists were convinced there was a scale of humanity, from the “most primitive” to the “most advanced,” with Black Africans at the bottom of the hierarchy and white Europeans at the top. There was extensive study of bodies to “prove” this scale, with the examination of the Khoi Hoi woman from South Africa, known as Sara Baartman (or, more popularly and pejoratively the Venus Hottentot), the most well-known person who was subject to this investigation. Georges Cuvier, the French scientist who published his findings from the (illegal) autopsy of Sara Baartman outlined his perspective that she was clearly an inferior person, noting her fatness along with other attributes, particularly her skin color, as “proof.”

Other scientists and philosophers picked up on these ideas, noting in particular the fact that fatness could be read as a sign of “degeneracy,” that is, a sign of one’s inherent inferior, unevolved traits. The most well-known of these was Cesare Lombroso, the Italian criminologist whose work on “criminal women” emphasized the “fact” that fatness was a sign of potential deviance, particularly sexual deviance in women. His work became key to the thinking of many eugenics projects in both the U.S. and Europe.

What we see in this history is a confluence of scientific and philosophical thinking that articulated the fat body as an inferior one, linked to racial and sexual inferiority in addition to cultural deviance. This has, in the broadest terms, had the effect of indoctrinating white people, particularly white women, into a serious concern about their weight in order to “maintain” the fabricated idea of purity associated with whiteness and superior position, while justifying the discrimination against Black and Indigenous people who frequently are framed as inherently inferior people.

When discussing fat bigotry, there are seven core components proposed in this report where fatphobia is both present and prevalent. Interestingly, these contexts require one to see identities and existence through an intersectional lens to fully understand the depth of ways that fat bigotry invades the lived experiences of those in smaller bodies, and even more so, those who are larger, Black, poor, or belong to other marginalized populations. The tensions that exist in negotiating one’s identity for respect and acknowledgement clearly correlate with society’s general hate for fatness and the constant resistance to see fat people as whole beings.

⁴Amy Erdman Farrell, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2011); Margaret Robinson, “The Big Colonial Bones of Indigenous North America’s ‘Obesity Epidemic’” in *Thickening Fat: Fat Bodies, Intersectionality and Social Justice* ed. Freeman et al (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2019); Sabrina Strings, *Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).

⁵William Banting, *Letter on Corpulence, Addressed to the Public* (New York: Mohun, Ebbs & Hough, 1864).

We posit via this report that a reckoning with fatphobia and the way it collides with intersectional identities is necessary to embrace a stance *truly* representative of anti-fat bigotry. For this cannot be achieved by seeing fatness as a standalone identity when individuals are complex beings, simultaneously holding multiple narratives of existence that both propel and inhibit them from living their best lives.

Core Components

Citizenship

The articulation of the “obesity epidemic” in the late 20th century has particularly exacerbated the ill treatment of fat people in the United States. Natalie Boero’s *Killer Fat: Media, Medicine and Morals in the Obesity Epidemic* lays out the extent to which this discourse of the obesity epidemic shaped the ways that fat people are treated as what Erving Goffman calls “lesser human beings.”⁶ This treatment compounds itself in every aspect of life, from the earliest treatment as children to adult participation in the fullness of social life (from education to work to family to enjoyment of public spaces). Hannele Harjunen, in her book *Neoliberal Bodies and the Gendered Fat Body*, explores the crucial ways that the contemporary neoliberal ideology of individualism blames fat people for these problems, as if fat people were themselves inherently inferior, rather than the stigma and discrimination faced by fat people in every aspect of life.⁷ From the lack of law and policy to protect the lives and livelihood of fat people, to the lack of access and accommodation in employment and basic necessities, the messaging sent to people who live in larger bodies is that their humanity will not be respected until they are smaller. In these ways, fat people are not treated as full citizens, worthy of the same rights and opportunities as everyone else. For readers wanting a good introduction to the myriad ways this lack of (fat) citizenship manifests, *The Fat Studies Reader*, edited by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, is a good place to start.⁸

Erasure and Hyper(In)visibility

Fat people face a distinctive experience of being what scholar Jeannine Gailey terms “hyper(in)visible” in her book *The Hyper(In)Visible Fat Woman*, which details the ways that fat women both face extensive and intrusive public scrutiny when “eating in public” or exercising or simply going about their daily lives, but also debilitating invisibility, in terms of recognition for job promotion, for having their voices heard and listened to, for being able to find appropriate resources, from clothing to seating to medical care.⁹ This hyper(in)visibility compounds itself when the fat person is larger outside of the

⁶Natalie Boero, *Killer Fat: Media, Medicine, and Morals in the American ‘Obesity Epidemic’* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2012); Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of A Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

⁷Hannele Harjunen, *Neoliberal Bodies and the Gendered Fat Body* (London: Routledge Taylor & Francis Group, 2017).

⁸Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, eds. *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

⁹Jeannine A Gailey, *Hyper(in)visible Fat Woman: Weight and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Society* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).

accommodations typically made in society, Black, poor, or otherwise marginalized, in ways that make daily life very difficult and that decrease one's "life chances," to draw from the term Erving Goffman articulated.¹⁰

Health

When confronted with discussions about anti-fat bigotry, people will frequently defend their discriminatory behavior and beliefs by saying "but fat is unhealthy." What a clear look at anti-fat bigotry illuminates, however, is that these deep-seated negative perspectives on fatness actually cloud thinking on the connections between ill health and fatness. One of the most important examples of this is the work of Katherine Flegal at the Center for Disease Control. In 2005, Flegal and her colleagues published a study which demonstrated that overall increases in mortality and morbidity was actually correlated to body size only in the most extreme underweight and obese categories.¹¹ The "overweight" category, a BMI of 25-30, actually correlated with better morbidity and mortality results. In 2013, in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* published an even more extensive study by Flegal and her colleagues, this one a "gold standard" study which pulled from all the studies on weight and health that the researchers could identify from electronic databases, yielding a combined sample size of more than 2.88 million people and more than 270,000 deaths.¹² It found that the epidemiological studies indicated that health risks correlating with body size seem to be linked primarily to either end of that U curve, not at all to a large range of body size. Indeed, the best health seemed to be correlated with overweight! What is important to note here is that very few people are aware of this extraordinarily well researched information; the headlines in the media and the diet industrial complex worked hard to erase this information. What is particularly important to understand is the devastating pressure and pushback she received for "daring" to publish this information. Indeed, in 2021 she published an essay in *Progress in Cardiovascular Disease*, in which she laid out the smear campaign and personal insults levied against her since 2005 that had nothing to do with the evidence, that toyed with the evidence by "paltering" (using true statements in a deceptive way), and that intimidated other scientists and journalists.¹³ She argued that we must learn to accept "inconvenient scientific findings" even when these facts are not supportive of lucrative industries or our deepset ideologies.¹⁴

What all this means in terms of health and fat people is that, most generally, fat people will face extraordinary pressure in the doctor's office to lose weight, including the pressure to undergo debilitating and life changing bariatric surgeries, which have increased from 8,631 per year in 1993 to 252,000 per year in 2018.¹⁵ It is mostly women who undergo bariatric surgery, likely because of the increased

¹⁰Erving Goffman, *Stigma: Notes on the Management of A Spoiled Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963).

¹¹Katherine M. Flegal, et al. "Excess Deaths Associated With Underweight, Overweight, and Obesity" *JAMA: the Journal of the American Medical Association* 293, no. 15 (2005): 1861-1867.

¹²Katherine M. Flegal, et al. "Association of All-Cause Mortality With Overweight and Obesity Using Standard Body Mass Index Categories: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis" *JAMA: the Journal of the American Medical Association* 309, no. 1 (2013): 71-82.

¹³Katherine M. Flegal, "The obesity wars and the education of a researcher: A personal account" *Progress in Cardiovascular Diseases* 67 (July 2021): 75-79. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pcad.2021.06.009>.

¹⁴Flegal, "obesity wars" 75-79.

¹⁵Wayne J. English et al., "American Society for Metabolic and Bariatric Surgery 2018 estimate of metabolic and bariatric procedures performed in the United States," *Surgery for Obesity and Related Diseases* 16 (2020): 457-463 (noting that there were 252000 bariatric surgeries in 2018); Guilherme M. Campos et al., "Changes in Utilization of Bariatric Surgery in the United States From 1993 to 2016," *Annals of Surgery* 271, no. 2 (2020): 203 (noting that there were 8631 bariatric surgeries in 1993).

cultural pressure and scrutiny on their bodies for being fat.¹⁶ As a result of this kind of medical stigma in doctor's offices, from scolding to the refusal of medical professionals to touch fat bodies to the lack of appropriately sized medical equipment to being told all health problems are a result of fatness, fat people get misdiagnosed, undiagnosed, and will frequently avoid going to the doctor. Many scholars have also pointed out the extent to which stress itself is a major cause of health problems, which little of the popular material connecting fat to ill health ever discusses. The medical industry continues to prescribe weight loss for fat patients, despite the fact that all evidence highlights the fact that diets are not successful in the long term and that the same behaviors that are being prescribed (intensive focus on food, restrictive eating) are the same behaviors that in thin patients are diagnosed as an eating disorder. Many essays in *The Fat Studies Reader* address these health issues.

The issues of access, which were noted earlier in this report, must also be addressed in terms of health. When a person doesn't have access to a seat belt that fits, or cannot easily go into a bathroom stall in a public setting or airplane, the health effects are serious, ones that can be life threatening or, as is the case with car crashes, fatal. These are health consequences of fatness that are matters of discrimination, not related at all the inherent "health" of a person.

And, finally, one also must note the concept of "healthism"; that is, the belief that one is only worthy of good treatment and lack of discrimination if one is healthy or at least working hard at being and appearing "healthy." This form of discrimination described by Jessica Roberts and Elizabeth Weeks in their book *Healthism* is particularly devastating for fat people.¹⁷ And, as some scholars have found, fat people, even when they have lost weight, still face stigma and discrimination for having been at one time in their lives "fat," a sign of an inferior being.¹⁸

Reproduction and Family

Anti-fat bigotry has severe consequences in terms of reproductive rights, family formation, and children's experiences. April Herndon's *Fat Blame: How the War on Obesity Victimized Women and Children* lays out in great detail the experiences of children forcibly removed from their homes because of their body size or their mother's body size; the idea that fatness in the family signifies an unsuitable home and unfit parenting has extraordinarily painful and devastating results.¹⁹ Public policy particularly targets families of color, Herndon demonstrates. Cassandra Dame-Griff's work on Latinx women and public policy demonstrates the way that this anti-fat perspective especially targets Latinx communities and works to solidify anti-immigration policy.²⁰

¹⁶Nikkolette Lee, "Bariatric Surgeries, Gender and Fat," in Amy Erdman Farrell, ed., *Gender and Fat* (forthcoming Routledge).

¹⁷Jessica L. Roberts and Elizabeth Weeks, *Healthism: Health Discrimination and the Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2019).

¹⁸Holly R. Fee and Michael R. Nussbaumer, "Social Distance and the Formerly Obese: Does the Stigma of Obesity Linger?" *Sociological Inquiry* 82, no. 3 (2012): 356-377; Barbara Hansen and Meredith Huey Dye, "Damned If You Do, Damned If You Don't: The Stigma of Weight Loss Surgery," *Deviant Behavior* 39, no. 2 (2018): 137-147.

¹⁹April Michelle Herndon, *Fat Blame: How the War on Obesity Victimized Women and Children* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2014).

²⁰E. Cassandra Dame-Griff, "The Future is Brown . . . and Fat: Population Control, Latina/o/x 'Health' and Protecting the Future Nation-State," *Fat Studies* 9, no 3 (August 2019): 220-233, DOI:10.1080/21604851.2019.1643183

Religion

Religious institutions frequently support anti-fat perspectives. Lynne Gerber's *Seeking the Straight and Narrow: Weight Loss and Sexual Reorientation in Evangelical America* focuses on the ways that Fundamentalist Christianity connects its insistence on heterosexuality with beliefs and practices of normative thinness.²¹ LeRhonda Manigault-Bryant, Susan Hill and Lynne Gerber's edited collection, *Fat Religion: Protestant Christianity and the Construction of the Fat Body* is the newest set of essays speaking to the ways that Protestant Christianity has vilified the fat body.²² Minna Bromberg's work in her project *Fat Torah* addresses anti-fat stigma within Judaism and those who are challenging it.²³ Leah Vernon's popular text *Unashamed: Musings of a Fat, Black Muslim* addresses anti-fat stigma within, as her title suggests, a Black, Muslim context.²⁴

Criminalization

At first glance, this may seem an irrelevant category. Fat may be stigmatized, but is it illegal? Nevertheless, this is an important category to consider, for the pressure to be thin has made many fat people experience their bodies as “illegal,” as non-citizens, so much so that the unending pressure to change their body size leads to drastic measures including gastric bypass surgery. In addition, fat people often feel they have no right—and generally are treated as if they have no right—to challenge poor and discriminatory treatment, because they have “acted wrongly” in being fat. On a more literal level, however, this category is also relevant because, as scholars like Da'Shaun Harrison have noted in his *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness*, often fatness and Blackness are seen as explicitly criminal, such as in the case of Eric Garner, with extraordinary violence enacted upon those whose bodies are seen as a crime.²⁵

Construction of Value

Fat people, perceived as lesser human beings, regularly receive lower pay and face educational and job discrimination to such a degree that they will experience lower social mobility compared to their thinner peers and family members.²⁶ The work of Heather Brown, including the text she edited with Nancy Ellis-Ordway's *Weight Bias in Health Education*, particularly focuses on the problems fat people face within educational settings.²⁷

²¹Lynne Gerber, *Seeking the Straight and Narrow: Weight Loss and Sexual Reorientation in Evangelical America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2011).

²²Lynne Gerber, Susan E. Hill, and LeRhonda S. Manigault-Bryant, *Fat Religion: Protestant Christianity and the Construction of the Fat Body* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021).

²³Minna Bromberg, “Fat Torah”, last modified November 13, 2021, <https://www.fattorah.org/>.

²⁴Leah Vernon, *Unashamed: Musings of a Fat, Black Muslim* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2019).

²⁵Da'Shaun Harrison, *Belly of the Beast: The Politics of Anti-Fatness as Anti-Blackness* (Berkeley, CA: North Atlantic Books, 2021).

²⁶Paul Ernsberger, “Does Social Class Explain the Connection Between Weight and Health?” In *The Fat Studies Reader*, eds. Rothblum and Solovay, 25-36 (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

²⁷Nancy Ellis-Ordway and Heather Brown, eds. *Weight Bias in Health Education: Critical Perspectives for Pedagogy and Practice* (London: Routledge, 2021).

Narratives, Language and Symbols

Anti-fat bigotry is pervasive and deep seated within popular culture—from the movies we watch to the stories we read to the advertisements we see. Sabrina Strings’ *Fearing the Black Body* speaks especially to the fundamental, core narrative of fat as a Black, primitive trait.²⁸ Amy Farrell’s *Fat Shame* addresses the many ways that fat serves as the marker of the “primitive” or the “before” that must be overcome for the protagonist to “win” or achieve validation.²⁹ Watching any episode of *The Biggest Loser* one will see this narrative in action and will be able to identify it across cultural forms.

Intersections, Convergences and Differences

The material shared above should give a good picture of the ways that anti-fat perspectives intersect with and intensify racism and misogyny. Class also plays a key role, as fat people face such discrimination that they will frequently experience significant downward mobility. Many scholars and activists have also outlined the connections between anti-fat stigma, transphobia and heterosexism, such as Cat Pausé, Jackie Wykes and Samantha Murray’s *Queering Fat Embodiment*.³⁰ Francis White particularly focuses on the ways that fatness constructs gender to such an extent that it makes it difficult for trans people to access appropriate medical care. May Friedman and Carla Rice’s collection *Thickening Fat: Fat Bodies, Intersectionality, and Social Justice* includes a range of scholarly perspectives on the ways that fatness intersects with multiple other identities and oppressions.³¹

Disruptions

In the last twenty years there have been many powerful disruptions to the hold of anti-fat bigotry. Joy Cox’s *Fat Girls in Black Bodies: Creating Communities of Our Own* is a powerful text that speaks both to the oppression faced by Black women but also the joyful possibilities of disrupting that oppression and seeking community.³² Writers like Kimberly Dark, Hanne Blank, and Susan Stinson disrupt anti-fat bigotry in all its complexities and manifestations in their essays and novels. Photographer Substantia Jones is extraordinary in her representation of fat people, especially fat queer people. Sonya Renee Taylor’s *Your Body is Not an Apology*, both her book and her larger activist project, speaks to the multiple avenues of challenging the idea that the body is a signifier of “civilization.”³³

²⁸Strings, *Fearing the Black Body*.

²⁹Farrell, *Fat Shame*.

³⁰Cat Pausé et al, eds. *Queering Fat Embodiment* (Farnham, Surrey, England: Ashgate, 2014); Rothblum and Solovay, *The Fat Studies Reader*.

³¹May Friedman, Carla Rice, and Jen Rinaldi, *Thickening Fat: Fat Bodies, Intersectionality, and Social Justice* (New York: Routledge, 2020).

³²Joy Cox, *Fat Girls in Black Bodies: Creating Communities of Our Own* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2020).

³³Sonya Renee Taylor, *The Body Is Not an Apology: The Power of Radical Self-Love* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 2018).

Many advocates, professionals and scholars are also working to disrupt anti-fat bigotry by utilizing fat acceptance and activism that challenges weight stigma through the promotion of body and wellness diversity in medical settings. Erin Cameron and Constance Russell's *The Fat Pedagogy Reader: Challenging Weight-Based Oppression Through Critical Education* speaks to, as the title suggests, the ways that educators can push against fat stigma.³⁴ Advocates like Sondra Solovay have turned their attention to legal remedies for fat discrimination.

There are many avenues to disrupt anti-fat bigotry, from art to literature to the law and public policy. This disruption is not, however, simply “body positivity,” which is often mostly a marketing tool. Rather, the work that seriously disrupts anti-fat bigotry addresses the myriad ways that popular culture, institutions, interpersonal relationships, and the economy bolster the idea of the thin body as “civilized” with very severe consequences.

³⁴Erin Cameron and Constance Russell, eds., *The Fat Pedagogy Reader: Challenging Weight-Based Oppression Through Critical Education* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2016).