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Breaking WEIGHT BIAS

Promoting Health without
harming through digital
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4.2. Coming out as fat





Table of Content

TRAINING CONTENT	3
4.2. Coming out as fat	3
4.2.1. Reclaiming the word “fat”	3
4.2.2. Coming Out versus Flaunting	4
4.2.3. How Visibility Matters	6
EXTERNAL RESOURCES	8



TRAINING CONTENT

4.2. Coming out as fat

4.2.1. Reclaiming the word “fat”

Words can have great power, especially if they are assigned negative meanings and associations. The case of the word ‘fat’ reveals the powerful and culturally accepted association of the idea of fatness with such negative notions as *inferiority*, *deficiency*, and *ugliness* (Lupton, 2013).

For centuries, the idealisation of *disciplined bodies* has been exalting the qualities of self-control as linked with a sort of moral superiority (Lupton, 2013). From the twentieth century and onwards, fat people are facing weight bias and are stigmatised as incapable of preserving their proper health (and a morally acceptable appearance) and, for that reason, they are deemed as undeserving of equal benefits and equal treatment in every aspect of their life.

While fat people are aware of their supposed moral failure and often feel very self-conscious in social situations, they are rightfully reclaiming the word ‘fat’ and striving to dissociate it from prior negative connotations. As illustrated in modern studies (like in the case of the journal ‘Fat Studies’ <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/ufts20/current>):

- the words ‘fat’ and ‘fatness’ are reclaimed as less offensive than medicalised terms that mainly describe deviations from a culturally accepted norm,
- the connection between ill health and fatness is contested (as it is not statistically proved),
- concerned people identify themselves as a minority that is constantly faced with discrimination and marginalisation and feel the need to resist them (Lupton, 2013).

In what is now called *the fat acceptance movement*, **the word ‘fat’ is preferred as a descriptor** and not as a negative discriminator with pejorative meaning (Meadows & Daníelsdóttir, 2016). This is because the movement’s incentive is to normalise the existence of fat bodies and strip them from negative connotations (Saguy & Ward, 2011).

“Ideally, it should be the target group itself that gets to decide on the label used to describe them”

(Meadows & Daníelsdóttir, 2016)



Labelling people with a word that represents a certain quality is, on its own, a process that normalises social division (*Us versus Them*); as such, it raises several questions as per the legitimacy of differential treatment and the motives behind such social injustices.

Research shows that the word ‘fat’ causes more negative reactions than the word ‘overweight,’ thus enhancing the prejudice against people who identify as fat (Brochu & Esses, 2011). However, the preferred terminology varies depending on agency and situational factors such as social settings (Trainer et al., 2015).

Overall, the contemporary movement seeks to reclaim the word ‘fat’ with the scope to attack weight stigma and **promote diversity and equality**. Therefore, the word ‘fat’ can be considered, under these circumstances, as a tool used to resist oppression by attacking its very source: the discriminatory tendencies seeking to elevate certain social groups at the expense of others.

4.2.2. Coming Out versus Flaunting

The *fat acceptance movement* does not only reclaim a single word (the word ‘fat’). Rather, it seeks to highlight the magnitude of the social injustices inflicted upon people who are categorised as ‘fat.’ In this context, individualities seek to restore attributes that were stripped off from them and that have nothing to do with physical appearance.

As a reaction to discriminatory practices and experienced social inequality, people who do not identify as ‘normal’ or ‘thin’ have started to renegotiate an identity that does not fall into the stereotypical representations of *visible stigmas* (Saguy and Ward, 2011). Visible -otherwise known as discredited- stigmas cannot be hidden or camouflaged.

“My fear was rooted in the knowledge of the stigma that surrounds fatness”

(Pausé, 2012, p. 44)

Stereotypical representations of fatness in popular narratives and the media contributed to the association of the word ‘fat’ with abnormality. For this reason, the efforts to renounce the respective stigma have led to two distinct terms:



- 1) Coming out as fat,
- 2) Flaunting

Coming out as fat equals to refusing to pass as anything *but* fat. Coming out as fat may seem like a paradox since body-size is a visible feature (Pausé, 2012). However, the act of promoting visibility to deconstruct stigma is an important feature of modern activism:

“Fat rights activists do talk about coming out as fat, which leads us to rethink the importance of visibility in stigma and de-stigmatisation strategies”

(Saguy & Ward, 2011, p. 56).

The coming out narrative was created to support gay rights and communities, in times when racism and discrimination were costing lives and civil rights movements feistily contested oppression and injustice. Inspired by gay and black power movements, the coming out narrative became “a rite of passage, something to be shared with others” as an affirmation of self-acceptance and pride (Saguy & Ward, 2011, p. 59). Adopting this kind of narrative in the case of fatness equals choosing to **appreciate one’s proper identity as it is, with no modifications or covering efforts.**

This comes as a direct contestation of priorly analysed *identity management* types, as those discussed by renowned sociologist Erving Goffman (Pausé, 2012, p. 46). In the coming out agency, as analysed outside the framework of fatness, individuals may occasionally succumb to an urge or need to pass as ‘normal’-that is, as members of the dominant group; in some cases, they may even choose to cover visible differentiating features or avoid social encounters by fear of exposure (Pausé, 2012, p. 46). This is not the case with fat people who promote the fat movement; their goal is to attack stigma at its socially constructed roots.

When it comes to stigma, coming out differs from flaunting up to a certain degree. Flaunting suggests that the person consciously draws attention to their stigmatised feature; this happens as an attempt to normalise said feature and, hence, challenge any respective stereotypes and misconceptions, as well as hegemonic discourses that deny legitimacy to anything transcending the dominant culture (Saguy & Ward, 2011, p. 57).

While the coming out narrative migrated from queer to fat politics and was, henceforth, expected to respond to new social contexts, it has remained a strong advocate of visibility in contempt of stigma. In this context, the coming out narrative



rejects the idea of forced and hypocritical assimilation for the sake of the politics of difference (Saguy & Ward, 2011, p. 62).

4.2.3. How Visibility Matters

Stigma and its multiple negative implications largely rely on the instinctive and defensive reaction of hiding or, at least, trying to assimilate into dominant groups.

To bring social change and improve the lives of thousands of people, individuals, governments, and policy makers should reconsider **the importance of visibility**.

Resisting stigmatisation can only be effective if concerned individuals refuse to succumb to “assimilationist strategies that stress sameness,” as much as to “radical political strategies that emphasise difference” (Saguy & Ward, 2011, p.53). In both cases, the true individual identity is kept hidden under the pretext of easily made categorisations, only to serve limited people’s interests for yet another time.

Whereas stereotypes and negative feelings like ‘fatphobia’ (the pathological fear of fatness) are inextricably linked to the visible nature of fatness, fat rights activists reject assimilation and demand visibility for fat people. This is because de-stigmatisation can only happen when people are seen and appreciated for who they really are and are treated equally and respectfully -as much as everyone else.

In this context, visibility becomes a sort of resistance against hegemonic discourses. By openly refusing to fit the norm and proudly accepting the Self despite formerly hidden identification features, a person can renegotiate their identity under new terms. This kind of renegotiation via visibility can happen in many ways; for instance, by challenging pre-existing assumptions, by assigning new meanings to priorly negatively perceived words, by weakening harmful behaviours connected to stigma (like fear and loathing), or by simply provoking others to reconsider former ideas or attitudes. With strategic actions like these, visibility gains symbolic importance in a culture that exaggerates and even demonises difference.

The symbolic importance of visibility relies mainly on the fact that it juxtaposes “a non-negotiable aspect of self” with “a temporary state to be remedied through weight loss (Saguy & Ward, 2011, p.65). In this way, visibility allows people to accept their *true* identity and to socialise/confront others without using *identity management techniques* (Pausé, 2012): that is, without wishing for something else or a change in the future, without hiding in (symbolic) closets, and without staging insincere performances.



“One claims the right to define the meaning of one’s own body and to stake out new cultural meanings and practices around body size”

(Saguy & Ward, 2011, p.74).

When the word ‘fat’ is successfully reclaimed, **people regain the freedom to coexist with others as equals** and to reject cultural attitudes that belittle fatness as something *ugly, unhealthy, and immoral*; in that sense, they *affirm and valorise a stigmatised and visible trait* (Saguy & Ward, 2011, p.74). By presenting themselves in social settings as if the stigma is already removed from the visible trait, individuals regain a sense of control and can feel empowered (Brighenti, 2007).

“Visibility lies at the intersection of the two domains of aesthetics (relations of *perception*) and politics (relations of *power*)”

(Brighenti, 2007, p.324).

Visibility and representation are the antidotes to stigma. This realisation will help healthcare professionals feel calmer when they meet people of different body sizes, without feeling the urgent pressure that they have to ‘make them lose weight immediately’. Moreover, it can empower them to gain self-confidence for their own bodies and represent their patients in the health community.



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