

Coming Out as Fat: Rethinking Stigma

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Abstract

This paper examines the surprising case of women who “come out as fat” to test and refine theories about social change, social mobilization, stigma, and stigma resistance. First, supporting theories about “social movement spillover,” we find that overlapping memberships in queer and fat activist groups, as well as networks between these groups, have facilitated the migration of this cultural narrative. Second, we find that the different, embodied context of body size and sexual orientation, leads to changes in meaning as this narrative travels. Specifically, the hypervisibility of fat changes what it means to come out as a fat person, compared to what it means to come out as gay or lesbian. Third, this case leads us to question the importance of the distinction made in the literatures on stigma and on social movements between assimilationist strategies that stress sameness, on the one hand, and radical political strategies that emphasize difference, on the other. Finally, this case suggests that the extent to which a stigmatized trait is associated with membership in a social group—with its own practices, values, and norms—shapes what it means to “come out” as one who possesses that trait.

Keywords

stigma, coming out, covering, flaunting, destigmatization strategies

When asked about how she became involved with the fat rights movement, prominent fat rights activist and author Marilyn Wann talks about her “Really Bad Day,” when a romantic interest told her he was embarrassed to introduce her to his friends because she was fat and when she received a letter from Blue Cross refusing her health insurance because she was “morbidly obese.” At that point, Wann realized that “living in the closet [was] not working,” and she “decided to come out as a fat person and tried to do it really publicly and really loudly because . . . [she] wasn’t going to put

up with exclusion” (Wann interview 8/17/01). Another activist, Sherrie, similarly talks about how she “came out as a fat person” at her first National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) convention: “Even though you may look fat, it’s hard to admit it.

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As we talk about in NAAFA, it's coming out as a fat person" (Sherrie interview 9/7/01).¹

In an essay on the "queerness of fat," Katie LeBesco notes that "fat activists regularly describe the experience of coming out as fat and choosing to no longer pass as on-the-way-to thin" (LeBesco 2004:95). She cites a 1983 example when "Pam Hinden told what she called her 'fat coming out story,'" in which she "explained that coming out meant mustering courage to engage in activities usually thought proper only for thin people, giving up futile diets, and rebuilding her self-esteem" (LeBesco 2004:95). "We're here, we're spheres! Get used to it!" Wann is quoted saying, echoing the ACT-up and Queer Nation's mantra "We're here, we're queer, get used to it!" (Burkeman 1998; cited in LeBesco 2004).

It is intriguing that fat acceptance activists—who combat discrimination on the basis of body size—would talk about *coming out* as fat. It is not surprising that members of this movement, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s in the wake of the civil rights, women's rights, and gay rights movements, would be drawn to a proven strategy for combating stigma or unwanted difference (Goffman 1963). However, the narrative of coming out does not seem to work with fat. That is, while coming out usually refers to revealing

something hidden, body size is hypervisible. It is what Goffman (1963) referred to as a "discredited identity," meaning that it is plainly visible, as opposed to a "discreditable identity," which can be concealed.²

This begs the question of why and how fat acceptance activists have come to use this narrative and how they are using it differently than have gays and lesbians. It thus speaks to the sociological question of how cultural narratives travel and change in the process. As the above quotations demonstrate, fat rights activists are not disclosing, as much as affirming, their fatness. They are reclaiming the term *fat*, commonly used as an insult, as a neutral or positive descriptor (it is in this sense that we use the word *fat* here), rejecting the terms *obese* and *overweight* as pathologizing normal human variation (Cooper 1998; Schroeder 1992; Wann 1999). They are thus innovating upon the concept of coming out as a "destigmatization strategy" (Lamont 2009; see also Wimmer 2008). Thus, the relatively understudied case of coming out as fat provides an opportunity to test and refine theories of stigma and stigma resistance. Before turning to our findings, we review our theoretical perspective, provide background on queer and fat politics, and describe our data and methods.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE: FATPHOBIA AND SOCIAL CHANGE

This paper seeks to contribute to understandings of political resistance and social change. It specifically considers political resistance to what we will call *fatphobia*, akin to homophobia, in which thinner bodies are defined as morally, medically, aesthetically, and sexually desirable, while heavy bodies

¹Unless they requested otherwise, interviewees are identified with first-name pseudonyms. We use first and last names for those interviewees who requested to be identified by their real names.

²That said, fat women often talk about feeling socially invisible, in that people only see a fat person and cannot see the individual woman, much as the protagonist in Ralph Ellison's (1947) *Invisible Man* speaks of being black in the United States in the 1940s.

are vilified. The suffix “phobia” evokes the fear and hatred that visible body fat on oneself or on others provokes for many in the contemporary United States. We conceptualize fatphobia as a social structure that is jointly composed of cultural schemas and material resources (Sewell 1992). Schemas are “virtual” in that they exist only as memory traces in people’s minds, are not always conscious, and can be transposed or extended to new situations when the opportunity arises (Sewell 1992:8). In contrast, resources are material. Schemas are enacted via resources, while the use of resources is directed by cultural schema. As a structure, contemporary American fatphobia is both *deep* (schema dimension) and of *high power* (resource dimension) (Sewell 1992). It is deep because it is pervasive and relatively unconscious. That is, in contrast to places where food is scarce and where fatness signals health and high status (Klein 1996; Popenoe 2005; Stearns 1997), in contemporary and wealthy Western societies, fatness predominantly signifies laziness, ill-health, and ugliness (Campos 2004; Latner and Stunkard 2003; Puhl, Andreyeva, and Brownell 2008).³ In contrast, slenderness is taken as proof of discipline, health, and beauty (Bordo 1993).

Fatphobia is of high power because negative attitudes about fat are buttressed by substantial economic and political material resources from the United States and other state governments and agencies, international organizations like the World Health Organization (WHO), pharmaceutical companies producing weight loss drugs, the weight loss industry, the fashion industry, and the medical establishment (see Campos 2004; Campos

et al. 2006; Oliver 2005). In contrast, the food industry seems to have an economic interest in promoting fatness. Indeed, the Center for Consumer Freedom, a food industry lobby, has publicized research showing that the risks of obesity have been overblown.⁴ Yet while clearly intent on protecting its bottom line from accusations that its products contribute to illness, the food industry has not produced a counter-ideology that celebrates bigger bodies. On the contrary, advertisements for diet foods explicitly suggest that thinness should be a personal goal, while other food advertisements implicitly convey the same message by, for instance, exclusively featuring very thin models (Bordo 1993). Plus-size fashion is probably the industry most invested in creating positive and glamorous images of larger female bodies. While a growing market, plus-size fashion nonetheless represents a tiny segment of the fashion industry as a whole, which caters to the slimmest women and emphasizes the desirability of slenderness. In other words, while not monolithic, contemporary Western economic interests overwhelmingly support the idea that thin—not fat—is desirable.

Yet even deeply entrenched and powerful social structures can be challenged. One way to do this is to apply existing schema to new contexts, a potential that Sewell calls the *transposability of schemas* (Sewell 1992). Thus, talking about coming out as fat transposes schemas developed in the gay rights movement (e.g., the importance of authenticity, value of diversity, critique of pressures to conform) onto fat bodies, so that they can be seen as valuable rather than pathological. This process, in which innovations diffuse from one social movement to another (see Soule

³Fat is, however, multivocal, and positive connotations of fat persist in certain contexts and in subgroups. See, for example, Klein 1996.

⁴See http://www.consumerfreedom.com/advertisements_detail.cfm/ad/30.

2004), is what social movement theorists call a *social movement spillover* (McAdam 1995; Meyer and Whittier 1994). Previous work suggests that cultural diffusion is most likely when a frame resonates across social settings (Snow et al. 1986) and among movements that have overlapping constituents (Meyer and Whittier 1994).

In that the coming out narrative has become broad and inclusive enough to accommodate a variety of different perspectives and interests beyond the specific social movement where it originated, it could be considered a *master frame* (Snow et al. 1986). Indeed, John Kitsuse (1980) noted as early as 1980 that a variety of groups, including “fat people, little people, [and] old people” were “coming out all over.” He argued that while these groups were not revealing a hidden stigma, they were nonetheless “coming out” by declaring “their presence openly and without apology to claim the rights of citizenship” (Kitsuse 1980:8). While he did not show that “new deviants,” as Kitsuse (1980:8) called them, were themselves using the term *coming out*, Kitsuse himself used it as a master frame to make sense of a wide range of new political activism, thus foreshadowing the phenomenon at the center of our analysis.

The effect of transposing schema or using a master frame, however, is not entirely predictable. Just because a metaphor or narrative has been successful in one setting is no guarantee that it will be successful in another. To work, it may have to be changed somewhat to fit the new setting. Moreover, the experience in the second setting is likely to have implications for subsequent usages of this metaphor. This corresponds to what Sewell (1992) calls the *unpredictability of resource accumulation*. The case of fat rights allows us to examine the important and understudied

issue of how different (embodied) realities shape the diffusion of social movement narratives.

Finally, for our purposes, Sewell (1992) discusses how the polysemy of resources provides opportunities for social change. This refers to how material resources can be interpreted in different ways. Thus, a fat body can be read as the embodiment of excess and moral softness, but it can also be seen as, say, expansive or generous. Similarly, thin bodies can be read as streamlined, but they can also be interpreted as narrow (as in narrow-minded) or stingy. The ways in which material resources—in this case physical bodies—can be interpreted are not infinite. It would be difficult to argue that a fat body is streamlined, just as it seems counterintuitive to frame a thin body as expansive, but there is nonetheless a varied (though limited) number of schema—with positive and negative valences—that can be applied to the same material resource. And this provides opportunities for those challenging the symbolic order.

Coming Out and Flaunting

The case of coming out as fat also provides an opportunity to rethink Goffman’s (1963) classic work on stigma. For Goffman, only those with invisible stigmas, what he calls “discreditable” identities, can pass as normal, that is, as not possessing the stigma in question. Thus a light skinned African American may pass as white, or a stereotypically masculine-looking gay man may pass as straight. Building on Goffman (1963), law professor Kenji Yoshino (2006) talks about coming out as a refusal to pass. Based on this typology, it is impossible to come out as fat, given that fatness is visible. Yet fat rights activists do talk about coming out as fat, which leads us to rethink

the importance of visibility in stigma and destigmatization strategies.

According to Goffman's (1963) typology, fat, as a discredited identity, is immediately apparent and impossible to hide. While a person with a discredited identity cannot pass, they can cover by preventing their stigma from "looming large" (Goffman 1963). Thus, a blind man may direct his eyes towards the person with whom he is speaking, not to pass as seeing, but to avoid making the other uncomfortable by drawing attention to his difference (Goffman 1963). Yoshino (2006) calls the refusal to cover, which results in drawing attention to a visible stigma, *flaunting*. He gives examples of gay men who are not only *out* about their sexuality but *flaunt* by, say, bringing their romantic partners to office parties, kissing their same-sex partner in public, or speaking out about gay politics. By extension, a fat woman may cover by wearing dark clothes or flaunt by wearing a hot-pink bikini. Thus, while coming out is assumed to be a strategy for discreditable identities, flaunting is available to those with both visible and invisible stigmas.

Yoshino (2006) argues that the same behavior may or may not be covering or flaunting, depending on personal sensibilities. For instance, some African Americans experience prohibitions against dreadlocks as a demand to cover, while others personally prefer to straighten their hair. Yoshino (2006) further argues that a given behavior can constitute covering on some dimensions and flaunting on others. He specifically discusses the dimensions of appearance, cultural expression (what he calls "affiliation"), activism, and association. Demanding gay marriage, for instance, can be seen as flaunting along the dimensions of appearance, activism, and association, but covering along the

dimension of affiliation, in that it reaffirms the mainstream cultural value of marriage. Queer theorist Michael Warner affirms this view when he argues that gay marriage "would make for good gays—the kind who would not challenge the norms of straight culture, who would not flaunt their sexuality, and who would not insist on living differently from ordinary folk" (Warner 1999:113).

Indeed, Yoshino's notion of flaunting as a refusal to cover resonates with queer theory and activism, in which "queer maintains a relation of resistance to whatever constitutes the normal" (Jagose 1996:99). Queer theory often performatively celebrates acts that are typically coded as socially deviant in order to resist the very categorization of "normal" and "deviant." Yoshino (2006) argues that coming out involves a politics of assimilation, whereas flaunting represents a politics of difference.

Sociologist Mary Bernstein makes a similar distinction between *identity for education*, which "involves challenging how dominant cultures perceive stigmatized individuals and communities in an attempt to gain legitimacy" and *identity for critique*, which "confronts the values, categories, and practices of the dominant culture" (Bernstein 1997). She argues that the former approach is more common among collectivities with strong organizational infrastructure and access to decision makers, while the latter is more common among groups with weak organizational structure and no access to decision makers (Bernstein 1997).

Yet, as we will see, in the case of fat, coming out often involves affirming difference, while flaunting is often part of a strategy of inclusion, leading us to rethink destigmatization strategies. Finally, the fat case draws our attention

to how other underemphasized variations in stigma—particularly the extent to which a given stigma is associated with cultural practices, beliefs, and values—shape destigmatization strategies.

BACKGROUND: THE COMING OUT NARRATIVE

In his examination of prewar gay male communities in major cities, George Chauncey explains that coming out was not initially associated with the closet. Rather, one spoke of coming out into homosexual society or the gay world, including enormous drag balls that were patterned on the mainstream debutante and masquerade balls, “a world neither so small, nor so isolated, nor often, so hidden as ‘closet’ implies” (Chauncey 1994:7). In other words, during this period, coming out was conceptualized as mainly social and cultural (see also Garber 1989:325). Borrowing from Sewell’s (1992) language, the upper-class debutante ball was transposed onto the gay social scene, exerting social change in a cultural more than a political sense.

By placing large numbers of men in same-sex living arrangements and putting women in workplaces with large numbers of women, the war increased the likelihood that those with same-sex desires would find like-minded people (Berubé 1989). The end of the war, however, brought renewed attention from the government, community and religious leaders, and the media to gender and sexual identity (Faderman 1991). As Alan Berubé explains: “The taste of freedom during the war, the magnitude of the postwar crackdown, and the example of the growing black civil rights movement caused more and more lesbians and gay men to think of themselves as an unjustly persecuted minority” (Berubé 1989:393). The few lesbian

and gay organizations in existence during the 1950s and 1960s, including the Mattachine Society and the Daughters of Bilitis, developed in response to the legal and political enforcement of sexual norms after the war. While they made political demands, the Mattachine Society’s use of coming out narratives was focused on the “internal acceptance of a homosexual identity (which could be wholly private)” (Johansson and Percy 1994:21).

The Stonewall Riots of 1969, or the Stonewall Rebellion, is a watershed in traditional narratives of lesbian and gay history in the United States and is often credited with sparking the gay liberation movement (see D’Emilio 1983; Duberman 1993). The Stonewall Inn, a popular, members-only bar in Greenwich Village in Manhattan, had, like other establishments catering to lesbians and gays, often been the target of police raids. On July 27, 1969, however, Stonewall patrons resisted a police raid, which escalated into Village-wide riots that continued off and on for several days, as others joined the resistance. Recent scholarship has shown that a vibrant political field was already in place prior to Stonewall and that the New Left played a greater role than the Stonewall rebellion in energizing and radicalizing the movement (Armstrong 2002). Nonetheless, Stonewall remains a pivotal and defining moment in collective gay rights narratives.

In the 1970s, the gay rights movement took the civil rights and black power movements as a new model for political organizing and conceptualizing gay identity (Armstrong 2002). While pre-Stonewall organizations such as the Mattachine Society conceptualized homosexuality as a relatively minor aberration of mental character, the post-Stonewall organizations framed

gay identity as a significant component of social and personal identity. The coming out narrative assumed a central role in gay identity and community, as is reflected by the publication of numerous anthologies of coming out stories (Holmes 1988; Moore 1997; Penelope and Wolfe 1980; Umans 1988).

The coming out narrative became a rite of passage, something to be shared with others, and the centerpiece of gay liberation movements. Coming out was, for the first time, set up in explicit relation to the metaphor of the closet. A hostile, homophobic mainstream culture was blamed for the creation of the closet but individuals, including gay individuals, were blamed for its maintenance. Thus, the mantra "Come Out, Come Out, Wherever You Are" of the 1980s and 1990s can be understood as just as much of a demand for gays and lesbians to publicly declare their sexuality as an assurance of safety and community. This new formulation of coming out asserts "the public relevance of what others deem private" (Gamson 1998:200; see also Valocchi 2001). Questions of authenticity, and the recognition that the veil of the private sphere had to be lifted for effective political mobilization, brought forth such notions as the "closet case" and the tactic of outing in which one's sexual orientation is publicly revealed by a third party. There is some evidence that the closet has recently receded as a powerful metaphor among gay and lesbians (Seidman 2002).

Ex-gay movements, also known as reorientation movements, have adopted the language of coming out to describe the journey from a gay identity to a straight identity. Richard Cohen's book *Coming Out Straight: Understanding and Healing Homosexuality* adopts the language and style of lesbian and gay

coming out anthologies. It includes a step-by-step model for coming out straight, a variety of coming out narratives, advice for families and friends dealing with the process, and a resource list for those seeking further advice and information on coming out straight (Cohen 2000). Organizations like Free To Be Me, an ex-gay group aimed at young adults, explicitly adopt the language of lesbian and gay scholarship and activism, specifically arguments about the fluidity of sexual identity, to argue that gay people can choose to become straight (New Direction for Life Ministries Inc. 2009).

DATA AND METHODS

The idea for this paper emerged at the 2001 annual convention of National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance, which the first author attended as part of a larger study investigating debates over body weight. Bill Fabrey, a self-identified fat admirer (men who are sexually attracted to fat women), founded NAAFA in 1969, in the wake of the civil rights movement. Fabrey says he consciously chose a moniker that resembled that of the NAACP, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (Fabrey interview 8/17/01), thus claiming moral equivalence between discrimination on the basis of race and size. Today NAAFA denounces weight-based discrimination and negative images of fat people in the media, and encourages self-acceptance and empowerment through workshops held during the annual national convention and local chapter meetings. The annual NAAFA national convention and state chapter meetings also offer social events for fat women (most weighing between 200 and 500 pounds) and fat admirers

to meet and socialize (Saguy and Riley 2005).

At 5'3" and about 120 pounds, the first author is generally not considered fat and worried that this might hinder her ability to develop rapport with NAAFA members. Her fears, however, were unfounded. Her presence evoked some puzzlement at first, but when NAAFA members heard that she was a sociologist interested in the fat acceptance movement, they were eager to share their perspectives. Indeed, several members commented that as a "thin person," she was better positioned to advocate for fat acceptance (assuming this would be her inclination) in that she could not so easily be dismissed as having an axe to grind. This is an instance of how thin privilege functions in debates over body size (see Bacon 2009; Saguy and Riley 2005).

During the 2001 convention and in the two months following the meetings, the first author had several informal discussions with participants and conducted formal, in-depth, semi-structured interviews with nine NAAFA members: eight fat-identified women and fat-admirer Bill Fabrey. Much to her surprise, the first author found that during their interviews, five of the eight women spontaneously used the analogy of "coming out" and/or the "closet" to talk about how they identify as fat. Bill Fabrey also recounted a very detailed coming out narrative in regard to his sexual desire for fat women, suggesting that future work should examine the case of fat admirers in greater detail.

As a follow-up, an additional seven women were interviewed in 2006-2008. They were selected based on their involvement in fat acceptance groups and/or their high profile in the fat acceptance literature. Three of these

additional respondents had publicly used the analogy of coming out as fat in their activism and/or writing, and the interview sought to clarify how they were using this analogy and its source. The remaining four respondents had not used this expression before the interview. One of them thought the metaphor did not work because the visibility of body size meant there was nothing to reveal: "I never felt like I was in the closet, so I couldn't come out." Two of these four, however, found the metaphor useful and readily adopted it during the interview to make sense of how they identify as fat. The fourth interview, conducted during the 2008 NAAFA convention, like the original interviews in 2001, did not explicitly address the metaphor of coming out but discussed identifying as fat and fat acceptance politics more generally. The respondent in this interview did not use the term "coming out as fat," but described experiences that closely paralleled what others labeled coming out.

Interviews lasted at least 90 minutes, and several respondents were interviewed more than once. Interviews were taped and transcribed verbatim, but interview excerpts were edited for clarity. Twelve respondents were white and three were bi- or multi-racial. Over half (eight) identified as either bisexual or queer. Ages ranged from 25 to 60 at the time of the interview, with an average age of 42 years. With one exception in which a respondent had recently lost 100 pounds and was of average size, body weight ranged from about 200 to 425 pounds. The respondent who had recently lost 100 pounds remained a good candidate for the study, in that she has a long history of involvement in the movement and her weight history provides her an interesting vantage point to discuss how body size shapes micro-interactions.

As these interviews are not drawn from a probability sample of fat-identified women (an impossible task, given that the full universe of fat-identified women is unknown) and were conducted over a seven-year period, they cannot tell us about the prevalence of the coming out narrative among fat-identified women at any given moment in time. However, they do suggest that this narrative is being used in this new context. Our goal here is to examine how.

To answer this, we also draw on ongoing (since 2001) participant observation on two fat-acceptance listservs, from which the first author regularly copies and analyzes relevant threads, autobiographies, and anthologies focusing on fat identity, fat acceptance zines (self-published or online magazines), websites, and blogs. We further draw on analyses of NAAFA newsletters. The most recent newsletters (Winter 2005–Winter 2008, or 16 issues) are available on the NAAFA website, and we were able to obtain from the current newsletter editor electronic versions of issues published between 1999 and 2003. We searched all of these issues for the words *out* and *closet*. The oldest issues (1970–2002) are not publicly accessible, but Bill Fabrey generously manually searched his personal full archive for any mention of *coming out* and provided us with a detailed report of what he found. Whenever possible, we contacted authors of relevant articles to ask them about how and why they chose this specific terminology to talk about affirming a fat identity.

The first author also engaged in several email exchanges with Charlotte Cooper, founder of the Chubsters, to gather specific information about this particular group, and with several of the interview respondents to clarify points or ask additional questions. From Cooper, we also obtained

published and unpublished articles detailing the history of the Chubsters. We further drew on the fat acceptance literature for historical information about the movement and its use of the term *coming out*, and we solicited feedback from many of the interview respondents and movement activists to hone our analysis. Finally, as part of an effort to capture the social context in which fat activists are coming out as fat, we searched Lexis-Nexis for all news articles for all available years in major papers that contained the terms *coming out* and *closet* in the keywords.

Our specific focus on women inductively emerged from the fact that the fat acceptance movement is comprised almost exclusively of (fat) women. Women are also the main producers of autobiographies chronicling their process of coming out as fat. Both patterns are probably largely due to the fact that fat stigma weighs more heavily on women than on men (men, in contrast, suffer more stigmatization than women if they are short) (Conley and Glauber 2007; Puhl et al. 2008). Specifically, the fat acceptance movement is dominated by fat, white, middle-class women (Sobal 1999), for whom body size is especially salient (see Brownell et al. 2005; Cawley and Danziger 2005). How fat men negotiate their body size is an important topic that has been examined elsewhere (Monaghan 2008), but it lies beyond the scope of the present study.

FINDINGS

Studying the migration of the coming out narrative from queer to fat politics allows us to (1) identify general mechanisms of cultural migration and (2) to see how narratives change when they are used in a new social context. Given that body size is typically more visible than sexual orientation, this

case further provides an opportunity to reconsider the role that visibility plays in stigma and stigma resistance (Goffman 1963; Yoshino 2006). Third, as we will see, this case leads us to question the distinction between coming out and a politics of assimilation, on one hand, and flaunting and a politics of difference, on the other (Bernstein 1997; Yoshino 2006). Finally, examining the case of fat acceptance draws our attention to underexamined aspects of stigma—specifically the extent to which it is associated with membership in a social group—that help predict if and how a given stigma will be reclaimed. We develop each of these points in four consecutive sections below.

Migration of Cultural Narratives

There are at least two pathways that the narrative of coming out may have travelled from queer to fat politics. First, it may be that the narrative has become culturally ubiquitous in a way that makes it increasingly available for appropriation in highly diverse settings, perhaps with little effort having to be expended by the appropriators, and perhaps with a gradual weakening of the definitional control, so that people can make of the terms whatever they like. Alternatively, or in addition, it may be that migration of the coming out narrative from queer to fat politics has been facilitated by networks or overlapping memberships between the two movements (Meyer and Whittier 1994). While *coming out* has indeed become cultural ubiquitous, we find that queer-fat networks and overlapping memberships in these movements have played a crucial role in the diffusion of the coming out narrative from queer to fat political groups.

A search, in October 2009, of the terms *coming out* and *closet* in the keywords of major papers, indexed by Lexis-Nexis for all available years, yields news stories that speak of people coming out not only as gays or lesbians, but also as asexuals, celibates, male heterosexuals, female homemakers, and stay-at-home fathers. There are references to Jews, Christian musicians, atheists, secular humanists, and witches coming out about their respective faiths. Socialists, republicans, white supremacist groups, climate change deniers, and Scots are described as coming out by revealing their political views or nationalities. A mother of a young man who is mentally ill describes herself as “coming out of the closet” by talking about his illness. Similarly, several articles discuss the coming out of taboo topics, including sexual harassment in the late 1970s, immigration in the late 1980s, family violence, abuse of Jewish women, surrogate motherhood, menopause, mood disorder, erectile dysfunction, and male vanity. One article describes abortion as moving “back in the closet.”

We found a reference to “large-size women . . . coming out of the fashion closet, with versions of European designs now available in sizes from 14 to 26” but we did not find examples of coming out as a fat person, as evoked by our respondents. Similarly missing from our list were examples of African Americans coming out as black. Indeed, stand-up comedian Wanda Sykes, who is black and recently came out as a lesbian, treats as a laughable impossibility the idea of “coming out black” to her parents in a 2009 HBO special “I’m a Be Me” (Sykes 2009). Consistent with this, the news media examples of coming out all involve instances in which something both stigmatized and hidden is brought into the

open. In other words, while the narrative of coming out has indeed become culturally ubiquitous, fat acceptance activists still appear innovative in their use of this narrative to affirm a visible stigma.

Moreover, our interview and textual data suggest that residents of San Francisco, where queer politics has been most active (Armstrong 2002), queer-identified activists, and queer theorists were among the first to talk of coming out as fat. For instance, Marilyn Wann was living in San Francisco in the early 1990s when she created the zine *FAT!SO?* and talks about being influenced by her gay male friends in Queer Nation who took her to “politicized/punk drag shows and other gay community stuff” (Wann email 9/30/09). She took further inspiration from queer zines being produced in San Francisco at the time, including *Diseased Pariah News* and *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist*.

Wann notes that when she began printing *FAT!SO?* in July of 1994, she used the “fat dyke community as a major support for [her] work” (Wann email 9/30/09). While traditionally marginalized in the NAAFA itself, feminist lesbians were active in the organization’s Fat Feminist Caucus and founded several independent groups, including the Feminist Underground in the early 1970s (Fabrey email 11/23/09; Stimson n.d.). Since then, lesbians and bisexual women have organized and supported scores of San Francisco-based fat activist groups, including performance groups such as the Fat Lip Readers Theater, Big Burlesque, Fat Bottom Revue, Bod Squad, Big Moves, the Padded Lilies, the Fat Women’s Swim, *Radiance* magazine, and the *Fat Girl* zine (Wann email 9/30/09). There are also queer cultural and fat positive events, such as Fat Girl Speaks, that

were organized in Portland in the late 1990s and early 2000s, and organizations like the National Association for Lesbians of SizE (NOLOSE). “Even now,” writes Wann, “when I think of local fat activist community, most of the people I turn to are fat and queer women or gender-queer people” (Wann email 9/30/09).

In an essay, activist Charlotte Cooper explains that “as queers it’s likely that we are a little bit more advanced [in] that we are better able to reject homophobia, or question assimilation” (Cooper 2009:4–5). Note that fat activist Pat Hindon, who was quoted in the introduction as one of the first people to talk about coming out as fat, also identified as lesbian (LeBesco 2004:95). Similarly, in a 1983 essay entitled “Coming Out: Notes on Fat Lesbian Pride,” the author Thunder, who identified as a “dyke,” spoke about “going from *being* a fat woman to *coming out* as a fat woman” (Thunder 1983:212, emphasis in the original). According to Cooper, in response to an earlier version of this paper, it is not so much that fat activists have appropriated coming out narratives from lesbian or queer groups, but that gay liberation rhetoric was already “woven into the history of fat liberation” via the experience of queer fat activists.

Queer theorists, who critically study the socially constructed nature of sexual acts and self-identifications, were also among the first to view fat through a queer lens. For instance, an essay that began as a 1986 conference paper by queer theorist Eve Sedgwick (Moon and Sedgwick 2001), explicitly uses the phrase “coming out as a fat woman” (see also Kyrola 2005; LeBesco 2004). It claims that, despite the visibility of fat, “there is such a process as coming out as a fat woman” in which “the denomination of oneself as a fat woman

is a way . . . of making clear to the people around one that their cultural meanings will be, and will be heard as, assaultive and diminishing to the degree that they are not fat-affirmative” (Moon and Sedgwick 2001:206).

Analyses of NAAFA newsletters lends additional support to the claim that networks between queer and fat groups facilitated the migration of the coming out narrative. We found six explicit mentions to “coming out as fat” in NAAFA newsletters printed between 1981 and 2006. In the first, published in the 1981 Spring/Summer newsletter, Kimm Bonner, then chair of the New England chapter of the NAAFA writes, “Personally—what I’ve gotten out of this [joining NAAFA] is to come out of the closet—I feel really good about who I am. I’ve been able to tell everyone in my life—family, friends, people at work that ‘Hey—this is me—if I like it, you should accept it too’” (Bonner 1981:2). In 1988 then executive director Sally E. Smith writes, “In my first year as a NAAFA, I came out of the closet on size acceptance issues” (Smith 1988:3). An April 1989 article with no byline, but which Bill Fabrey attributes to himself, says, “The first NAAFA office was located in Fabrey’s spare bathroom, and the membership file was maintained in their walk-in closet . . . (Talk about fat people and their admirers coming out of the closet!)” (NAAFA 1989:2). Barbara Altman Bruno writes in the 1993 newsletter that “it takes most people a period of time before they will ‘come out’ as fat people, and join NAAFA” (Bruno 1993:7), and in 1995, “Your ‘coming out’ process [as fat people] may have taken many years, perhaps decades” (Bruno 1995:4). In 2006 Kathy Barron writes about coming to realize that many fat people are “‘in the closet’ in terms of acknowledging themselves as fat” and urges “all

NAAFA members to come out as proud fat people and fat activists” (Barron 2006:1).

When asked how they came to use this language, several of these NAAFA newsletter contributors pointed to the contact they had had with queer activism or with others who were in touch with in queer activism. Sally Smith explains that she worked for LIFE (Lobby for Individual Freedom and Equality), an umbrella group of primarily gay and lesbian organizations whose mission was to lobby for responsible AIDS legislation. She says, “I’m sure that being immersed in (what was at the time) a gay rights issue provided a prism with which to view my experience” (Smith email 12/16/09). Bill Fabrey says he picked up the expression of “coming out” as a fat admirer from “fat feminists,” who he says were the first at NAAFA to use the phrase in reference to body size: “I never thought of it until they used it” (Fabrey email 10/6/09). While himself a heterosexual man, Fabrey’s ex-wife of many years identifies as bisexual, and he considers himself “supportive of gays and lesbians” (Fabrey email 12/3/09).

When asked how it had occurred to her to use this language, Bruno, who is straight and “happily married for 32 years,” mentions that she may have picked it up from one or several NAAFA board members who were living in San Francisco: “Since she [a NAAFA board member] lives and I used to live in the Bay Area, ‘coming out’ was a common term” (Bruno email 12/16/09). Barron mentions that she “used to hang out a lot in Hank’s Gab Café (on Marilyn [Wann’s] *FAT!SO?* website)” and that “I’m sure that Marilyn had something to do with it—she has been a huge inspiration to me and a driving force in much of my fat activism” (Barron email 12/16/09).

How Visibility Matters

In some cases in which a person was previously fat and still identifies as such, coming out as fat involves—as with coming out as gay or lesbian—the disclosure of a hidden self identification. For instance, after losing 100 pounds and arriving at college where no one had known her as fat, Jennifer spoke about hearing “women talk about fatness in a way I’d never heard before” and finding herself “rather mortified.” She says, “I felt the only way they’d understand was if I outed myself. That’s what I did, rather uncomfortably” (Jennifer interview 7/14/06).

In her one-woman short video entitled *A Fat Rant* (Nash 2007), which had attracted over one million viewers on YouTube by August 2008, the young, beautiful, witty, and fashionable Joy Nash announces that she weighs 224 pounds and is “moderately obese” according to government guidelines. “I’m fat,” she says, “and it’s OK. It doesn’t mean that I’m stupid or ugly or lazy or selfish. I’m fat. . . . F-A-T. It’s three little letters. What are you so afraid of?”

After a public lecture in which the first author showed a clip of *A Fat Rant*, members of the audience protested that the charming woman on the screen was not actually fat. It may be that many people do not realize just how broadly the official category of obese is defined, including one-third of the U.S. population, many of whom do not look especially fat. When Nash announces that she is obese, she may, in fact, be announcing something people do not realize, thus challenging their assumptions of who is obese, much in the same way that a straight-looking woman challenges assumptions about what it means to be lesbian when she comes out as such. By associating

a happy, confident, and beautiful face to fat, Nash undermines the fear and loathing that this term typically provokes in the contemporary United States. This act is of symbolic importance, especially given how often the mass media use “headless fatties” (photos of fat bodies with heads cropped out of the image) when discussing the so-called obesity epidemic (Cooper 2007).

More typically, coming out as fat involves a person who is easily recognized as fat affirming to herself and others her fatness as a nonnegotiable aspect of self, rather than as a temporary state to be remedied through weight loss. For example, Kelly says, “I’ve begun identifying more now with fat as opposed to thinking of myself as essentially a thin person who just needs to lose twenty pounds” (Kelly interview 12/22/06).⁵ For many, using the word *fat* is a key component of coming out. Lily says, “If there’s a marker for me, when I would say I came out as a fat person, it’s when I first reclaimed the word fat” (Lily interview 7/7/06). Marilyn Wann explains that she tries to “get people to use the F word. There is nothing inherently bad about the F word. I don’t use euphemisms because these reinforce the concept that there is something wrong with fat” (Wann interview 6/9/06).

Bogeywomen zine suggests responding to the statement “you’re not fat” by saying “I am fat, honey. Don’t assume I’m as terrified of the word and the concept as you are” (Owen, Buffington, and Owen 2000-2001). When Nicky meets someone for the first time, she describes herself as a “fat black woman.” When they express surprise, she responds by

⁵Note the use of “with” as opposed to “as” fat here and the reluctance it seems to signal. Thanks to Rene Almeling for this point.

saying “*Fat* is not a four-letter word. I’m very comfortable with the word *fat*, so feel free to use it. Fabulous and Thick. That’s what it stands for” (Nicky interview 7/11/08). As our only (biracial) African American respondent, Nicky integrates the word *thick*, which is commonly used among American blacks to appreciatively denote fleshiness, into the word *fat*, creatively arguing that FAT is an acronym for Fabulous and Thick.

Respondents say that when they reclaim the word *fat*, it can no longer be used to humiliate, shame, or silence them. For instance, when a woman tried to cut in front of her in line and called her a “fat ass” when she protested, Michelle says she “just smiled and said, ‘Yes, I’ve got a fat ass, but you cut in line and I’m first.’ And she absolutely could not handle the fact that I was absolutely unashamed to be called fat, that that was okay by me because it’s just an adjective like thin, tall, short, you know, brown, green, young, old (Michelle interview 10/18/06). While coming out as fat in this way does not involve revealing a secret about one’s body size, it does reveal the surprising—and potentially subversive—attitude that being fat is acceptable.

The Chubster website goes further, imagining an alternative reality in which fat is celebrated and *narrow fucks* are vilified. *Narrow*, the website explains, “refers not to body size, because *Chubsters don’t give a shit what size clothes anyone wears*, but to a narrow mind” (Chubsters 2006, emphasis in the original). *Narrow fucks* are described as “hassling fatties in the street,” “crowing about their diets and gym memberships,” “believing that fat is wrong,” “selling weight loss products and services,” and “spreading lies about the horror of obesity.” The use of the word *narrow* here is a creative play on

a negative association with thinness that reverses, at least momentarily, the moral hierarchy between fat and thin. In Sewell’s (1992) terms, it exploits the polysemy of thin bodies as a material resource. Thus the Chubsters not only reject the stigma associated with being fat but also envision an alternative world in which body size diversity is widely valued and where size bigots are stigmatized.

In proudly coming out as fat, one rejects cultural attitudes that fatness is unhealthy, immoral, ugly, or otherwise undesirable. 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. Queer theorists have similarly challenged meanings of disability. For instance, Robert McRuer argues that asking “Wouldn’t you rather be hearing?” reinforces “compulsory able-bodiedness.” In response, McRuer calls for “coming out crip,” where *crip* (short for crippled) functions as an appropriation of a derogatory term for disabled” (McRuer 2006:9). As with fat, coming out in this context means affirming and valorizing a stigmatized and highly visible trait.

Coming Out versus Flaunting

The case of coming out as fat leads us to reconsider existing distinctions between *coming out* or *identity for education*, on one hand, and *flaunting* or *identity for critique*, on the other (Bernstein 1997; Yoshino 2006). While we can identify cases in which fat rights activists are emphasizing similarity and others in which they are asserting difference, often they are simultaneously doing both in different ways. Moreover, we find that flaunting fat is importantly often a way of claiming inclusion, albeit on new terms.

In *A Fat Rant*, Nash, a self-identified fat woman, emphasizes both her similarity to and difference from thin people. By publicly lashing out against clothing stores for not carrying clothes in the sizes she wears, that is “18, at least, sometimes 20, and often—dare I say it?—triple X!” she unabashedly asserts her physical difference from the contemporary cultural ideal of thinness, if not from actual female bodies. Yet by informing her viewers that she enjoys running, swimming, and eating carrots, she also challenges stereotypes of fat people as couch potatoes who subsist on junk food, thereby emphasizing her shared cultural and moral commitment to health. Likewise, when Marilyn Wann engages in arenas or activities “that are coded as having thin people as participants,” such as ordering vegetarian entrees, doing yoga, or dancing in public (Wann email 2/24/09), she is both asserting her difference in certain spaces/activities, while also affirming her similarity in cultural tastes. Correspondingly, when fat women take part in mainstream fitness classes, they flaunt along the axis of appearance, in that their fatness is hypervisible, but not on the axis of cultural expression, in that they are reaffirming, rather than challenging, the hegemonic cultural value of physical fitness.

Many health researchers and clinicians have argued that our health goals should focus on “health at every size” (HAES), including access to respectful healthcare, nutritious food, and exercise, rather than weight loss (Bacon et al. 2002; Blair and Church 2004; Lyons and Burgard 1988), and there is a strong emphasis on health at every size in the fat liberation movement. For instance, the National Association to Advance Fat

Acceptance website includes a link entitled “What is HAES?” (NAAFA 2009) and the 2001, 2003, and 2009 NAAFA conventions featured keynote addresses by authors of books advocating for HAES (Bacon 2008; Campos 2004; Gaesser 1996). Given how weight-focused medicine and public health currently are, advocating health at every size is radical in this context. Some fat activists, however, question whether health is relevant to a discussion of rights. As Lily explains, “I want to remove [health] from the rights equation altogether and say this is a human right, give it to me” (Lily interview 7/7/06).

From this perspective, one can make a powerful statement by rejecting the social mandate to pursue health through exercise and “healthy” eating. Lily thus recounts ordering pancakes and French toast in a restaurant when she could not decide between them as a “political” act of resistance (Lily interview 7/7/06). By ordering these two dishes, Lily performs the excess for which fat people are reviled, asserting her right to eat more than others deem appropriate. Similarly, Kelly explains how, at a restaurant, “one of our friends was like there’s no way you could possibly eat all these cheese fries. I’m like, ‘Really, do you want to see me?’ I did, you know, I ate every single one” (Kelly interview 12/22/06).

The Chubsters website similarly flaunts on the axis of cultural expression. It displays profile photos for 46 members, who boast special skills (e.g., sheer heft, the butt clench); weapons of choice (e.g., teeth, my tushy, deadly flatulence); fatal flaws (e.g., BLTs, pie eating contests, lime jello); happiest-when sections (e.g., bathing in chocolate, stalking and sneering, jiggling, eating a fine and mature cheddar); and mottos

(e.g., Got Beef? Can I have some?).⁶ The Chubsters flaunt and exaggerate fat difference as part of an effort to subvert fat stereotypes. As Chubsters founder Charlotte Cooper explains, “Somehow, embracing fat stereotypes enabled us to subvert them, and perhaps rob them of their power over us” (Cooper 2009). The Chubsters thus embrace the excess that attaches to fat embodiment to remobilize it as a source of pleasure and pride. The group’s intentionally loose organizational structure and disinterest in gaining access to decision makers, inspired by punk and Do It Yourself (DIY) practices (Cooper 2009; Stasko 2007) fits with their strategy of identity for critique (Bernstein 1997).

While these tactics can be quite powerful, they run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes. And if fat-identified women feel peer pressure to give this kind of performance, it can feel like a demand to act out stereotypes, what Yoshino (2006) calls “reverse-covering” or what Degher and Hughes (1999) call “reaction formation.” Reflecting upon the tensions between advocating health at every size and rejecting healthism, Sherrie says, “In this world where society so tells you to be thin, there’s a part of me that wants to eat a sundae in front of models. Part of me wants to say, ‘Look what I can do!’ But that’s a kid part, and then you have to grow up and say . . . ‘I have a right to be healthy and a right to eat celery’” (Sherrie interview 9/7/01).

Often activists blend assimilationist strategies and radical critique. For instance, Wann has served on the NAAFA board, gives public lectures on fat acceptance, and actively lobbies for anti-weight-based discrimination laws, but she is also a member of the

Chubsters. This suggests that activists may use a variety of strategies—some assimilationist and some more radical—depending on the social context, just as their performance of fatness (or relative thinness?) will vary based on the situation.

Moreover, whereas previous work has distinguished between coming out or identity for education, on one hand, and flaunting or identity for critique, on the other (Bernstein 1997; Yoshino 2006), we find that flaunting fat is often a strategy of inclusion. For instance, in an interview (8/17/01), Wann talks about deciding “to come out as a fat person . . . really publicly and really loudly” because she was no longer willing “to put up with exclusion.” She explicitly discusses, in this interview, her decision to confront fat prejudice in “a fun and sassy way.” She thus speaks of “coming out,” while using language such as “really loudly” or “in a fun and sassy way” that evoke flaunting. But ultimately, she seeks social inclusion.

Similarly, while a fat woman wearing a bikini may seem like an act of flaunting, Melissa describes it as claiming a “normal life.” In her interview, Melissa retells how she bought her first bikini in eighteen years at her first fat acceptance event and soon after wore it at a NAAFA convention fashion show, as well as at the pool. Rather than flaunting her difference to stand out, wearing the bikini represents an important step in becoming more socially integrated: “Many fat people sort of hide themselves away, and they don’t get out and enjoy their life. . . . So [it’s affirming when] they come and they see all these other fat people wearing bathing suits and down in the pool and having a good time and dancing and just, you know, having a *normal* life” (Melissa interview 8/16/01, emphasis added).

⁶See www.chubstergang.com.

Culture and Community

Fat acceptance activists speak about how organizations have helped them find comfort and pride in their bodies on a personal level, while acknowledging that a “fat-pride community” or culture, akin to gay/lesbian/queer culture with its rainbow flag, gay neighborhoods, and pride parades, does not yet exist. The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance had only two to three thousand paid members in 2001 (Saguy and Riley 2005). The International Size Acceptance Association (ISAA) has branches across the United States, in Canada, Brazil, the United Kingdom, France, Australia, and in the Middle East and North Africa (ISAA 2007), but it has not operated as a paid membership organization since 2005, according to ISAA director Allen Steadham (Steadham email 5/18/09). “Fat-pride community,” in Wann’s words, is hard to find (Wann interview 6/9/06). It is, she says, “very grassroots and small. It’s not even a lawn. It’s a few blades of grass” (Wann interview 6/9/06).

Given this, websites and/or books provide a virtual “fat-pride community” for many. Before Joy Nash made her film *A Fat Rant*, she had never been to a fat acceptance meeting, but as she explains in an interview, “I’d already been reading a bunch of the [fat acceptance literature], like *Shadow on a Tightrope* and [Marilyn Wann’s] *FAT/SO?* and things like that. So, I definitely knew that I wasn’t alone.” Similarly, Jennifer talks about coming out “into a hypothetical community, aware there were other people with these ideas, without actually ever knowing any of them, ever meeting any one of them” (Jennifer interview 7/14/06). While virtual or hypothetical “communities” can be comforting and absolutely crucial to affirming

a stigmatized trait as a valued part of one’s sense of self, they are limited in their ability to foster the sustained interpersonal interaction among like-minded individuals that is necessary for the formation of group practices, beliefs, and values.

The fact that the fat acceptance movement is *not* grounded in cohesive social groups with their own practices, values, and culture is, we would argue, the reason why the movement has not yet developed a strong counter-culture and why coming out as fat is more about rejecting negative stereotypes than about affirming group practices, beliefs, or values. Wann speaks to this when she says that “fat people have yet to find a point of anger that would mean no turning back. Fat people still go along with blaming ourselves—rather than blaming the prejudice against us—when we’re treated as second-class or untouchable” (Wann email 1/12/09). Wann explains how, at a NAAFA convention, she was “joking about how Slim-Fast® is self-hatred in a can, and [later learned that] a woman sitting nearby leaned over to another NAAFA member and confided, ‘I’ve drunk a Slim-Fast® every morning since I’ve been here’” (Wann interview 6/9/06). Similarly, Michelle says in an interview, “I have people who are within my own chapter who consider themselves to be fat-acceptance people, but on the other hand, they still never have walked away from dieting. They never have” (Michelle interview 10/18/06).

Just as many fat people, including some members of fat acceptance associations, would rather be thin, prefer thin mates, and would hope to have thin children, blind people—who do not have a common culture, history, or language—tend to shun the company of other blind people, seek sighted mates, and do not wish to transmit their

blindness to their children (Deshen 1992). In contrast, members of the deaf world, who have a vibrant culture, their own language, and pride in their deafness, prefer to socialize with and marry other deaf people and often hope to have deaf children (Lane 2005).

Wann and others refer to the contemporary fat acceptance movement as “pre-Stonewall” (Wann email 1/12/09), which suggests that it is early in its development and is following a teleological path common to identity movements.⁷ However, if the tentative and weak nature of the movement is indeed a product of the lack of a real offline community, it is unlikely to change in the absence of a vital fat-pride community. Dieting groups, such as Weight Watchers or Overeaters Anonymous, could potentially provide a basis for such a movement, in that they bring together large numbers of individuals (mostly women) who feel too fat, even if they are often not heavier than average. Yet the fact that such groups are dedicated to helping members exit the category of fat through weight loss undermines their potential for fat pride.

CONCLUSION

This paper makes several sociological and social psychological contributions. First, it provides additional support that networks and shared membership in different social movements facilitate the diffusion of cultural narratives among these movements. Given the unpredictability of resource accumulation (Sewell 1992), discussions of coming out as fat may lead other groups with visible stigma to similarly talk of coming out as, say, blind or black. Second, our study shows how different

embodied experiences can lead people to use old narratives in new ways. Specifically, given the visibility of body size, coming out as fat has been used to affirm fatness as a neutral or positive trait, while disclosing a fat-positive perspective. This points to how cultural resources and physical bodies jointly constrain social behavior.

Third, the case of coming out as fat troubles the distinction made between coming out, identity for education, and a strategy of assimilation, on one hand, and flaunting, identity for critique, or a strategy of difference, on the other (Bernstein 1997; Goffman 1963; Yoshino 2006). These distinctions are useful for examining how activists vary in the extent to which they, say, affirm a shared cultural commitment to health or reject the hegemonic health imperative (Lupton 1995). Yet, when fat-identified women affirm their difference, whether in a bikini or in a restaurant, they are often not affirming difference for difference’s sake but as part of an effort to challenge social norms in order to gain social inclusion.

Finally, this study suggests that stigmatization strategies are informed by the extent to which a given stigma is associated with membership in a social group. While there exists a vibrant gay and lesbian culture in many large urban centers, fat-pride culture remains largely virtual. As a result, coming out as fat often means affirming a label and rejecting negative stereotypes rather than coming into a subculture with its own values, practices, and norms. This is an important distinction with implications for which stigmas are likely to be reclaimed and how.

When Joy Nash affirms she is fat, she rejects the idea that this means that she is “stupid or ugly or lazy or selfish.” But this raises a question: What about people who are stupid or ugly or lazy or

⁷Thanks to Steve Epstein for this point.

selfish? Might they one day come out as such? More generally, what makes some stigmas—and not others—reclaimable? We speculate that stigma is likely to be reclaimed when it corresponds to a category (1) into which some people clearly fall, (2) from which they perceive no easy escape, and (3) which entails clear social sanctions. People who cannot buy health insurance, clothing in offline stores, or are forced to buy two airplane seats because of their body size unquestionably fall into a category that carries social costs. Such incidents provide frequent reminders that their body size makes them a second-class citizen. While fat phobia harms women and men across the weight spectrum, albeit in different ways, the fattest women are penalized the most. Thus, it is no surprise that they have dominated the fat rights movement. A belief in weight loss prevents many more people from joining the cause, as this keeps alive the hope that exiting the fat category is possible. Indeed, while we have focused on reclaiming stigma, what some call *equalization* or *normative inversion* (Wimmer 2008), outside of the fat acceptance movement, other destigmatization strategies are probably more common. In addition to exiting a category, these include appealing to other commonalities, blurring the boundaries between categories, and shifting the line dividing different categories (Lamont 2009; Wimmer 2008).

Like being fat, being black, female, or homosexual are categories into which some people clearly fall, from which they perceive no easy escape, and which carry clear social sanctions. In all of these cases, medical science has, now or in the past, played an important role in creating and justifying these categories. In contrast, stupidity, ugliness, laziness, and selfishness are human traits that are highly subjective and

variable. We recognize different kinds of intelligence and stupidity, and the idea that beauty is in the eye of the beholder is a cliché. Who counts as lazy or selfish is similarly largely a matter of opinion. We have no governmental or scientific categories for these terms, if we accept that mental disabilities differ from garden-variety stupidity, and we do not use these categories as a basis for denying legal, medical, or consumer rights. If this were to change, we might indeed see new social movements emerge around these categories.

Some worry that the fat acceptance movement harms health by encouraging an unhealthy lifestyle (Fumento 1998). Even leaving aside the contested questions of whether or not heavier weight is unhealthy or whether body size is changeable for most people, there is strong evidence that weight-based stigma itself negatively impacts health (Muennig 2008). Given this, destigmatizing strategies developed by the fat acceptance movement may improve the mental and physical health of fat people (see also Lamont 2009). To the extent that fat activists' demands for respectful preventive medical care for people of all sizes are successful, this too should have a positive effect on health. Moreover, to the extent that coming out narratives enable a positive identification as fat, this may strengthen and broaden support for political and legal claims on the basis of body size (Kirkland 2008; Solovay 2000).

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