

No Blue Eyeliner:
An Exploratory Study on Experiences of Fat Women in Academia

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Samantha Murray (2008:25) uses the word *lipoliteracy* to name the way we read people based on their physical appearance. These judgments are often internalized as truths about the person in the body. Fat bodies are read in accordance with a number of widespread myths relating to health, beauty, and choice, which are largely the basis of discrimination against fat people. Yet, only in the last 30 years have scholars taken up these discourses through a critical scholarly lens.

Fat studies is a growing interdisciplinary field of scholarly work concerned with the marginal social placement of fat bodies and the “discourse relating to beauty, femininity, sexuality, health, pathology, morality, excess, and self governance,” (Murray 2008:3). This thesis will investigate possible experiences of work discrimination through the lens of fat studies. Specifically, I explore the experiences of fat female professors, their relationships with their body, and how their identities and appearance impact their jobs.

WORDS MATTER

Among fat studies scholars, fat acceptance activists, and advocates, the word “fat” is preferred to other body size descriptors such as “obese” and “overweight” which have been pathologized and medicalized (Fikkan and Rothblum 2011; Graves and Kwan 2013:32). The movement to reclaim the word fat as connotatively neutral represents a scholarly and popular movement of approaching fat bodies with compassion, understanding, and a hope to move away from the prejudicial rhetoric around fat bodies. Therefore, in this thesis, I will follow the lead of the fat studies discipline and use fat whenever possible throughout this work.

AN INTRODUCTION TO FATPHOBIA

At the turn of the 20th century, the American body ideal for women shifted away from “corpulence,” and thinness became associated with beauty and national identity. This shift was

motivated by a desire to move the national idea of beauty away from aesthetics associated with black women which included a thicker body (Strings 2019:35). Philosophy and research, pioneered by white men and steeped in anti-blackness, changed the narrative of women's beauty and created a hierarchy which idealized the features of thin white women (Strings 2019:40). Beauty is a controlling framework through which women's worth is assessed, and the closer to the thin white ideal a woman is, the more she is valued.

Rooted in anti-black and anti-immigrant sentiment, the fear of fat, or fatphobia, emerged initially as a branch of American racism and nationalism. This intersected with the tendency to use beauty indicators as indicators of health, though the two are unrelated, especially in regard to weight (Kwan and Graves 2007:45). In an attempt to further distance white women from black women, thinness gained cultural legitimacy as a marker of good health opposite fatness which complimented whiteness opposite blackness. As the proportion of white Americans who fall into obese and overweight categories has grown over the years, national awareness campaigns of the "obesity epidemic" have become more prominent. When white bodies become marginal through other identities, such as fatness, white political and social power can be invoked to spark movements, including the anti-fat movements seen today (LeBesco 2003:38).

MYTHS ASSOCIATED WITH FATNESS

In 1998, the World Health Organization published a report which declared obesity a disease that was rapidly affecting the global population and causing negative health outcomes including premature mortality (World Health Organization 1998). This report reframed anti-fat stances and hate as concern for the health of fat people and catalyzed the study of fatness as an urgent pathologic issue. The reality of the so-called epidemic is much different.

The concept of the “Obesity Paradox” refers to the protective factors excess weight bring to certain populations (Elagizi et al. 2007; Elagizi et al. 2018). While obesity is *associated* with negative outcomes, it has not been found to *cause* any negative health outcomes (Penney and Kirk 2015; Flegal et al 2005). Although the WHO instituted the Body Mass Index (BMI) as the standardized measurement for classifying overweight and obesity, further research showed that the BMI does not appropriately assess these categories (World Health Organization 1998; Elagizi et al. 2007, Elagizi et al. 2018). The WHO 1997 press release entitled “Obesity epidemic puts millions at risk from related diseases” cemented the inclusion of pathology in the discussion around weight and health. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) supported the messaging of obesity as an epidemic.

Beginning in 1999, the CDC published annual reports in the form of maps highlighting changes in obesity across the nation (CDC 1999). Though the numbers seemed to be growing substantially, which furthered the epidemic narrative, the WHO definition of obesity shifted to include a larger weight range and, therefore, more people. The CDC’s endorsement of the “obesity epidemic” and shifting goalposts for weight classification contributed to growing fear of fatness and encouraged the perspective that fatness was something the individual must remedy (Kwan and Graves 2013:78).

The emphasis on an individual’s choices regarding fatness and weight loss stems from a neoliberal moralization of choice. Fatness is most commonly attributed to gluttony and lack of exercise which are understood to be personal choices, and thinness is understood to be the morally correct choice to make or pursue for your body (LeBesco 2003:27). Commonly supported weight loss techniques such as diet and exercise have been found to be largely ineffective (Penney and Kirk 2015). Diets often have a “yo-yo” effect where the weight is lost

then gained in bursts of time which has negative health impacts (Penney and Kirk 2015; Kwan and Graves 2013:76). Weight loss and weight gain are both socially constructed as wholly within the control of the individual when this is not necessarily the case (Graves and Kwan 2013:61). The perception of fatness as a completely autonomous choice, in addition to a major health concern, frames widespread anti-fatness as a position of care rather than aggression or bigotry, sometimes referred to as concern trolling (Quimby 2019). Further, this justification can support resulting discriminatory practices which affect fat people in many areas, including the workplace (Giel et al. 2010).

POSTIONALITY

As a researcher, part of my interest in the topic stems from my own experiences with body dissatisfaction and fatphobia which started at a very young age. The first time I was called fat was at a birthday party in second grade. My initial reaction was confusion – I didn't understand the connotation of the word or why it was spoken in a whisper. Confusion gave way to shame as I pieced together that the word "fat" was being used to name something undesirable about how I looked. I am not now, nor have I ever been fat. But throughout elementary school, I developed, and had reinforced for me, a distorted or *dysmorphic* perception of my body. By middle school, I had internalized a fear of fatness and began disordered eating habits that followed me through my freshman year of college.

In my sophomore year of college, I read *Hunger* by Roxane Gay (2017). This catalyzed my consumption of works relating to body positivity, including closely following fat activists on social media. I have continued to make an active practice of seeking out body positive and body neutral imaging, messaging, and literature and supporting those who produce it to work through my internalized fatphobia. Today, because of the imaging and messaging I surround myself with,

I have a positive or neutral opinion of my body, and though I still fight against thoughts of disordered eating, they are less present than they were years ago. This research has personally affirmed the importance of addressing fatness and naming the bias and stigma associated with it. I acknowledge the personal nature of this work not to discredit the data and analyses but to provide context for the lens through which I took on this project and my role as a researcher.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This literature review provides an analysis of current research relating to weight bias in general work settings, perceptions of bodies in relation to work, and gender and weight related dynamics in performance evaluations, which indicate that academia is susceptible to significant negative heavy weight bias. Because some scholars have used “obese” or “overweight” in their studies, this section will contain mixed adjectives in accordance with the terminology used by the scholars whose work I reference. This review will also include literature around youth fatness and academics, supporting reasoning for my target group, and op-eds from various websites, which indicate a distinct absence of voice in the literature. The research on weight bias within the context of academia is limited. While the effects and scope of weight bias are comprehensive and negative, the lived experiences of fat people within the context of work are not often explored.

BIAS IN THE WORKPLACE

Often the basis of fat stereotypes is the assumption that a person’s body reveals aspects of their personality. For fat people, these stereotypes include character judgements of laziness, weak-will, and general unsuccessfulness, which can lead to bias and discrimination (Puhl and Heuer 2012; Andreyeva, Puhl, and Brownell 2012; Carr and Friedman 2005). The prevalence of weight bias and discrimination based on body size nearly doubled from 1996 to 2006 in the US, but only two states, California and Michigan, have protections for fat workers (Andreyeva, Puhl, and Brownell 2012; Fisanick 2007). Weight has been found to have a negative effect on hiring probability for obese/overweight applicants. When the weight of an applicant is known, either through pictures or body type indicators such as “obese” and “overweight,” these individuals are less likely to be hired for a job (Bellizzi and Hasty 2013; Pingitore et al. 1994; Klesges et al. 1990; Larkin and Pines 1979). Once hired, fat women make almost \$7,000 less per year than

their thin counterparts (Solovay 2000:18; Baum and Ford 2004). Additionally, bias against fat women is stronger than bias against fat men who, as a group, are rated as having better overall character as compared to fat women (Pingitore et al. 1994; Andrevaya, Puhl, and Brownell 2012).

Race also affects the salience of fatphobic attitudes. Hebl and Heatherton (2008) found that white women rated “large” white women more harshly on measures of attractiveness, intelligence, job success, relationship success, happiness, and popularity than they did “average” or “thin” women. Conversely, large women, especially large black women, did not have significant losses in scores when rated by other black women, except in attractiveness. Black participants also did not show bias against fat applicants in job placements, with relatively even distribution across job levels. White women, however, were significantly less likely to place fat applicants in professional level jobs, placing less than 3% of fat women in that category whereas black women placed 36%. Overall white women show significantly more bias against fat applicants than black people. Paeratakul et al. (2012) also found white women as having the strongest bias against fat individuals but did not find any other significant relationships regarding race. They acknowledged, though, the need for further research and emphasized that this was the first exploratory study done that considered the intersections of weight, gender, and race. Studies since then have found mixed results on the interaction between race and weight.

Van Amsterdam and van Eck (2019) interviewed women in the Netherlands about their experiences with weight discrimination in the workplace. The women, mostly white and middle-class, described combatting perceived weight bias as a constant job. While the women did not all respond to the stereotypes in the same way, they all understood the stereotypes commonly held about fat people and adapted their behavior accordingly. Adaptive behaviors included foregoing

casual Fridays in favor of business clothes, not taking sick days for fear of judgement, and dressing in showy clothing to reclaim visibility. The fat body and how it may or may not be perceived was at the forefront of the participants' minds. As one of the few studies on weight discrimination utilizing interview methodology, the results of this study indicate that the experience of weight discrimination is embodied – an interactive and dynamic relationship between the self, body, and world.

Job interviews are a site of proven, manifested weight bias which can have an adverse impact on the hiring of fat people (Rothblum et al. 1990; Bellizzi and Hasty 2013; Pingitore et al. 1994; Kleges et al. 1990; Larkin and Pines 1979). During the job search fat women feel hyper-visible and experience low self-confidence when applying to jobs and taking interviews (Rothblum et al. 1990). Advancing academic careers requires a series of interviews starting from graduate school applications to jobs as professors. Additionally, fat applicants are more likely to be viewed as better suited to jobs at less challenging sites and jobs with less face-to-face interaction (Bellizzi and Hasty 2013). Jobs at universities demand a level of rigor and competition that could create bias against fat applicants for hiring and promotion.

BIAS IN SCHOOL

Bias has been found to affect fat students as early as elementary school and follow them through their school experience. Early in a child's academic career, weight impacts how students move through their schooling. Fat girls are shown to have negative outcomes and emotional affect associated with school from a young age, and both teachers and peers demonstrate antifat biases (Martin et al. 2017; Tiggemann and Anesbury 2006). Obese and overweight students receive lower grades in their classes but do equally as well as their thin peers on standardized test scores indicating a potentially hostile school environment (MacCann 2010). However, in a study

by Martin et al. (2017) which utilized a focus group of 12-17-year-old female students, the girls reported that they got good grades *because* they were isolated by their peers and were, therefore, not distracted during class. Though the girls maintained good grades, peer isolation negatively impacted their feelings about school.

Fat girls also face hardships in college. They are less likely than their thin peers to be accepted into college, go to college, or complete a degree (Swami and Monk, 2012; Crosnoe 2007; Fowler-Brown et al. 2010). They are also less likely to receive financial support from their parents to pay for college expenses (Crandall 1991; Crandall 1995). The impact of weight on financial support and college attendance/completion was unique to fat women and did not significantly impact outcomes for fat men. Fat students who want to attend graduate school also face discrimination. Burmeister et al. (2013) conducted a study of the graduate school admissions process and the presence of weight bias. Analyzing the application process and outcomes for 97 currently enrolled psychology graduate students at a large university, Burmeister et al. found a significant negative relationship between a student's BMI and post-interview offers of placement in a graduate program. Notably, the letters of recommendation for students with a higher BMI included more positive adjectives than in letters for students with a lower BMI. The discrepancy between post-interview offers of admission and positive letters of recommendation indicates that weight bias affects how applicants are perceived during their graduate school interviews regardless of their academic achievements and perceived ability from recommenders.

BIAS IN ACADEMIA

Media depictions of great philosophers, professors, and other thinkers are typically white, heterosexual, able-bodied men, creating a heterogenous visual representation of intellectual

authority. Fat female professors deviate from this stereotype and, thus, have an added burden of proving credibility to their students (Fisanick 2007). Professors are evaluated within the classroom for effective teaching, and these evaluations often factor in promotion decisions and tenure cases. Women have been found to receive lower classroom evaluations from students than their male counterparts (Mitchell and Martin 2018). Additionally, when evaluating professors, students are more inclined to give attractive professors better evaluations (Hamermesch and Parker 2005). On the RateMyProfessor.com website, which allows students to publicly review their professors, *hotness* is evaluated alongside other factors such as class *quality* and *easiness*. Felton et al. (2008) found that ratings of *quality* and *easiness* were significantly higher for professors with high *hotness* scores than for professors with low *hotness* scores. This becomes especially problematic given that fatness and beauty are often seen as antithetical (Fikkan and Rothblum 2011; Graves and Kwan 2013:90; Rothblum et al. 1990). Weight also impacts the harshness of disciplinary measures. Fat employees are more likely to receive harsher sanctions as compared to their thin counterparts (Bellizzi and Hasty 2013). Given these biases, it is likely that fat female professors will be evaluated more poorly and also have their performance viewed more harshly as compared to their thin coworkers, which could impact promotion potential.

ADDING VOICE

ChronicleVita.com, an arm of the Chronicle of Higher Education, published a series of three interviews, conducted by Stacey Patton in 2014, with professors who talked about what it was like to be fat in academia. Patton's interviews are unique with their prioritization of voice and identification of the professors who she interviews. While some professors have published op-eds talking about issues they face as fat professors, they mostly remain anonymous (Benton 2004). Patton interviewed two women, one white and one black, and a black man. Interviewees

mentioned physical barriers which prevent them from performing their best or feeling comfortable in spaces, such as desks with attached chairs, classrooms with rows too close to walk through, and a lack of elevators in some buildings. The comments on physical space mentioned across all interviewees indicates a need for more interview data to gather information about the lived experiences of fat professors as it would be harder to capture this specific common experience through statistical data. That information, though, is critical in developing a holistic understanding of fat bias in academia and can be key in identifying gaps, such as hostile spaces, and understanding the embodied experience of being a fat professor.

Congruent with the literature, Patton found that anti-fatness does not end once a job is secured, and the lack of support, space, and recognition of bias can feel isolating. The women Patton interviewed mentioned the conflict between feeling the discrimination against them because of their size and the lack of “proof” to support their feelings. Though there is increasing research on weight discrimination, their responses point to the lack of validation the fat studies discipline is receiving from other scholars and alludes to the difficult task of pushing the research that has been done into mainstream consciousness.

Chapter 3: Methods

Because the goal of this study is to address the gap of personal voice and lived experiences in the current literature, semi-structured interviews were used to collect data which allowed the participants agency in directing the conversation. The interviews involved probing questions along three themes: general body relationship, relationship with their body in their work context, and professional environment and workplace interactions. The purpose of aligning the interview with themes is to increase the opportunity for analysis by having participants respond to similar questions along those themes. These themes were chosen to target gap areas in the existing literature on weight discrimination and focused on understanding the participant's various environments, the types of messaging they receive and interactions they have in those environments, and how that makes them feel. No questions asked about explicit experiences of discrimination. The aim of the questions was to prioritize the feelings of the participants, learn about the participant's daily routines and histories, and understand where participants do or do not see weight as a salient factor in their educational and work experience. Because the interviews were semi-structured, not all participants were asked the same questions. All of the questions, however, were based around the central themes and many of the questions were the same to allow for stronger analysis.

Beginning this research required going through the IRB approval process. The study was approved under the Exempt category, although it was submitted for approval under the Expedited category. The approval process took three months from submission to approval. After the study was approved, recruitment began.

RECRUITMENT

The sample included woman-identifying professors at the University of Texas at Austin. Women were the focus of this research due to the previously highlighted intersection of gender

and weight for antifat discrimination (Pingitore et al. 1994; Fikkan and Rothblum 2011).

Professors were the focus of the study because of the varied interactions and environments they encounter in their position which include teaching students, working with colleagues, and reporting to superiors.

The recruitment method utilized a two-part process of identifying potential participants through mass email. For the first phase, a flier was created which advertised the opportunity to participate in a study focusing on the influence of appearance for women in academia (Appendix A). The flier did not specify the focus on weight to try to recruit a larger initial pool because the topic of weight is considered sensitive. This specification was made later in the recruitment process. Because department chairs at the University of Texas at Austin have the most direct access to professors in their department and every professor can be accounted for through a department. Every department chair was emailed with a request to forward the below email to all of the professors in their department (Appendix B) with the recruitment flier attached. Email addresses of every department chair are located on the official UT website. Emails were sent to ensure that all possible participants had equal opportunity to self-select into participating, but this method relied on the chairs to forward the information. I received confirmation emails from 15 department chairs that information was forwarded to their faculty; UT has 79 unique departments listed on their website.

An overwhelming majority of potential participants from this phase were professors in the medical fields. This could be because chairs of the medical field departments were more diligent in disseminating the information from the study to their faculty, but it could also be due to a particular interest of women in those fields to talk about issues relating to appearance at work. The second phase of recruitment involved following up with potential participants after

they responded to the general call with an email which specified weight as the specific interest of the study (Appendix C). Only potential participants who confirmed their willingness to participate after the second email were considered for participation in the study. Thirteen women responded to the second email. The aim was to collect data from seven woman-identifying professors at the University of Texas. Due to the compressed timeline of this study, four participants were selected for interviews. Priority was given to the three individuals who responded to the second email with enthusiasm and/or explicitly expressed interest in talking about weight. The fourth participant was chosen randomly from the potential participant pool. All participants selected a date, time, and location of their convenience for a thirty minute in-person interview.

The final sample included four women who held faculty positions at the University of Texas at Austin. The participants held positions in four different colleges within the University. One was a clinical instructor, one was a lecturer, and two were assistant professors one of whom was explicitly not tenure track, the other was unspecified. Three of the women were white, one was Latina. All participants were younger than 50 years old and had been at the university for over five years. This sample is not reflective demographically of professors at the University of Texas at Austin.

STUDY DESIGN AND PROCEDURE

Participants were met at the date, time, and location of their choosing. After introductions, they signed a consent form (Appendix D) and were given a copy of the consent form for their records. The interviews lasted 30-50 minutes and were recorded with consent. After the interview, the recordings were transcribed verbatim. Participation in this study was kept completely confidential and all identifying information was removed at the time of

transcription. After transcription, the interview recordings were deleted, and each participant was given a pseudonym to be used throughout the study.

Chapter 4: Results

This chapter outlines the findings of the study following interviews with the four participants along the main themes that presented in the data. The themes that emerged include a changing body relationship, appearance expectations and rebellions, intersections of identity and microaggressions, and health. In this chapter, the themes will be analyzed in light of the prevailing literature.

CHANGING BODY RELATIONSHIPS

The prevalent social message that fat bodies are unideal bodies and should be fixed is well documented in research and in the media (Graves and Kwan 2013:11; Rothblum and Fikkan 2011; Cooper 2010; Puhl and Brownell 2012). Antifat attitudes have been observed in children from early ages (Cramer and Steinwart 1998) but the findings vary on how it affects self-esteem. For the women who participated in the present study, childhood was a critical period in which they developed negative relationships with their bodies, largely influenced by others' reactions to their bodies.

An Awareness Incident

Only one of the women, Kay, had a specific moment she recalls as the catalyst for her body image issues. Two of the women, Hannah and Emily, recalled various moments and feelings that accumulated in their minds over time. Hannah, Kay, and Emily all indicated childhood as the start of their bodily awareness and the beginning of antifat attitudes toward themselves. Kay was 10 or 12 years old when her father gave her a pin that depicted a sheep and said, “You is not fat, you is just fluffy.” She said that it took months to figure out the meaning of the message:

I didn't understand the joke. Like I think it took me several months before I even understood what it even meant, because I had never framed myself in that way. So that was probably [the first time I realized people perceived me differently for my appearance.

Hannah had a similar experience, remembering her mom being “hyper-fixated on [her] size” when she was young. As a result, Hannah began to diet when she was 11 years old. Emily did not say that she received any explicit messaging about her body from her parents but remembers starting to gain weight at around 6 years old and that her mom was very self-conscious about her own weight. Parental talk about weight and commentary on their children’s body is associated with negative psychological effects on their children (Fulkerson et al. 2007). This awareness of their bodies as fat and of fat bodies in general being unideal were the foundation from which self-esteem issues and disordered eating habits arose.

Hannah said growing up she spent “a lot of time of not liking my body, ‘feeling fat,’ looking in the mirror and not liking what [she] saw.” She also was on diets from age 11 to 27, and ultimately stopped dieting on recommendation from a dietician due to the way it affected her mental health. Emily commented that she has “always struggled” both with the physical and emotional aspects of her weight:

[My relationship with my weight] was always really complicated. I remember binge eating in middle school so like I would get off the bus station, go to the little gas station, I don’t know how I had money, but I would buy a box of macaroni and cheese and make it before my parents got home. And I would down the whole box. I must have been 13 or 12 to be able to use the stove and pay for macaroni and cheese.

Binge eating and extreme dieting behaviors have detrimental physical and psychological effects (Brownell and Rodin 1994). Yet these avenues were pursued in attempts to cope with the psychological stress of perceiving their body as fat.

Dysmorphia

Women who consume media and receive messages which promote thinness as a beauty ideal often perceive their body as larger than it is (Markovik, Votava-Raic, and Nikolic 1998; Hill and Bhatti 1995). Teasing from other children during school and the attention that Hannah’s

mom placed on making Hannah's body smaller created an internal perception for Hannah that her body was larger than it really was. She noted:

Always, when I look back at pictures of myself from [second grade], I'm like, I was just a bit chubby. But the other kids made fun and my mom was so clearly fixated on my size that I just thought I was... I don't know like the Michelin Tire Man or something.

Emily talked about looking back at pictures from high school when she was overweight and struggling with her feelings toward her body and now thinking, "I would love to be that weight at this point in my life." The perception of their body as children was distorted. Kay summed up the distortive effect saying:

It's so funny when you look back at pictures of yourself right? Because in your head you are always like 'I was so fat,' and I look back at those pictures and I think about later in my life when I really was quite fat, you know, like 200 lbs, and I was not that fat [in college], real average. *laughs* But in your head it just doesn't work out that way.

The women internalized that their bodies were fat, and that fat was bad. The negativity around fat bodies led them to perceive their bodies in a way that did not reflect reality.

The psychological implications of having a fat body in childhood seem to include feelings of shame and insecurity along with the development of unhealthy relationships with food and disordered thought patterns in relation to eating which is supported by the data (Brownell and Rodin 1994; Cramer and Steinwart 1998; Markovik, Votava-Raic, and Nikolic 1998). These effects, however, may not be inherent to the body itself but a product of the messaging a child receives about their body from external sources, like their parents, classmates, and media.

Finding Peace and Fighting Messages

After years of antifat messages in childhood, fat adults often internalize those prejudices (Barker and Cooke 1992). The participants exhibited internalized fatphobia to varying degrees as evidenced by comments about their own bodies during their interviews. However, when asked

about their relationship with their body currently, the women had a single unifying word to explain it – peace. Kay says she is “coming to peace with [her body]” as she ages, and Hannah felt similarly noting that “a lot of the work [she has] been doing in [her] 30s has been to make peace” with her body. The idea of the body as something to make peace with alludes to it being a site where peace is not inherent, that it is a place where these women are having to fight against the hateful messages, both external and internal.

Kay mentioned that therapy and mindfulness have helped her in terms of unlearning many antifat messages about her body. Kay resisted the observer’s perspective of her body (Augustus-Horvath and Tylka 2011). She talked throughout the interview about loving her body for what it can do versus how it looks and choosing clothes to wear that feel comfortable to her despite potential repercussions. Hannah took a more academic route to coming to body acceptance and neutrality after seeing a dietician in grad school who urged her to stop dieting for her mental wellbeing. She began by reading books and literature about weight, health, and acceptance and created an informal support network with other fat women in her graduate program. Now a professor, Hannah explicitly refers to self-work and making peace with her body as her focus of growth for her 30s. She uses Instagram to help curate the external messages she receives. For example, she said:

When people talk about what you look at everyday helping to establish your standards of beauty, even just following accounts of other plus-sized women who are posting pictures of themselves, like Lizzo. Your brain goes “Oh they’re really pretty!” And then you look at yourself and you’re like “Oh I am also like that.” It definitely helps. It’s not a cure all, but it helps to be exposed to other sizes, and it’s something I am really conscious of now.

Stress can trigger previous negative thought patterns which indicates the pervasive nature of the negative messaging, even after processing and unlearning them. These messages, unlike the ones of childhood, come from within Hannah. She described the typical spiral of negative thoughts

relating to her body and diet, initiated by stressful events such as going out of town for an academic conference, that centers the blame for physiological stress reactions on her fat body. Though she is working to reject her internalized fatphobia, freeing oneself from those messages is a long-term, intensive process that is often nonlinear.

Emily's perception of her peace with her body was more definitive, claiming an arrival by stating "I think I've made peace with [my body]," though her tone was the more resigned and less proud than that of the other two women. Emily talked a lot about "feeling good" within the context of her diet. She is currently doing intermittent fasting (IF) and says that she "feels really good on it." Intermittent fasting is not a diet but an eating pattern that restricts the hours in a day when someone can eat and when they cannot -- the fasting period (Mattson and Wan 2005). During the work week, Emily says IF is easy, she feels good, and she loses weight, but on the weekends or when she goes out of town, "things all change" and she gains back the weight she lost. Emily tied her feelings about her body to how well she stuck to her IF plan, but there is a tension between Emily's support system and her diet. On the weekends and at home where earlier in the interview she said she feels pretty and loved, she struggles to maintain the IF plan that she is able to while at work -- an environment where she feels uncomfortable and hyper aware of her body. She said:

I think it just depends on my environment, who I'm around. Like professionally I struggle because a majority of my colleagues are thin, so I would say here I really struggle. At home I feel beautiful and loved, you know. It's more of a professional environment. With my friends I feel pretty... I think it too depends on how I feel that week. Like if I had a horrible weekend -- like right now, I went to Vegas this past weekend and so I just feel absolutely horrible right now. And so by Friday I will feel good because I will have eaten really really well for this week, and who knows what's going to happen this weekend again.

The critical role of the environment in Emily's IF efforts points to her sense of confidence and beauty to be located outside of herself and points to a general sense of bodily dissatisfaction.

Both of which conflict with the sense of peace she described. This could indicate coming to a feeling of peace as aspirational, but it could also indicate a pressure for fat women to communicate being at peace with their body to others.

The fourth participant, Lindy, was the only participant who did not mention being fat at any point in her life. Lindy's response to her current feelings about her body echoed the sentiments of the others in terms of peace but did not remark on the process -- "I just kind of feel like it's my body." Her phrasing, like the phrasing in the others' statements, connotes her body as neutral. However, contrary to the others, there was no mention or feeling to her statement that reflects the difficult nature or process-intensive journey of getting to the state of neutrality. Lindy reported that she only had negative thoughts about her body "to the extent that we all do," then listed examples of negative thoughts, all of which revolved around weight and wanting to be smaller, an effect of fatphobia. Given the data from other participants, the lack of emotionality and hardship in relation to her body could reflect Lindy's thin privilege -- the ease of a thin body moving through a world which prioritizes thinness (van Amsterdam 2013).

APPEARANCE EXPECTATIONS AND REBELLIONS

There are social norms associated with how to dress appropriately as a professor. Hannah laughed when she said she feels like the men in her department "can wear whatever they want," but the title of professor invokes a certain image (Fisanick 2007). Female professors in general contend with this image when they show up to work every day, and women often use dress to assert professional credibility and authority. Lindy has a unique job situation where she spends around half of her time in scrubs for practicum teaching and client-centered work. When not in scrubs there is not a formal dress code policy for Lindy to follow, but there is an expectation of professionalism. Lindy explained:

When we are teaching, we are expected to be business professional/business casual. So I would say when I'm getting ready, I'm not thinking "Oh I should put on this outfit for materialistic reasons or fashion reasons." It's more upholding the image of the school as a faculty member to our students.

For Lindy, "day to day teaching [she feels] pretty comfortable in business casual," adding a blazer or suit for formal meetings or conferences. She attributes her comfort to her long career in the nursing field prior to working at her position at UT because she has "always had dress codes to follow." The other participants shared an understanding of the expectations of professionalism from their job but did not have the same comfort Lindy expressed.

Kay dresses casually in the classroom and at most work events. She says that she dresses that way partially because it is what she feels comfortable in, but also because she wants to be a possibility model for students in her program. Kay said:

I know for me to show up to something a little more on the casual side, that means that a student who showed up like that will feel a bit more okay about it. And it's also just like, I prefer to be more comfortable and casual. So it's me being me, but I also recognize that because I do have a bit more power that I am role modeling in some way, I am being a possibility model in some ways. That yeah, you can show up like that, you can be yourself, and that's okay.

Though she can identify some people in her department who she feels judge her based on appearance, she chooses to ignore it. When having to dress more formally, Kay says she feels some anxiety, but she generally feels confident in her appearance. She does acknowledge that there is pressure to fit the "academic look," but she chooses to ignore it. Her focus is on showing up as herself so that her students feel comfortable to do the same.

Professional appearance in the workplace is often tied to "health," but health is really used as a proxy for thinness, and fat women can feel as though they need to overcompensate for their weight through professional dress (Haynes 2012; van Amsterdam and van Eck 2019). Both Hannah and Emily talked specifically about their appearance playing a key role in how they feel

in the classroom. Hannah thinks a lot about how her appearance can impact how she is being perceived by students. Mostly she worries about how her position of authority could be jeopardized by wearing clothes she loves. She said:

I have conversations with myself on almost a weekly basis about whether the clothes I wear are professional enough. I feel like that's something women broadly do regardless of size... I love my outfit. I feel very me in it. But I also wonder all the time if dressing like this puts me at a disadvantage in the classroom.

Though she worries, Hannah still wears the clothes that she likes and feels comfortable in. Emily felt similarly. When dressing for the day she is "careful of what [she chooses] to wear also. [She chooses] clothes that make [her] feel good." A lot of the time, the clothes that make her feel good are at odds with the unspoken norms of professionalism in her office. The pressure to look a certain way in order to play the role of the job, is present in Emily's workplace. She said:

I do feel the need [to look a certain way]. I feel the need but I rebel against it. Yes, I feel the need to cut my hair, I feel the need to try different clothing, jewelry, but that's not who I am. I have one blazer and I bought it begrudgingly because I was presenting a workshop, directing a workshop essentially. It's not me. And I feel the need, all the time. And part of me, like I *love* blue eyeliner but obviously I can't wear it to work... The staff *love* my style, but the colleagues, I don't think they get it. There's not a lot of makeup in my colleagues, or jewelry even, it's kind of a lot more basic almost.

Emily feels like she cannot express who she is at work due to the appearance expectations of the job. There have never been explicit messages that Emily's appearance needed to change or adjust to fit the standards but there is "just the feeling" that she does not fit in which weighs on her. It was difficult for her, she says, as a "first generation everything" to come into the workplace needing to figure out the unspoken norms, noting that nothing which seemed to look natural to others felt natural to her. Based on the research about the impact of appearance on teaching evaluations, female professors are better off for their evaluations if they do dress professionally, and appearance in general can subconsciously influence performance reviews, so Hannah and

Emily's anxieties about their appearance are valid (Hamermesh and Parker 2005; Mitchell and Martin 2018).

Hannah, Kay, and Emily all felt like their appearance in some way did not align with the standard of a professor. The idea of professional attire came up numerous times, but even that definition differed in specification between participants. The women did not articulate a clear reason why they felt their appearance was "off," however, falling in line with norms of appearance can impact promotions and job security in a less secure field like academia, especially for fat women (Mitchell and Martin 2018; Hamermesh and Parker 2002; Fikkan 2004; Fikkan and Rothblum 2011; Graves and Kwan, 2013:55; Rothblum, et al. 1990).

INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY AND MICROAGGRESSIONS

Many of the explicit messages the women receive at work about their bodies occur after weight loss. While the words people say are probably viewed by the speaker as positive, the message is felt as negative. These messages can come from students and colleagues alike. After losing weight, Kay received a lot of comments about her weight loss. She remembered:

I was at a potluck in the fall and a student I was actually pretty annoyed with was like, "Oh my gosh you look so good blah blah blah" and it was like you have no idea, you don't know anything about my life, and why do you feel it is appropriate to comment on my body. I get that from some of the older professors here and there as well. There the power dynamic is different because I'm not junior anymore but I'm not tenure track so there's always a power dynamic there. With them I just kind of ignore the comments and move on with my day because it's just not worth investing my time.

Hannah was in a similar situation at a job while at UT but not in her current position. She said:

I had lost maybe 20-30 lbs and she [my boss] was like "Oh you look so great!" You know, and on the one hand, thanks, but it felt like it was clearly because - it wasn't like "I like your outfit" or "Cool haircut" - it was clearly "You are thinner and you are in better shape."

In general, the women noted that the feeling of judgement they get from the workplace comes from a more complicated place than just their weight. The participants felt that gender, age, and ethnicity alongside weight could all be factors in how their authority and credibility are perceived. Age and gender were major factors in how Hannah understood colleagues' perceptions of her:

I think it's always difficult to untangle all the threads. There's issues of gender, I am a woman. There's issues of age, I am a younger woman... If I meet a colleague in the break room who has never seen me before, they seem to assume I am a grad student or even sometimes a staff member. And I can't say that's because of my size, right... but like yeah I do think all of those things working together, youth, gender, and I'm sure size is part of that.

Emily understood her ethnicity as playing a major role in feeling invisible and not respected in the workplace.

I feel like I always get overlooked by white men, unless I'm like exotic to them, then they are interested, but other than that I'm not taken - it's like "Who are you again? What's your name again? Have I met you?" "You've met me four times." And it really is angering. But that's something else too. I went to a conference because of my role and I was mistaken for [being] coordinator about two or three times, and there's nothing wrong with being coordinator obviously but why are you assuming that I am a coordinator and not the director... I think because of my weight and then my ethnicity, I think people don't assume I am a professor. I think they don't assume I am the teacher in the room sometimes.

Weight interacts with other identities in creating the feeling of otherness and disrespect felt by the women, and, therefore, is an intersectional issue. Research has yet to find a significant relationship between race, gender, and workplace discrimination (Roehling, Roehling, and Pichler 2005; Paeratakul et al., 2012). However, Emily feels hostility from her work environment more acutely than the other women. This could also be due to or exacerbated by her work environment being in the medical field which has few women and very few racial and ethnic minority professors (Xierali, Fair, and Nivet 2016). Implicit or explicit, however, the women all

understood that their weight is a part of their identity and can factor into the treatment they receive from superiors and colleagues (van Amsterdam and van Eck 2019).

Other Discomforts

Teaching evaluations play a role in professors performance evaluations, but they also give a professor insight into how they are perceived by their students. In her teaching evaluations, Hannah says she often gets comments about being funny:

Sometimes in student evaluations I get described as “lively,” or I don’t think I’ve been described as “jolly,” but like “funny” you know - words that make you feel like there is a bit of coding that is certainly gendered... but it feels like words that could be coded for fat women specifically, because fat is funny and stuff like that. And I think I’m funny as hell *laughs* so it’s not all bad, but yeah.

Because she is tuned in to how fat bodies and fat women are often read as one-dimensionally funny, Hannah views her student’s comments about her humor with discomfort. Even though she thinks she is funny, there is a tension between what is written on the evaluation and what that evaluation could actually mean in terms of her academic authority being overshadowed by her body.

Despite the harmful impact of microaggressions (Sue et al. 2007), the women expressed a general begrudging appreciation for the lack of explicit comments from their workplace about their weight. Hannah commented that she is “sure there are people who have attended *this* institution that have experienced size discrimination in *that* overt a manner,” but she has not experienced it. Even though Emily became visibly upset as she talked about feeling overlooked and underappreciated at work, she still commented that “Nobody has ever been explicit, so I have that at least...” There is a desire to push away the discomforts experienced in the workplace as not as serious as they could be. Antifat discrimination is seen as the last acceptable form of discrimination (Deidrichs and Puhl 2016; Puhl and Brownell 2012; Fikkan and Rothblum 2011).

This could be why, though they feel the harm done by the implicit messages, the women express begrudging gratitude for the lack of outwardly discriminatory and hostile comments.

HEALTH

A surprising theme in the data was participant engagement on the topic of health. None of the interview questions asked the participant to address their health. This topic was intentionally omitted, partially because of the contentious relationship between health and body size, but also because it did not seem relevant to the study. Each participant, however, brought up their health of their own accord and made health related comments at points throughout the interview. The heavy presence of health throughout the interview points to the interrelated nature of bodies, health, and fatness.

Hannah talked about feeling exasperated by the one thin model of health. She says that even though she keeps her body healthy by exercising consistently and eating a lot of fruits and vegetables, her weight does not change drastically. Therefore, even though she knows that her body is healthy, it is not read as such because of her weight. Kay noted that as she found ways she liked to exercise at all points in her life, when she was younger, and fatter than she is now, she was not told that her body was an active body. The singular model of health is frustrating, limiting, and invites shame where there should not be (Fikkan and Rothblum 2011; Graves and Kwan 2013:60; Phelan et al. 2015).

Health is often read into weight because the model of health conflates thinness with fitness (Fikkan and Rothblum 2011; Graves and Kwan 2013:61). Lindy notes that she makes active and healthy choices, not to lose weight, but to stay healthy. She says, though, that she has “always been super health-conscious but not in an appearance way.” This seems to deflect the idea that she exercises to not become fat, but as noted previously, her comments of body

dissatisfaction center around a desire to be smaller. Emily talked about food jealousy while watching other people, especially at work, eat foods like cupcakes because she does not “feel like [she can].” There is a tension between a desire to appear healthy to others and engaging in activities like eating which are critical to functioning but may invite unkind assumptions about a person because of their weight.

Kay summed up a common sentiment among the participants in regard to health and bodies by saying, “I feel good when I feel good.” Kay used this phrase to reference her working out and eating food in order to support her feeling good about her body and her body’s capabilities. However, not unlike the comment about peace, for some participants, there seemed to be dissonance between what was said and what was revealed through the course of the interview in relation to feeling good about their body. For women who have struggled with their body, this dissonance may reflect another area of internalized fatphobia, or it could be a result of the restrictive models of health.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

This chapter discusses the conclusions and limitations of this research. This chapter also includes directions for further research. While this is an exploratory study, there are insights that can contribute in new ways to the existing discussion on fat women's relationships with their bodies and weight bias in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

This study confirmed findings that parents play a key role in shaping how their children viewed their bodies through the way they framed their child's body as well as their own (Wertheim 2002). Participants mirrored their parents' reactions to their bodies to build a frame of reference for their own body. A significant proportion of the messages these women received as children revolved around health and needing to become thin in order to be healthy. Implicit messages, microaggressions, and explicit messages of anti-fat sentiment during childhood had lasting negative impacts on the women including body dysmorphia and internalized fatphobia.

The women recognized their relationship with their body as something that needed to change in order to find "peace." Though not specifically defined, peace seems to reflect a sense of neutral thoughts and feelings about one's body. Arriving at a sense of peace with one's body requires intensive mental work. Conscious and continuous effort is needed to maintain a sense of peace with one's body, and peace seems to be a process, not a destination. Stress can trigger previous negative thought patterns which indicates the pervasive nature of the negative messaging, even after processing and unlearning them. While there is a tension between words and actions, making peace with one's body also does not seem to be necessarily at odds with a pursuit to lose weight.

The norms of dress for professors at UT reflect an appearance that the women recognize as different than their appearance. They attribute this difference to the intersections of their

identity which include their age, gender, weight, and ethnicity. Overall, these women do not reflect the typical older white male professor image which means their appearance conflicts with traditional academic authority. By rebelling against this image in favor of better expressing their identity and personality through their appearance, they feel they risk losing authority both with students and colleagues. After coming so far in their journey to find peace within themselves, this is a risk they are willing to take, but there is still anxiety about the potential consequences.

While this data does not point to abundant instances of discriminatory experiences within the workplace, it does reveal microaggressions and hostile interactions which occur in a variety of contexts, including interactions with students and colleagues. There is a desire to minimize the hostile experiences through contextualizing them as not explicit discrimination, thus, not as bad as they could be. Even still, the data show that the academic workplace can be a hostile space for fat women, and especially fat women of color.

There are limitations to this study. Not all women who participated were or had ever been fat. The participants were professors from a single university. There are differences across the nation in terms of fat acceptance that inform policy and experiences which are not necessarily reflected here (Puhl, Andrevaya, and Brownell 2008). Additionally, participants needed to confirm that they were willing to talk about weight prior to being considered for participation. Talking about prior or current discrimination practices or other experiences within the same university context they occurred in could be prohibitive to participation, and some women who have experiences within the scope of the study may not have felt comfortable talking about them. The results of this study should be viewed as exploratory and inform directions for future research.

This data point to fat women understanding their discomfort and/or differential treatment in the workplace results from an intersection of race, gender, age, and weight. Existing literature does not show a strong connection between race and weight for workplace discrimination. Further qualitative studies can examine why this discrepancy between the qualitative and quantitative data may be occurring. Additionally, further research should be done to understand why fat women minimize their experiences with hostility and negative work environments and any personal and professions repercussions that might arise from doing so.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Flier

Recruiting Woman- Identifying Professors

Undergraduate Thesis on Influence of
Appearance in Academia

Time Commitment: 30 Minute Interview

- No compensation

Contact

- Michaela Lavelle, MICHAELA.LAVELLE@UTEXAS.EDU

Thesis Supervisor, Lynette Osborne: LOSBORNE@UTEXAS.EDU

IRB APPROVED - Study number 2019-08-0050

Appendix B

Study Invitation: General Recruitment

Hello,

My name is Michaela Lavelle and I am a senior at UT studying psychology and humanities. For my undergraduate thesis I am recruiting woman-identifying professors to do a short interview on their perception of the influence of appearance in academia.

Could you please forward the attached flyer to your faculty so they can be aware of this opportunity? Thank you for supporting undergraduate research!

Best,

Michaela Lavelle

Appendix C

Study Invitation: Schedule an Interview

Hello,

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in my thesis research. The more specific topic of my study on appearance in academia is the influence of weight/body type. If that is something you are willing to talk to me about for my thesis, I would love to schedule a time to interview you. If not, thank you so much for your time, and I really appreciate your support of my project. Because of the supportive responses I have received, I am thinking about how to tackle the general topic which resonated with you through other projects in the future.

Best,

Michaela Lavelle

Appendix D

Consent Form



UT Austin IRB Approved
Protocol Number:2019080050
Approved: 11/8/2019

Title of the Project: Women's Bodies in Academic Spaces
Principal Investigator: Michaela Lavelle, Humanities Undergraduate, University of Texas at Austin
Faculty Advisor: Lynnette Osborne, Assistant Professor of Sociology, University of Texas at Austin

Consent to Participate in Research

Invitation to be Part of a Research Study

You are invited to be part of a research study. This consent form will help you choose whether or not to participate in the study. Feel free to ask if anything is not clear in this consent form.

Important Information about this Research Study

Things you should know:

- The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of women professors at the University of Texas at Austin understand how, if at all, their weight has affected their career.
- In order to participate, you must be a woman-identifying professor at the University of Texas at Austin.
- If you choose to participate, you will be asked to participate in an interview at a location and time of your convenience. This will take .5-1 hour.
- Risks or discomforts from this research include talking about difficult topics such as body image and discrimination.
- There is no direct benefit for participation in this study.
- Taking part in this research study is voluntary. You do not have to participate, and you can stop at any time.

More detailed information may be described later in this form.

Please take time to read this entire form and ask questions before deciding whether to take part in this research study.

What is the study about and why are we doing it?

The purpose of the study is to explore the experiences of women professors at the University of Texas at Austin who are overweight to understand how, if at all, their weight has affected their career trajectory.

Research has shown perceived weight discrimination affects fat individuals during pre-employment processes and during an individual's tenure with an organization (Giel et al., 2011;

Pingitore et al., 1994; Puhl and Brownell; 2012; Puhl and Heuer, 2012). Research has also been done on teaching evaluations and beauty, finding a positive correlation between the two (Hamermesh and Parker, 2005). Because professors hold highly visible jobs and teaching evaluations are a part of their workplace advancement, fat women are, in theory, more vulnerable to perceived discrimination in academic spaces which could affect their career trajectory. This study seeks to highlight those experiences, because research on weight bias in academic contexts is very limited and rarely centers the voices of those who perceive it.

What will happen if you take part in this study?

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview where you will be asked a series of questions relating to your body, your career path, and your work environment. The interview will take no more than one hour.

How long will you be in this study and how many people will be in the study?

Participation in this study will last no more than 1 hour. The study will have 7 participants.

What risks and discomforts might you experience from being in this study?

No risk exceeds those you would encounter in daily life.

Because the study covers topics such as body image and perceived discrimination, answering some of the questions may cause discomfort which will not exceed that which could be encountered in daily life. In the event of an answer where trauma is revealed, a list of local and national resources can be provided to you. Additionally, because protecting your confidentiality is important, all information will be kept anonymous and confidential, so any information that could give away your identity will be removed or changed during the transcription of the interview.

The researchers will let you know about any significant new findings (such as additional risks or discomforts) that might make you change your mind about participating in this study.

How could you benefit from this study?

Although you will not directly benefit from being in this study, others might benefit because your participation will help shed light on an under-researched area of discrimination and help combat the taboo of “body talk” in academia.

What will happen to the data we collect from you?

As part of this study we will collect an audio recording of the interview as well as take coded notes during the interview. After the interview is transcribed to a protected file where identifiable information is removed or coded, the recording will be deleted.

How will we protect your information?

We will protect your information by removing identifiers from the study and generalizing information that could link you to participation in the study. Your name and any other information that can directly identify you will not be stored. Only the principal researcher and faculty sponsor will have access to the data collected from the study. The data or samples that we will collect about you will not be shared with any other researchers. We plan to publish the results of this study. To protect your privacy, we will/will not include any information that could directly identify you.

Under certain situations, we may break confidentiality. If during the study we learn about child abuse or neglect, we will report this information to the appropriate authorities including the police and/or the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services.

Information about you may be given to the following organizations:

- Representatives of UT Austin and the UT Austin Institutional Review Board

What will happen to the information we collect about you after the study is over?

We will not keep your research data to use for future research or other purposes. Your name and other information that can directly identify you will be deleted from the research data collected as part of the project.

How will we compensate you for being part of the study?

You will not receive any type of payment for your participation.

Your Participation in this Study is Voluntary

It is totally up to you to decide to be in this research study. Participating in this study is voluntary. Your decision to participate will not affect your relationship with The University of Texas at Austin. You will not lose any benefits or rights you already had if you decide not to participate. Even if you decide to be part of the study now, you may change your mind and stop at any time. You do not have to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

If you decide to withdraw before this study is completed, any audio recording and/or notes will be deleted immediately.

Contact Information for the Study Team

If you have any questions about this research, you may contact:

Michaela Lavelle
Phone: 8179660615
Email: Michaela.lavelle@utexas.edu

Or

Lynette Osborne
Phone: 512-232-6300
Email: losborne@utexas.edu

Contact Information for Questions about Your Rights as a Research Participant

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the following:

The University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board
Phone: 512-232-1543

Email: irb@austin.utexas.edu

Please reference study number 2019-08-0050.

Your Consent

By giving written consent below, you are agreeing to be in this study. We will give you a copy of this document for your records. We will keep a copy with the study records. If you have any questions about the study after your participation in the study, you can contact the study team using the information provided above.

I understand what the study is about and my questions so far have been answered. I agree to take part in this study.
