Becoming "the fat girl": Acquisition of an unfit identity

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Synopsis

This article offers a feminist post-structuralist theory of fat based on body narratives of diverse women who recount becoming the “fat girl” within a Canadian context. Through examining cultural messages concerning fatness and fitness conveyed to contributors in childhood, it analyzes intersections of personal body histories with broader social histories. The article documents how devaluing perceptions of fat frame participants as “unfit” and how disparaging attributions of size interwoven with other differences disqualify their gender. Size stereotypes surface throughout accounts as a key contributor to women's eating and exercise practices that crystallize in their greater susceptibility to engage in problem eating and avoid activity. A difficult double bind also is created through persistent negative perceptions that obstruct

participants' efforts at establishing credible feminine or tomboy identities. While anti-fat messages compromise their physical abilities and identity choices, women show creativity at self-making, mediating differences with improvisational identities as a constant and dynamic process.

I want my point made public. Sometimes I just want to hold a press conference and tell everybody off. [Laughs.] I've always been lonely, the odd person out... I'm a fantastic person, but nobody could see past the fat. It angers me more than it hurts me. But it hurts. (Leila)

In North American society, there are many disparaging depictions and few positive portrayals of girls and women perceived as fat. Despite growing dialogue about body acceptance, overweight and obesity increasingly are interpreted as unattractive, downwardly mobile, not physically or emotionally healthy, and lacking in body and self-control (Bordo, 1993; LeBesco, 2004). Within global and national public health discourses, obesity currently is conceptualized as an epidemic as well as an illness or disease (Fairburn & Brownell, 2002; Raine, 2004). Throughout feminist and social scientific accounts, fat is seen as a disease of the social and the biological body, shaped by gender, class, race, and other inequalities (Beauboeuf-LaFondant, 2003; Lovejoy, 2001; Orbach, 1979). Amid escalating anti-fat attitudes over the past thirty years, weight has emerged as a major marker of social status in western countries. Consequences of body size standards and stereotypes are especially exacting and far-reaching for girls and women, who encounter frequent evaluation of physical appearance and difference as part of their social experience of gender.

Post-structuralist and feminist perspectives emphasize how bodies and identities are shaped and experienced through cultural representations and social relations. Unfinished at birth, bodies are molded and modified over the course of a life through the intermingling of biology with culture and society. For some contemporary theorists, physiology, psyche, and society all play a part in the body's dynamic process of "becoming" (Birke, 2000; Grosz, 1994). From a feminist post-structuralist vantage point, cultural meanings given to bodies also become a basis of identity in social relations (Brah, 2001; Woodward, 1997). People construct a sense of their bodily self from messages, spoken and unspoken, that they receive from popular images and other people throughout their lives (Jenkins, 1996). This occurs when they grasp how others perceive their bodies and understand the personal and social significance of these perceptions to their sense of identity and possibility (Rice, Zitzelsberger, Porch, & Ignagni, 2005). In our society, one location that may be more generative of identity than other social spaces is school, a place where perceptions of appearance and difference shape children's sense of belonging and standing (Rice, 2003). When they enter school, children for the first time are grouped together under the authoritative presence of adults. The organization of student bodies by age and grade heightens children's consciousness of physical differences and encourages body conformity as a condition of belonging (James, 2000). For girls especially, association of idealized face and body features with popularity and social power teaches them that an attractive appearance is a cultural requirement of gender (Currie, 1999; Thorne, 1999). Children who diverge from cultural standards often experience devaluation of physical differences as a result of stereotyping and stigma. This includes fat girls, who may be marginalized by cultural

messages about the abject fat female body interwoven throughout their everyday interactions.

Origins of anti-fat attitudes are found in the cultural and social milieu. Anxieties about fat also are intensified through dominant health discourses concerning the occurrence, causes, and consequences of obesity and overweight. Within current social theory, implications of cultural and medical assertions and assumptions with regards to overweight are being critically examined. For example, research in social psychology is starting to investigate consequences of size stereotypes for the body and self-images of people perceived as fat, especially kids¹ (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2003; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Faibisch, 1998; Pesa, Syre, & Jones, 2000; Vessey, Duffy, O'Sullivan, & Swanson, 2003; Young-Hyman, Schlundt, Herman-Wenderoth, & Bozylinski, 2003). Critical studies in sociology, physical education, and health also are questioning the impetus and implications of conceptualizations of obesity as a disease caused by overeating and physical inactivity (Campos, 2004; Cogan & Ernsberger, 1999; Gard & Wright, 2005; Sobal & Maurer, 1999a,b). For example, some studies suggest that size stereotypes have many negative consequences for individuals' bodily self-images; in addition, defining overweight or obesity as a disease caused by personal health practices may foster fat people's adoption of harmful habits, increase stigma against size differences, and deflect attention away from structural roots of health problems associated with fat. Yet the ways in which cultural and medical assertions about weight, activity, appetite, and health might affect girls' bodies and

¹ I use the North American colloquial "kid" in this article to reference common spoken language that children (including women-as-girls in this study) use to describe themselves and their social group.

behaviours, including eating and exercise, remain unexplored. Also unknown are consequences of negative messages for fat girls' emerging social identities, especially gender.

In response to these gaps, this article offers a feminist post-structuralist theory of fat based on body narratives of diverse women who retrospectively recount experiences of becoming the “fat girl” within a Canadian context. Through examining cultural messages concerning fatness and fitness conveyed to contributors within their childhood social worlds, I analyze the intersections of their personal body histories with broader social and political histories. I use critical social and feminist theory to uncover relationships in the narratives that are currently unmapped within the conventional literature on childhood obesity: connections between negative perceptions of size differences and the emergence of fat girls' “unfit” bodies and identities. Stories of participants trace how harmful consequences of weight stereotyping crystallize in fat girls' greater susceptibility to engage in problem eating and to avoid physical activity. Furthermore, persistent negative perceptions of fatness create a difficult double bind for participants by blocking opportunities for claiming credible feminine or tomboy identities. While anti-fat attitudes compromise their physical abilities and identity choices, contributors also show creativity and courage at self-making, by mediating attributions of difference with improvisational identities as a constant and dynamic process. In light of recent warnings raised throughout media coverage, epidemiological research, and government reports about the apparent obesity epidemic among kids, this analysis concludes with discussion of the study's implications for future feminist research and praxis.

Methodology and interpretation

This analysis emerges from a qualitative research project I undertook several years ago to understand women's diverse experiences of their bodies across the life span. I became interested in women's body image formation through my twenty years experience as an activist and clinician working with women with a range of body image struggles. Because most body image research focuses on white, middle class, and non-disabled women's weight problems, I decided to interview diverse women to learn more about similarities and differences in their body experiences. This research asks: *How do women negotiate cultural meanings given to bodies and use these interpretations to shape their identities, subjectivities, and sense of life possibilities?* The research traces the role of the body in women's identity acquisition in the timeframe from early childhood to late adolescence; it follows their creation of body images and initiation into body modification projects as attempts to give symbolic and material form to preferred accounts of themselves.

When I began this study, I combined inductive methods of grounded theory—to uncover and build theory from informants' accounts—and phenomenology—to unearth participants' experiential knowledges of their lived bodies in the social world (Creswell, 1998). While inductive methods offered an ethical starting point for suspending my own theoretical commitments, I found that the research questions I asked and the stories participants told were inevitably value-based. With this realization, I turned to feminist post-structuralist methodology to understand epistemological positions that influenced my implementation of methods and interpretation of findings (Naples, 2003).

Methodological and interpretive approaches evolved over time to encompass four

guiding principles: 1) use of a hybrid “inductive–deductive” approach to integrate methodology and interpretation; 2) emphasis on contradiction, complexity, and theoretical plurality; 3) privileging of participants' experiential knowledges, agency, and creativity; and 4) attending to experiences of difference throughout interviewing and theory building.

Data collection and coding methods

To obtain body histories of 81 diverse women, I combined snowball and strategic sampling (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Written and word-of-mouth advertising through community organizations, universities, and media outlets were purposely planned to facilitate greater inclusion of women from under- and misrepresented groups. I crafted an open-ended, semi-structured interview guide to capture contributors' experiences of their bodies in narrative time and in diverse social spaces.² In my initial conversations with those marginalized by mainstream research on body image, many expressed an ethical commitment to telling their stories as a way of revisioning conventional accounts and enriching understanding about implications of differences. Following detailed discussion about the scope and aims of the project, I carried out in-depth individual interviews spanning one, two, or three sessions at my office, home, or the homes of contributors. I applied a constant comparative method to discover common themes that emerged through distinguishing among events told by the women. These I emphasized

² *The Body Image Across the Life Span Interview Guide* developed for this research is available by contacting me at carlarice@trentu.ca.

in proportion to their significance to the women themselves, as determined by frequency and prominence in the narratives.

Transcripts were coded separately by myself and by a research assistant; as coding progressed, we met periodically to discuss commonalities and discrepancies in developing categories. Coding with a collaborator helped to increase “construct validity”³ by guarding against my possible imposition of oppressive conceptual frameworks onto participants' lives (Lather, 1991). To check “face validity” of emerging analyses with groups under investigation (Lather, 1991), I conducted public talks in diverse community settings as well as private consultations with selected interviewees having “insider knowledges” of themes discussed in this article (White, 2002). Audience and interviewee responses to analyses were of immeasurable value in enriching knowledge generated in the research.

Participant profiles

The research draws on body narratives told by women between the ages of 20 and 45, with an average age of 30 (see Table 1: Selected participant profiles). Importantly, most participants (90%) came to see themselves as over- or underweight and 25% formed a “fat” identity by the end of childhood. Contributors equally included

³ Lather (1991) defines “construct validity” as a self-reflective process of interrogating conceptual frameworks to guard against researcher imposition of theoretical preconceptions onto participants' experiences. She uses the term “face validity” to mean checking emerging analyses with communities under investigation to ensure they reflect the realities of respondents' lives while taking into account people's possible investment in “ideologies that do not serve their best interests” (Lather, 1991 p. 63).

racialized and non-racialized women,⁴ including Northern European (28%), African–Caribbean (20%), South–Asian (14%), Southern and Eastern European (13%), and Asian (10%) Canadian women. Percentages of participants roughly reflected the ethno-racial makeup of the Canadian City where the study was conducted.⁵ Contributors' mobility and sensory disabilities included cerebral palsy and blindness (11%); their facial and physical differences consisted of craniofacial conditions and scoliosis (9%); and their chronic illness ranged from rheumatoid arthritis to reproductive disorders (23%). While women evenly described growing up in middle (43%) and working or welfare class households (40%), at the time of the interview a majority (61%) reported that their income situation was “limited” (under \$30,000).

⁴ In this article, the term racialization refers to others' reading of women's perceived phenotypic bodily features according to pre- conceived racial categories and privileging these differences within everyday interactions (Rice, 2003). Racialized women in this study frequently became conscious of negative cultural meanings given to differences in face and body features as a result of racial stereotyping and stigma when they entered school. While a majority of white women could not recall acquiring a racial identity because they were never categorized as racially different, Eastern and Southern European, European Caribbean, and Jewish women related experiences of being marginalized as “other than white.”

⁵ The “visible minority” population in Canada has grown in the past twenty five years from an estimated 5% of the population in 1981 to 13.4% in 2001, mainly due to changes in racist immigration policies (Boyd & Vickers, 2000:9–10; Chard & Renaud, 1999:22–23; Statistics Canada, 2003). In 2001, South Asian, Asian, and African Canadians comprised the largest racialized groups in Canada, and were concentrated in metropolitan areas of Toronto, Vancouver, and Montreal (Chard and Renaud, 1999; Statistics Canada, 2003). While most racialized women in this study grew up in major urban centres, many came of age before the cultural and racial landscapes of cities changed. As with those who inhabited small cities or towns, they recall being one of only a few children within their communities and schools identified as an ethno-racial minority.

Table 1. Selected participant profiles

Participant name	Size identity	Cultural/ethnic background	Country of birth	Disability, physical difference, or chronic illness	Class background	Current income (limited under \$30,000)/occupation	Age
Anjula	Worried about weight since 4th grade	South Asian, Hindu	Canada		Immigrant, Middle class	Limited, Student	21
Aurora	Has identified as too thin since childhood	Ecuadorian	Ecuador	Scoliosis in early adolescence	Immigrant, working class	Limited, Student	26
Catherine	Fat identity from age 8	White Protestant	Canada		Working to middle class	Middle, Teacher	37
Erum	Fluctuates, identified as overweight since age 10 or 11	South Asian, African, Middle Eastern, Muslim	Canada	Poly cystic ovarian syndrome	Immigrant, working class	Limited, Student	22
Gayle	Identified as fat since 3rd or 4th grade	Welsh, English, Scottish, Metis	Canada		Middle class	Limited, Student	26
Gina	Identified as overweight	Estonian	Canada	Cerebral palsy	Working class	Working to middle class, Office worker	36

Participant name	Size identity	Cultural/ethnic background	Country of birth	Disability, physical difference, or chronic illness	Class background	Current income (limited under \$30,000)/occupation	Age
	since 2nd grade						
Isobel	Fluctuates, identified as fat since age 10	African, Brazilian, Celtic	Brazil	Psychiatric diagnosis	Immigrant, working class	Disability benefits, The arts	31
Iris	Fluctuates, identified as fat since age 7 or 8	English	Canada	Auto-immune deficiency (thyroid)	Middle class	Limited, Unemployed academic	32
Katerina	Average	German, Austrian	Canada	Psychiatric diagnosis	Immigrant, working class	Limited, Bank clerk	32
Leigh	Fluctuates, identified as fat from 2nd grade	Chinese, Trinidadian (2nd generation) Canadian (first generation)			Immigrant, working class	Middle, Urban planner	24
Leila	Identified as overweight since 4th or 5th grade	Scottish	Canada	Spinal problems from birth	Working class	Limited, office	34

Participant name	Size identity	Cultural/ethnic background	Country of birth	Disability, physical difference, or chronic illness	Class background	Current income (limited under \$30,000)/occupation	Age
Marianne	Identified as overweight since age 9	Cultural–European, Ethnic–African American	Canada		Middle class	Limited, Public relations	33
Maude	Fluctuates, identified as fat since 2nd grade	White Canadian	Canada	Blind from adolescence	Working class	Limited, Massage therapist	27
Rose	Fluctuates, identified as too thin in childhood and as too fat from age 15	Korean born, Canadian raised	Korea		Immigrant, working class	Limited, Bank clerk	24
Salima	Fluctuates, identified as fat from 5th grade	South Asian, Indian	England		Immigrant, working class	Working class, Day care worker	30
Sharon	Identified as fat since age 7 or 8	West Indian	England		Immigrant, working to middle class	Middle, Policy analyst	31

Participant name	Size identity	Cultural/ethnic background	Country of birth	Disability, physical difference, or chronic illness	Class background	Current income (limited under \$30,000)/occupation	Age
Sylvie	Identified as fat since 3rd grade	Italian, Scottish	Canada		Working class	Middle, Manager	38
Yolanda	Identified as overweight since 4th or 5th grade	Dutch, Indonesian	Canada		Middle class	Middle, Editor	23

Of 81 women participating in the study, the following list includes profiles of those quoted in this article.

These statistics provide a partial snapshot of participants' identities, yet they also collapse multifaceted differences into pre-defined categories. Complex and contradictory meanings of differences given in interactions had implications for women's bodies and lives that were not easily predicted by conventional groupings. However, concerns and issues regarding body and self-image emerged as a common thread among those with differences in size. Accounts of 18 women who formed a fat identity by the end of childhood and/or who witnessed effects of anti-fat attitudes on other kids are analyzed throughout this article. Emphasized in the following theoretical framework are cultural representations and social relations productive of fatness that underpin participants' personal accounts.

Competing frames of fatness

I wasn't what a girl should be. I was going to be a big kid. I wasn't necessarily going to be fat, though. It became a self-perpetuating cycle of eating to feed myself emotionally because I didn't fit. I think I became fat because of circumstance. Like, cultural environment shaped my size. (Sylvie)

In North American societies, two competing frames shape current dialogue on obesity and overweight: obesity as an “epidemic” versus as a “myth” (Campos, 2004; Gard & Wright, 2005). The first frame—the epidemic of obesity—dominates public discussion and debate. Fear of a pandemic of fat people has made obesity a “hot topic” in many western countries. Global and national public health institutions have fuelled this fear by interpreting obesity as an escalating epidemic that threatens the health and fitness of western populations and nations. The World Health Organization (WHO) has

even referred to the global spread of obesity as “globesity” (WHO, 2000, 2003). The apparent increase in overweight and obesity among Canadians over the past 25 years is deemed in many federal and provincial public health reports to constitute a “Canadian epidemic” (Basrur, 2004; Raine, 2004). Obesity epidemic discourses have become so prominent and pervasive throughout Canada and other western countries that they often have invalidated alternative views.

As recently as the 1980s, there was active dialogue and debate within North America about the concepts, causes, and consequences of obesity and overweight. In text and talk, academics, activists, and medical experts argued whether obesity was a body type or disease type; debated dangers of dieting; and acknowledged that weight prejudice was an increasingly intolerable aspect of everyday experiences of fat people, especially women (Bennett & Gurin, 1983; Ciliska, 1990; Ernsberger, 1987). Feminist theorists in particular provided alternative positions to conventional medical accounts, by situating experiences of diversely embodied women within patriarchal social relations (Millman, 1980; Orbach, 1979). In economically privileged, media-driven parts of the world where women are identified socially with their bodies, feminists showed how pervasive cultural messages about valued or devalued female body sizes, shapes, and capacities had especially serious consequences. Although alternative feminist, sociological, and scientific perspectives entered mainstream media stories throughout the 1980s, these increasingly were marginalized by obesity epidemic rhetoric. Initially adopted by the United States government, Canadian institutions also embraced this conceptualization, and commissioned mounting reports that framed fatness as a disease of westernized societies. Media coverage of reports generated much public

discussion and galvanized many politicians in ways that further framed debate, confirming the emerging consensus that obesity was an epidemic (Gard & Wright, 2001; Lawrence, 2004).

Close reading of obesity research reveals empirical uncertainty underlying its core conviction that fatness is a disease caused by overeating and physical inactivity (Gard & Wright, 2005). For example, the disease status of fat depends on its correlation with future non-communicable illness (Ross, 2005). Yet, the classification of potential pathology as actual disease can be contested for narrowing the notion of what constitutes health and for sanctioning medicalization of current size based on possible future illness. Inquiry into the science of fat further uncovers doubt and dissent among researchers about whether weight is a good predictor of health and whether repeated weight loss attempts are harmful to health (Ernsberger & Koletsky, 1999; Miller, 1999). Acknowledging the health consequences of extreme obesity, critical theorists question conventional researchers' inclusion of overweight and moderately obese people in disease statistics, which are used to claim that nations are confronting a "health crisis" (Gard & Wright, 2005). Use of the term "epidemic" also is challenged for arousing deep-seated fears associated with rapid spread of communicable disease, which may heighten public anxieties and rationalize medically and morally questionable interventions into overweight (Campos, 2004; Gard & Wright, 2005). Despite dissent within obesity science itself about the culpability of bad habits in rising rates of obesity, causes and solutions to the crisis recurrently converge on people's health practices. Such a stance not only ignores empirical ambiguity about causes of overweight, but it

erases contextual factors of poverty, sexism, racism, and weight prejudice that constrain individuals' options for eating and activity.

Critical analysis of obesity discourses shifts emphasis from stemming the epidemic of fat folk to examining the emergence of a cultural idea—obesity as a dangerous disease—that has captured the cultural imagination (Barthes, 1972). Throughout western history, body size has been a signifier for the health, fitness, welfare, and status of individuals, groups, and nations. Social historians confirm that celebration and stigmatization of fat has fluctuated at different times among different social groups (Schwartz, 1986; Stearns, 1997). While concerns about medical and moral risks of fatness circulated in pre-modern times, morally laden interpretations of overweight as symbolic of wealth and waste have intensified over the last century (Stearns, 1997). These negative meanings have gained momentum within a visual culture profuse with size stereotypes (Brazier & LeBesco, 2001), as well as growth of a multi- billion-dollar weight loss and pharmaceutical industry that profits from size prejudice (Fraser, 1998). They find credence in a moral climate censorious of effortless lifestyles and excessive consumption seen to signify social decline (Gard & Wright, 2005). Finally, they gain acceptance in a political economy more invested in changing bodies of fat people than in shifting structural roots of health problems associated with fat. Erasure of uncertainty and complexity about causes of overweight is accomplished through appeals to personal responsibility that place burden and blame for a weight solely on the individual (Crawford, 2004; Evans, Rich, & Holroyd, 2004). Within rhetoric privileging personal responsibility, overweight folks facing contextual constraints are viewed as lacking knowledge, skills, or ethics to take healthy actions.

Throughout western countries, present day dominance of obesity discourses was preceded and made possible by earlier government efforts to improve the health and fitness of citizens. From the late 1960s onwards, state promotion of physical activity as a method of population health improvement gained prominence, in Canada and elsewhere (Bauman, Madill, Craig, & Salmon, 2004; Rootman & Edwards, 2004). In response to growing concerns about excessive consumption and sedentary lifestyles of western populations (Gard & Wright, 2001), governments initiated public education campaigns (Fig. 1⁶) that called for more physical activity to prevent fatness and promote fitness in citizens. Through a chain of binaries and signifiers, messages that associated firm active bodies with national strength also linked a flabby sedentary citizenry with stagnation of the state. Signifying the future health and prosperity of western nations, children typically were targeted as a group needing special attention (Gard & Wright, 2005).

Figure 1

⁶ Many thanks are extended to Russ Kisby and ParticipACTION Canada for permission to reprint the Fit-Fat and True North Soft and Free graphics analyzed this article.

Importantly, the efficacy of such interventions has never been established. Studies show fat children and youth are less likely to be physically active and more likely to engage in problem eating. Yet research has not revealed whether overeating and under-exercising increases overweight or whether being fat increases their susceptibility to problem eating and inactivity (Boutelle, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Resnick, 2002; Duncan, Woodfield, O'Neill, & Al-Nakeeb, 2002; Mellin, Neumark-Sztainer, Story, Ireland, & Resnick, 2002). Some physical education scholars speculate that demanding physical education practices introduced in the 1970s actually may have dissuaded many overweight students from participating in physical activity (Gard & Wright, 2005). Moreover, fitness promotion campaigns inadvertently may have reinforced stereotypes and stigma, which current studies confirm have harmful consequences for children's body and self-images (Barker & Galambos, 2003; Burrows, Wright, & Jungersen-Smith, 2002; Holt & Ricciardelli, 2002; Krahnstoever Davison & Birch, 2002; O'Dea & Caputi, 2001; Van den Berg, Wertheim, Thompson, & Paxton, 2002; Vander Wal, 2004). Charting effects of anti-fat attitudes on a previous generation may be critically important for assessing implications of obesity epidemic rhetoric on a current cohort of fat kids.

In the past forty years, feminist scholarship has provided alternative conceptions of size that challenge conventional medical accounts. Since the second wave, writers concerned with understanding women's bodily oppression in patriarchal society have centred experiences of embodied subjects as feminism's theoretical touchstone (Brownmiller, 1984; Greer, 1971; Kruks, 2001). Concern of feminist activists and clinicians with cultural messages about the ideal and abject female body mounted

throughout the 1980s and 1990s, when increased prevalence of eating and body image problems led many to focus attention on the profound consequences of gendered body standards, especially for girls and young women (Orbach, 1979; Schoenfielder & Wieser, 1983; Székely, 1988). With the turn to post-structuralism, theorists moved away from probing constraints placed on female bodies in patriarchal structures toward exploring ways that bodily selves are shaped through social discourses (Butler, 1990; Smith, 1993). To understand individual investment in body alteration, feminists interrogated how meanings about female bodies that are produced through language and imagery contour women's desires to embody a particular image (De Lauretis, 1987; Ussher, 1997). By situating individual body struggles within a broader context, feminist scholarship has made a major contribution in bringing to light harmful consequences of cultural images and social interactions which instruct women that their bodies are unacceptable and in need of alteration for them to be viewed as worthy people (Bordo, 1993). Through synthesizing first-person with post-structuralist accounts, feminists further have revealed the pivotal role of restrictive representations and others' evaluative responses in women's body image, identity, and self-making (Davis, 1995; Mama, 1995).

Feminist and post-structuralist perspectives emphasize how cultural meanings that contour bodily experiences also intervene in biology to shape physiology (Fausto-Sterling, 2000; Grosz, 1994; Marshall, 1996). New emphasis on the interactivity of physiology, psyche, and society in the body's becoming has important implications for feminist analyses of fat. Such a perspective posits that neither genetics nor health habits alone determine size; instead, individuals' weights may develop differently

depending on the relationships of sized bodies with psyches and surrounding worlds. Theorizing the physiology of weight as an interactive process calls into question mechanistic or moralistic scientific and cultural claims that faulty genes or bad habits cause fat. It raises important ethical questions about discourses that advocate individual interventions based on the erroneous belief that personal behaviour alone causes overweight. Finally, it challenges approaches that sanction stigmatization of overweight and obesity based on the misguided conviction that fat women have not taken correct action to ensure a socially or medically acceptable size. Drawing on feminist insights about the body's becoming, this article argues that size is a social form produced at the intersection of biology, psychology, and culture. *Women's coming-of-age body histories show how the unfit fat body is made from interactions of large bodies, cultural representations, and social practices that shape bodies of size.*

Acquiring an unfit identity

My mom would ask me to go down the store. I had so much anxiety about that... I think it was because of being overweight and people commenting even though that's not what I thought consciously. All I knew then was that it was uncomfortable to go outside. (Salima)

Women with differences in size recount how they were rendered as physically and also as socially unfit through the on-going dialogue of their social relations. This included the symbolic systems, physical environments, spatial arrangements, and visual, verbal, and even physically violent exchanges, which taught them that they transgressed the culturally normal body. For most participants, negative perceptions of

fatness became increasingly commonplace as they moved through childhood, occurring at home, on the street, and especially at school. Stereotypes concerning size also were cumulative, recurring in relationships with parents, peers, teachers, health providers, strangers, and others. According to women's narratives, memorable anti-fat attitudes received through cultural representations gained meaning and momentum in everyday interactions. When images and messages resonated across situations, they had significant implications for participants' developing sense of body and self.

Learning size differences

Participants tell how critical comparisons and comments were the most memorable sources of cultural knowledge about body size binaries. For most women, including Aurora, parents and family members first imparted the significance of size differences through body-based comparisons with sisters, cousins, and female friends: “My sister is chubbier. They'd always make that distinction. I was ‘la flaca’, and she was ‘la gorda’. Together, we make the perfect ten. It was terrible. They're lavishing on me and disregarding her...”

As a result of body-based comparisons, a majority of women acquired consciousness of unequal values given to different sizes. Stories of Catherine, Gayle, and many others further suggest that gendered power relations operating in encounters with fathers, brothers, and other boys frequently opened up big girl bodies to a particularly critical gaze.

My brother started to give me the nickname Moose or Cow. Those names hurt. But I wasn't aware of it and it [being big] wasn't negative until people started to comment. (Catherine)

In Grade 4, Thomas Lum, yelled out at me, "Fat." I tried to run after him and catch him, but I'm not built to run. I thought, "My God, I am fat." That was the first time I can remember it really impacting on me. From that point on, things went downhill with my attitude with my body. (Gayle)

Through greater power given to their harsh and harassing comments, boys and men dictated anti-fat attitudes that informed women's body and self-perceptions. For many, designation of their bodies as "fat" laid the foundation for their forced accommodation to an unfit identity, imbued with incapacities associated with female fatness that negatively affected and shaped their embodied being.

State-sponsored fitness promotion campaigns heighten consciousness of size

Within Canada, memorable messages for many women interviewed were state-sponsored fitness tests delivered through school physical education curricula and public service announcements (PSAs) disseminated through television and print media. In one PSA entitled "FitFat" (Fig. 2) that ran throughout major Canadian media in the late 1970s, an ungainly, chubby "a" cartoon character was contrasted with an able, slimmed down "i" figure (Lagarde, 2004). By visually and vocally linking fitness with thinness, this clip reproduced positive cultural meanings associated with thin and replayed negative meanings given to fat. The images and messages, in positioning fat as opposite to fit,

also conveyed that fatness and fitness could not coincide within the same body. Importantly, few women in this study could vaguely recall contents of messages. Yet as Maude's story illustrates, they vividly recount consequences of them, which included instilling a nascent sense that their bodies were in some way bad or wrong:

I remember this feeling of dread when the ads came on TV. Once my father and I were watching, I remember a man's voice saying, "This year fat's not where it's at." This made me so self-conscious because I was already feeling bad about my body... (Maude)

Figure 2

Negative perceptions of fatness produce physical unfitness

For women in this study, body standards and stereotypes were communicated everywhere at school. These were conveyed through school furniture and dress codes, playground and classroom interactions, popular physical education pedagogies such as fitness tests and team selection, as well as classroom organizing practices of seating arrangements, line ups, and student placement in class pictures. Entering school environments for the first time, women recall being grouped together by age, grade, and physical traits under the authoritative presence of adults (James, 1995; 2000). As a result, all developed increased consciousness of their own and other kids' proximity to norms in height, weight, and physical ability. Because women-as-girls had little access to alternative frameworks with which to question meanings associated with assigned or implied differences, they were especially susceptible to incorporating others' attributions into their developing body and self-images. Subjected to an evaluative gaze in gendered interactions at school (Currie, 1999; Thorne, 1999), those perceived as fat frequently faced greater censure for failure to conform to body standards. Contributors tell how being positioned around certain notions of standard bodies was a common occurrence that began before school age. Yet classroom and schoolyard practices of categorizing students according to perceived similarities and differences in age, size, height, gender, and athletic abilities had implications for participants' sense of physical identity and possibility throughout the school years.

A majority of women in this study enjoyed participation in physical education. Once identified as “the fat girl”, however, many describe how their continual framing according to the attribution of fat rather than by their actual and potential range of abilities eroded their physical agency. When teachers and students rooted assessments

of fat girls' abilities in stereotypical notions concerning their size, as Iris explains, they produced girls' presumed lack of strength, coordination, and skill:

Once I was a fat kid, there's limitations on your abilities. You're unfit basically... NO, I lost confidence in that. I didn't like sports or gym. Not because I couldn't actually perform the sports. It's because I didn't like being taunted. (Iris)

Within recent feminist research, experiences of gender, race, and weight-related harassment emerge as a major obstacle to girls' participation in physical activity at school (Bauer, Yang, & Austin, 2004; Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Larkin & Rice, 2005). For many respondents in this study, routines and requirements of physical education such as fitness testing, public performance, weight measurements, and revealing clothes also increased their exposure to the evaluative gaze of others.

My teacher commented on how I was gaining weight, when I was about 10. He said that I had poor eating habits. When we had to run in the gym, he said I had problems running... It didn't feel very good. I felt upset in front of everybody. (Isobel)

My body became a source of torment. This is why I HATE my grade 5 teacher: he had the practice of letting kids divide up teams for sports. My best friend and I were always picked last. (Gayle)

According to women's narratives, pedagogical practices that undermined fat girls' sense of physical ability often dissuaded them from participation in school physical activities. By exposing big girls' bodies to others' critical gaze, school design of dress

codes and open change rooms further instilled a negative sense of physical appearance, giving rise to stressful strategies to conceal size difference.

When I was younger, we had a school uniform and the gym uniform was shorts and a T-shirt. Maybe they thought, “They are little kids. What do they have to hide?” But sweatshirts or sweatpants weren’t even an option. So I hated gym because we had to wear shorts and I hated my thighs. Whenever I could, even if I hadn’t forgotten my shorts, I would leave them in my gym locker. I would tell my gym teacher I had forgotten my shorts and could I wear my tracks? ...I did it so frequently. (Anjula)

I loved school, but I hated the students and I hated the interaction. I hated gym class. I hated changing in the change rooms. I didn’t want them to see my body. (Yolanda)

For participants of diverse sizes, stresses of size and gender differences resulted from compulsory participation in a state-sponsored physical education curriculum called the “Canada Fitness Awards.” Designed to improve Canadian children’s fitness levels, the program awarded gold, silver, or bronze “badges” (designed to reflect the Olympic medals system) based on student completion of chin-up, push-up, and long jump competitions. Some, including Rose, recall how challenges involved in public evaluation of physical performance were intensified by gender and size biases built into the tests:

I hated Canada Fitness because my friend was athletically gifted and she always got the red excellent badge. I always got the bronze. It was horrible to test kids in front of other kids. How many chin ups you could do. ...Women generally can’t do

as many because of upper body strength. If you have long legs it is easier to do the hurdles or the long jump. (Rose)

Weighted in favour of children with long legs and upper body strength and against those who lacked height or well-developed arm muscles, women describe how fitness tests tended to privilege boy over girl bodies as well as tall over short ones. Yolanda further describes how compulsory fitness tests heightened consciousness of her appearance and ability differences, and diminished confidence in her physical abilities:

I wasn't doing very well in ParticipACTION or Fitness Canada. I didn't like running around in shorts and I always wore track pants... But I was active in my own way. I biked to school, I walked to school. I was active everyday... (Yolanda)

Because masculine ability norms required in sport contradict feminine appearance ideals obliged by culture (Cockburn & Clarke, 2002; Kirk & Tinning, 1994; Krane, Choi, Baird, Aimar, & Kauer, 2004; Oliver & Lalik, 2004), interviewees encountered critical looks and comments for failing to meet standards of the athletic boy or measure up to images of the attractive girl. Participants of all sizes and shapes avoided physical activity to evade others' judgments. Yet the consequences of such marginalization were especially marked for fat girls. Seen as commensurate with cultural standards of passive femininity, physical inability also is viewed as productive of fatness. As a result, fat women tell how they frequently faced exclusion for having a body that failed to qualify as fit and confronted social disapproval for their ensuing disengagement from physical activities.

As many feminist sociologists have noted, girls and women in sport commonly confront the cultural contradiction of an active female body (Krane et al., 2004; Lenskyj, 1994; Malcom, 2003). Because female athletes often are evaluated according to skillful execution of sport as much as convincing performance of femininity, they may have to meet and manage conflicting expectations of athleticism and attractiveness to be successful in sport. For participants perceived as fat, this contradiction was especially difficult to navigate. Seen as contravening a male athletic and female attractive body, fat athletes tell how they encountered deeply disparaging assessments of their physical performance in sport despite their display of skill.

I rode and I show-jumped. In my first big horse show... I remember being given a fifth place ribbon and the judge walking up to me and saying, "Actually you should've been first. But your job was to sit there and look pretty and frankly you need to lose weight." First, I remember feeling mad because... it wasn't my horse's fault the way I looked, she'd done her job beautifully. I should by all rights have been first. And he was denying it to me on my appearance. That's when things really sort of hit home that these things were very important. (Iris)

Fatness signifies personal and social unfitness

In a culture that equates merit and morality with body size conformity, women's narratives imply that fatness becomes a physical marker of personal disorder as well as a bodily sign of social unfitness. This is especially evident in narratives of women who attended schools for kids with disabilities. At Gina's school, for example, officials separated and regulated the eating of students perceived as fat. Segregation of fat kids

with disabilities created an identifiable group of “others,” who were doubly disabled by the perception that they were incapable of maintaining control over their eating and weight.

They had definite ideas about kids with disabilities, it was this institutional attitude. They stuck any kids that they perceived to be too big or too fat on the diet table in the cafeteria, right? For years, myself and a number of my friends were on this diet table. Nothing reinforces that more because then your peers are on this side of the wall, you're on that side of the wall and they're telling you that that you are being segregated... That was very damaging because it was at public school and everybody was young and peer pressure [was intense]...

(Gina)

For women with disabilities, cultural messages about the disabled body, such as bodily fragility, vulnerability, and dependency (Rogers & Swadener, 2001), intersected with messages about the fat form, including incapacity, overindulgence, and lack of restraint or will power (Bordo, 1993; LeBesco, 2004). Although both bodily differences were interpreted as impairments that needed fixing, cultural treatment of disability as an inherent attribute contrasted sharply with framing of fatness as an intentional act. Fat disabled kids were regulated because their fatness was seen as a deliberate action that further impaired an unfit form. Fatness signified surrender of the disabled child's self to excessive appetites that could be restrained only through greater control of the already incapacitated body.

According to contributors, being a big girl was not the equivalent of being a fat girl. Significantly, women's bigness became fatness within environments that produced girls' social and physical unfitness and lead to exercise habits typically associated with fat. Fat became a problem for participants because it emerged out of a disordered relationship between big girls' bodies and social relations that refused to see female physical and social fitness as embodied by anything but a thin, able form.

Other-gendering fat girls

The boys would say “you're fat” and the girls would say “that fat girl.” Guys would call girls fat more than girls would call girls fat. “You're fat. Get away from me.”
(Erum)

Fat becomes a dominating identity

For most participants, fat became a major marker of place and power in girlhood and, for many, a dominating identity they have carried throughout their lives. Framed first as “unfit” fat kids and only secondarily as girls with other identities, characteristics, abilities, and aspirations they learned, like Marianne, “to collapse people's negative reactions into my size.” Gina, too, describes how she was haunted by negative perceptions of her physical differences, which caused her to become confused about whether “I'm unattractive because I'm overweight, disabled, or because I'm disabled and overweight.” Throughout their accounts, size inter- mingled with and/or overrode other devalued differences inscribed on women's bodies, becoming a defining characteristic thought to express something essentially faulty or flawed about them (Degher & Hughes, 1999). For example, combined racial, disability, and weight-related harassment

made it difficult for racialized women and those with disabilities to distinguish which physical differences were being devalued within interactions. Yet when fatness was framed as a personal flaw or moral failure at home and school, as Leigh testifies, it became a recurring source of shame.

I was the only Chinese kid in class. So I didn't know: "Are they picking on me because I'm Chinese or are they picking on me because I'm bigger than they are?" Of course it's obvious by the name they are calling you when they are picking on you but sometimes it is not that easy to differentiate... More from my family that I was given all these comments and made to feel bad about myself. People talk about overweight people being shamed into losing the weight. I don't know how they ever thought that shame would work. But I guess that's what my mom thought that she would do. What my mom taunted me with was also heard by my siblings. I guess that's what bothered me the most, that they learned this from my mother. (Leigh)

Anti-fat prejudice obstructs efforts at establishing credible feminine and tomboy identities

Women's narratives illustrate how gender became a core definition of the self in childhood. Rather than being a cohesive identity, the salience of gender shifted in social situations and in intermingling with other identities (Thorne, 1999). While gender fluidity was a significant feature of their childhood accounts, gender identities frequently became fixed in a negative direction by devaluation of women's size differences. Fat women tell how they were perceived to possess a body that "other-gendered" them

within interactions as “improper”, “odd”, or “not” girls. Gayle, for instance, describes how peer perceptions of fat positioned her as other than feminine girl:

It wasn't big breasts that made me feel like an improper female, but it was fat, fat, fat.... So because of my fat... I was made to feel like an improper female if I showed any signs of femininity. In grade 3, I liked a boy. There was nothing remotely sexual. He had the best sense of humour and I really liked him. “Look, he's your boyfriend!” “Oooh, you like him!” That was a total shock to me, having to watch your actions so that they can't be construed as you like someone... I was having enough dealings with being “fat ol' Gayle, fat stupid Gayle.” My “fat, ugly” label stuck and I was pretty much a loser, weird Gayle. (Gayle)

For women in this study, failing at becoming a feminine girl often opened up other possibilities for gender. The in-between status of “tomboy” enabled many to express attributes that the feminine girl discourse disallowed, such as athleticism, competitive- ness, curiosity, and strength (Davies, 2002; Thorne, 1997). Once given the attribution of “fat”, however, women found their status as tomboy was difficult to sustain. When cultural meanings of boy bodies as wiry, gutsy, and strong conflicted with interpretations of fat bodies as inert, inept, and weak, participants perceived as fat frequently faced disqualification from tomboy identities through exclusion from tomboy pursuits. As Sylvie's narrative suggests, exclusion often occurred through boys' aggressive challenges to big girls' physical abilities and strength:

I remember my “fall from grace” from being one of the boys. When I was a kid I was stronger than they were. I used to beat the shit out of half of them. I didn't

throw like a girl, I didn't run like a girl, I didn't fight like a girl. So no one picked on me. And no one treated me like a girl... I can remember in grade five when the boys started to become stronger than me. They would gang up on me so I couldn't beat them up any more. So I got banished... I became the classic fat kid. I was teased. The boys hated me. I could no longer beat them up. I went from being a powerful kid to totally despised, despicable. (Sylvie)

While many study contributors of diverse sizes continued to express athleticism and/or aggression in interactions, girls' designation as tomboy meant such activities now belonged to the boys' domain. As a result, participants of all sizes encountered increased pressure to relinquish boy-coded activities and tomboy identities as they approached adolescence to avoid renouncing femaleness and heterosexuality (Barden, 2001).

Size intermingling with other differences disqualifies gender

Black and other racialized women indicate that images of an attractive female body spanned a broader range of sizes and shapes in their communities than in mainstream contexts. However, those in this cohort grew up during a time when communities of colour comprised less than 5% of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2003). For this reason, most contributors recall being one of only a few children within their communities and schools identified as an ethno-racial minority. Coming of age at a time prior to the existence of segmented television channels, Black and other racialized women in this study also had little access to an alternative cultural imaginary in which to revision beauty. Subjected to racial othering and to racial isolation

within social and cultural landscapes of childhood, many lacked a cultural or community context in which to develop a critical consciousness about racist beauty ideals or to imagine an alternative body aesthetic (Poran, 2002). As a result, many, including Sharon, tell how negative perceptions of their colour combined with negative perceptions of their size to disqualify their gender:

I didn't feel like a girl. Do girl things. I was not a girl, not a boy, just someone existing. Then compound that with being a black female. It's even worse 'cause you feel, Jesus, I'm nowhere. 'Cause it's bad enough being a white little girl and you're fat. But when you're fat and you're black, it's like holy fuck. That's like the lowest. The worst thing you could ever be. (Sharon)

Black feminists have analyzed how black women are seen as more masculine, aggressive, and athletic within dominant discourses of femininity (Hammonds, 1999; Hill Collins, 2004). African–Caribbean Canadian women suggest that meanings of female blackness as more masculine may intermingle meanings of fatness as less vital, active, and able to position them as neither boys nor girls.

Compliance with culturally feminine bodies is secured through surveillance and violence

Women further reveal how surveillance and control of big girls' bodies caused many to develop problem eating practices, including dieting, bingeing, and starving behaviours. When those perceived as fat failed to “qualify” as girls, doctors, mothers, and others encouraged and enforced dieting routines as a strategy for remaking their bodies to fit gendered size norms. While others justified dieting using discourses of

“healthy weights”, concern over health masked deeper anxieties regarding girls' adherence to a culturally feminine body. Pressures to comply with cultural constructions of the feminine girl were closely connected to pressures to adapt to cultural weight norms (McKinley, 1999). As Sharon illustrates, messages about healthy weights augmented messages about femininity to enforce adherence to both imperatives.

I was 8 or 9, and my doctor said, “You should try and lose some weight. Don't you want to go to your high school prom?” He said that boys don't go out with fat girls. So I fucked off with that doctor. I told my mother I'm not going to him. Cause my mother was there when he said this. She sat there quietly. She had brought me to him to try and help me to lose weight. ... They put me on pills. They just made me sleep. I didn't lose weight... I liked food, too. So don't tell a kid, okay she's a little big, but Jesus Christ, she wants to eat. That was when I started to hide the food... (Sharon)

For most participants in this study, regulation of weight through enforced dieting routines resulted in lifelong struggles with food and eating. Some women developed compulsive, binge, and secretive eating practices as a direct response to adult interventions. Others took up extreme dieting, anorexic, and bulimic practices in the transition to womanhood when they faced increased pressure to look and appear as desirable. Because it was considered a failure, default, or rebellion against cultural notions of female attractiveness, fatness in girls—as Katerina vividly illustrates—was treated as a very significant, symbolic, and threatening state of embodied being (Millman, 1980).

I'll never forget this, she [a girl perceived as fat in Katerina's grade school class] was walking home... A bunch of boys got together and they spit all over her. Her jacket was covered in spit. That's when her mother complained. Cause that was...abuse. To this day I can't believe that they did that to her. Her mother brought the jacket to school and said, "Look at this. This is what they did to my daughter." (Katerina)

Many social commentators starting with Foucault have argued that power in modern society operates indirectly through creating desire within people for conformity to a "normal" body (Foucault, 1980, 2003). Women in this study testify that girls' compliance with gendered size norms also is secured through direct, repressive, and often violent control of their bodies and appetites. Women-as-girls recount how negative perceptions of size intersecting with other differences positioned them as "other" prior to adolescence. For many, the process of becoming fat that adversely affected their body images and eating practices predated adolescence, a period that many feminist psychologists and theorists argue is fraught with dangers to girls' bodies and psyches.

Contesting negative meanings

Before I was overweight I was a fairly confident kid. But once I was overweight, the children's chants... I got beaten up quite often. ...It took a long time for my confidence to be beaten down, I am still fairly outgoing and trying to do well in school. I was very creative... (Iris)

Women-as-girls mediate attributions of difference to improvise identities

Women's stories reveal that they possessed limited power and resources in girlhood to challenge the intense emotions of contempt and fear that female fatness aroused. In childhood, participants had few options for intervening in broader physical, social, and symbolic environments. Yet they still found creative strategies to contest received meanings and improvise unique identities. Some took on a comedic role to ameliorate peers' disparaging perceptions. Many focused on developing intellectually or artistically as a method of divesting themselves from the devalued trait. A few, including Leila, asserted their physical abilities despite stereotypic perceptions of unfitness, by reversing the cliché of the fat girl being chosen last:

If I wasn't the team captain, I was chosen last. Most of the time I was the team captain, I made sure of that. My momma didn't raise no fool. [Laughs.] But I always tried to be the team captain so I wouldn't have the rejection of being last.... (Leila)

Exploiting cultural associations of size with aggression and masculinity, some fat women resorted to violence to resist negative attributions. Boys responded to fat girls' aggression with vengeance because girls' use of physical violence flaunted the power of fat female bodies, challenging the lowly place of fat girls on the social landscape as they understood it.

I was fighting this boy, who I knew I could beat up. But he was one of the popular boys and the other kids knew that, and so all the boys got in a circle. We're having a fight in the schoolyard and I started winning and the boy started to get really angry. He stopped fighting and another boy took his place. Then when the

other boy got tired, another boy took his place. So all of them fought me and after a while, you're going to get tired, because you can't fight everybody, and I got exhausted. Then they all started pounding me. So they were putting me in my place. (Sylvie)

The narratives show that women perceived as fat creatively and continually resisted forced reconciliation to an unfit identity. All attempted to preserve a positive sense of themselves despite devaluation of body differences. Yet women also describe how others' regulation and retaliation undermined their capacities for action. Negative consequences of social perceptions were especially marked in the transition to womanhood, when participants faced greater pressure to assert credible gender and sexual identities to “qualify” as women (Rice, 2003). While all confronted increased censure as they navigated social relations of adolescence, their continued agentic actions underscore the abilities of girls marginalized by bodily differences to craft a self in the context of disparaging images and daily intrusions. Women's stories indicate that fat has become a major marker of difference for many girls growing up in the west. Size has joined sex, disability, and race as a powerful visual symbol of devalued identity that positions girls as deficiently different and undermines their sense of identity and possibility as they make their way in our increasingly body-centred world.

Conclusion

Over the past three decades, obesity and overweight have been reframed. Once seen as an uncertain condition that increased individuals' susceptibility to future chronic illness, obesity now is interpreted as a disease of epidemic proportions. Yet the

designation of obesity as a dangerous disease may have serious costs and consequences for the bodies and lives of people perceived as fat, especially girls. According to women in this study, anti-fat attitudes make possible and permissible combined gender, race, and weight-related harassment that undermines fat girls' bodily self-images. Such attitudes also are supported by pedagogical practices of weight measures, fitness tests, revealing clothes, and team selection in physical education that encourage and enforce body hierarchies at school. From the perspectives of participants, negative perceptions and practices are likely to do little to promote physical fitness in girls. Instead, by framing them as unfit, anti-fat discourses may produce fat girls' presumed lack of physical ability, strength, and skill. Finally, fear of bodily difference that fuels adult imposition of dieting routines typically results in big girls' development of problem eating, including bingeing, yo-yo dieting, bulimia, and anorexia. Ironically, women's experiences indicate that anti-fat perceptions and practices may be productive of the very behaviours and bodies that they are attempting to prevent!

Within contemporary discourses, causes and cures of obesity span from the individual realm of biology and behaviour to the social realm of the environment (Lawrence, 2004). Individualized frameworks that limit causes of obesity to bodies and behaviours confine solutions to information or interventions intended to alter people's weights through changing their eating and exercise. In shifting burden and blame for fat from unhealthy individuals to unhealthy environments, systemic frameworks emphasize changing social conditions that cause fat (Fairburn & Brownell, 2002; Lawrence, 2004). Yet women's body histories reveal how size is a social form produced at the intersection of biology and culture, where the unfit fat body is made from interactions of large

bodies, cultural representations, and social practices that shape body sizes. Broadening the focus beyond personal to social responsibility is an important step in identifying social factors that may be productive of health problems associated with fat (Brownell & Horgen, 2004). However, in reframing obesity as a disease or disturbance of the social body (Lovejoy, 2001), systemic approaches do little to disrupt cultural devaluation of fat. Instead, fatness remains a powerful cultural signifier of body otherness through conflation of body size with health status.

Women in this study suggest that fitness promotion programs commonplace in 1970s and 1980s contributed to their problem eating and exercise practices. Framing fat as unhealthy and unfit within physical and social environments of home, clinic, and school caused contributors to avoid physical activities, to engage in secretive eating, and eventually to gain weight. As women so eloquently explain, these messages also had significant implications for their sense of well-being, belonging, and self. Their narratives show how designating obesity as a dangerous disease supports morally laden health discourses and pedagogical practices that fix fat bodies as unfit. With a renewed focus on fatness prevention through fitness promotion, today's obesity epidemic proponents likewise may be leading a new cohort of large kids to adopt problem eating and exercise practices, possibility contributing to their greater struggles and increased overweight. Rather than endorsing perspectives with such potentially harmful effects, a preferred approach may be to intervene in aspects of physical, social, and cultural environments that obstruct girls' efforts at engaging in good eating and exercise habits. For example, a "body equity" approach that advocates greater acceptance of diverse bodies in school settings (and elsewhere) could enhance girls'

body images, expand their opportunities to explore enjoyable physical activities, and increase their capacities to make good food choices (Rice & Russell, 2002; Larkin & Rice, 2005).

The present study is an opening conversation about the ways in which cultural messages adversely affect the bodies and lives of girls and women perceived as fat. More research is needed to understand implications of size stigma for diverse groups, especially fat girls coming of age in a cultural milieu that is ever more rejecting of fat. Insights that emerge from contributors' accounts suggest that feminist and post-structuralist perspectives may illuminate the role of cultural meanings in making fat bodies. To expand lines of inquiry into fat from medical and scientific domains to the social and cultural terrain (LeBesco, 2004), a critical fat studies may be needed. Critical fat studies would explore the emergence and operations of size differences within cultural representations and social relations. It would investigate how fat intersects with gender, disability, class, race, and nation to affect the bodies and lives of diverse individuals and groups. Such scholarship also could engage critically with medical and scientific knowledges and encourage more respectful responses to fat bodies. Finally, critical fat studies would open up space for thinking about other ways to approach the relationship of fatness to fitness and health. This might involve moving away from cultural practices of enforcing body norms and toward more creative endeavors of exploring physical abilities and possibilities unique to different bodies. In a social world that is as generative as it is dismissive of fat, such a stance might go a long way in remaking devalued size differences into inhabitable identities.

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