

**Throwing Their Weight Around:  
A Critical Examination of Faculty Experiences with Challenging Dominant Obesity  
Discourse in Post-Secondary Education**

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Faculty of Education at

Lakehead University, Thunder Bay, Ontario

In partial fulfillment of the requirements of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy in Educational Studies

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## ABSTRACT

Obesity discourse is dominant in mainstream Western society, and is increasingly identified as a social category that normalizes, privileges, and praises certain bodies while stigmatizing others. Given that weight-based stigma has been shown to have harmful consequences, addressing and employing teaching strategies that address this social justice issue is, therefore, of utmost importance. This research investigates the academic experiences, philosophical perspectives, and pedagogical approaches of twenty-six post-secondary faculty members in social sciences, humanities, health sciences, behavioural sciences, and education who are known for challenging dominant obesity discourse in their teaching. Data were collected via semi-structured interviews and relevant course materials submitted by each participant (course syllabi, Power Point presentations, workshop materials, and academic papers). Qualitative data analysis and reporting techniques were employed within a critical fat studies, framework to explore the experiences, perspectives, and approaches of all participants.

Analysis indicates that fat oppression within academic institutions is prevalent and that working to address this social justice issue is complex. Participants drew specific attention to how bodies are read within their university classrooms in the context of contemporary dominant obesity discourse. They highlighted how their academic careers are being influenced by size privilege and fat oppression within their post-secondary institutions. Lastly, participants shared various pedagogical approaches and teaching practices they have employed in the classroom that aimed to disrupt the reproduction, legitimization, and promotion of biomedical obesity narratives and offer alternative perspectives around fatness. This research concludes that combining critical fat studies and educational research is generative for understanding and addressing fat oppression within higher education.

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like the saying goes “it takes a small village to raise a child,” it also takes a small village to finish a PhD. While there are many people to thank who have supported me through this study, there are also many people to thank for instilling the importance of education, the drive to succeed, and a passion for social justice. To my parents, thank you for exposing me to so many opportunities; and always believing in me. To my brothers, I am, and always will be, proud to be your sister. To my extended family members, your passion for life and learning has been and always will be inspiring. To the many other teachers, friends, and mentors who have challenged me to invite new perspectives, consider new possibilities, and reimagine the unimaginable, I am forever grateful. Thank you for walking with me over the years.

With regards to this study, I am indebted to the 26 individuals who participated in this study and shared their stories, experiences, and insights with me. Given that I was interviewing accomplished scholars and teachers within my field, I was often nervous during the interviews but was continually appreciative of their humility, generosity, and genuine interest in my study.

I am also indebted to my four doctoral committee members. Dr. Teresa Socha, my supervisor, I couldn't have done this without you. Thank you for your support, friendship, and humanity over the last four years. Dr. Connie Russell, your insights and input in the development of this research study was instrumental. Your excitement and interest in fat theory was inspiring and I look forward to working with you on future projects (including our anthology the *Fat Pedagogy Reader*)! Dr. Gerald Walton, I can't thank you enough for gently pushing me to critically engage my material and reminding me to pay attention to the small details. Your investment and belief in me, and this project, will not be forgotten. Dr. Joe Barrett, thank you for reminding me stay connected to my health and physical education roots. As someone aspiring to

work within the field of health and physical education, I found strength in remembering my insatiable curiosity for how we learn/read/teach bodies, health, and sport. I would also like to acknowledge the families of my committee members whose patience and support also made this project possible.

I would also like to extend a big thank you to my internal reviewer Dr. Lori Chambers and external reviewer Dr. Geneviève Rail for their thought provoking reports and supportive words and for pushing my thinking, specifically with regards to future directions for my work. Their insights and feedback will have enduring impact on my academic career.

I am also fortunate and thankful to have had such great friends and colleagues throughout this process whom I have learned so much from and who feel equally passionate about social justice education. In particular, I'd like to thank Dr. Michelle Kilborn, who I met in my first year of doctoral studies and who at the time was a PhD student with similar academic and research interests (go WOW power!). I'd also like to thank colleagues at Lakehead University, particularly: Kathy Kortés-Miller, Alexa Scully, Jody Mitchell, Jan Oakley, and James Czank. Thank you for sharing this journey with me. And, of course to all the staff in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University, including Diana Mason, Teresa Ruberto-Gaudry, and Gail Saarinen, I can't thank you enough for your friendly smiles and encouraging words, and of course for putting up with my frequent pregnant chocolate cravings! And, I am grateful to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada for supporting this research.

Lastly, I am grateful to my in-laws, Jocelyn Francis and Jim Cameron, for their unwavering and ongoing help in caring for our growing farm and family. I am also thankful to my husband, Jeffrey Cameron, whose love, patience, and support made this journey possible. And my children, Carter and the unborn baby in my belly, your hugs and kicks were wonderful

reminders to keep things in perspective and to make the most of everyday. This is as much my success as yours.

## DEDICATION

*This research is dedicated to all those who have been subjected to fat oppression within educational institutions. May this research contribute to stopping fat hate and addressing fat-phobic institutions that reinforce and reproduce dominant obesity discourse.*



## CHAPTER ONE—SETTING THE STAGE

### Introduction

Over the last decade, concerns about “globesity” (World Health Organization, 1998), referring to a supposed global “obesity”<sup>1</sup> epidemic, have flourished. These concerns regarding obesity are expressed in popular culture (Kwan & Graves, 2013), media (O’Hara & Gregg, 2012), education (Cameron et al., 2014), and by health leaders who have claimed that it is “more threatening than weapons of mass destruction” (Carmona, 2003, para. 66). Scholars who situate themselves within this biomedical paradigm often use the terms “obesity” and “overweight” to denote specific body weight categories that are associated with health beliefs about the prevalence of disease and risk. This process of medicalization—the application and expansion of medical authority and technologies over individuals and human populations in the name of health and life (Conrad, 1992)—has served to reproduce a framework of thinking, talking, and action, where “a ‘size matters’ message fuels narratives about large body size as signifying personal irresponsibility and lack of willpower” (Cameron, Socha, Russell, Møller, & Wakewich, in press). Such a framework ignores other dimensions of health that have more serious consequence such as the social determinants of health, and has led to harmful attitudes towards and judgements of fat bodies (Evans, Rich, Davies, & Allwood, 2008; Gard & Wright, 2005; Lewis et al., 2010; Lyons, 2009; Orbach, 2009).

In recent years, scholars have begun to deconstruct the Western cultural discourse of obesity and offer new perspectives with regards to health, bodies, and weight. Scholars from

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<sup>1</sup> The use of double quotation marks here indicates that I situate this dissertation within an emerging body of scholarship where the biomedical term “obesity” is problematized. Given that the overuse of double quotation marks is distracting, from this point forward, I will, for the most part, simply refer to obesity without any added punctuation. Yet, I remain committed to ensuring that this dissertation does not reproduce, legitimate, and endorse biomedical narratives that privilege some body sizes and stigmatize others. I also draw upon the work of fat activists who employ the term *fat* as a political statement to disrupt dominant obesity discourses and reinstate fat as a size descriptor (Wann, 1998).

Canada (see McDermott, 2008; McPhail, 2010; Rail, 2009, 2012; Rail, Holmes, & Murray, 2010; Sykes, 2011), the USA (see Brownell, 2005; Campos, 2004; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009; Saguy, 2013), Ireland (see Monaghan, 2005, 2008a, 2008b, 2013), England (see Colls & Evans, 2009; Evans, Davies, & Rich, 2008; Hopkins, 2008, 2012; Rich, 2012), New Zealand (see Burrows, 2011; Longhurst, 2005; Pringle & Pringle, 2011), and Australia (see Gard, 2011a; Gard & Wright, 2005; Lupton, 2013) challenge dominant obesity discourse. Such scholars dispute the scientific rationalizations of obesity, drawing attention to the historical, cultural, social, and political context of the obesity discourse, and highlighting how such discourse perpetuates questionable assumptions such as the idea that all people labeled as obese are unhealthy and/or have eating problems requiring treatment. This growing body of literature, referred to by various scholars as “critical obesity studies” (see Colls & Evans, 2009), “critical weight studies” (see Monaghan, Hollands, & Pritchard, 2010), “critical geographies of body size” (see Hopkins, 2008), and “fat studies” (see Cooper, 2010), endeavours to deconstruct commonly held assumptions about body weight and to expose the injustices of a culture that assigns moral value to body weight.

Some scholars, particularly those who identify as fat studies scholars, have taken political action towards reclaiming notions of fatness. Not only do they use the word “fat” as a size description (also referred to by Wann (1998) as the “f-word”), but also they strategically use the term to counter the stigmatizing and privileging of particular body sizes and weights (Cooper, 2010). These scholars suggest that the deployment of biomedical weight categories, such as obesity and overweight, has served to reinforce notions of corporeality that normalize, privilege, and praise certain bodies and stigmatize others (Anderson, 2012; Braziel & LeBesco, 2001; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). Furthermore, they argue that biomedical weight categories

and a weight-centred health paradigm continue to validate fat hate and fatphobia and have led to harmful health behaviours and practices, such as unhealthy body preoccupations, weight-cycling, decreased self-esteem, and eating disorders (Aphramor, 2005; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Mann et al., 2007; Monaghan, 2006, 2010; O'Brien, Hunter, & Banks, 2007).

More recently, critical scholars have begun to focus on how educational institutions serve as powerful pedagogical sites where dominant obesity discourse is reinforcing and reproducing perceptions about the normative healthy “thin” body (see Evans & Rich, 2011; Gard, 2008; Gullage, 2012; Jalongo, 1999; Kirk, 2006; Petherick, 2011; Quennerstedt, Burrows, & Maivorsdotter, 2010; Rail, 2009). Increasingly, it has also been shown that current approaches to obesity prevention in schools have damaging consequences on young people’s body image and developing sense of self (Evans et al., 2008) and could be causing even greater problems with regards to unhealthy eating and exercise practices (Rice, 2007).

It appears, then, that not only do schools serve to reinforce body conformity, but an emerging body of literature suggests that current obesity prevention strategies might be contributing to what has been coined a “shadow epidemic” (Daghofer, 2013, p. 6): as obesity concerns have escalated, so too have rates of weight bias, stigmatization, and discrimination. While most of the weight bias literature has focused on K-12 school contexts, some research has focused on weight bias within post-secondary institutions.

University students in health-related programs, such as medicine (Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Puhl & Heuer, 2009, 2010), nursing (Waller, Lampman, Lupfer-Johnson, 2012), nutrition (Puhl et al., 2009), psychology (Waller et al., 2012), physical education (Brettingham, 2007; Sykes & McPhail, 2008), and kinesiology (Greenleaf et al., 2008; Greenleaf & Weiller, 2005; O'Brien et al., 2007) hold high levels of weight bias. Arguably, some faculty also hold and

perpetuate this bias. Take the recent case of Dr. Geoffrey Miller, an evolutionary psychology professor who recently came under fire for tweeting, “Dear obese PhD applicants: If you don’t have the willpower to stop eating carbs, you won’t have the willpower to do a dissertation. #truth” (Kingkade, 2013, para. 3). Miller’s tweet caused instant outrage across Internet news blogs and opinion sites and within academic circles, and led to concerns being expressed about his “research” by his home university.

While much of this work on weight bias in educational environments highlights individuals’ biased attitudes, some research suggests that academic environments are rampant with size privilege, that is, the “unearned privileges associated with being or aspiring to be an (ever changing) culturally ideal body size, currently a particular level of thinness” (Brown, 2012, p. 149). For example, Hetrick and Attig (2009) articulate how college classroom furniture such as desks serve to fuel size privilege as they require students to fit into prescribed spaces in order to participate in formal education. As Brown argues, fat students not only have to struggle with learning the material but also face constant prejudice that devalues their bodies.

Size privilege does not just impact students; it also impacts faculty. As body studies scholar Fisanick (2006) writes, “during a job interview, I was told by one faculty member that my research on bodies in the college classroom seemed *irrelevant* because *the classroom is bodiless*” (p. 330, emphasis in original). She argues that while some may want to hold onto the traditional view that post-secondary classrooms are disembodied, in reality, “bodies do matter in academic culture, and fat academics remain susceptible to the fat-hating rhetoric that permeates American culture” (p. 237). While for some scholars the politics of body size may seem trivial—or nonexistent—the number of scholars now challenging obesity discourse in post-secondary

classrooms suggests a new pedagogical movement that aims to disrupt dominant social standards of body size.

Over the last century, feminist scholars and critical scholars within educational research have been very interested in emancipatory and liberatory pedagogies. These scholars, such as but not limited to hooks, Giroux, Apple, Greene, and McLaren, have argued that classrooms are not separate from, but instead extensions of a society fraught by hierarchies and structures of dominance. To date, the scholars within the fields of feminist pedagogy and critical pedagogy have focused on many social justice issues in the classroom such as gender, race, class, sexuality, and ability, but fewer have focused on body size as a social justice concern (Cameron et al., 2014). Moreover, in my reading of the literature, only a handful of scholars have examined how dominant obesity discourse is *pedagogised* within school environments (see Leahy, 2009; Rail, 2009; Rich & Evans, 2009).

In their book *Education, Disordered Eating and Obesity Discourse*, Evans et al. (2008) draw attention to the damaging consequences of how dominant obesity discourse is operationalized in schools and reinforcing a culture of body perfection and performance. They suggest that body pedagogies—“the conscious activities undertaken by people, organizations, or the state that are designed to enhance individuals’ understanding of their own and others’ corporeality” (p. 17)—reveals the “contributory” relationship between dominant obesity discourse in schools and harmful health consequences (body dissatisfaction, disordered eating, excessive exercise, depression, etc.). Evans et al. argue for the need to move away from reducing students to ‘bodies’ and towards appreciating the complexity of the social conditions of students’ lives. Arguably, addressing these wider structures will require not just a politics of fat but also a politics of pedagogy, where teachers and scholars engage in reimagining an

experience of education that is inclusive of size diversity. As Giroux (1999) writes, pedagogy needs to be understood as a political act through which “identities are shaped, desires mobilized, and experiences take on form and meaning” (para. 3).

While socially just pedagogies alone cannot stand against the depth of inequalities within educational institutions (Apple, 2000), they can play an important political role in bringing attention, awareness, and recognition to specific areas of difference. As Lee and Green (1997) argue, pedagogy “is central to the academic disciplinary work of the Academy...[and] grasping the implications of this is crucial to engaging productively and meaningfully with the changed and changing circumstances we now find ourselves in” (p. 3).

Given significant weight bias in post-secondary institutions and the increased efforts to disrupt it by academics working in a number of disciplines, the time is ripe for research that examines the personal and institutional experiences and disciplinary nuances of teaching about and against weight-based oppression. As Hanson (2005) writes, “from life writing [and our teaching stories] we stand to learn new perspectives, fresh strategies, and we may find a new lease on our own identities. We may even learn how to be ourselves, in a better sense” (p. 79). While some authors have shared individual perspectives of, and specific teaching strategies for addressing weight-based oppression in the classroom (Boling, 2011; Escalera, 2009; Guthman, 2009; Koppelman, 2009), there is a need for novel empirical research that is broader in scope and pays attention to the nuanced perspectives within different disciplines (Watkins, Farrell, & Doyle-Hugmeyer, 2012).

### **Research Purpose and Questions**

The purpose of my doctoral research is to study the academic experiences, philosophical perspectives, and pedagogical approaches of post-secondary faculty across a variety of

disciplines who challenge obesity discourse. By doing so, I hope to assist readers in heightening their awareness of weight-based oppression in the academy and strengthening their own teaching practices related to weight-based oppression, and to identify the cross-theorizing potential between educational research, critical pedagogy, and critical fat scholarship (i.e., critical obesity studies, critical weight studies, fat studies, and critical geographies of body size).

The overarching question that guides this research is: *How are faculty known for challenging obesity discourse in the social sciences, humanities, health sciences, behavioural sciences, and education working to disrupt weight-based oppression within post-secondary education?* The following three sub-questions helped me address the overarching question:

1. What are the academic experiences of faculty who challenge obesity discourse and how might they shed light on enhancing fat-inclusivity in post-secondary education?
2. What are the philosophical perspectives taken by faculty who challenge obesity discourse in the academy and how might they shed light on the emerging field of critical fat scholarship in post-secondary education?
3. What are the pedagogical approaches used by faculty who challenge obesity discourse in post-secondary classrooms and how might they shed light on a developing fat pedagogy?

### **Naming the Emerging Field**

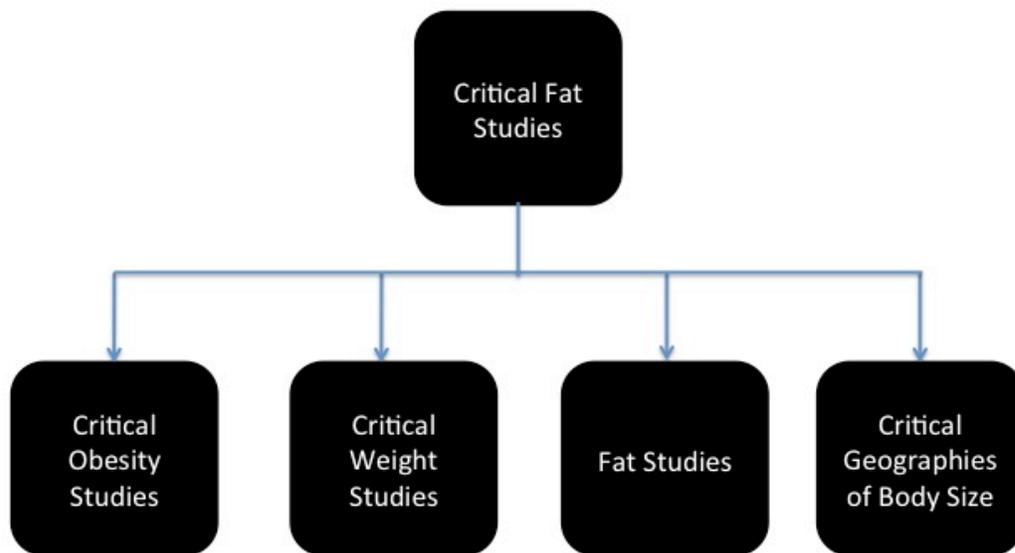
Those working to deconstruct obesity discourse represent an interdisciplinary body of scholarship; they have employed various labels for describing the field, namely: critical obesity studies, critical weight studies, critical geographies of body size, and fat studies. These various labels denote different disciplinary backgrounds and theoretical paradigms that sometimes have

caused tensions within the emerging field. As Cooper (2010) articulates, there is currently “a jostling for primacy between the various players within the newly expanded field” (p. 1026). While each field descriptor and/or label denotes the respective approaches and interests of researchers, they are all concerned with the problematization of fatness (see Aphramor, 2009; Colls & Evans, 2009; Cooper, 1998). As Monaghan, Colls, and Evans (2013) write, “all of [the subfields] offer important *critical* perspectives on the dominant view of obesity and are united in their refusal to simply reproduce/legitimate/endorse biomedical narratives that would have us ‘tackle’ this putative problem” (p. 251).

The nuanced complexity within the emerging field is evident within my study. While some participants spoke broadly about advancing critical perspectives with regards to body size, other participants strongly identified with one of the field descriptors and/or labels. One participant even spoke about intentionally not aligning with any particular label but rather taking a “god’s eye view” approach. It was made clear through the research that while these scholars had the common goal of disrupting notions of fatness, the different descriptors also spoke to deeper issues of power, privilege, and identity within the emerging field. For example, some still debate whether or not one must be fat in order to do fat studies (Brown, 2012), given a concern that if you are not fat, “you run the risk of repeating old, unjust patterns that treat fat individuals as if they are incapable of determining their own subjectivity” (p. 18). Wann (2009) suggests that, if fat studies maintain this fat/thin binary, prejudice will continue. Instead she, like me, believes that every *body* has a role to play in challenging dominant obesity discourse.

At the beginning of this research study, I liberally used the term “fat studies” to describe my field of study. However, through this study, I have come to appreciate and recognize the subtle yet important distinctions between the various labels used to describe different types of

research in this larger field of critical fat scholarship. While I debated coming up with a new term to situate this study (WOFG Studies—short for Weight/Obesity/Fat/Geographies of body size Studies), I felt as though this would be unproductive and unwieldy. I want to respect the various perspectives of my participants, and I also want this research to add to the growing body of literature that refuses to reproduce the dominant obesity discourse. After much consideration, I have chosen to use Rice’s (2007) term “critical fat studies” (p. 171) as the umbrella term to denote the larger project of critical fat scholarship. This is visually depicted in Figure 1 and described in more detail in Chapter Two.



*Figure 1.* Visual depiction of the various subfields within critical fat studies.

The term “critical fat studies” was first introduced by Rice (2007) when she argued that there is a need to move beyond just medical and scientific approaches to fatness towards also including social and cultural approaches. She defines the key aspects of her framework as needing to,

explore the emergence and operations of size differences within cultural representations and social relations... investigate how fat intersects with gender, disability, class, race, and nation to affect the bodies and lives of diverse individuals and groups...engage critically with medical and scientific knowledges and encourage more respectful responses to fat bodies...open up space for thinking about other ways to approach the relationship of fatness to fitness and health. (p. 171)

As highlighted by Rice, a critical fat studies framework incorporates all of the various subfields, nuanced perspectives, paradigms, and ideologies that make up the emerging field of critical fat scholarship. It is for this reason, I believe, that it is the best framework for situating my research theoretically and methodologically.

Admittedly, in using “critical fat studies,” I see one main issue and want to address it at the outset. The similarity of the terms “critical fat studies” and “fat studies” might serve as a point of confusion for readers. For this reason I have tried my best to clearly differentiate between the two terms whenever necessary. While I do significantly draw upon fat studies literature, I want to be clear that I situate this research within the larger body of scholarship that challenges obesity discourse and dominant notions of fatness. Given that my participants were scholars from *all* of the different subfields who hold varying perspectives, it was extremely important for me not to use terminology that would exclude any of my participants. As such, through the writing of this manuscript-style dissertation, I paid close attention to language and how I was describing my study and the various subfields. I made note of the emerging nuances/labels within each research article and how this study included scholars working from different perspectives. I also included a personal disclosure in each of the articles so that readers

would have a better frame of reference for my personal, political, professional, and scholarly involvements with fat.

While I outline my positionality in greater detail within the methods section, I feel it is also important to briefly situate myself here within this introduction. For many readers, particularly within educational studies, the field of critical fat studies might be a completely new paradigm to consider. In presenting my research, I am often asked the question, “But, isn’t it unhealthy to be fat?” Given the pervasiveness of obesity discourse, this question is logical, but as will be illustrated through this dissertation, the argument that obesity is unhealthy remains a hotly contested and debated topic (Campos, Saguy, Ernsberger, Oliver, & Gaesser, 2006; Gaesser, 2002; Gard, 2011b; Gard & Wright, 2005; Gibbs, 2005; Glassner, 2007; Kolata, 2007; Oliver, 2005). Through this dissertation, then, I try not to focus so much on whether obesity is healthy or unhealthy, but rather, like other sociologists of science, I focus on the social process by which knowledge becomes realized within individual and societal consciousness (Saguy, 2013). More specifically, I am interested in the educational practices of teaching and learning about body weight.

### **Format of this Dissertation**

This dissertation is written using a manuscript-style format organized into eight chapters, plus references and appendices. Manuscript-style dissertations, also referred to as article-based dissertations, are comprised of several scholarly journal manuscripts addressing common themes, with each article constituting a separate chapter (Krathwhol, 1994). In such a format, each manuscript is self-contained and ready for publication with its own abstract, introduction, literature review, methodology, results, and conclusion. Typically, introductory and concluding chapters that help to frame the overall study and appendices are used for all

other relevant information. This format is recommended by a number of universities (University of Alabama, Montana State University, University of Georgia, to name a few), not just in the sciences, where it is a more common form of representation, but increasingly in disciplines such as Education (Duke & Beck, 1999).

The first chapter provides an introduction to the research and it highlights the purpose of the study, the guiding questions that informed this work, and situates the study within critical fat studies. The second chapter outlines my theoretical framework and reviews the following five main themes within critical fat studies: language, origins, characteristics, social justice, and activism. Given the lack of research focused on post-secondary education, this review also includes studies from K-12 school environments with regards to weight stigma, bias, and discrimination.

The third chapter describes the research design employed in this study. It provides a summary of relevant information regarding the twenty-six participants (i.e., gender, countries of origin, disciplinary background, years of teaching experience, type of fat-related teaching experience, and self-identification with regards to body size) and it outlines the data collection and analysis methods.

Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven are stand-alone manuscripts intended for publication in different academic journals; each highlights one of four themes that emerged from the research: *bodies* that teach, *why* I teach, *how* I teach, and *what* I teach. The first research article explores the nature of bodies within teaching, research, and learning, and how physical differences constitute embodied subjectivities and positionalities within classroom cultures (Chapter Four). The second research article provides insights into the developing field of critical fat studies and the resistance faculty members face working in this field (Chapter

Five). The third research article focuses on the pedagogical approaches used by the participants and highlights some of the similarities between an emerging fat pedagogy and critical pedagogy (Chapter Six). Lastly, the fourth research article shares some of the specific teaching resources used in post-secondary classrooms (Chapter Seven). The intention of sharing these teaching resources is not to serve as a “methods as ends” model of teaching (Britzman, 2003), but rather as a beginning place to help inform future fat pedagogy.

The final chapter provides a summary of the key ideas and themes that emerged in my dissertation, potential areas of future research, limitations of the study, and three key recommendations moving forward<sup>2</sup> (Chapter Eight). I not only highlight some of the explicit learning, but also some of the implicit learning, some of which was predicted and some of which came as a surprise. For example, while many scholars in critical fat studies draw from feminist theory and explicitly use a feminist lens (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Orbach, 1994), the role of gender did not emerge as a salient theme within this study. While a few of the participants mentioned the intersectionality of gender and fat in their interview, overall, the participants did not explicitly identify gender concerns as central to fat pedagogy. Given the historical context of critical fat studies, I was initially surprised, but I now see two potential reasons for this. First, I did little to incite reflection with regards to gender and to probe into the similarities or differences between feminist pedagogy and a developing fat pedagogy. Second, of the twenty-six participants twenty-three were female. This, in and of itself, is indicative that gender is implicated somehow in fat pedagogy given that more women are drawn to this work. Thus, while gender was not an explicit theme to emerge in this study, it was undoubtedly an

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<sup>2</sup> All of the references from chapters one, two, three, and eight are collectively located at the back of the dissertation in the reference section.

implicit theme and plays a role in fat pedagogy. This is highlighted in more detail as an important area for future research in Chapter Eight.

I was motivated to write a manuscript-style dissertation for both practical and methodological reasons. For practical reasons, I hoped that doing so would keep me focused during the writing phase of my dissertation and at the same time improve my academic writing for scholarly journals; this approach has proven to be useful and successful for other doctoral students within Education (Oakley, 2012). As well, I believed that, by using this format, I would accelerate the process of turning my dissertation into research publications, thereby disseminating my research more quickly and contributing to my academic and professional goals.

This practical approach also complemented my methodological approach by highlighting the voices of those people fighting against weight-based oppression in post-secondary education. Together the chapters offer insight into the influence of obesity discourse in the academy and the ways in which critical fat studies scholars are working to dismantle this discourse inside and outside the university classroom. Each research article was written to serve as a vehicle to promote and foster progressive social change, a tradition referred to as “liberation sociology” (Feagin & Vera, 2001). I hope that each research article will help meaningfully shape policy and practice with regards to weight-based oppression.

### **Defining Key Terms**

The following key terms, listed in alphabetical order are used throughout this dissertation. While each term will be further explored within the literature review, this list of terms provides an important point of departure for this study.

- ***Critical Fat Studies*** is a field of scholarship that examines the cultural and social representations of size, investigates the ways in which fat intersects with other forms of oppression (i.e., gender, disability, class, race, ability), engages critically with medical and scientific knowledges, and creates new pathways of relational understanding between fatness, fitness, and health (Rice, 2007). Critical fat studies includes elements from multiple critical approaches (i.e., critical obesity studies, critical weight studies, fat studies, and critical geographies of body size) in order to theorize bodies as multidimensional (biological, social, and political) and move beyond simple reductionistic corporeal ideology (Monaghan et al., 2013).
- ***Fat*** is a body size descriptor (i.e., similar to other body descriptors like tall, female, and light-skinned), and a political statement used to disrupt the biomedical discourse of obesity (Wann, 1998, 2009). It is also a word laden with social values, attitudes, and prejudices. As such, increasingly scholars and activists use the word in an attempt to challenge dominant obesity discourse and to draw public attention to how the word fat has been used to harm. This political and strategic act of reclaiming words is not unique to fat studies but is a well-known cultural and political response by which a group (although by no means all members of a group) reappropriates the power of disparaging words by turning them into positive descriptors.
- ***Fatphobia*** refers to anti-fat attitudes, values, and beliefs that are expressed and perpetuated from person-to-person, from culture-to-culture, and within social institutions. Fatphobia is most commonly measured using the Fat Phobic Scale (Bacon, Scheltema, & Robinson, 2001; Robinson, Bacon, & O'Reilly, 1993).

- **Obesity** is a medicalized term that refers to a person's body weight that is considered higher than "normal". The most common way to measure body fatness is using the Body Mass Index (BMI), a ratio of weight-to-height, that serves to classify people into distinct categories (Health Canada, 2003). It is most commonly presented as simple fact (Rich & Evans, 2005) and as a medical condition and chronic disease in need of treatment (World Health Organization, 1998).
- **Obesity Discourse** refers to a technique of governance to direct a way of talking, thinking, and representing fat bodies from a medicalized perspective that equates low weight with health (Lupton, 2013). It endorses obesity as fact, rather than as a socially constructed idea rooted in a particular social, political, cultural context.
- **Weight-Based Bullying** refers to bullying that specifically targets an individual's high weight. Like other forms of bullying, weight-based bullying can take the form of physical abuse, verbal abuse, covert abuse, and cyberbullying, and may result in poor body image, low self-esteem, unhealthy eating behaviours, exercise avoidance, social rejection, poor grades, school avoidance, depression, suicidal thoughts, and overall poor quality of life (Daniels, 2008; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Puhl & Luedicke, 2011).
- **Weight-Based Oppression** is defined as the negative attitudes and beliefs about high weight that result in societal stigma, bias, and discrimination that privilege thin bodies and oppress fat bodies (Daghofer, 2013).
  - **Weight Stigma** refers to how body size, particularly weight that is higher than "normal", is devalued in a social context (Puhl & Brownell, 2006).
  - **Weight Bias** is the negative weight-related attitudes, beliefs, assumptions, and judgements toward individuals that often result in false and negative stereotypes

(i.e., common stereotypes related to high body weight include lack of willpower, laziness, ugliness, weak-willed, emotional, morally unstable, and messy; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Rukavina & Li, 2008).

- ***Weight Discrimination*** refers to unjust behaviours and actions of people who are targeting other people because of their high weight (e.g., verbal abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, and cyber-bullying; Puhl, 2011).

## CHAPTER TWO—SITUATING THE RESEARCH IN THE LITERATURE

### **Why Critical Fat Studies?**

Beginning in the late 1960s in the United States, an activist movement began calling for a radical shift in understandings of fatness. This social movement was not unlike other liberation movements, such as the gay liberation movement, the second wave of feminism, and the civil rights movement where focus on singular identities that faced injustices mobilized activism and motivated people to challenge oppressive structures. This is not to say that these activists did not have other intersecting identities, but rather that one identity served as a motivating factor and was the primary focus of the activism. Fat activism was largely influenced by second wave feminism and found new ways to open up spaces for fat-inclusive bodily perspectives (Farrell, 2011). According to Brown (2012), these early fat activists contended that “rather than forcing themselves to lose weight in order to fit into an anti-fat society, [fat people] should be afforded the same rights, responsibilities, and respect as any other person” (p. 9).

In the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the work of these early fat activists and a number of scholars began to gain momentum within the academy and shape the field of fat studies (Wann, 2009). With its roots in fat activism, fat studies has been defined as a “radical field... [that] goes to the roots of weight-related belief systems” (Wann, 2009, p. ix). This field was a new way of exploring fat that went beyond mainstream feminist analyses of eating disorders and dieting, and highlighted the lived experiences and everyday lives of fat people (Cooper, 2010).

In 2009, two pivotal academic texts, *The Fat Studies Reader* (Rothblum & Solovay) and *Fat Studies in the UK* (Tomrley & Naylor) helped to establish fat studies within the

academy and highlighted the breadth of fat-focused work being done in the areas of literature, history, popular culture, civil rights, economics, education, science, and public health. Cooper (2010) argues that fat studies “offers more than just a radical counterpoint to dominant obesity discourse, it can also be seen as a culture, one that is beginning to develop its own critical discourse” (p. 1021). As evidence, the field now has its first academic journal, *Fat Studies*, which was launched in 2012. While fat studies has been defined as radical, arguably any scholar addressing the “problem” of fatness is—by nature of doing “critical work”—radical.

Some scholars interested in fat studies and the larger project of problematizing obesity discourse have also engaged with the medical field, refuting claims made about fat bodies within obesity epidemiology and challenging health-related weight assumptions (see Campos, 2004; Gard & Wright, 2005; Gard, 2011a). Some of these scholars have also drawn attention to how obesity discourse reinforces a moral discourse (see Lupton, 2013), a moral panic (see Campos et al., 2006), and a fat panic (see Saguy & Almeling, 2008) that has led to today’s thriving obesity and dieting industries (see Oliver, 2006). Other scholars have examined how obesity discourse impacts male dieters (see Monaghan, 2008a, 2008b), young peoples’ bodies (see Wright & Harwood, 2009), and school curriculum (see Azzarito, 2007; Gard, 2008). These areas of research, labeled by some as critical obesity studies or critical weight studies, challenge dominant obesity discourse but have been critiqued because they remain situated within the biomedical framework (Cooper, 2010). While critical obesity studies and critical weight studies focus on contesting obesity science, ideology, and ethics, fat studies scholarship suggests that scholars and educators need to completely move away from the biomedical framework and focus on issues such as fat bias, subjectivity, and embodiment.

Another area of research that has emerged as somewhat distinct from those already mentioned is critical geographies of body size. This label or subfield focuses on the relational impact of bodies, space, and place where there is a broader focus on how body size (i.e., fat, thin, small, tall) may be subjected to experiences of exclusion and marginalization based on assumptions about capacities and capabilities (Hopkins, 2008, 2012). It draws upon critical and radical human geography and the earlier work of feminist geographers such as Johnston (2009) and Longhurst (1995, 1997) to examine the ways in which “dominant constructions of obesity and fatness are materialized and experienced across a range of spatial and temporal contexts” (Colls & Evans, 2009, p. 1016). From clothes shopping to participating in leisure places, this scholarship has illustrated how obesity discourse serves to reinforce structures of constraint that limit individuals from having positive attitudes about their bodies (Hopkins, 2012).

Given that my dissertation focuses on the academic experiences of scholars from *all* of the various subfields, it was incumbent upon me to find a way to talk about them in an inclusive manner. As previously outlined in the introduction, Rice’s (2007) definition of critical fat studies was a good fit theoretically. Based on her description, critical fat studies examines the cultural and social representations of size, investigates the ways in which fat intersects with other forms of oppression (i.e., gender, disability, class, race, ability), engages critically with medical and scientific knowledges in an effort to create more fat-inclusive cultures, and creates new pathways of relational understanding between fatness, fitness, and health. Rice suggests this framework not only helps move away from cultural practices that impose normative body ideals but also offers new possibilities for exploring, understanding, and appreciating human weight diversity. Adopting elements from multiple critical approaches, the critical fat studies framework theorizes bodies as multidimensional (biological, social, and political) and helps

move understandings of fat beyond simple reductionistic corporeal ideology (Monaghan et al., 2013).

The benefits of employing critical fat studies as an overarching framework is that it incorporates all the nuanced and theoretical complexities emerging within the field. It engages with medical and scientific knowledges, supports spatiality and intersectionality, and acknowledges the lived experiences of people. For these reasons, a critical fat studies theoretical framework offered the best framework for this study.

### **Theoretical Framework**

I approached this research utilizing a critical fat studies theoretical framework and drawing heavily also from the fields of critical pedagogy (Apple, 1982; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1988, 1997, 2009; McLaren, 2009) and feminist pedagogy (hooks, 1994; Luke & Gore, 1992; Shrewsbury, 1993; Weiler, 1991). Given that body-related research has been typically characterized by a Western reductionist view that has privileged a biomedical perspective of the body (Cameron et al., 2014), this framework was helpful in considering the multiple structures of power being enacted upon teaching and learning bodies in formal educational environments, such as elementary schools, high schools, and universities.

Social and cultural obsessions with the body have been the focus of a growing number of feminist theorists. While early feminist writing examined how thin obsessions manifested through eating disorders such as anorexia and bulimia, more recently feminist theory focuses on how fatness is a gendered issue and the resulting moral imperatives of obesity discourse. Some have gone so far as to suggest that fat is a feminist issue, in that it is about normative social roles, beauty ideals, and the experience of being female in society. For example, Orbach (1994), author of *Fat is a Feminist Issue* and a leader in feminist-inspired psychotherapy,

believes fatness to be rooted in the social inequality of women. She writes, “an examination of the symbolic meanings of fat provides insight into individual women’s experience in patriarchal culture. Fat is an adaptation to the oppression of women” (p. 22). Since the publication of *Fat is a Feminist Issue* in the late 1970s, others have built upon this work, and have contended that fat is a feminist issue predominantly because the physical standards for women, with regards to weight, are far more rigid for women than for men, and as a result, women have endured more weight-based oppression (Bordo, 1993; Brown, 1985, 1989; Chrisler, 1989; Wooley, Wooley, & Dyrenforth, 1979). In a systematic review of the literature on weight-bias, gender, and ethnicity, Fikkan and Rothblum (2012) argue that, despite the significant evidence that women suffer disproportionately from weight bias, feminist scholars have failed to “devote as much attention to the lived experiences of fat women as they have to the ‘fear of fat’ experienced by thin women” (p. 566). They suggest that this theoretical gap only serves to further devalue the fat female body.

Many feminist scholars interested in body-related research have also drawn from poststructuralism and Foucault’s (1984) concept of ‘biopower’ – the idea that people are controlled through body practices that are predominantly classed, racialized, and gendered (see Wright & Harwood, 2009). Foucault’s (1984, 2003) ideas on biopower express how power functions through technologies that give the illusion of freedom through discourses of production, conservation, and protection of life (Harwood, 2009). For example, technologies of power include such things as self-regulation of the body, where public health discourses reinforce prescribed ways of living through slogans such as ‘avoid fat’, ‘stop smoking’, ‘get fit’, ‘practice safe sex’ (Tinning & Glasby, 2002). Technologies of power are also imposed on society as a whole through things such as vaccinations (Polzer, 2009; Polzer & Knabe, 2012),

disease categories (Jutel, 2006), and public health policies (Beausoleil & Ward, 2010; Low & Thériault, 2008; Raphael, 2009a) that serve to conserve social order. This is what Hook (2003) has aptly described as “bottom-up” and “top-down” flows of power (p. 616). Biopower can be enacted within everyday activities through technologies such as language and rhetoric, where people learn to govern and police themselves. Biopower can also be enacted through governmental laws and policies that subjugate and control populations at large, what Foucault (1979) referred to as governmentality. For example, the “obesity epidemic” has become a major agenda for governments, resulting in national health campaigns focused on informing the public how they can “protect” themselves. Not only is this illustrative of how targeted population change can shape knowledge, but also how it can influence people’s lives in material ways (e.g. engaging in weight loss behaviours). This type of power is what Gramsci (1971) described as hegemony or ideological domination, though not in the context of discipline of bodies.

In addition to Foucault, I also draw on the work of Butler (1990, 1993), and Shilling (1993, 2005, 2007, 2008) who have worked to highlight the ways in which social, cultural, and political discourses influence bodies. Butler’s work on performativity is helpful in understanding how people perform health and the important implications this has on identity construction. Shilling’s (2007) work on body pedagogics is insightful, where he defines body pedagogics as the “means through which a culture transmits its main corporeal techniques, skills, dispositions, and beliefs” (p. 13).

Together the work of Foucault, Butler, and Shilling have been useful for other scholars, such as Evans et al. (2008) who explore the power relations and body discourses that exist in schools. In the co-edited book *Biopolitics and the ‘Obesity Epidemic’: Governing Bodies* (2009), Rail, Rich, Evans, Azzarito, and Leahy explore how obesity discourse is produced,

reproduced, and normalized within school contexts. The field of critical pedagogy is also helpful in such analysis in that it too emphasizes that schools are political sites (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009) that serve to reinforce dominant social structures and ideologies of inequality (Monchinski, 2009). But critical pedagogy offers more than just support for analysis, criticism, and change—it offers an educational vision for justice (Kincheloe, 2004) that supports a nuanced exploration of teaching and learning committed to change within the institutional structures of a school or university (McLaren, 2003). In this way, critical pedagogy serves as a useful lens through which to pay attention to how faculty challenge obesity discourse both inside and outside university classrooms.

Similarities between feminist theory, poststructural theory, and fat studies have been articulated, including their focus on power in the construction and conservation of systems that support the status quo (Orbach, 1994, 2009; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). Important distinctions between them have also been made; as Wann (2009) articulates in *The Fat Studies Reader*, fat studies offers a unique theoretical lens:

Like feminist studies, queer studies, and disability studies, which consider gender, sexuality, or functional difference, fat studies can show us who we are via the lens of weight. Fat studies can offer an analysis that is in solidarity with resistance to other forms of oppression by offering a new and unique view of alienation. (p.xxii)

Brown (2012) articulates how fat studies acted as a theoretical framework in her own doctoral study of the experiences of fat learners in a post-secondary institution. She outlines what she believes to be the four core characteristics of a fat studies theoretical framework.

First, she suggests activism is at the core given its roots in the fat rights movement, also referred to as the size acceptance movement, fat acceptance movement, or fat liberation

movement. She argues that fat studies provides a platform for strengthening fat culture and building alliances between grass roots movements and the academy. Second, Brown suggests that using a fat studies theoretical framework forces the researcher to pay close attention to language and the use of words like fat, obesity, and overweight. Third, she suggests the main focus of a fat studies theoretical framework is to reject obesity discourse and to highlight how fat oppression is a social justice issue; as she writes, “defining weight as a medical condition is of concern to the critical fat studies researchers because issues of health and disease are often conflated with issues of morality...[where] fat individuals become unworthy of the rights of *normal citizens*” (p. 21, emphasis in original). Lastly, Brown suggests that there is an emphasis on placing the fat individual at the centre of research in a fat studies framework. Akin to feminist studies, she argues fat studies draws attention to the lived experiences of the individual and often illustrates how real life experiences are different from what is represented in mainstream science and popular culture. As Wann (2009) writes, the focus on lived experiences “helps move [the obesity discourse] obstacle from our shared path, freeing us to enjoy authentic – rather than alienated – embodiment” (p. xviii).

Brown’s articulation of a fat studies theoretical framework offered an important starting point for my study. It highlighted some important theoretical positions for me to consider, but it became clear to me that there were two key theoretical differences between our studies. First, although Brown suggests language plays an important role in the framework, she uses the terms critical fat studies and fat studies interchangeably and goes as far as calling it a “critical fat studies theoretical framework.” This is confusing as it is not clear how and why she uses the term *critical* in some instances and not others. As I have argued previously in this chapter, there are important differences between the two. I would argue that her framework is, in fact,

exclusively fat studies. Nowhere in her framework does she make mention of the important role of critically engaging the medical literature around health and risk that is foundational to obesity discourse. Given that some of my participants were scholars whose work is more aligned with the subfields of critical obesity studies and critical weight studies, my theoretical framework needed to recognize that an important part of disrupting obesity discourse is to also engage with and challenge the medical literature. Second, while the focus on placing the fat individual at the centre of research has been and will continue to be a cornerstone of fat studies research and important for expanding knowledge of weight-based oppression within society, there is also a need for more research to recognize how *all* bodies are implicated in this culture that “weigh[s] our value as people” (Wann, 2009, p. xv).

While Brown’s theoretical framework was insightful and helpful to me, in the end, I drew predominantly from Rice’s (2007) account of a critical fat studies framework. Her framework includes all the concerns suggested by Brown, but it also creates room for research that includes participants of all sizes and critically engages with medical and health discourses. Fat studies has historically rejected any discourse related to health, but it is clear to me that scholars from the other three subfields also make excellent contributions to the field by actively engaging with and finding ways to contest notions of health. Thus, for me, a critical fat studies theoretical framework was most helpful in exploring alternative body pedagogies that were not reinforcing but rather critically disrupting obesity discourse.

### **Literature Review**

While critical fat studies has become more common in some fields, such as sociology and women’s studies, it has not yet gained traction with educational researchers or within the field of education and higher education (Brown, 2012). Given the focus of my dissertation

research, I initially focused my literature review on critical fat studies focused on post-secondary education. The little research I was able to find examined the following areas of study: fat bullying in outdoor and environmental education in university (Russell et al., 2013); the impact of fat phobia in the tenure and promotion process (Fisanick, 2006); the influence of researchers' fat embodiment while conducting research (Rice, 2009); the impact of post-secondary classroom furniture on fat students (Hetrick & Attig, 2009); the prevalence (or lack thereof) of fatness in post-secondary curricula (Koppelman, 2009); the experiences of fat learners in an American college (Brown, 2012); weight bias among students (Puhl & Heuer, 2009); fat bias reduction strategies (Dánielsdóttir, O'Brien, & Ciao, 2010); and the experiences and/or challenges of teaching a fat studies course (Boling, 2011; Fisanick, 2007; Guthman, 2009; Tirosh, 2006; Watkins & Doyle-Hugmeyer, 2013). To date, my thorough literature search only found one study that explored the implementation of four fat studies courses in the United States; I and Watkins et al. (2012) contend that there is a need for more pedagogical research that is broader in scope and that covers various disciplinary perspectives.

Given the relatively small number of articles I found with the narrow focus on post-secondary education, I was compelled to broaden my search to include all formal and informal sites of education. A search for keywords was conducted that included but was not limited to the following words used individually and in combination: weight, size, obesity, fat, bias, oppression, discrimination, bullying, and education. I searched journal articles and grey literature (e.g. government documents, conference proceedings, organization websites, etc.) published as of 1970, which corresponds to the beginning of the fat acceptance movement and the emergence of critical weight-based research (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). This expanded search was supplemented by cross-referencing from reference lists of key journal articles. In

total, over 900 abstracts were retrieved. Papers were considered and included if they addressed critical fat studies in relation to research, practice, or education. The final sample comprised 126 papers published in English. I will turn to this now, beginning with a “big picture” analysis of critical fat studies literature.

In my analysis of the growing interdisciplinary body of work in critical fat studies, I discerned five broad themes that dominate the current literature and which help to situate my own research. The first theme focuses on language (i.e., obesity, weight, fat); the second on how the field challenges and critiques the obesity discourse; the third on efforts to map the origins and growth of the field; the fourth on situating fatness as a human rights issue; and, the fifth on fat-inclusive pedagogies and practices. While I endeavour to draw upon all of the various subfields (i.e., critical obesity studies, critical weight studies, fat studies, and critical geographies of body size), admittedly I draw most heavily on fat studies within this literature review. This is due to the fact that fat studies is the most well-established of all the subfields and has emerged as a collaborative voice against fat oppression. It has succeeded in distinguishing itself as a field unto itself whereas the other subfields have situated themselves within larger disciplinary discourses in, for example, health and geography.

### **The Weight of Words: Strategically Using Language**

Word choice is important in critical fat studies (Wann, 2009). For instance, in critical obesity studies and critical weight studies, words like “obesity” and “overweight” are still used as a way to bridge paradigm boundaries, even when the overarching intent is to deconstruct dominant discourses. In contrast, many fat studies scholars prefer the term “fat” to “overweight” and “obese”. These O-words, particularly the word obesity, are seen as bureaucratic medical terms that serve to pathologize fatness (Lupton, 2013). This process of

medicalization has been documented elsewhere. For example, Foucault documented how “sexuality” became discursive in the 1800s when, in Western science, it seemed everything was becoming medicalized and categorized, thus eliciting their emergence into discourse and/or delineating normal from abnormal (Foucault, 1984). Fat activist Wann (2009) suggests that there is “nothing negative or rude in the word *fat* unless someone makes the effort to put it there, using the word fat as a descriptor (not a discriminator) can help dispel prejudice (Wann, 2009, p. xii, emphasis in original).

While the label fat tends to incur negative reactions (Brochu & Esses, 2011), fat studies scholars work to “reclaim” the word in an attempt to challenge dominant obesity discourse and to draw public attention to how the word fat has been used to harm. This political and strategic act of reclaiming words is not unique to fat studies. It is a strategy that has been employed by many marginalized groups, such as some lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered, and transsexual people reclaiming “queer” and some African Americans reclaiming “niger.” The process of reclaiming is a well-known cultural and political response by which a group (although by no means all members of a group) reappropriates the power of disparaging words by turning them into positive descriptors. Through this process words that previously were seen as pejorative can become about self-empowerment and personal validation.

Fat activist and scholar Wann (2009) advocates using the word fat, arguing that its use may help reduce prejudice better than consenting to the other alternatives such as obesity and overweight. While Wann’s definition of obesity -“a doctor’s fancy way of saying I’m looking at you, and I find you disgusting. Would you like to buy this ineffective but wildly expensive weight-loss treatment? If you don’t, you could die” (p. 19) - is provocative and satirical, it

contains some hard truths. I will explore the terms obesity and overweight further to illustrate this point.

The term obesity derives its origins from Latin and refers to the state of becoming “fattened by eating” (Camden, 2009, p. 1). While this older definition simply describes a natural physiological process, the influence of health institutions, health campaigns, health economics, and media, have shaped obesity into a medicalized term that identifies and defines “incorrect” bodies (Lock & Nichter, 2002; Scheper-Hughes & Lock, 1987). For example, the World Health Organization (WHO) describes obesity as a medical condition and a chronic disease (World Health Organization, 1998) defined by an “abnormal or excessive fat accumulation that may impair health” (World Health Organization, 2012, para. 1). This definition is similar to many others provided by health institutions, such as:

- “Overweight and obesity are both labels for ranges of weight that are greater than what is generally considered healthy for a given height” (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2012, para. 1).
- “Obesity is an abnormal accumulation of body fat, usually 20% or more over an individual's ideal body weight” (“Obesity”, 2012, para. 1).
- “Obesity is defined as having an excessive amount of body fat” (Mayo Clinic, 2012, para. 1).
- “Obesity is a risk factor in a number of chronic diseases” (Health Canada, 2006, para. 1).

Collectively, these biomedical definitions all present obesity as simple fact (Rich & Evans, 2005) and the most common way to measure it is using the Body Mass Index (BMI), a ratio of weight-to-height, that classifies people into distinct categories of weight

(“underweight”, “normal weight”, “overweight”, and “obese” class I, II, and III; Health Canada, 2003). The BMI is a crude proxy measure for body fatness, is widely used as a population-based metric, and is promoted by the WHO. Yet, the BMI has come under intense criticism as it does not take into consideration factors such as muscle mass, bone density, water content, sex, age, and race, all of which have been shown to influence BMI results (Anderson, 2012; Burkhauser & Cawley, 2008).

The BMI is not only a very misleading measure of body fatness, but it also fuels harmful assumptions about weight and bodies (Evans et al., 2008). Even Keys, who employed Quetelet’s weight-to-height equation and later called BMI index (Keys, Fidanza, Karovnen, Kimura, & Taylor, 1972), later questioned his earlier findings by noting that weight-to-height ratios do not follow a normal bell curve and therefore should not be used as a diagnostic tool for body composition (Keys, 1989). Furthermore, the BMI categories have shifted over the years which has led to confusing interpretations about the prevalence of obesity. For example, in 1985, the U.S. National Center for Health Statistics defined overweight as having a BMI of 27.8 or more for men and 27.3 or more for women. Then in 1998, following the publication of a report by the WHO and the International Obesity Task Force (IOTF), the National Institutes of Health (NIH) lowered the cutoff to a BMI of 25 for both men and women, thereby causing 29 million Americans to become overweight overnight (Saguy, 2013).

Given BMI’s troubling history, researchers in the fields of public health (Lewis et al., 2010) and nutrition (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011) have voiced serious ethical concerns over its use. Yet, the use of BMI is ubiquitous and gaining popularity. On the Internet, there has been an explosion of tools that assist people in calculating their BMI. For instance, a quick search of “BMI calculator” in February 2014 using the Google Canada search engine produced 1 700 000

results. Furthermore, a number of states, cities, and communities in the United States have implemented school-based use of the BMI, and many other jurisdictions have considered doing the same (Ikeda, Crawford, & Woodward-Lopez, 2006; Johnson & Ziolkowski, 2006; Scheier, 2004). The use of the BMI as a surveillance and self-surveillance tool is very troubling. As Nihiser et al. (2007) have argued, there is still too little known about the unintended consequences of BMI measurement such as its role in fueling discrimination and unsafe weight control behaviours.

Creating weight categories has arguably not only validated the public policing of bodies but has also lessened our acceptance of human weight diversity and the idea that human weight, like human height, is unique to every body. As Wann (2009) writes, “if a word like ‘overweight’ is acceptable and even preferable, then weight prejudice becomes accepted and preferred” (p. xii). To prove her point, she substitutes the word “height” in common sentences about weight (e.g., “I need to lose three inches”), making clear how ridiculous it would be if we obsessed about height in the same way. While her analogy is somewhat simplistic, there is an increasing body of research suggesting that the relationship between obesity and adverse health outcomes is more complex than originally thought (Campos, 2004; Flegal, 2006; Flegal, Graubard, Williamson, & Gail, 2005, 2007; Flegal, Kit, Orpana, & Graubard, 2013; Pérez, Muñoz, Cortés, & Velasco, 2007). Probably most surprising to the general public is that in some cases fatness has been shown to have positive survival benefits (Amundson, Djurkovic, & Matwiyoff, 2010; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011). By devaluing human weight diversity, many people have come to accept “questionable assumptions that legitimize fat fighting and institutional intolerance and insensitivity to ‘sizeism’” (Joanisse & Synnott, 1999, p. 49).

While weight categories have been shown to underlie prejudice, euphemisms for fat such as heavy, large, voluptuous, and big boned serve only to positively mask negative views of fatness (Wann, 2009). Worse still are the use of animal or object characterizations such as hippo, cow, elephant, and truck, which are not only “anti-fat” but often speciesist and sexist (Hardy, 2011; Russell et al., 2013). As noted above, Wann and others thus encourage the reclaiming of the word fat and argue that it is a simple three-letter human descriptor with multiple possible meanings. For instance, it is used to refer to a food or a substance, can be an allusion to something good (fat wallet), something bad (fat chance), an aesthetic (fat angel), and in some cases something erotic (Kulick & Meneley, 2005). For example, according to the *Online Etymology Dictionary* “phat” (n.d.) is said to be hip-hop slang for “sexiness in a woman” (para. 1).

While fat foods and fat bodies are celebrated in some parts of the world as signifying wealth and power, in contemporary Western cultures, fat has become symbolic of poverty and immorality (Braziel & LeBesco, 2001). In Western society, fat has come to infer the corporeal qualities or characteristics of “reckless excess, prodigality, indulgence, lack of restraint, violation of order and space, transgression of boundary” (p. 3), and in some cases, even criminality (Schachter, 1971). Furthermore, fatness is often used as a symbol of national identity whereby fat people represent failed citizens (Elliott, 2007).

Examining the language used to describe body weight may uncover how obesity is as much an idea as a physical phenomenon that can be measured. Obesity is not simply an excess percentage of adipose (i.e., fat) tissue, nor is it a simple fact. The full story of obesity, then, is the unfolding story of how social, cultural, and political ideas of fatness are influencing the way individuals think, feel, and act towards body size. By understanding obesity as a social

construct, perhaps one can better understand how to celebrate one's body and oneself, as embodied and emplaced. In his chapter that weaves together historical contexts and pre-modern perceptions of fatness, Klein (2001) writes, "until this century no one has ever dreamed of living in a skinny land. Fat has always been the shape of utopia. Now, of course, the prejudice against fat seems universal and eternal; and thin belongs to what is truly good and utopia" (p. 35).

### **Getting the Skinny on Fat: A Journey from Harmless to Evil?**

As obesity discourse has been taken up in spheres such as popular culture, politics (see Obama's *Let's Move* campaign, 2010), and economics (where obesity is said to be a threat to public health systems; see Government Office of Science, 2007), the notion of fatness has arguably taken on different meanings. Different values and actions regarding fatness arise from our various ideological, political, and ethical beliefs, different interpretations of the past, and competing visions for the future. To many, the word fat has little to do with an actual human body but rather is more of an embodied emotion. In her book, *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, Orbach (1994) suggests that for many people, "fat isn't about the physical; it is in their own mind and in their articulation of what they believe fat to be" (p. xv). She explains that for many, fat has negative connotations and can create discomfoting emotions. From harmless cell to disembodiment, what has led to Western societies' discomfort with fat?

Rothblum (2011) identifies the 1880s and the 1920s as key time periods in North America when acceptable and unacceptable body shapes and sizes were defined. She suggests that three societal shifts helped to transform fat from something thought to be healthy and attractive to something ugly and unhealthy. First, economic shifts in industrial production of food ensured that it was more readily available and fatness became no longer a sign of wealth.

Second, demographic shifts, specifically an increase in immigration, led some Americans to want to “distinguish themselves, physically and racially, from stockier immigrants” (Fraser as quoted in Rothblum, 2011, p. 175). And third, shifts in medical and pharmaceutical industries were instrumental in the invention of scales, calorie counters, and weight-loss practices as tools to promote “health”; these were then sold en masse. Thus, advertising media became a tool by which fatness was categorized and medicalized for profit.

Klein’s (2001) exploration of the history of fatness describes 15 000 year old fertile Venus figurines and the Middle Ages’ sense of plentiful abundance and leads his readers on a journey from a time when fat was considered beautiful and desirable to when it became, particularly during periods heavily influenced by religion, “the emblem of all the mortal weight of sin arising from temptations” (p. 28). She suggests that, in the last century, fat, and specifically dieting, has become a symbol of capitalism. It works to generate profit because it does not work but effectively exploits people’s desire to meet media-driven social norms (i.e., thinness). Many studies show that the overwhelming majority of dieters end up regaining all they lose and often more (see Bacon, 2008; Ernsberger, 1991; Ernsberger & Koletsky, 1993; Ernsberger, Koletsky, Baskin, & Collins, 1996; Kolata, 2007). In fact, in a study evaluating the quality of evidence for obesity treatment, Mann et al. (2007) reported that dieting was a predictor of weight gain in the majority of studies reviewed. Klein (2001) believes that the high failure rate of dieting is what fuels the diet industry: “since capitalism depends on consumers consuming, the more they diet the more they frustrate desire, thereby magnifying its imperious demands” (p. 37). While dieting has been shown not to work long-term, short-term success often gives people a sense of false hope that this time, with this specific diet, it will work.

This notion of dieting as a symbol of capitalism is supported by Veblen's (1994) theory of conspicuous consumption, the idea that consumption is driven by the desire to display one's wealth and status. In other words, consumption practices are influenced by commodity capitalism where "thin" bodies serve as symbols of power. While this may seem contradictory to notions of consumption (e.g., the more you eat, the fatter you will become), it nonetheless works in a similar fashion whereby thinness becomes the desired product promoting consumptive practices that help people to "work" on being thin. Not only did normative beauty ideals feed this industry but so also did the desire to perform one's power, quite literally, by showing control of one's body to lose weight. Other scholars such as Gilman (1999, 2004, 2008), Schwartz (1986), and Stearns (1997) have also pointed to how a growing dieting industry helped to feed a culture of fat phobia and reinforce body policing and surveillance.

The American medical community also played a key role in the diet industry, which at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, began to construct obesity as a pathology (Schwartz, 1986; Stearns, 1997). This pathologizing of obesity is what some have called the process of medicalization, a "process whereby more and more of everyday life has come under medical dominion, influence, and supervision" (Zola, 1983, p. 295). Some have argued that medicine has become an institution of social control because of the diminution of religion and the growing faith in science, rationality, and progress; moral ideology went from sin to sickness (Conrad, 1992; Turner, 1984, 1987; Zola, 1972). Perhaps best known for their work in this area, Foucault (1975) and Illich (1999) worked to demystify the nationalized medical profession and the role of doctors, whom they believed to have too much cultural and social power. Foucault in particular drew attention to the "medical gaze" and how over time there was a shift from disease afflicting the individual to the body as pathological. Yet, "medical imperialism" is not

the only explanation for medicalization. Rather, as Jutel (2006) suggests, there are other possible explanations:

What are some possible explanations for the emergence of overweight as a disease entity? I believe that two important phenomena provide a strong foundation. The first is the importance accorded to measurability in the establishing true understanding of health and illness, and the second is strong emphasis that Western society places on normative appearance. Whilst these two factors precede the changes I have identified in the current study they are enabled by the commercialization of self-management through the gym, diet and pharmaceutical industries. (p. 2270)

Undoubtedly, the combination of defining and categorizing obesity as a disease and Western culture's emphasis on appearance contributed to the rise of the commercial dieting enterprise. It was further helped along by insurance companies, which, by the mid-1900s, were using the BMI to assess morbidity risk (Schwartz, 1986). This practice further institutionalized a normative standard for body weight as well as the ranking and social judging of people according to their adherence to this standard.

By the late 1990s, medical and pharmaceutical corporations had great influence on the American public health debate, a phenomenon that Lyons (2009, p.79) has termed "Obesity, Inc." For instance, when U.S. Surgeon General Koop declared a "war on obesity" in 1995, not only did he use his medical authority to ensure the success of his *Shape Up America! Campaign*, he also reinforced fat as bad and weight loss as the solution (Burgard, Dykewomon, Rothblum, & Thomas, 2009). More recently, current Surgeon General Carmona has updated Koop's war metaphor for the new age of terrorism, claiming that "unless we do something

about it, the magnitude of the dilemma will dwarf 9/11 or any other terrorist attempt” (Associated Press, 2010, para. 2).

Such obesity rhetoric, along with the multi-billion dollar diet and pharmaceutical industry (e.g., weight-loss programs, weight-loss food, diet cookbooks, bariatric surgery, exercise clubs, cosmetic surgery), has effectively fueled a culture of fat hatred and fat phobia that relies on people, particularly women, feeling dissatisfied with their bodies. As Burgard et al. (2009) suggest, “we are brainwashed into believing that our bodies are products and that these products can be standardized or shaped or changed at will, or that we can buy products that will change our bodies” (p. 337). Arguably, this war against fatness and the industries that have benefited may be more dangerous than obesity itself. As Daniels (2008) argues, prejudice against people who are fat “is the only remaining socially acceptable prejudice in an era of political correctness” (p. 382), and as some have argued, it too will become unacceptable given time (Hartley, 2001). By no means is this meant to suggest that racism, homophobia, and other social prejudices have been eradicated, it simply suggests that most people in society do not express them openly in public.

### **Mapping the Field: Emerging Subfields within Critical Fat Studies**

As noted earlier, the literature focused on challenging obesity discourse comes from different theoretical and political standpoints. As Cooper (2010) writes, there continues to be “a jostling for primacy between the various players within the newly expanded field” (p. 1026). The existences of various subfields (i.e., critical obesity studies, critical weight studies, critical geographies of body size, fat studies) demonstrate the complexity of viewpoints within the new landscape.

Given the medical origins of obesity discourse, a number of scholars have focused their attention on challenging the science behind the obesity “epidemic.” Some scholars have focused on the poor interpretation and over-generalization of obesity data (see Campos, 2004; Campos et al., 2006; Gaesser, 2002; Oliver, 2005), making strong assertions such as current obesity science being “a product of greed, junk science, and outright bigotry” (Campos, 2004, p. xvii). Other scholars, who challenge obesity science but through less aggressive approaches, seek to identify the uncertainties, complexities, and contradictions within the literature and highlight the social contexts in which obesity research has emerged (see Basham, Gori, & Luik, 2006; Gard & Wright, 2005; Gard, 2011b, 2011b; Jutel, 2001, 2005, 2009). For example, in *The Obesity Epidemic*, Gard and Wright (2005) argue that obesity science has remained stagnant since the 1880s and that media has tended to focus on studies that are not only old but that also misconstrue and misrepresent the facts.

All of these scholars suggest that science remains the biggest part of the dominant obesity discourse. In her book *Fat*, Lupton (2013) suggests that scholars who challenge the science of obesity make the following general arguments: (a) an increase in body mass at a population level has occurred in modest not “epidemic” proportions; (b) life expectancy has risen not fallen since the increase in population body mass, suggesting good global health; (c) statistical evidence has failed to demonstrate negative health effects from weight except at the extreme ends of the weight spectrum; (d) there is a lack of evidence to support that significant weight loss improves health, whereas, weight cycling—the constant losing and gaining weight—does have a negative impact on health; (e) fatness is a symptom not a cause of disease; and (f) fitness not fatness is more important to health.

Many of the scholars who debunk these “obesity” facts also address the social, political, ethical, and even spatial concerns with regard to obesity and weight. For example, some scholars who challenge the obesity science also point to the ethical dilemmas of recommending weight loss as an intervention strategy when studies have shown that a focus on diet alone often can result in long-term weight gain and weight-cycling, and result in sustained feelings of guilt and shame (e.g., Kolata, 2007; O’Hara & Gregg, 2012; Puhl & Heuer, 2010).

Other researchers who have gone beyond challenging obesity science, have focused on the spatial dimensions of bodily experience and subjectivity, such as how spaces discipline bodies like university desks (see Hetrick & Attig, 2009) and airplane travel (see Brandon & Pritchard, 2011; Longhurst, 2005). Researchers have also looked at how body policing and surveillance influence shopping practices (see Colls, 2004, 2006) and public eating habits (see Murray, 2008; Tischner & Malson, 2008)

While all of this research offers important contributions critical to the larger project of problematizing dominant notions of fatness and reclaiming fat, Cooper (2010) suggests that fat studies offers a particularly generative theoretical lens. Wann (2009) asserts that fat studies is a radical field that gets at the roots of fat oppression and Rothblum (2011) defines it as an interdisciplinary field of scholarship that “critically examines societal attitudes about body weight and appearance, and that advocates equality for all people with respect to body size” (p. 173). Fat studies ventures to challenge societal weight-related attitudes that legitimate the notion that: a) fat people should lose weight; b) fat is a disease; c) fat people cannot live healthy long lives; and d) fat is ugly and thin is beautiful (Wann, 2009). Moreover, with roots in the women’s movement, the field of fat studies embraces lived experiences and celebrates the

diversity of human weight that varies widely across any population and can change over a lifetime.

Not only has fat studies brought together feminists and critical scholars, but it has also inspired anthropologists and psychologists, all in the name of *lipoliteracy*. Lipoliteracy refers to “reading” fat in critical ways that expose it for what it is – complex, constructed, and contradictory (Graham, 2005). Fat studies thus “seeks to challenge the status quo and rework negative associations about marginalized, stigmatized and often misunderstood social groups” (Hopkins, 2012, p. 1229). In an attempt to map the field, Cooper (2010) suggests that fat studies literature disrupts dominant obesity discourse mostly in relation to stigma and discrimination, concern for social justice, fat embodiment, fat activism, and the celebration of fat. It helps to enrich our understanding of how fat subjectivities are constructed and how body size acts to privilege and oppress both men and women.

When did this field emerge? Inspired by other liberation movements of the 1960s, the fat acceptance movement took shape in 1969 when Fabrey founded the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA; initially the National Association to Aid Fat Americans; Rothblum, 2011). The fat acceptance movement continued to gather momentum through the 1970s, especially when a small group of female activists, including Sara Fishman, Ariana Manow, Sheri Fram, Judy Freespirit, Gudrun Fonfa, and Lynn McAfee, separated from the NAAFA and formed the Fat Underground (Fishman, 1998; Rothblum, 2011).

For over a decade, the Fat Underground not only engaged in dozens of public demonstrations, disrupting medical workshops and lectures, but also they wrote the Fat Liberation Manifesto, in which they advocated “FAT PEOPLE OF THE WORLD, UNITE! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE” (Freespirit & Aldebaran, 2009, p. 342). While the group

dissolved in the early 1980s, they were instrumental in helping to raise awareness about fat oppression. As a result of their advocacy and the continued work of the NAAFA, the number of fat activists and grassroots organizations in the United States has increased over the last three decades. Most recently, there has been a surge of fat-positive movements and exercise programs (Schuster & Tealer, 2009) and fat-positive Internet sites, sometimes known as fatospheres (Rothblum, 2011).

As a result of the fat acceptance movement of the 1970s, individual scholars also began to explore weight as a social justice issue, but it took another three decades before it would become an established field. Wann (2009) asserts that fat studies was launched in 2004 through a conference held at Columbia University Teachers' College, "Fat Attitudes: An Examination of an American Subculture and the Representation of the Female Body" and its accompanied art show, "Fat Attitudes: A Celebration of Large Women." Since then, the academic discipline and field has expanded significantly (see Rothblum & Solovay, 2009; Tomrley & Naylor, 2009). Now, fat studies is the focus of a number of conferences, post-secondary courses, online groups, academic texts, and academic journals, including *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*, first published in 2012.

Despite the growth of the fat studies field, societal weight bias and discrimination is more prevalent than ever before, at least partially due to the profitable outcomes of making people feel badly about their bodies and themselves. Negative and demeaning images of people who are fat are easy to come by in lifestyle magazines, television shows, reality television programs such as *The Biggest Loser*, *Celebrity Fit Club*, or *Supersize vs Superskinny*, and television documentaries such as *Half Ton Mom*. Humour that targets fat people and fatness is often used in stand-up comedy, sitcoms, and movies, such as Howard's mother on *Big Bang*

*Theory.* There are also examples of celebrities being written out of television shows for being considered too fat such as Angelina in *Jersey Shore*, and Oscar winners being ostracized for being fat such as Jennifer Hudson who later became the celebrity spokesperson for Weight Watchers.

Respected health professionals such as former U.S. Surgeon General Koop have used a war metaphor when talking about obesity, suggesting physicians join the “battle” against obesity. Environmentalists have also taken up the charge as noted in this headline: “Fat people causing climate change, says Sir Jonathan Porritt” (see Gray, 2009; Russell et al., 2013). Health promotion campaigns such as Shape Up America! sponsored by the likes of Weight Watchers, the Campbell Soup Company, the Heinz Foundation, *Time* magazine, Kellogg Company, Jenny Craig, Slim\*Fast, and the National Cattlemen’s Beef Association, have not only perpetuated the construction of fatness as bad, but also they have led “to more suffering” (Burgard et al., 2009, p. 334) through increased weight bias and fat hate. The obesity rhetoric in these campaigns—“obesity is not just an appearance problem; it is a condition that can lead to serious disease” (see [www.shapeup.org](http://www.shapeup.org))—makes clear that the “war on obesity” is alive and well.

But obesity is not the only “war” being declared in the United States; other issues such as drugs and crime have also been subjected to metaphorical war discourse. This is not coincidental but represents contemporary forms of power being enacted on individual bodies and populations to police the boundaries of normalcy that are in constant flux despite appearing to be stable, including around race, class, sex, gender, and size. Foucault’s (1979) study of power is particularly helpful in understanding how neoconservative ideology, a criticism against proponents of modern liberalism, has been used to fuel perceptions of a society out of control and at risk, and has enabled increasing levels of control and surveillance to go

unquestioned. His notion of governmentality helps to explain how an apparatus of security could serve as a mechanism for the justification of disciplinary management over individuals and everyday life where actions are both produced and constrained (Turner, 1997). The war on obesity is one example in which a neoconservative state inscribes itself through policy and disciplines such as healthcare, education, and law whose discursive practices effectively lead to the regulation of bodies, ensuring that a populace of docile, practical bodies is maintained.

In Canada, the newly revitalized federal health promotion campaign *participACTION*, which began in the 1970s, serves as a neoconservative example of how governmental policies reinforce dominant obesity rhetoric. The website highlights empirical research on the impact of physical inactivity, but fails to mention any research on the social, cultural, and political aspects of physical inactivity thereby reinforcing dominant obesity discourse. It is this type of neoconservatism that Broom (2008) argues leads to “hazardous good intentions?” (p. 129). She identifies the need for reflexive and critical awareness of the political environment and cultural economy in the field of health promotion. She mentions the following unintended consequences of certain approaches to health promotion: enhanced stigma, oppressive structures, intensified surveillance, commodification of health, and a failure to address inequalities. She writes, “good intentions are not enough to ensure that the project of prevention achieves its promise of better health...a much more self conscious and self critical view of health promotion and preventive care will be needed to diminish these (and perhaps other) unintended consequences” (p. 136). In essence, she is highlighting the age-old adage that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions.”

According to Raphael (2009b), hundreds of studies have demonstrated that the economic and social conditions in which people live are far more important to a person’s health

than lifestyle choices such as healthy eating and physical activity. Thankfully, an increasing number of health professionals and politicians have begun to question current obesity discourse. For example, a recent report published by the BC Provincial Health Services Authority titled “From Weight to Well-Being: Time for a Shift in Paradigm” (Daghofer, 2013) states that:

Mounting evidence has linked many current obesity reduction approaches with harm to mental and physical health and well-being. Facile “energy in = energy out” equations, that ignore mental health and wellbeing and the broad socio-environmental determinants of health that powerfully influence individual behaviours, can result in unintended negative consequences, particularly weight-bias. (p. 9)

The report highlights three areas that need to be addressed in order to better protect and promote human health in Canada, namely: (a) tackling weight bias and discrimination; (b) supporting individuals, family, and community networks; and, (c) addressing the determinants of mental and physical well-being (i.e., promoting healthy youth development, developing inclusive communities, promoting size diversity, implementing healthy policies, and adopting complexity inspired approaches to government). The report is a huge step forward in disrupting obesity discourse and pushing biomedical reductionism. As McPhail (2010) has argued, “once obesity can be disassociated from illness and removed from the medical and epidemiological model, new and different questions can be asked about its development and salience as a disease category” (p. 9). Further, given that current reductionist obesity prevention approaches clearly do not work and in some cases have been shown to cause further harm, research is clearly needed that considers the educational implications of this research to better understand the complexity of teaching, learning, and living healthy bodies.

## **The (Dis)Obedient Fat Body: An Inequality and Social Justice Issue**

Scholars working within the various subfields of critical fat studies have argued that biomedical health and beauty discourses have obscured the social constructedness of body size categories and have created a body hierarchy that privileges thinness and stigmatizes fatness (see Gard & Wright, 2001; Rich & Evans, 2005; Solovay & Rothblum, 2009). Fatness has come to signify specific cultural meanings within society, where assumptions about the psyche and self are made about people based on a reading of their bodies (Grosz, 1994; Braziel & LeBesco, 2001). In particular, fat bodies are subjected to contemporary discourses around illness, personal responsibility, and consumption that have manifested as a cultural loathing of fatness and of bodily “excess” and that promotes fat bodies as Other (Lupton, 2013). This focus on the embodied subjectivity of fat has inspired scholars to begin to examine the way in which body size serves as yet another axis of signification used to categorize, differentiate, and strengthen structures of dehumanization (see, for example Evans et al., 2008; Guthman, 2009; LeBesco, 2004; Monaghan, 2008a; Russell et al., 2013; Sykes, 2011; van Amsterdam, 2012 2013; van Amsterdam, Knoppers, Claringbould, & Jongmans, 2012).

Intersectionality has become an important theoretical lens for feminist and fat scholars alike (Lykke, 2011). Scholars have examined how gender, social class, race/ethnicity, sexuality, ability, and species all intersect with fat and serve to shape and co-produce power, normativity, and identity (e.g., Boero, 2009; Boling, 2011; Hardy, 2011; Russell et al., 2013; Sykes, 2011). For example, in her book *Fat is a Feminist Issue*, Orbach (1994) argues that fat has everything to do with how women’s bodies are highly sexualized and commodified, giving the impression that what matters most is appearance and that one must conform to normative ideals of beauty and complacency. As Orbach contends, “fat offends Western ideals of female beauty and, as

such, every ‘overweight’ woman creates a crack in the popular culture’s ability to make us mere products” (p. 21).

Feminist scholars have also been particularly interested in the ways fat female bodies serve to resist gender domination (Bordo, 1993). Historically, women have been defined by their reproductive abilities and compliance to beauty standards (Demello, 2014). Some feminist scholars have argued for reconceptualizing female embodiment and focusing on processes such as menstruation, lactation, pregnancy, and birth to challenge notions of containment, compliance, and boundaries (Bordo, 1993; Grosz, 1994). Drawing upon these reconceptualizations, fat female bodies can be seen to disrupt gendered norms by taking up space, which has typically been a male characteristic and representation of power (Demello, 2014; Hartley, 2001; Tischner & Malson, 2011).

In her book, *Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture*, Farrell (2011) suggests that fat has become increasingly used as a marker of class by examining contemporary discourses of fat as an index of upward, or downward, mobility. She points to public figures such as Oprah Winfrey, Britney Spears, Monica Lewinsky, and the United States’ First Lady Michelle Obama to suggest that weight loss is a sign of upward mobility and weight gain “designates a loss of position, a figurative and literal move down in the social and economic hierarchy” (p. 118). The intersection of fat and class has also been explored through TV shows such as *Honey*, *We’re Killing the Kids* and *Jamie’s Ministry of Food* that moralize and decontextualize health inequalities (Rich, 2011) and youths’ constructions of the fat working-class bodies versus the thin middle-class bodies (van Amsterdam, 2013).

Regardless of how fat intersects with other identities, it is clear that fat people in general face weight bias and discrimination, often in similar ways to better known types of

discrimination such as sexism, racism, classism, and ableism (Lupton, 2013). Schvey, Puhl, & Brownell (2014) found a positive correlation between exposure to weight bias and greater cortisol reactivity, known as a biological marker of chronic stress, which is just the latest in the growing body of literature documenting the negative effects of weight bias (see Puhl & Brownell, 2006; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Schvey, Puhl, & Brownell, 2011). Weight bias is said to impact children as young as three years of age, influencing their choice of friends and positive associations (Harriger, Calogero, Witherington, & Smith, 2010) and continues on through adulthood, particularly in the areas of employment, healthcare, and education (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Weight bias stems from negative attitudes and beliefs about people who are above a perceived idea of “normal” weight and results in prejudicial behaviour and discrimination (Lewis & Van Puymbroeck, 2008; Puhl & Latner, 2007; Rukavina & Li, 2008). Common negative stereotypes associated with weight bias include lack of willpower, laziness, ugliness, emotional instability, and moral laxity (Friedman et al., 2005; Puhl & Heuer, 2009).

Weight bias has significantly increased in the United States (Andreyeva, Puhl, & Brownell, 2008; Latner, O’Brien, Durso, Brinkman, & MacDonald, 2008). Arguably, the fact that fatness is highly visible compared to some other stigmatized conditions makes it highly susceptible to oppression and resistant to change (Crandall, 1994; Rogge, Greenwald, & Golden, 2004). Weight bias is evident in health insurance companies denying people coverage based on weight (Wann, 1998) and, on the scale of the ridiculous, scientists blaming fat people for climate change (Edwards & Roberts, 2009). Media and popular culture also play significant roles in negatively portraying and targeting fat people and fatness (Saguy & Almeling, 2008). Weight bias is pervasive in diverse professional fields, such as social work (Lawrence, 2010;

Melcher & Boswick, 1998), psychology (McHugh & Kasardo, 2012), leisure (Lewis & Van Puymbroeck, 2008), and fashion (Aagerup, 2010), to name a few.

In the world of work, weight bias has shown to affect employment opportunities, hiring practices, and wages (Bradstreet & Kleiner, 2003; Pagan & Davila, 1997; Pascal & Kurpius, 2012; Register & Williams, 1990; Roehling, 2002; Sartore & Cunningham, 2007; Swami, Chan, Wong, Furnham, & Tovée, 2008; Venturini, Castelli, & Tomelleri, 2006). More recently, Hausman (2012) used the *Walmart Stores Inc. vs Dukes* court case to advocate for anonymous hiring: “The case for anonymous hiring—stripping resumes of all information related to race or sex, and eliminating selection interviews...would also reduce hiring discrimination based on weight, size, or attractiveness—without changing federal law to protect those characteristics directly” (p. 1343). It is this type of creative thinking that directly addresses the politics of obesity and ventures to reduce weight bias within hiring practices.

In healthcare, physicians (Huizinga, Cooper, Bleich, Clark, & Beach, 2009; Monaghan, 2010; Warner et al., 2008), nurses (Camden, 2009; Creel & Tillman, 2011), dieticians (Puhl, Wharton, & Heuer, 2009), and physical therapists (Sack, Radler, Mairella, Touger-Decker, & Khan, 2009) often hold negative attitudes towards fat people. Not only does this influence the level of care fat patients receive (Huizinga et al., 2009), but, since weight bias is known to cause direct and indirect stress, there is the chance that these healthcare professionals unintentionally cause further harm to their patients (Kirk & Penney, 2010). For example, Teixeira and Budd (2010) argue that negative attitudes towards obesity by healthcare professionals can act as a barrier to diabetes management in that it has shown to impact the quality of care of patients (e.g., time spent, degree of education provided, and treatment options

offered). They suggest healthcare professionals should critically reflect on their weight-based attitudes and beliefs to become aware of potential weight biases.

The pervasive “weight-centred health paradigm” within healthcare is based on three assumptions: (a) people should be able to control their weight; (b) fatness is associated with excess and disease; and, (c) weight loss will lead to better health. These tacit assumptions have been shown to not only be ineffective at producing thinner, and presumably healthier, bodies, but also to have unintended harmful consequences such as food and body preoccupations, repeated cycles of weight loss/gain, distraction from other health goals, decreased self-esteem, and eating disorders (O’Hara & Gregg, 2012). These assumptions are also challenged on ethical grounds (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011). Aphramor (2005) argues that the focus on weight loss as a health promotion strategy not only promotes the idea of “normal” weight, but also fails to accept and celebrate people’s embodied differences.

Despite evidence of the negative impact of weight bias in important areas of society, significant gaps in the research remain. In 2001, Puhl and Brownell published the first comprehensive review of research on weight bias and stigma. In 2009, Puhl and Heuer updated the review, identifying new research that explored weight bias in the media, interpersonal relationships, and emotional health. Their findings suggest weight bias persists and its prevalence may actually be increasing in employment settings, healthcare, and education. In their concluding remarks, Puhl and Heuer highlight emerging research on the consequences of weight bias, namely vulnerability to depression, low self-esteem, poor body image, maladaptive eating behaviours, and exercise avoidance. They also highlight key areas for future research and suggest the following:

Perhaps needed most are studies to develop, test, and compare effectiveness of stigma-reduction strategies to reduce weight bias in multiple settings...[O]f the few studies that exist, weight bias appears to be a challenging stigma to reverse, and may be resistant to interventions that have successfully improved attitudes toward other stigmatized groups. (p. 20)

The need for more strategies to reduce weight bias is now also a key priority in Canada, as outlined by the Canadian Obesity Network-Réseau Canadien l'Obésité (CON-RCO). In 2011, CON-RCO organized a one-day summit of national and international leaders and stakeholders to discuss the issue of weight bias and discrimination (CON-RCO, 2011). As part of this meeting, a summit advisory council of experts was convened with the purpose of making recommendations to address weight bias and discrimination in Canada in the areas of healthcare, policy, and education. Of particular relevance to my research were the four recommendations specific to education, namely that CON-RCO: (a) work with partners to develop specific strategies to address weight bias within existing anti-bullying programs; (b) help infuse messages about the effects of weight bias in the Healthy Schools initiatives; (c) promote weight bias as an important component of the federal, provincial, and territorial framework and Declaration for Health and Health Promotion; and (d) address weight bias as it relates and impacts mental health within schools. Given that there is still a paucity of research on reducing weight bias in educational settings and that fat students continue to face significant obstacles in educational achievement (Rice, 2007; Sykes & McPhail, 2008), more work needs to be done to understand this important issue.

### **Standardizing Bodies: Fat Phobia and Fat Bullying in Educational Contexts**

Weight-based bullying is particularly salient in schools and one of the most common forms of bullying observed and experienced by youth (Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Puhl & Latner, 2007). It has been shown to be associated with lower body image, higher depression, and higher suicide ideation in adolescents (Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, Haines, & Wall, 2006; Eisenberg, Neumark-Sztainer, & Story, 2003). Weight status is not only considered the “number one reason for peer rejection in America” (Jalongo, 1999, p. 95), but longitudinal research by Griffiths, Wolke, Page, and Harwood (2006) has shown that weight status significantly predicts future victimization, with the heaviest youth at greatest risk. Aside from the social consequences, weight-based bullying also has long-term health impacts and has been shown to result in weight gain, disordered eating, and binge eating up to five years following the victimization (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 2007). Girls seem to be particularly vulnerable to weight-based bullying given that body and appearance seem to be more central to their self-concepts (see Brumberg, 1997; Crosnoe, 2007). Ample evidence indicates that norms about weight are more strictly and publicly enforced for girls (Martin, 1996; Wardle, Waller, & Jarvis, 2002), fueling increased body dissatisfaction and concerns about appearance, including among young girls (Slater & Tiggemann, 2011; Smolak, 2004).

Puhl, Luedicke, and Heuer (2011) surveyed 1 555 American youth about weight-based bullying and found that a high percentage of students reported witnessing peers being teased about their weight (92%), called names (91%), teased in a mean way (88%), teased during physical activities (85%), ignored or avoided (76%), excluded from activities (67%), verbally threatened (57%), and physically harassed (54%). Moreover, in the same study, 75% of the students reported experiencing weight-based discrimination. This is of concern given that

victims of weight-based bullying are more likely to avoid going to school, report that their grades are affected, and are involved in more incidents that lead to school suspensions (Daniels, 2008; Puhl & Luedicke, 2011). Most notably, the fact that three-quarters of the students within this study experienced weight-based bullying implies that students of all weights, not just those supposedly classified as obese, are feeling the ramifications of a school culture that is increasingly becoming a site for body policing and body surveillance.

Recently, studies have begun to specifically explore the types of school settings in which weight-based discrimination occurs. For instance, while weight-based bullying is found to occur in lunch rooms, cafeterias, and classrooms (Puhl et al., 2011), it is found to most frequently occur during school-based physical activity and in physical education classes (Fox & Edmunds, 2000). Within these settings, fat students have reported feeling discomfort and embarrassment, and have often been excluded from participating in some of the activities (Pierce & Wardle, 1997; Trout & Graber, 2009). One study found that weight-related bullying is a major barrier to participating and being fully engaged in physical education (Bauer, Yang, & Austin, 2004). Li and Rukavina (2012) suggest that gymnasiums are sites of weight-based bullying because of the public display and visibility of students' bodies and abilities and the ensuing social comparisons amongst peers that occur within that context.

Teachers are also significantly influenced by the weight of their students (Broomfield, 2009; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, & Harris, 1999), particularly those who teach health, physical activity, and physical education (Brettingham, 2007; Edmunds, 2008; Faith, Leone, Ayers, Heo, & Pietrobelli, 2002; Storch et al., 2007). These educators not only reported lower perceptions and expectations of overweight students compared to "normal" weight youth, but also held significant weight-biased attitudes and endorsed negative stereotypes of fat students (Greenleaf

et al., 2008; Greenleaf & Weiller, 2005; O'Brien et al., 2007; Peters & Jones, 2010; Peterson, Puhl, & Luedicke, 2012; Sykes & McPhail, 2008). For example, many teachers viewed fat students as less popular (Mahoney, Lord, & Carryl, 2005), more messy, less likely to succeed, and more emotional (Neumark-Sztainer et al., 1999).

Given that teachers' expectations and perceptions of weight have been shown to have a negative impact on students who are fat and can further inscribe negative stereotypes and biases in the classroom, there is a need for educators to become aware of how bodies are read and learned within formal educational institutions. While obesity prevention is typically addressed within health and wellness curricula and programs (which in itself can contribute to stigmatization), there is a need for all educators, not just health and physical education teachers, to become aware of how weight bias impacts all students (Cameron et al., 2014).

While some research has explored weight bias within K-12 settings, less research has explored weight bias within higher education. The little research that does exist underscores its prevalence among students in medicine (see Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Puhl & Heuer, 2009, 2010), nursing (see Waller, Lampman, & Lupfer-Johnson, 2012), nutrition (see Puhl et al., 2009), psychology (see Waller et al., 2012), physical education (see Brettingham, 2007), and physical education-related majors such as kinesiology, health promotion, and recreation (see Greenleaf et al., 2008; Greenleaf & Weiller, 2005; O'Brien et al., 2007); and it is likely present in outdoor and environmental education as well (see Russell et al., 2013). Furthermore, weight has had a direct impact on offers of admission and educational attainment in higher education (Wann, 2009) and faculty also hold and perpetuate weight bias; the recent case mentioned earlier of Geoffrey Miller tweeting about obese applicants to graduate programs is a good example (Kingkade, 2013).

## **Developing Fat-Inclusive Pedagogies and Practices**

Despite all the research that has documented the existence of weight bias and discrimination within educational contexts, a limited number of empirical studies have endeavoured to explore specific pedagogical strategies aimed at reducing or addressing weight-based oppression. Within this limited number of studies, results have been mixed and have focused on one or a combination of the following three interventions: (a) the modification of students' knowledge and beliefs about obesity; (b) the promotion of empathy, acceptance, and positive affect; and (c) the introduction of social influences such as social consensus and social norms (Dánielsdóttir et al., 2010).

As noted earlier, research has clearly articulated that weight status is determined by a multitude of factors (i.e., socioeconomic status, employment, education) and that lifestyle factors are of lesser consequence (see Raphael, 2009). Despite the overwhelming evidence supporting the social determinants of health, public health messages permeate society and reinforce public opinion that obesity is controllable through dieting and physical activity. To address these misperceptions, a number of fat bias reduction interventions have focused on informing students about the complexity of obesity in the hopes that this would change beliefs and attitudes. While some studies have focused on the success of specific interventions such as educational lectures and textual descriptions of the social and cultural dimensions of obesity (such as Crandall, 1994; Diedrichs & Barlow, 2011; Puhl, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2005), other studies using similar strategies have completely failed to change students' fat biased attitudes (such as Bell & Morgan, 2000; Harris, Walters, & Waschull, 1991). Studies have examined other multi-intervention strategies, also with mixed results. For example, in one 6-week intervention study with pre-service teachers that included lectures related to weight bias and a

service learning project with school-aged children, students' negative beliefs about personal responsibility for obesity were reduced but not their anti-fat prejudice (Rukavina, Li, & Rowell, 2008).

Given the success of empathy and reflective-based intervention strategies to reduce prejudice in other stigmatized groups, a number of studies looked at interventions such as the promotion of empathy and acceptance to reduce fat biased attitudes (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). While some studies examined the efficacy of short empathy-evoking videos in reducing anti-fat bias (Hennings, Hilbert, Thomas, Siegfried, & Rief, 2007), others examined the use of first-person narratives (Batson et al., 1997; Gapinski, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2006; Teachman, Gapinski, Brownell, Rawlins, & Jeyaram 2003); such interventions had little to no impact on fat bias. Other empathy-based interventions include restricting calorie-intake among healthcare students for a one week period to increase students' awareness of the challenges of losing weight (Cotugna & Mallick, 2010), using web-based educational modules promoting size acceptance (Hague & White, 2005), education about the socio-cultural factors of obesity, and exposure to fat individuals (Wiese, Wilson, Jones, & Neises, 1992), again with limited success.

The power of social influence, how emotions, opinions, and behaviours are affected by others in the classroom, has also been the focus of recent fat bias reduction strategies (Dánielsdóttir et al., 2010). A few studies have examined the role of social influence with regards to group-consensus and social norms (see Stangor, Sechrist, & Jost, 2001). For instance, Puhl et al. (2005) used phony feedback about the attitudes and beliefs about fat people, which showed to significantly impact students' attitudes towards fatness. However, more research is needed to explore the impact of social influence approaches on a broader scale.

Not only is the dearth of research on educational interventions to reduce fat bias a problem, but also the number of methodological and scope-of-practice challenges identified in this research. In a comprehensive review of the literature on fat bias reduction, Daniélsdóttir et al. (2010) suggest that the research thus far has been plagued with methodological problems, including a lack of methodological rigour that limits the interpretability of results. Those studies that they deemed to have employed more rigorous experimental designs have shown limited effectiveness. Daniélsdóttir et al. conclude, “given the strength of antipathy displayed toward those who are perceived as ‘fat’ or obese, research in this area is urgently required” (p. 47). The importance of identifying effective methods for disrupting fat oppression cannot be understated, particularly in professional training in colleges and universities given the role education can play in forming (or changing) students’ conceptions of obesity and their future professional conduct (Ottenritter, 2004).

In addition to fat bias reduction research, there are a number of paradigms that challenge dominant obesity discourse. The emerging transdisciplinary movement called Health at Every Size (HAES) has been shown to challenge the weight-focused healthcare paradigm that promotes weight loss and dieting behaviour by shifting the focus to weight-neutral outcomes (Bacon, 2008). Furthermore, a growing resistance to anti-obesity culture can be seen in various grassroots fat acceptance groups such as the gay “bear” subculture (Gough & Flanders, 2009), where larger bodies and extra bulk are celebrated and eroticized.

There are also a few educators, particularly within higher education, who offer courses that critically introduce weight-based oppression through the lens of critical fat studies. Some feel that they are taking great risks in doing so; in fact, some have been told that “focusing on Fat Studies would be a career-ending move” (Burgard et al., 2009, p. 339). Those who have

written about their “fledgling efforts, misgivings, and breakthroughs” (Boling, 2011, p. 110) in teaching about weight-based oppression have consistently highlighted how destabilizing contemporary discourses on obesity can provoke overt student resistance. Guthman (2009), for example, said that her efforts have made students mad “in the dual sense of both angry and crazy” (p. 1111).

A recent quest to identify the number of post-secondary fat studies courses in the United States turned up four courses, with an additional two courses focused on Health at Every Size, and a number of other courses that drew, at least in part, upon fat studies literature (Watkins et al., 2012). The main focus of all of these courses was to critique mainstream views about obesity, emphasize the social construction of fatness, and explore the intersection of weight-based oppression with other systems of oppression such as racism, classism, sexism, eurocentrism, ableism, and heterosexism. While instructors have all reported a level of student interest with their courses, they also all expressed a high degree of frustration with the overt resistance demonstrated by many students. It should be noted, however, that some students also expressed great joy and relief at encountering fat studies (Boling, 2011).

### **Critical Fat Studies and Educational Research**

Activists took the first steps to speak out against fat oppression in the 1960s, leading the way for a fat-positive social movement and a fat-focused academic field. Now, an increasing number of university instructors from the sciences to the social sciences and humanities challenge dominant obesity discourse in the classroom. Given the paucity of research on fat pedagogy, critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy have much to contribute to the emerging field of critical fat studies by helping to identify educational practise that both critique obesity discourse and engender hope.

While some use the term pedagogy to mean “no more than a teaching style, a matter of personality and temperament, the mechanics of securing classroom control to encourage learning, a cosmetic bandage on the hard body of classroom contact” (Lusted, 1986, p. 2), the field of critical pedagogy argues it encompasses much more. Critical pedagogy, which has strong roots in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School (Gur-Ze’ev, 1998; Lather, 1998), is premised on the idea that educational institutions serve as microcosms of society that reinforce structures of dehumanization (Apple, 1982; Kincheloe, 2004; McLaren, 2003). While administrative policy practices of schools and universities, combined with pedagogies of oppression, reinforce oppressive structures, they can also serve as sites to teach and learn how to subvert, challenge, and practice resistance (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1997; hooks, 1994).

It was from a lens of critique and hope that Giroux (1986) developed a version of critical pedagogy focused on a “language of possibility.” In other words, he felt that it was not enough to critique power structures in the classroom; educators also needed to encourage a pedagogy that leaves room for change, where people can both identify the effects of oppression as well as act to dismantle them (Giroux, 1988, 1997). In this way critical pedagogy is both a goal and a process (Bell, 2007) that involves the utopian vision of eliminating all institutionalized domination and oppression through the identification of oppressive structures.

This vision of social justice and transformation in the classroom is not exclusive to the field of critical pedagogy but has also been pursued by feminist scholars acutely aware of how universities and classrooms serve to reinforce oppressive structures of sexism and patriarchy. In fact, feminist conceptions of pedagogy are similar to critical pedagogy in a variety of ways, in that they both rest upon visions of the classroom as a liberatory environment; they believe in engaged, reflective, and active learning; and they both assert the existence of oppression and

work to de/reconstruct dominant discourses (Crabtree & Sapp, 2003; Shrewsbury, 1993). But there are also important differences. For example, Weiler (1991) suggests that feminist pedagogy offers a more complex and situated pedagogy that addresses the shortcoming of critical pedagogy in that it too often “assumes a universal experience and abstract goals” (p. 455). Instead, she suggests feminist pedagogy offers valuable insight into how authority, voice, and difference are constructed in the classroom by, in, and through gender; which, also calls attention to existing structures of power and other subjectivities such as race, class, and (dis)ability.

More specifically, feminist pedagogy consists of four characteristics: participatory learning, validation of personal experience, engagement of socially-contextualized knowledge, and the development of critical thinking (e.g., Luke, 1996; Manicom, 1992; Markowitz, 2005; Shackelford, 1992). Despite such work, feminist scholars continue to face challenges employing feminist pedagogy within the contemporary university classroom. As expressed by Crabtree and Sapp (2003), “those challenges bring additional political and professional consequences for teachers who practice feminist pedagogy, which could prove detrimental to teachers’ success in the academy, a social context where innovative teaching often is neither valued nor rewarded” (p. 133).

Despite challenges, like others, I believe, like others, that pedagogies concerned with social justice can and will make a difference in the classroom (Hayes, Mills, Christie, & Lingard, 2006). It is from the conceptualization of critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy as pedagogies of transformation and social change, that I situate my research. However, like Kumashiro (2004) suggests in his book *Against Common Sense: Teaching and Learning Toward Social Justice*, I also believe that it is not enough to speak of oppressive structures

within educational institutions; one must also be aware of and draw attention to how education is *not* neutral, non-oppressive, and apolitical and thus desperately in need of anti-oppressive work. As he writes,

Now more than ever, we need to redefine what it means to be a teacher... We need to reshape how we prepare and support teachers in contexts that actively hinder social justice education. We need to reconceptualize social justice education so that it explicitly responds to and even capitalizes on the ways that the Right has come to dominate schools. (p. xxvi)

The type of reconceptualization that Kumashiro advocates can easily be seen when comparing various strategies articulated within critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; hooks, 1994; Luke & Gore, 1992; Sensoy & DiAngelo, 2012). First, it is important to develop an awareness of the dynamics occurring at various levels (individual, classroom, university, society) with regards to power, privilege, and social location. Second, attending to the various needs, worldviews, subjectivities, and sensibilities within the classroom will invite more engagement. Third, this type of approach moves beyond the traditional education model of passive learning to engage new perspectives, new ways of thinking, and deeper critical reflection. Lastly, educating for social justice and all social issues is both a process and a goal.

My analysis of the literature revealed that critical fat studies research has focused on addressing and reclaiming language, challenging the scientific and medical claims about obesity, mapping the origins of the field, and highlighting fat as an inequality and social justice issue; there has been far less research on the pedagogy of critical fat studies. There thus remains much research to be done. Personally, I am inspired by scholars in critical pedagogy and

feminist pedagogy who argue that it is not enough to focus on classroom teaching strategies; one must also pay attention to the institutional structures in which that pedagogy is occurring. For this reason, I designed a study that not only examined the pedagogical practices of scholars teaching about critical fat studies, but also explored their experiences as faculty members and their philosophical perspectives. The next chapter, then, examines the methodology and methods employed in designing and implementing the research.

## CHAPTER THREE—DESIGNING THE RESEARCH

In the previous chapter, I identified how my doctoral research adds to the existing scholarship of critical fat studies and how it addresses a gap within the literature in the areas of pedagogy, critical fat studies, and higher education. This chapter outlines the methodology and methods employed within this study. It highlights my positionality as a researcher, and the overall research design used in the study. It concludes by explaining the process of writing this manuscript-style dissertation and the format of the four research articles (Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven).

### **Methodological Approach**

Through a critical fat studies theoretical framework, and drawing from feminist and critical pedagogy, my study examines how faculty members known for challenging dominant obesity discourse in the social sciences, humanities, health sciences, behavioural sciences, and education work to disrupt weight-based oppression within post-secondary education.

A qualitative methodological approach was a good fit, because it allowed me to engage the participants' experiences in order to carefully consider issues of power, privilege, and identity (Brown, 2012). I was interested not only in the experiences of faculty members and their pedagogical approaches to teaching about weight, obesity discourse, and fatness, but also in understanding the complexities of how they align themselves with the field of critical fat studies (i.e., with one or more of the subfields, such as critical obesity studies, critical weight studies, fat studies, critical geographies of body size). I also carefully considered how they negotiate issues of power and privilege within the academy.

Qualitative research is also a good fit because, secondly, it aims to make “the world visible” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Qualitative research can “offer opportunities to

examine issues in depth that may yield a clearer understanding of what is happening in certain circumstances and how changes can be made to meet the needs of all” (Lichtman, 2010, p. xiii). Given that I was interested in understanding how the actions of faculty help to promote fat-inclusivity in higher education, it was important to ensure that the research included opportunities for faculty to speak about their experiences beyond the classroom. It was my hope that this also would provide insight into the emerging field of critical fat studies.

Lastly, qualitative research is a good fit because it acknowledges that researchers are inextricably a part of the research and the research process, and that they do not remain objective bystanders (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Qualitative researchers embrace the idea that multiple subjective realities exist (Creswell, 2007) and in order to understand these complex realities one must minimize “objective separateness” (Guba & Lincoln, 1988, p. 94) and continuously reflect on one’s position to/in/with the research (Bolak, 1997). In fact, Lichtman (2010) writes, “our work is an expression of who we are and who we are becoming” (p. 121) and as such it is important to position oneself in the work. Very briefly, as a burgeoning scholar interested in critical fat scholarship, I not only spent the summer of 2013 collecting data for my doctoral research, but I attended conferences such as the Canadian Obesity Network Conference, and developed and taught a public health course at Lakehead University, “Obesity Discourses in Healthcare, Education, and Society.” All of these experiences helped to inform my understanding of the emerging fields of critical fat studies and fat pedagogy.

Denzin and Lincoln (2005) describe qualitative researchers as bricoleurs and quilt makers, those who take parts and assemble them together using whatever strategies, methods, or materials are deemed necessary. As such, it is not always the case that researchers must choose one methodological practice over another but rather some draw upon multiple

methodologies and perspectives as a strategy for adding depth to inquiry. This strategy, what Caelli, Ray, and Mills (2003) have called a “generic” approach to doing qualitative research, has been gathering momentum over the last decade. While many scholars have merely stated that they are conducting a qualitative study, without defining a specific approach, others have endeavoured to ponder more carefully what a generic approach might be. Some have described “generic qualitative approach” (Lichtman, 2010; Merriam, 1998; Sprenkle & Piercy, 2005) as a “noncategorical qualitative research approach” (Thorne, Kirkham, & MacDonald-Emes, 1997), “basic or fundamental qualitative description” (Sandelowski, 2000), or “exploratory research” (Brink & Wood, 2001).

A generic qualitative research methodology seeks “to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (Merriam, 1998, p. 11). Unlike other qualitative methodologies, generic qualitative research methodology does not declare allegiance to one specific approach and is open to various applications. For example, my study sought to explore the experiences of those teaching critical fat studies, with no requirements to only examine cultural rules (ethnography), build theory (grounded theory), or focus on a specific group (e.g., feminist methodology) or approach to fat (e.g. fat studies).

Generic qualitative methodology is particularly useful in education because it “is often undertaken for the purpose of improving practice” (Merriam, 2002, p. 19) and has been described as being among the most common forms of qualitative research in the field of education (Merriam, 1998, 2002). While generic qualitative research studies have been seen as gaining momentum, they have also received criticism for regularly failing to identify a methodological or theoretical framework, and using incommensurable methods of data collection and analysis (Caelli et al., 2003). Rather, collection and analysis of data use

“concepts from the theoretical framework... [that would] result in identification of recurring patterns, categories, or factors that cut through the data” (Caelli et al., 2003, p. 3). This way, once the data analysis is complete and key themes are discerned, an in-depth account is presented and discussed using the literature to frame and inform the findings (Merriam, 2002).

To address such criticisms as noted above, Caelli et al. (2003) argue that generic qualitative research must address the following four key areas: theoretical positioning of researcher, congruence between methodology and methods, strategies to establish rigor, and the analytic lens through which the data is examined. In my introduction and literature review chapters, I have highlighted the theoretical framework that guides my research, described the analytic lens with which I engaged the data, and articulated tenets of critical fat studies that helped frame my analysis. In the next section, I address my theoretical positioning, which “refers to the researcher’s motives, presuppositions, and personal history that leads him or her toward, and subsequently shapes, a particular inquiry” (p. 5).

### **Positionality**

While disclosing one’s positionality is, I believe, an important academic undertaking, it is also important to articulate how such an act may privilege and complicate the researcher’s perspective. For example, I come to this research as a heterosexual, white, able-bodied female, with thin privilege. As Rice (2009) writes, “such descriptions tend to encourage centering of researchers’ embodied subjectivities and skirting of power dynamics underpinning data production” (p. 250). Heeding Rice’s cautionary note about disclosing positionality, I engaged in a number of feminist ethical practices throughout my study, namely: *researcher accountability* (verification of transcripts and analysis), *researcher responsibility* (engagement in the research topic), *researcher advocacy* (commitment to improving practice), and

*researcher reflexivity* (interrogation of researcher as part of the research process). Nonetheless, like Rice (2009), “I recognize that my interpretations may be as much about my relationship to informants’ accounts as about the relationship of the [informants] who narrated them to the circumstances in which they live” (p. 262).

I am 5’10, 155lbs, and thus, according to the highly contested body mass index (BMI), I am within the “normal” weight category. I have probably spent most of my life within this so-called “normal” category. But to be honest, I consider my body and my weight to be anything but normal because for most of my life, I have been told I was fat. As a result, I did such things as starve on salad, binge on sugar, and exercise excessively. So while my visible body weight and size might have been classified as “usual,” “regular,” or “common” and thereby not warranting concern, my internal body weight and size struggles tell a very different story. This is one of the reasons that I have come to believe that weight and body size alone cannot tell the story of whether a person is healthy or unhealthy, just as the colour of one’s skin does not tell you about a person’s moral character.

In a weight-obsessed culture in which fatness is ostracized and shamed, in which diet and physical activity are constantly positioned as catch-all health solutions, and bariatric surgery has become increasingly common in the United States (LeBesco, 2004), Canada (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2014), and some suggest even worldwide (Buchwald & Oien, 2013), it has been found that people would rather get hit by a truck, have a leg amputated, or die rather than get fat (Wann, 1998). Arguably, then, everyone in Western society is implicated in fat oppression. As Wann (2009) points out in her foreword in the *Fat Studies Reader*:

People all along the weight spectrum may experience fat oppression... a young woman who weighs eighty-seven pounds because of her anorexia knows something about fat oppression.... A fat person who is expected to pay double for the privilege of sitting down during an airplane flight... [I]f we imagine that the conflict is between fat and thin, weight prejudice continues. Instead, the conflict is between all of us against a system that would weigh our value as people. (p. xv)

Let me tell you a little about my own experiences of weight-based oppression.<sup>3</sup> I was an active child and involved in many different activities. I particularly loved sports. In fact, I was told that someday I would be a great athlete and I believed it, so much so that when I began to achieve national and international acclaim, I not only accepted but embraced the regulation, disciplining, degradation, and monitoring of my body. I endured public *weigh-ins*, where standing on the scale became a measure of my value and worth as a person, which was, at times, celebrated and at other times shamed. Everything I did and everything I was became measured, objectified, and individualized. Nutritionists calculated my energy-in-energy-out ratio and physiologists calculated my power-to-weight ratio (the amount of power I was able to generate per pound or kilogram of body weight). These numbers were then used to assert my future success and/or failure as an athlete and as a person. Worse yet, coaches employed these numbers and expressed them through animal characterizations – likening my weight to elephants, hippos, and whales. Not only did this rhetoric work towards devaluing me as a human being, but it devalued non-human species as well (Hardy, 2011).

It was not until I minored in kinesiology and pursued a bachelor of education, majoring in physical education and outdoor education, that I became aware of another side of physical

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<sup>3</sup> Parts of this personal account with weight-based oppression have been published elsewhere (i.e., Russell, C., Cameron, E., Socha, T., & McNinch, H. (2013). “Fatties cause global warming”: Fat pedagogy and environmental education. *Canadian Journal of Environmental Education*, 18, 27-45.)

culture in Western society. While in elite sport, I had faced weight-based oppression, but suddenly outside of elite sport, my athletic accomplishments gave me a high degree of cultural and physical capital; I “measured up” and easily fit into normative physical culture. In other words, within the fields of kinesiology and physical education, and arguably others, I began to recognize the body as a site of status and power where there is a privileging of fit, thin, strong, trainable, and able bodies (Andrews, 2008) and a marginalization of all other body types.

Drawing upon the work of Giroux (2004), Andrews writes “in privileging and celebrating particular classed, race, gendered, and sexed bodies, as it pathologizes and demonizes others, physical culture plays an important role in, quite literally, embodying and advancing the moralizing and self-righteous tyranny of neoliberal individualism” (p. 54). Mirroring Andrews’ emphasis on the effects of physical culture, I began to see how my sport background and education had indoctrinated me; suddenly I understood myself as now employing Fernández-Balboa and Muros’ term (2006) a “hegemonic functionariate” (p. 197), meaning someone who serves to reproduce dominant ideologies, such as dominant obesity discourse, within normative physical culture. As a result of this realization and my increased efforts to address this issue as a contract lecturer and through scholarly activities (to date I have published three relevant peer-reviewed articles, one peer-reviewed chapter, two co-authored publications, one article that is in press, and I was recently invited to write an article in *Biochemistry and Cell Biology* about education, diabetes, and weight bias), I became interested in how people around the world address dominant obesity discourse within post-secondary classrooms and more broadly within the academy.

My experiences as a straight, white, thin, able-bodied woman, who has occupied and is occupying various other identities such as athlete, student, instructor, mother, sister, and wife,

all help to inform my understanding of this topic. Based on my own experiences and what I read in the literature, I came into this research believing that weight-based oppression is a major social justice issue, an issue that, thus far, has remained under-researched in education. I am now even more convinced of the importance of the work of creating safe learning spaces for all students, regardless of size, but particularly those who are fat and tormented because of it.

### **Key Tenets of Qualitative Studies**

As evidenced in the previous section, positioning oneself in qualitative research helps to inform readers as to the specific experiences that have and continue to inform the researcher's analytic lens. In doing so, the language used in qualitative research is often quite personal and literary; terms more associated with quantitative research such as validity, generalizability, and objectivity are less common (Creswell, 2007). This goes beyond language matters; there are some fundamental tenets that qualitative studies share, particularly interpretive studies, which emphasize reflexivity, positioning, problematizing, contextualizing, and reciprocity. As a researcher working within a qualitative research paradigm, I am committed to each of these tenets and as such will briefly describe how I approached them within my research.

***Reflexivity.*** Reflexivity has become “a signal topic in contemporary discussions of qualitative research, especially in educational studies” (Macbeth, 2001, p. 35). Attention to reflexivity encourages qualitative researchers in education to think about the role of self in research and to be aware of how they shape the research and conversely how the research shapes them. Reflexivity acknowledges that the researcher is an active participant within the research and a key influencer of the research process (Tobin, 2006). Thus, a reflexive researcher questions and reflects on the historical, social, political, and cultural influences throughout the doing of the research.

One of the ways I engaged in reflexive practice was by keeping a research journal that highlighted my changing perceptions and understandings of key concepts throughout the study. In total, 70 pages in a small notepad were taken and captured the key thoughts, ideas, and reflections throughout the research process. For instance, after the first interview I reflected upon the fact that the participant didn't identify with fat studies and therefore was it appropriate for me to call what I was doing fat studies research. This early entry helped to formulate my thinking around the importance of naming the field and defining it within the term "critical fat studies". Furthermore, I conducted this research while also teaching a course for the Masters of Public Health program at Lakehead University titled, "Obesity Discourse in Healthcare, Education, and Society." Reflexive practice throughout data collection and analysis was facilitated by drawing upon my own deepening practical understanding of fat pedagogy.

***Positioning.*** In keeping with the qualitative tradition, I included a section titled "positionality," sharing my own experiences with weight-based oppression and illustrating how past experiences have inspired my interest in this topic. While I left room for participants to ask me questions in the interviews, only six of the twenty-six participants asked me to specifically share my story and explain why I was conducting the research. As I reflect further and continue to engage in conversations about my study, I will continue to position myself in a similar manner to future audiences to provide a context for why this work was and is important to me.

***Problematizing.*** Grele (1994) suggests that reflexive research, particularly interview research, sometimes leads to conflict and tensions with participants as different worldviews or experiences are shared and expressed. Rather than ignore such conflict and tension, Lowan (2011) suggests "recognizing, resolving, and reporting on this tension [which] can deepen the research process and lead to richer results" (p. 151). Drawing upon Lowan's advice, I too aimed

to respond to participants, albeit cautiously and sensitively, when asked for my own thoughts on key issues around weight-based oppression in the interviews. Like Lowan, I found this to be a rich approach as it enabled me to better understand the key historical and sociocultural moments within the participants' lived experiences. For example, while some of the participants were relatively new to the academy, others were at the end of their academic careers and had been a part of the fat rights movement so were more prepared to enter into dialogue about the connections between activism and education.

**Contextualizing.** Given that bodies do not exist in isolation from the context of time and place, this study is contextualized historically, culturally, and politically. As discussed in previous sections, by examining the historical and sociocultural roots of fatness, one can begin to see that it is anything but the straightforward 'bad thing' that is often portrayed in society. Rather, in some cultures, fat bodies are considered sexy and ideal, and symbolize strength and health; in other spaces, particularly in some variations of hip-hop and theatre, fat bodies are flaunted, celebrated, and politicized (Kulick & Meneley, 2005). Given that my participants represent a range of geographical contexts (Canada, USA, UK, Scotland, New Zealand, and Australia) and disciplines (medicine, nursing, kinesiology, nutrition, psychology, geography, sociology, education, women's studies, history, writing/rhetoric, and community studies), and were at various points in their career (from a new PhD and working as a contract lecturer to thirty years as an academic) when I interviewed each of them, I paid close attention to participants' different contexts throughout data collection and analysis. Doing so deepened my study and, in fact, emerged as a key theme unto itself (for more details see Chapter Five).

**Reciprocity.** Within qualitative research, reciprocity is identified as a key component of ethical practice (Lowan, 2011). Reciprocity, as Creswell (2007) suggests, is the "giving or

paying back those who participate in research” (p. 24). While I plan on sharing my findings in academic journals, non-academic publications, public presentations, and professional meetings, I also plan to invite participants to collaborate on future research projects and publications that build upon this work after I complete the dissertation. In fact, I have already begun this process by inviting all participants who indicated an interest in participating in future collaborations to contribute to a co-edited book I am working on, *The Fat Pedagogy Reader: Challenging Weight-Based Oppression in Education* to be published in the “Counterpoints” series for Peter Lang Publishing. Like *The Fat Studies Reader*, the book will be made up of an extensive array of relatively short and accessibly written chapters that describe and analyze pedagogical approaches used by educators from around the world who are addressing weight-based oppression in their work.

**Embodiment.** While embodiment is not necessarily a tenet of qualitative research nor is the body privileged within the academy (see Chapter Four), I would like to briefly mention its importance to my own research. For congruency sake and as someone who works to disrupt weight-based oppression, I critically and consciously consider my own embodied and emplaced practices of the “body” that promote mind-body (Kentel, 1993; Halas & Kentel, 2008), culturally-relevant (Halas, 2006), and wisdom-guided holistic approaches to living and learning (Kilborn, in press). In my roles as mother, wife, sister, daughter, friend, student, researcher, and teacher, there are many different priorities vying for my energy, love, and care. But, as I have learned in previous experiences, it is important for my mind, body, and spirit to take the time to move, listen, and be present. While I cannot say that I have achieved balance at every point along this dissertation journey, I can say that my growing “bun in the oven” and his constant

kicks were a continual reminder to enjoy the process along the way and to attend to all parts of me.

## **Methods**

### **Participant Recruitment**

The population I targeted in this study was post-secondary faculty from around the world known for their critical teaching approach to weight and bodies in the fields of social science, humanities, health science, behavioural science, and education. Since not all participants were tenure-track faculty, and the term “teacher” usually denotes a K-12 context and “instructor” is too broad a term, I decided to employ the term “faculty” to mean those who have taught in a university or college, which includes current and previous faculty members, full-time lecturers, and contract instructors. I initially defined teaching as faculty who have taught full courses or class units (a minimum of 6 hours) addressing critical issues of weight, obesity, and fatness, and who had drawn upon the fields of, but not limited to, fat studies, critical obesity studies, critical weight studies, or critical geographies of the body. This definition was somewhat arbitrary and came out of discussions with my supervisor about how to recruit participants.

It became very clear at the beginning of my study that this definition was too narrow in scope and that I was not going to obtain a sufficient number of participants. There were too few relevant faculty teaching full courses. A number of people I contacted said that, due to various course and curriculum limitations, they were unable to teach full courses or even units. Following discussions with my supervisor, I revised my definition of teaching to include faculty who had taught full courses, class units, or had infused critical issues of weight, obesity, and

fatness into their classes. With this revised definition, thirty-one individuals expressed initial interest in participating in the study.

Participants were recruited through publicly listed university email addresses. An initial participant list was assembled by including authors who had written on the topic, my professional networks, searches of university websites, and reviews of relevant academic journals (such as the *Fat Studies Journal*) to identify faculty teaching in post-secondary institutions who challenge dominant obesity discourse or problematize dominant notions of fatness in their classes. Additional participants were generated using snowball sampling, which is an appropriate technique to use when members of a population are difficult to locate (Lichtman, 2010); I thus asked my initial contacts to name others who met my criteria and recruited a few more participants through these referrals.

In qualitative research, little serious attention has been paid to the role of sample size (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007). Some have argued that 15 is the smallest acceptable sample size (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006), others that 50 is too large (Ritchie, Lewis, & Elam, 2003). Particularly for interviews, Creswell (2007, 2012) argues that between 15 and 30 is considered an ideal sample size. Thirty-one faculty were initially recruited to the study and five had to withdraw due to a number of unforeseen circumstances in their lives. As illustrated in Table 1, the final sample size was 26 faculty, 23 of whom identified as women (88%) and 3 as men (12%). As stated in Chapter One, this gender matrix is representative of the historical origins of critical fat studies and the types of faculty drawn to this type of work.

Table 1 shows not only participants' sex, but country of origin, as well. Six are from countries other than Canada and the United States, with the largest percentage of faculty from

Table 1

*An Overview of the Participant Characteristics in the Research Study*

Demographics	Participants
Sex	Female ( $n = 23$ ), Male ( $n = 3$ )
Location	Canada ( $n = 9$ ), United States ( $n = 11$ ), England ( $n = 2$ ), New Zealand ( $n = 3$ ), and Australia ( $n = 1$ )
Science Disciplines	Kinesiology ( $n = 4$ ), Nutrition ( $n = 4$ ), Medicine ( $n = 2$ ), Nursing ( $n = 2$ ), and Psychology ( $n = 1$ )
Social Sciences and Humanities Disciplines	Geography ( $n = 3$ ), Sociology ( $n = 2$ ), Education ( $n = 2$ ), Women's Studies ( $n = 2$ ), Writing/Rhetoric ( $n = 2$ ), History ( $n = 1$ ), and Community Studies ( $n = 1$ )
Years Teaching	1-5 years ( $n = 11$ ), 6-10 years ( $n = 5$ ), 11+ years ( $n = 10$ )
Teaching Experience Related to Fat	Full critical fat studies courses ( $n = 7$ ), Full unit focused on Fat ( $n = 2$ ), Infused fat into classes ( $n = 16$ )
Body Size Identification	Fat ( $n = 6$ ), Fat identity (they identified as fat but had lost weight; $n = 4$ ), "Innies" (in-between; $n = 3$ ), "Normal" weight and/or having thin privilege ( $n = 13$ )

*Note.* The information in this table could not be further broken down to indicate, for example, how many Canadian male Geography faculty members there were, to protect confidentiality since doing so would make participants potentially identifiable given such a small research community. For example, by linking the following characteristics: female, Canada, education, teaching experience of two years, taught full fat studies course, identifies as "normal" weight and with thin privilege, one may easily recognize that this participant is me.

North America (77%). There was broad representation of academic disciplines, with a balance of participants in the sciences and in the social sciences and humanities disciplines. The participants ranged in years of teaching experience in higher education from one to over eleven years, with the smallest percentage of participants representing 6-10 years (19%). Only seven participants had taught full fat-focused courses, whereas more than half of the participants (61%) infused materials related to fat into their classes. Lastly, of the twenty-six participants 23% identified as fat, 15% identified as having had a fat identity (they had been fat then lost weight, but still kept the identity), 12% identified as “innies” (in-between), and 50% identified as being a “normal” weight and/or having thin privilege.

### **Protecting the Confidentiality of my Participants**

Prior to commencing my research, I applied for and received ethics approval from Lakehead University’s Research Ethics Board (REB). As part of this process, I constructed an invitation letter and a consent form (see Appendices A and B). These documents outlined that there are no foreseeable risks to participating in the study, participation is entirely voluntary, and participants could decline to answer any question and withdraw from the study at any point without penalty. I indicated how no identifiable participant information would be released, and pseudonyms would be used in any published results to ensure confidentiality unless participants specifically asked to be named in the dissertation and publications. Additionally, I specified that my supervisor and I would have sole access to the information linking participants to their pseudonyms and that we would have the data securely stored for at least five years in the Faculty of Education at Lakehead University. Participants, if they wished to proceed, then signed a copy of the informed consent form and indicated if they wished to receive a copy of

the results after I completed the research, and collaborate on future publications following the conclusion of the study.

Given that I aimed to explore the philosophical perspectives of faculty participants and that I would be asking faculty to share their experiences with teaching critical approaches to weight, obesity, and fatness, I was aware that I could evoke emotional responses; other scholars in this area have noted this possibility as well (Boling, 2011; Guthman, 2009). But, to the best of my knowledge, no one was inclined to seek out additional support.

### **Data Collection**

Data collected included interviews, field notes, and teaching artifacts. The primary method of data collection was open-ended, semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 2002, 2009; Merriam & Simpson, 2000). Interviewing is widely regarded as a powerful mode of inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Patton, 2002). Fontana and Frey (2000) say that interviewing not only can help us to understand the *hows* of lived experiences but also the *whats* of everyday life activities. It is considered both an art and a science and requires careful consideration and planning (Seidman, 2006).

Much has been written about the interview process, and, in particular, the advantages and disadvantages of conducting interviews. Qualitative interviews are said to provide rich, in-depth experiential accounts of an event or lived experience (Fontana & Frey, 2000). They can help provide information when behaviour cannot be directly observed and they can help to provide a window into personal experiences (Creswell, 2012). Despite these potential benefits, many qualitative researchers caution beginning scholars of the challenges of relying on in-depth interviews because what questions are asked and how they are asked can lead to the researcher hearing what he or she wants to hear, equipment can fail during the interview process, the

presence of the researcher can influence the data, and eliciting meaningful responses from participants can be difficult (Berg, 2004; Creswell, 2012; Fontana & Frey, 2000).

In order to minimize these challenges, I developed an interview guide in collaboration with my supervisor to be used during the study. My research questions obviously informed the development of this guide (see Appendix C) and these questions were grounded in my review of the literature. The questions served as “probes” (Creswell, 2012) to guide the interviews and to encourage participants to reflect on specific areas of inquiry. The interview guide also served as a preparation tool for the participants, as I sent it to them ahead of time so that they would know the types of questions I would ask. Some of the participants expressed appreciation for this gesture and suggested that it had helped them to reflect upon their philosophical approaches and pedagogical strategies prior to the interview.

Given the international scope of my research and the fact that I could not afford to travel to conduct the interviews, I gave participants the option of conducting the interview by telephone (audio) or skype (video). Interviews were one to two hours in duration. I began by expressing gratitude to the participants for taking time out of their busy lives to participate in my research, and reiterated key points from the consent form (see Appendix B). We also usually engaged in a brief dialogue unrelated to the research, such as weather and the day’s events. The intention of this opening dialogue was to establish rapport with participants (Fontana & Frey, 2000).

As noted, at the outset I asked participants if they had any questions for me before we began; while many did not have any questions, about one third of the participants asked me why *I* was doing this research, which helped them to gain some insight into *who* I was as a researcher and the contextual lens that I brought to the work. In this opening dialogue, I also

invited the participants to come up with their own pseudonyms. While most participants preferred that I simply assign them a pseudonym, five provided specific names. Each interview was recorded using two devices: a small digital recorder equipped with an external microphone and the QuickTime Player on my laptop. The QuickTime Player served as a backup when the digital recorder failed to record (which it did, once). The digital files were immediately uploaded to a password protected external drive kept in a locked file cabinet at Lakehead University.

The other two types of data collected, teaching materials and field notes recorded in my research journal prior to, during, and following the interviews, played secondary roles to the interviews but nonetheless contributed to my data matrix (Creswell, 2007). Prior to the interviews, participants were asked to provide any relevant teaching materials they were comfortable sharing (e.g., syllabi, PowerPoint files, lecture notes, and assignment outlines) that would further my analysis of their pedagogical practices; about half the participants sent me such materials. While these secondary data sources played a minimal role in the write-up of the research findings due to confidentiality concerns (for more on this, see the section in this chapter on the format of research articles), these secondary sources of data served three important functions. First, in preparation for each interview, I used the relevant teaching materials to gain a better understanding of the participants' specific teaching experience and practice, which served as a valuable tool to probe for further descriptions during the interviews. Second, the teaching materials were considered alongside interview data in the data analysis to help provide a more complete depiction of the participant's pedagogical approaches and strategies, some of which are highlighted in Chapter Six. Third, my field notes provided a space for me to develop ideas, and reflect on the entire research process (Charmaz, 2006). I found this

spontaneous writing engaged my imagination and helped act as a self-reflective tool throughout the study and helped me to be aware and hold onto some of the complexities and nuances of the emerging data analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

In preparation for data analysis, I transcribed the audio files using the format recommended by Friese (2012) for use with ATLAS.ti 7.0, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. All files were transcribed verbatim with contextual elements (e.g., *[pause]*, *[laughter]*, *[telephone rings]*), which can serve as “useful information about times when interviewees cannot or will not respond to a question” (Creswell, 2012, p. 239).

I then reviewed the 446 pages of transcripts and compared them aurally with the digital files. At this point, I also did some minor editing to ensure legibility and flow, such as eliminating all the umm’s and ah’s and partial sentences. I also reviewed my field notes (70 pages of a small notepad) and the teaching materials that participants had provided (94 artifacts, 1890 pages). This process helped to re-acquaint me with the data. Transcriptions were then sent back to the participants for verification. Not all participants chose to provide feedback. A few expressed concerns with some of what they had shared in their interviews given that they are well known in the field and may be easily identified. I quickly reassured them that records identifying the participant would be kept confidential and that all personal identifiers would be omitted. I also noted that it would be very difficult to remove all the things that might allow someone who knew them to guess their identity and any publications would focus on key themes rather than focus only on one individual’s experiences, approaches, or practices. While most felt reassured, one participant requested that all quotations used from the transcript be sent before I finalized the dissertation. Upon writing the first draft of my dissertation, I sent the

participant all of the quotations I intended to use from that transcript. The participant quickly responded by expressing gratitude for me doing so and was comfortable with all of the quotations I planned to use. A number of other participants noted that they found the process of rereading their stories insightful and provided me with follow-up thoughts, and requested permission to use the transcription for their own future publications, which I happily granted.

After verifying the transcripts, I then converted all the transcripts, field notes, and teaching materials files to rich text format and PDF documents and then uploaded them to ATLAS.ti. Given that I was coding multiple interviews and an extensive amount of additional documents, computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software was helpful. With ATLAS.ti, I could code large amounts of qualitative data and use supplemental coding devices such as coloured fonts, bolding, and italicizing in my data, and I could also conveniently insert comments or analytic memos related to a specific code. Saldaña (2013) highlights a helpful feature of using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis programs, such as Atlas.ti; she writes, “unlike the human mind, [ATLAS.ti] can maintain and permit you to organize evolving and potentially complex coding systems into such formats as hierarchies and networks for ‘at a glance’ user reference” (p. 31). This was an extremely useful tool as I went through my coding as it allowed me to step back and see emergent categories from a more visually evocative perspective, rather than just from a textual linear perspective.

In qualitative research, data analysis is the process of studying the data to discern codes, develop categories and central ideas, and move from categories to concepts or themes (Lichtman, 2010). For this study, I drew upon Lichtman’s “Three C’s Analysis Approach” (Coding, Categorizing, Concepts), which is a content-driven, thematic analysis approach that is

particularly suitable for exploratory studies (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012). This approach involves six steps of moving from raw data to meaningful concepts.

The first step of data analysis is done quickly and spontaneously, creating initial codes that capture the central ideas of the participants. The second step involves the deliberate task of revisiting the initial coding and modifying the codes. The third step focuses on developing an initial list of categories or central ideas. This step is directed, selective, and provides the framework for the research. The fourth and fifth steps involve continuing to modify the list of categories. The final step is the process of refining the list of categories into major concepts or themes that best reflect the meaning found within the data. As part of this final step, I continually reorganized, rewrote, and rethought in order to ensure that the most powerful ideas emerged. This approach to analysis of initial coding (establishing code list), revisiting coding (developing categories), reassessing categories (seeing major themes), was a helpful guide through the data analysis.

As I started working with the transcripts, field notes, and teaching materials, I began the process of first-cycle coding (step 1). I used a combination of structural coding and initial coding (also often referred to as “open coding”). Structural coding, which “applies a content-based or conceptual phrase representing a topic of inquiry to a segment of data that relates to a specific research question” (Saldaña, 2013, p. 84), facilitated segmentation of data related to pedagogy within the classroom. I also wanted to be able to examine the complexity of each participant’s academic experiences and to understand their philosophical perspectives. So, I employed initial coding for “breaking down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examining them, and comparing them for similarities and differences” (p. 100). Due to this large number of codes, I revisited my codes to check for any redundancies and to ensure

comprehension (step 2). Through this first-cycle coding process, I ended up with 76 different codes, such as academy resistance, course topics, teacher body, and social justice (for complete list of codes see Appendix D). I then moved to the next step of developing categories (Figure 1).

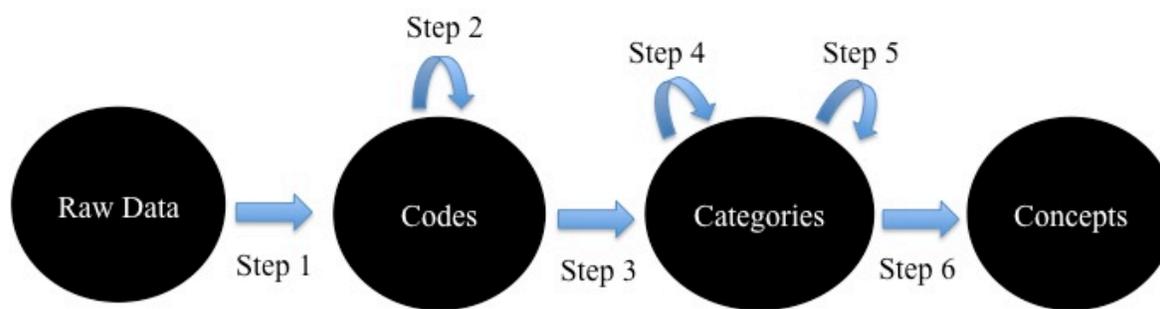


Figure 2. Lichtman's six steps for conducting data analysis

Through the process of second-cycle coding, I modified my codes and organized them into categories (step 3). While codes are distinct ideas from the transcripts, categories emerge through the process of grouping codes into similar ideas. The goal of second-cycle coding is to develop categories from the first cycle codes. As Saldaña writes, “second-cycle coding is reorganizing and condensing the vast array of initial analytic details into a ‘main dish’” (p. 208). It was in the focused coding that I searched for the most frequent or significant codes where categories began to form. Through an iterative process of modifying this initial list of categories, (step 4) and revisiting my key categories (step 5), seven main categories emerged: classroom activities, self-care, bodies, pedagogy, career, academy, and fat studies. These categories then allowed me to organize that data into four major descriptive concepts (step 6): (a) *bodies* that teach, (b) *why* I teach, (b) *how* I teach, and (d) *what* I teach (see Appendix E) that were then organized according to their support of, or challenge to, existing relevant literature (see Chapters Four, Five, Six, and Seven).

So far in this chapter, I have addressed the methodology and methods designed to explore the research question: *How are faculty known for challenging dominant obesity discourse in the social sciences, humanities, health sciences, behavioural sciences, and education working to disrupt weight-based oppression within post-secondary education?* In this final section, I highlight how I chose to represent the research findings, particularly with regards to confidentiality decisions and the intended avenues for disseminating the findings of this research.

### **The Process of Writing the Dissertation**

As noted at the beginning of this dissertation, I have practical and methodological reasons for choosing a manuscript-style dissertation. For practical reasons, I believed it would improve my manuscript writing skills, and accelerate the process of publishing chapters of my dissertation in academic journals, as stand-alone papers. For methodological reasons, I wanted my dissertation to centre the voices of the participants and to serve as a vehicle to promote those fighting against weight-based oppression in post-secondary education.

### **Format and Style of Manuscripts**

The following four chapters are scholarly papers focused on a theme that emerged from this study. Each focuses on one particular theme: academic experiences (Chapter Four), philosophical perspectives (Chapter Five), pedagogical approaches (Chapter Six), and teaching resources (Chapter Seven). Each one addresses one or more of the three sub-questions of this research study:

1. What are the experiences of faculty who challenge dominant obesity discourse in the academy and how might this shed light on enhancing fat-inclusivity in post-secondary education?

2. What are the philosophical perspectives taken by faculty who challenge dominant obesity discourse in the academy and how might this shed light on the emerging field of critical fat studies in post-secondary education?
3. What are the pedagogical approaches taken by faculty who challenge dominant obesity discourse in post-secondary classrooms and how might this shed light on a developing fat pedagogy?

These chapters were written as stand-alone research articles for submission to academic journals. Each article has been prepared according to the required format and style of the different journals for ease of submission to these journals for peer review upon completion of this dissertation. The process of writing each chapter turned out to be quite rigorous and many drafts were written. For example, the first draft of each article far exceeded the maximum word count allowable for the respective journals as each contained a significant amount of quotations taken directly from the interviews to show the depth of data collected. In these first drafts, the articles were 11 000 words, 21 500 words, and 14 000 words respectively. Given the word limits of each journal, a process of streamlining occurred in subsequent drafts. While the benefits of a manuscript-style dissertation are that each chapter is a publishable manuscript, the downside is that there is less space for the fuller stories and rich quotations commonly found in traditional dissertations. As such, difficult decisions had to be made and a balance was struck between offering enough quotations to give voice to my participants' experiences and to provide evidence of the rich data that was collected, yet leaving sufficient room to link the study to key literature and discussions in the field. As much as possible, I erred on the side of creating space to represent the voices of my participants, so, consequently the introduction, discussion, and conclusion sections are relatively brief and succinct.

The first research article, “Body/ies Talk: Examining Body Size as Pedagogical Work in Post-Secondary Education” will be submitted to *Sport, Education, and Society*. Ranked 45/112 in the field of Education and Educational Research, this international journal invites research that is theoretical or empirical that examines broadly the areas of pedagogy, policy, and the body in society. This article will be of particular interest to the journal editor given his influential and pivotal work highlighting how obesity discourse has damaging consequences on young people’s body image and developing sense of self (Evans et al., 2008). This article is a good fit for this journal as it highlights how body size does important pedagogical work in university classrooms. The article was written taking into consideration the submission guidelines outlined on the journal’s website (300-word abstract, 10 keywords, APA, and other particulars).

The second manuscript, “‘Weighty Matters’: Faculty Experiences With Challenging Dominant Obesity Discourse in Higher Education” will be submitted to the *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*. Published quarterly, this journal invites research that is original, theoretical, and highlights innovative practices that can guide institutions of higher education towards being more inclusive. This article is a good fit for this journal because it highlights how fat is an important diversity issue that has yet to be fully addressed within post-secondary institutions. Consideration was also given to the submission guidelines outlined on the journal’s website (APA formatted, 250-word abstract, double spaced, and other particulars) and the article follows a similar style to those already published in the journal. While I predominantly use the term post-secondary education throughout the rest of the dissertation, I use the term higher education in this article to use the terminology favoured by this journal.

The third and fourth research articles “Toward a Fat Pedagogy: A Study of Pedagogical Approaches Aimed at Challenging Dominant Obesity Discourse in Post-Secondary Education” and “Teaching Resources for Post-Secondary Educators Who Challenge Dominant Obesity Discourse” will be submitted to *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society* as a two-part series, ideally published in the same issue. Established in 2012, this journal is published twice a year and accepts both original research and reviews of scholarship related to fat studies, broadly understood. The journal invites articles that critically explore theory, research, practices, and programs that challenge dominant obesity discourse and offer opportunities for fat to be reconceptualized within society. This journal is a good fit for these particular articles because of how it might offer readers tangible teaching tools, since readers are assumed to be mostly scholars interested in fat studies and who are perhaps contemplating teaching fat studies courses. As such, the articles have been formatted based on the instructions to authors that are provided on the journal’s website (100-word abstract, double-spaced, APA formatted, etc.) and the style of each article follows previously published articles based on original research. In particular, the two-part series idea comes from the example of Hopkins (2008, 2011) who first submitted an article to *Geography Compass* titled, “Critical Geographies of Body Size,” summarizing the existing research in the field and the need for more research in the area. He then followed this article with a second one titled, “Teaching and Learning Guide for: Critical Geographies of Body Size,” outlining how an instructor might go about teaching such material.

As noted at the outset, the manuscript-style dissertation has become more common within doctoral research in education (Duke & Beck, 1999). Given the format, some repetition occurs across each article with regards to the methodology and method and relevant literature

used to guide the research. However, to avoid plagiarism, I have written each method section differently. Each article includes direct quotations from the interviews with participants but does not include any quotations from the secondary data sources, teaching materials and research journal, due to confidentiality concerns outlined earlier.

Lastly, I wish to indicate that given that these are stand-alone manuscripts being sent to different journals, I chose not use the term “critical fat studies.” While this is the term I use in my dissertation, it is not the term that is commonly used in the broad field of scholarship related to challenging obesity discourse, nor is it a term used by all of the participants in my study, therefore I felt that it was important to refer more broadly to the field as critical fat scholarship in the manuscripts.

To be submitted to the journal of *Sport, Education, and Society*

CHAPTER FOUR—BODY/IES TALK: EXAMINING BODY SIZE AS PEDAGOGICAL  
WORK IN POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION

Given the dominance of obesity discourse, it is perhaps not surprising that, as yet, there has been little research conducted on university instructors' experiences with, and pedagogical approaches to, challenging this dominant obesity discourse. To address this gap, 26 post-secondary faculty from around the world who are known for challenging the purported 'problem' of fatness in their teaching were interviewed about their academic experiences, perspectives, and practices. Results indicated that issues of credibility, invisibility, and vulnerability are key aspects of their academic experiences. This paper explores how body size can help to inform and disrupt dominant obesity discourse in the university classroom.

**Keywords:** *Dominant Obesity Discourse; Critical Pedagogy; Higher Education; Pedagogical Work; Social Theory of the Body; Fat Studies; Critical Weight Studies; Critical Obesity Studies; Weight Bias; Weight-Based Oppression*

### **Introduction**

“Dear obese PhD applicants: If you don't have the willpower to stop eating carbs, you won't have the willpower to do a dissertation. #truth” (Kingkade, 2013, para. 3). This tweet, sent on June 2, 2013, caused instant outrage across Internet news blogs and opinion sites, and within academic circles. It was tweeted by Dr. Geoffrey Miller, an evolutionary psychology professor

at the University of New Mexico. Not only did the university censure Dr. Miller, but they also hired an obesity stigma expert to conduct sensitivity training for all their staff and faculty (Wentworth, 2013).

Despite the swift response by the university and Dr. Miller, who removed the tweet almost immediately, apologized, and closed his Twitter account, the tweet remains embedded in cyberspace memory and is an apt representation of dominant “obesity” discourse. Such discourse has served to reinforce negative views of fat bodies that are generally construed as unattractive, downwardly mobile, not physically or emotionally healthy, and lacking in body and self-control (see Bordo, 1993; Fisanick, 2006, 2007; Ingalls, 2006; LeBesco, 2004; Rice, 2007; Tirosh, 2006). Dr. Miller’s tweet and the politics of “obesity” may seem trivial, but, to a growing number of scholars, it serves as a mechanism of oppression that has led to harmful attitudes about, and judgements of, fat bodies in society generally (Braziel & LeBesco, 2001; Lupton, 2013), including in social institutions such as schools and universities (Evans, Rich, Davies, & Allwood, 2008; Fisanick, 2006; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Rice, 2007).

While schools and universities can be places where many types of harmful discourses are (re)produced, many critical pedagogues have argued that they can also serve as important sites for subverting, challenging, and practising counter-discourses that resist oppressive forces more broadly (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 1997; hooks, 1994). As such, pedagogy is a form of cultural politics that (re)produces knowledge, values, attitudes, and identities rather than merely a science of knowledge transmission (such as Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009). While some scholars have examined teaching strategies to reduce weight bias (such as Danielsdottir, O’Brien, & Ciao, 2010; Puhl & Heuer, 2009), others have written about their efforts to disrupt dominant obesity discourse and weight-based oppression in post-secondary classrooms (such as

Boling, 2011; Escalera, 2009; Fisanick, 2006; Guthman, 2009; Koppelman, 2009; Tirosh, 2006). However, there remains a dearth of research on weight-based oppression and fat pedagogy in higher education (Ottenritter, 2004; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Watkins, Farrell, & Doyle-Hugmeyer, 2012).

This study investigated the academic experiences of post-secondary faculty around the world known for addressing and challenging dominant obesity discourse in the university classroom. Taking inspiration from critical pedagogy (Darder et al., 2009), this paper offers insights into the embodied experiences of instructors who ranged in body size, disciplinary background, and years of teaching experience. At the outset, I want to acknowledge that, as a thin, heterosexual, white, able-bodied female, I come to this research with thin privilege. As Wann (2009) states “every person who lives in a fat-hating culture inevitably absorbs anti-fat beliefs, assumptions, and stereotypes, and also inevitably comes to occupy a position in relation to power arrangements that are based on weight” (p. xi).

### **Literature Review**

Founded as elite social institutions, universities have traditionally reflected the experiences and perspectives of White European elite males who are able-bodied and heterosexual (Fisanick, 2007; Kobayashi, 2002; Smith, 2010). Within these institutions, the body has been seen as a deterrent of and a distraction from reason (Grosz, 1994). To this day, academic disciplines, particularly those that position themselves as scientific, serve to suppress the subjective, affective, and corporeal aspects of the person (Ivinson, 2012). For example, body studies scholar Fisanick (2006) writes, “during a job interview, I was told by one faculty member that my research on bodies in the college classroom seemed *irrelevant* because *the classroom is bodiless*” (p. 330, emphasis in original). Bodies are rarely seen to matter and they

are continually reduced and marginalized. Yet, as Bordo (1993) suggests, bodies undoubtedly act as “the surface upon which culture is symbolically written” (p. 186). What she means by this is that bodies are inscribed with meaning and are continually being read and judged against normative cultural and social values.

The traditional notion of the academy as an ivory tower, a mythical and disembodied and secluded mind fortress, has been critiqued by many critical feminist scholars and a growing number of fat scholars who “call attention to their own particularities that refuse the polite anonymity and disembodied equanimity that has traditionally characterized educational settings” (Freedman & Holmes, 2003, p. xii). These scholars question the premise that they are minds that happen to be attached to an apparatus, their body, whose sole purpose is to transport us around to classrooms and meetings. They call attention to their subjective identities (e.g., race, class, gender, size) and lived experiences as a way to disrupt the repressive “anti-body” culture of the academy. As hooks (1994) writes, “once we start talking in the classroom about the body and about how we live in our bodies, we’re automatically challenging the way power has orchestrated itself in that particular institutionalized space” (p. 137).

Drawing upon social theory of the body (e.g., Butler, 1993; Foucault, 1979; Grosz, 1994; Shilling, 1993, 2005, 2008), scholars have begun to look at how K-12 schools serve as sites that inform students’ perceptions and ideologies of the “healthy” body (such as Evans et al., 2008). Here, the healthy body refers to more than just a biological phenomenon; instead, it refers to how schools act as part of larger social structures of dehumanization that privilege certain bodies and degrade others (Cameron et al., 2014). For example, researchers have demonstrated how technologies such as fitness testing and body mass index (BMI) monitoring have had negative impacts on students’ self-esteem and self-identity (such as Rice, 2007; Sykes

& McPhail, 2008). They also have shown how obesity discourse has fueled unprecedented rates of weight-based bullying (such as Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Puhl & Latner, 2007), particularly within physical education programs (such as Fox & Edmunds, 2000; Russell, Cameron, Socha, & McNinch, 2013). Research has also pointed to how teachers are influenced by obesity discourse (such as Gullage, 2012), have negative perceptions of fat students (such as Brettingham, 2007; Edmunds, 2008; Storch et al., 2007), and perpetuate harmful stereotypes of fatness in their classes (such as Greenleaf & Weiller, 2005; O'Brien, Hunter, & Banks, 2007).

The prevalence of weight bias among university students has been explored in health-related programs, such as medicine, nursing, nutrition, psychology, and kinesiology (e.g., Puhl, Wharton, & Heuer, 2009; Puhl & Heuer, 2009, 2010; Sykes & McPhail, 2008; Waller, Lampman, & Lupfer-Johnson, 2012). Specific instructional strategies aimed at reducing or addressing weight-based oppression in post-secondary classrooms have also been examined (e.g., Daníelsdóttir et al., 2010; Puhl & Heuer, 2009) which have focused on modifying student knowledge and beliefs (Bell & Morgan, 2000; Diedrichs & Barlow, 2011; Puhl, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2005; Rukavina, Li, & Rowell, 2008; Rukavina, Li, Shen, & Sun, 2010), promoting empathy and acceptance (Cotugna & Mallick, 2010; Gapinski, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2006; Hague & White, 2005; Hennings, Hilbert, Thomas, Siegfried, & Rief, 2007), and using mechanisms to highlight the power of social influence (i.e., peer pressure; Stangor, Sechrist, & Jost, 2001). The few studies that have endeavoured to move beyond the “how to” of teaching have been primarily anecdotal (Fisanick, 2006, 2007; Ingalls, 2006; Tirosh, 2006).

### **Methods**

The findings presented in this paper are from a larger study that examined the academic experiences, philosophical perspectives, and pedagogical approaches of twenty-six university

faculty challenging dominant obesity discourse in the classroom. Participants were recruited through their university email addresses and were identified through reviews of relevant academic journals, personal networks, and searches of websites. Additional participants were generated using snowball sampling. Semi-structured interviews were conducted and teaching materials collected (course syllabi, PowerPoint files, lecture notes, and assignment outlines) to explore not only *what* and *how* the instructors address dominant obesity discourse in the post-secondary classroom, but also *why*. It immediately became clear that an instructor's body size served as an important pedagogical tool within the classroom, and as such, I began to probe more specifically about their body size and its pedagogical implications.

Of the 26 participants, 23 identified as female and three as male. The participants came from five different countries (Canada, United States, England, New Zealand, and Australia), with a greater proportion of faculty from North America (77%). There was broad representation of academic disciplines with a balance of faculty in the sciences and the social sciences and humanities. They ranged in years of teaching experience in higher education from one year of contract lecturing to 30 years as a tenure-track faculty member; seven had taught full fat-focused courses and two taught full units focused on fat, whereas more than half of the participants (61%) infused fat content throughout their classes. Lastly, 23% identified as fat, 15% identified as having had a fat identity (they had been fat then lost weight, but still kept the identity), 12% identified as "innies" (in-between), and 50% identified as being a "normal" weight and/or having thin privilege.

All interviews lasted one to two hours and were transcribed verbatim. To respect confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned or selected by the participants. After verifying the transcripts with participants to ensure they were comfortable with what was transcribed, I

engaged in two rounds of successive coding and a thematic analysis of the data with the use of ATLAS.ti 7.0. This paper addresses one of the four key themes to have emerged from this study, specifically *bodies* that teach.

While two sources of data were included in the data analysis, only quotations from the interview data are used in this paper, and identifying characteristics in combination (e.g., pseudonym, body size, gender, discipline) are not used to reference quotations so as to protect participants' identity; many of the participants are known scholars in their field and demographic data or excerpts from course syllabi could reveal their identity.

### **Results**

Participants talked about body size as a part of their academic experience in three main ways: credibility, visibility, and vulnerability. The voices of the participants are foregrounded in this section to illustrate the richness of the data.

#### **Size and Skill: Body Policing Through Credibility Discourse**

Whether acknowledging their fat bodies, thin bodies, or fluctuating weight, all participants shared experiences related to how their body size played a role in the classroom when they challenge dominant obesity discourse. As Sophie articulated, "My body shape and size impacts my ability to deliver information or not deliver information," when referring to how her "normal" weight body speaks just as loud, or louder sometimes, than her words about obesity. This was also well articulated by Jennifer who suggested that, by not appearing either fat or thin, her body cannot be read as easily by students and therefore students have trouble situating her within dominant obesity discourse:

I think having a body they couldn't read easily was disconcerting because I was neither. My weight fluctuates, but I was probably at the low end of what I am generally so I

wasn't obviously fat and my TAs [teaching assistants] were both very thin and athletic.

So, they [the students] were very confused ...they couldn't make sense of us.

This notion that bodies “talk” and “communicate,” as indicated by Sophie and Jennifer is illustrative of their awareness of the discursive production of bodies within university classrooms. It also highlights the ways in which they feel their own specific bodies are continually classified, defined, and influenced by students' perceptions of who counts as a “credible” or “not credible” instructor.

Most other participants expressed similar awareness, particularly with regards to how credibility was gained or lost based on being branded as fat or thin within their various disciplines. For example, Evelyn felt that she would be taken more seriously if she were thinner:

What I always imagine is that people don't take me as seriously because of my body size, but would take someone who was thinner more seriously because they look less biased somehow.

Jessie suggests his normative body size has meant he has never faced credibility issues:

The fat studies people that I have interacted with say that they are constantly having to negotiate the question of credibility in public forums [sic]. All I can say to you is that has never been an issue for me and that probably tells you something.

Further, Rhonda suggests her thinness gives her students the perception that she has a high degree of competence when speaking about nutrition:

I think there's a certain credibility I'm given as a Ph.D. nutritionist, registered dietician, who is on the thinner size of the weight spectrum to talk about this stuff. I would

imagine I would get way more push back as a faculty member if I were promoting this and I were heavy or in a larger body.

A similar idea was articulated by Autumn who suggested that the association of thinness and credibility derives from “the perception that the speaker’s subjectivity is a bias rather than a resource for knowledge.”

Two of the participants shared ways they explicitly addressed this bias in class with students. Elizabeth explained that she has on occasion explicitly asked students if the size of the messenger matters:

In rare moments of candor, I did this exercise where I say, “How would you feel if I were presenting on this topic and I weighed at least 100 pounds more than I do now?” and students have said, and they’ve said it very honestly, “I would not believe you. I would question you.”

Kuna explained that she too has done something similar in class using TED talks:

I found towards the end of class two TED talks that were largely the same in content. And one was delivered by a thin woman and one was delivered by a fat woman. I showed them both and I’m, like, “So, if you had a choice, which would you show?” We talked about that whole thing about how the thin woman might be taken more seriously and accepted because she’s not fat.

Not only did participants share activities they have used in class to bring attention to size bias, but they also shared ways students have articulated fat bias. Four participants spoke about how students would often use course evaluations to make egregious comments about their bodies and appearance, so much so that June stopped reading her evaluations altogether out of fear of what would be written:

I actually avoided reading my evaluations for this class because I was afraid something would be in there. The first time I ever taught a class, I had a student write about how my tan pants were horrible and that a fat woman should never wear them.

Autumn expressed a similar sentiment:

I was imagining the things they might think of me, and I didn't feel strong enough to be that body, to speak as a person, and then to attempt to go on speaking as a teacher. I had let the shame get one over on me. But it was hard not to do so when, after guest lecturing for a colleague, they received feedback on their evaluations saying that they shouldn't let people come speak who "promote obesity."

Autumn and June seem to have lost credibility because of their size, while a number of participants spoke specifically about how they gained credibility when they lost weight, both from students and from the academy in general. Brenda, for instance, talked about how she had lost weight due to illness and, as a result, gained credibility:

People were just astonished when they saw me after I lost all this weight. Obviously, a number of them asked me what happened, they thought I had, because they knew the literature about weight loss, they thought I had an illness that causes weight loss. And in a way I did. I mean I do, I do have chronic pain. The morphine just deadened my appetite. I could just hardly eat at times. The weight just fell away. I didn't even notice it until one day I got on the scale and I couldn't believe my eyes. I didn't regularly weigh myself. I did notice that people treated me differently. Now I have more credibility and before I had less.

Samantha spoke about how losing weight has made her more aware of the politics of language and her body size:

I used to use words like “fat” without being too concerned because I could self-identify as fat, I could talk about using it as a political and positive signifier and we talked about some comparisons around using “queer” or the way the word “nigger” is used and who can use “nigger” and who can’t. . . . Now that I’m slimmer, I’m more aware that I don’t want to feel like, if there are fat students in the class and they feel like, “Oh, who is she? What does she know to speak on behalf of me? She knows nothing about my life and what it’s like.” So, in a way it’s not like I’m trying to kind of claim that I was fat, so I can speak about it, but at least I can put some of those issues out on the table about how do we talk about it, who can talk about it, and what terms do we use to talk about it, and so on.

While Brenda and Samantha spoke about losing weight and gaining credibility, June shared how her fatness gave her more credibility in certain situations:

Certainly, I think my physical body helped in dealing with some of those students who were having issues related to eating disorders because I talked about it in the very opening, how I came to this class and why I was interested in the topic. And I talked about the struggles that I was having with the gastric bypass and how that was causing anemia and how that might come to play as we went through the semester. I was trying to be really open about that. I think that led people to come in and talk with me.

Offering a somewhat different perspective, Sharon argued that credibility can be gained or lost whether one is “too” thin or “too” fat depending on the context:

I always say damned if you are and damned if you aren’t, because in a counseling setting, yeah, maybe someone won’t take you seriously because they don’t understand Health at Every Size and everything if you’re large. But then if you’re thin, then they

will say you've never experienced what I am experiencing so how do you know? There is no way to win. You're screwed if you're thin, you're screwed if you're fat, so let it go.

While all of the participants referred to the fact that body size impacted credibility in the classroom, a number of participants also talked about the impact of one's body size on other elements of their academic career, such as publishing and funding. For example, while Alexa is a fat studies scholar and supports "all stuff fat-related," she argues that, for the most part, scholars getting published within her field have thin privilege.

If you think about it, who has gotten the most attention from their work? [Scholar A] who is normal sized... [and] it's people like [Scholar B] who might be slightly overweight but because he's male he can get away with it, or [Scholar C] who is in the normal BMI range. These are the people who have gotten a lot of attention for their work, and granted their work is good and I'm glad they're getting the attention, but that idea that, well, if you're fat, you can't have an opinion.

Participants in this study predominantly focused on the singular influence of size on credibility, but some also highlighted the intersectionality of size and other identities. For example, in talking about how universities have traditionally been male-dominated, Lydia made the following statement: "fat males are looked upon with much more authority, with much more credibility, with much more respect than fat females, fat women like myself."

Jennifer noted the intersectionality between body size, race, and gender:

So, the way I think that it's gendered in part is because if you're the white guy instructor, you're the body from nowhere. Your body isn't even in the room because you have that presence of being the authority. But, already once you're a woman, your

body is in the room because yours isn't the normative body, kind of. Then, when your body is not aligning with their expectations, then they don't know what to make of it.

We know this from fat activism, that people are always looking to figure out what your body is to make sense of what you're writing.

John poignantly argued that even though he brings in feminist theory and fat theory into his classes, his white, male, and thin privileges still remain the dominant discursive construction:

The students still see a man who is like them, I do have an athletic background, it's not only shocking to them, but I also think, and I sometimes wonder if they don't quite take me seriously. They're like, "Oh, he is funny, he's saying this, but he's really just a good old boy."

### **The Visible Body: Engaging with the Material Body**

While participants focused primarily on body size and credibility, they also referred to the materiality of bodies, the pulsating, thinking, feeling, sensing bodies that they and those with whom they interacted possessed. As Nicole aptly put it, "We all have bodies. We all have anxieties about our bodies. We have fears and we have desires about our bodies." All participants spoke about how these bodies are visible inside and outside the post-secondary classroom. They all discussed size privilege in the academy and the cultural and social structures that reinforce and reproduce thinness over fatness.

For example, some of the participants explicitly noted that body size of students in post-secondary institutions seemed to vary by discipline, with some disciplines seemingly comprised of thinner bodies. Rebecca observed that her medical students tend to have a high degree of thin privilege:

Most of the med students all are, most of them are, upper class and thin and feel very smart about their bodies. I'm sure that the students who are a bit larger in med school must feel pretty awful.

Three participants also observed how the make up of the student body visibly changes over time, depending on how far along they are in their studies. For example, Sophie who teaches in a science oriented discipline, noted that, in her faculty, greater size diversity is apparent in first year and noticeably diminishes by fourth year:

I think for those bodies that are larger, which I think are very few as time progresses in our kinesiology and physical education discipline. I think having bodies of different shapes and sizes would be really important. But I don't know what happens... my classes would be full of all kinds of people in first year classes, and by the time they reached fourth ...the diversity of body, shapes and sizes is gone really.

Sophie and the two others did not offer reasons why size diversity in their programs might be changing (e.g., Are students dropping out? Are students losing weight? Are students switching disciplines?), but are suggestive of the way size privilege is visibly playing out in disciplines like medicine and kinesiology where fit, thin, able bodies are the norm.

Size privilege was also noted by participants in the social sciences disciplines, albeit a little differently. Three participants articulated what they perceived to be a growing irony in the way in which taking a fat studies course is a venue to becoming "hip." For example, Andrea talked about how popular her fat studies course is despite her predominantly thin student population:

It's interesting to me, while being fat is not considered a sexy thing at all and certainly on this campus it's not, I would say we have a very thin student body. I think that speaks

to the kind of discrimination in higher education, getting into the schools or the ways students would select out of this school if they were fat. It would look like a place that isn't welcoming to them. But the weird thing is I think this class is considered very sexy. They want to get it. It's considered to be very hip to be taking fat studies. So, that is a kind of weird thing, like a weird phenomenon that I'm not going to fight. They're hip to get how fat stigma works even though it's not "hip" to be fat in their world.

Many of the participants talked about how they had not anticipated the ways in which challenging dominant obesity discourse in the classroom would make their bodies more visible. As articulated by Elizabeth, "it didn't occur to me how as a researcher, as an academic, and as a teacher, how [addressing dominant obesity discourse] would put my body under the microscope." Other participants felt this type of close scrutiny and surveillance as well, regardless of their size. As Autumn argues, "No matter one's body size, talking about fat studies in the classroom forces one to wrestle with one's own embodiment. Audacity or not, it can be a struggle."

It was clear that working to disrupt dominant obesity discourse can be, and indeed has been, a very emotional and challenging endeavour for all of the participants. Some participants even suggested that teaching about weight-based oppression in the classroom is more challenging to teach than other social justice issues, such as race and class, because dominant obesity discourse is not only accepted but promoted, particularly in health-related disciplines, such as kinesiology, public health, medicine, and nutrition, that emphasize the biomedical model. Samantha, who, at one time, identified as fat but now teaches from a place of thin privilege, said,

I think you can tell from the way I'm stumbling, I find teaching this material challenging, more than other material. I do find it, because this is something that I struggled with for such a long time, I do find it more difficult in the classroom for that reason and I do find it more difficult than teaching gender, sexuality, and ethnicity because I think the students have that old idea that ...it's an individual choice and we're in this neoliberal environment and if you're fat, you clearly deserve it because you're not doing all the right things that one's supposed to do. I do think that in the classroom you do encounter those kinds of opinions much more than if you're teaching about ethnicity or even social class or this idea that the fat person is deserving of their own fate. [And] for the personal reasons of my own embodiment, I think teaching in this area is quite challenging.

Other participants talked about how students are also impacted in their classes. Bella suggests that, when she challenges dominant obesity discourse, she inadvertently puts students' bodies on display:

The students will all sit there looking at each other and they all know each other and everybody's staring at everybody. It can be really awkward when everybody can immediately tell what everybody's size is when they start talking about these things.

Evelyn, like a few other participants, also told stories about how university furniture serves to reinforce the visibility of bodies; the act of trying to squeeze into and out of the normatively sized classroom desks and/or chairs is highly stigmatizing:

I remember the first day we had this small classroom and one of the larger students was like, "I can't fit into this classroom." You have a class on fat theory and 50% of your students are really uncomfortable in this class because it was a really small class. I don't

remember what kind of desks. I can't remember, but it wasn't a good thing. Then there was a woman who was in a wheelchair and it was bad for her as well.

By challenging students to think differently about fatness there was a heightened consciousness about bodies thereby making bodies more visible in new and sometimes very discomfoting ways for both the instructor and the students. Participants offered ways they had learned to deal with such discomfort. They talked about embracing the discomfort within the classroom and shared unique means of how they attended to their "fleshiness." For example, Autumn talked about dressing up to make herself *more* visible: "One of the strategies that is just in my everyday life now is, I wouldn't say I dress to the nines now all the time, but I'm definitely almost always overdressed."

Sixteen participants talked about how sharing their own embodied struggles became an important part of addressing the discomfort productively. For example, Kuna said that she often shares her own experiences with disordered eating to enhance student learning:

I use myself as a model...Had I ever gone to a clinician I'm sure I would have clinically been diagnosed with anorexia and bulimia in my younger years. And the weight-biased experiences that I had. And I also focus on sharing my coping techniques and my current comfort with my body. I also talk with them about having setbacks when it isn't so easy. I share the experience I had with a doctor telling me that I'm obese and need to lose weight.

Other participants tried to avoid the discomfort by making their bodies *less* visible. For example, Evelyn talked about dressing down in class to hide her body: "For me, how I deal with it now is to just not bring my body in at all. Just wear black all the time."

Six participants spoke about diffusing discomfort by creating a meditative distance from the affective body. These participants focused more on disrupting the science and dissecting ideas rather than sharing experiences related to their own embodiment. As Bella explains, “I try to keep it more about ideas and policies and questions about law and justice and not about them and their bodies.” While 23% of the participants spoke of using variations of this approach, other participants spoke about how creating such distance stemmed from an unwillingness to indulge in, as Nicole called it, the “messy stuff.” Andrea admits that her meditative distance approach is “probably not the way that I would think immediately we want to do that kind of fat pedagogy” but she goes on to explain why she takes that approach:

I’ve been pretty much using the same pedagogy that I found that works with dealing with controversial stuff ... which is trying to get into the writer’s head, seeing things from the writer’s point of view and really having to grapple and understand that before you are actually, in a certain way, allowed to just move immediately to what my opinion is... almost trying to discourage huge visceral reactions to things.

While the “meditative distance” approach articulated above may work for some participants, it is noteworthy that all participants who spoke of taking such an approach identified as “normal” weight or as having size privilege. The fact that available pedagogical choices can be size-specific is emphasized by Autumn, who asserted that she could never talk about fatness without addressing the fact that she is fat:

I think if I tried to make that distance when talking about fatness, it would be false.

People can see that I’m fat. I’m not slightly fat. I could just say this is the research and it’s not anything on my experience, but I would be lying. If I were a thin person, maybe I could pull that off.

### **Exposing Vulnerability: Faculty “Coming Out” Within the University**

The notion that bodies “talk” is clearly articulated by Evelyn who argued that one of the biggest fallacies of obesity discourse is that “it assumes that we can talk about bodies without being bodies.” While some participants such as Evelyn tried to teach in somewhat disembodied ways by maintaining a meditative distance, all of the participants shared experiences that illustrated how the discursive body and the material body are nonetheless always present in the classroom whether they want it to be or not:

It’s funny because I think personally I try, when I teach, to disembody myself, because especially a course like that, I don’t know, but of course people do, I don’t want people thinking about my body, but of course they do.

Many of the participants spoke about the tension that arises from doing work that challenges normative body size ideals. They articulated frustration at the fact that despite being able to intellectualize weight-based oppression, they too were vulnerable to this harmful discourse and how it promotes body policing and body regulation. Participants spoke about how their professional pursuits challenging dominant obesity discourse have made them highly sensitive to how such discourses were influencing their own personal lives and everyday activities. Many expressed frustration with the pervasiveness of the discourse despite their attempts to disrupt it.

Jessica, for one, stated,

I’m constantly astounded by the fact that I can still be taken in by it. I will watch a movie and there’s this really thin beautiful woman and I will be, like, “Oh, I used to look like that.” And then, I’m, like, “I study this critically. I try to teach about this. What the hell is going on here?”

Sarah made a similar observation, suggesting that everyone is susceptible to the discourse:

I think it's getting people past the idea that it's about the messenger, it's about the message and whether you're thin, whether you're fat, whatever you identify as, it impacts everybody. It impacts me in terms of my interactions. It impacts me in terms of my body image and the things that, I don't necessarily mean me personally, but if you're not overweight then most people that I know who are not overweight are worried about being overweight. So, it impacts everybody.

Participants also spoke about the struggles of disrupting dominant obesity discourse in higher education. Three talked about initially hiding behind their academic identities by addressing body size in their work but never talking about their own bodies. For some, however, there came a moment when they decided to claim space and confront their embodiment rather than ignore it. Ginette, for one, suggested that showing one's vulnerability is an important part of being an instructor:

One of my foundational beliefs is that, when we peel back this expert façade that is untouchable and unreachable then we allow ourselves to be seen. When we allow ourselves to be seen by our students in a way that is generative, not in a way that they need to be able to help us, but in a way that shows that we are human and that we are vulnerable and they too can learn from that to be human and vulnerable in their work.

For many of the participants, then, the process of coming out (meaning, identifying as either fat or thin) was an important aspect of their work of disrupting dominant obesity discourse and positioning the body as a pedagogical tool within the classroom.

### **Discussion**

Body size, even when not used intentionally, was an important pedagogical tool among these educators. These findings shed insight into how body size has served to foreground the

consequences of bodily engagement in two fundamental ways. First, when challenging dominant obesity discourse, it is not only the explicit classroom activities that do pedagogical work, but also the instructor's body size. Participants articulated various ways in which body size acted as a conduit for dominant obesity discourse. Second, when dominant obesity discourse is challenged, it is not just the instructor's body size doing pedagogical work, but *all* of the bodies present in the classroom that are exposed and made visible. Participants suggested that it is this visibility that creates a sense of vulnerability in both instructors and students whose bodies do not fit within prescribed size norms.

The emergence of critical fat scholarship has brought attention to how dominant obesity discourse “pathologizes, insults, and oppresses difference and fatness” (Aphramor, 2005, p. 334) and participants articulated various ways that body privilege is being enacted within post-secondary institutions. Size privilege is an idea borrowed and redefined from the concept of white privilege (McIntosh, 2000) that suggests that, “like structures that privilege whiteness, cultural and social structures privilege the thin” (Kwan, 2010, p. 146). Participants highlighted how their body size impacts how students perceived their credibility as an instructor in challenging dominant obesity discourse.

Extensive research has explored how instructor credibility plays an important role in classroom dynamics (such as Golish & Olson, 2000; Myers, 2004; Myers & Bryant, 2004; Roach, Richmond, & Mottet, 2006). Scholars in this area have found that credibility is influenced by many different variables, one of which is marginalized status, as indicated by Russ, Simonds, and Hunt (2002). For example, instructors who are members of marginalized groups are often perceived as less credible than instructors who are not; such is the case of women (e.g., Anderson & Miller, 1997; Basow, 1998; Bennett, 1982; Centra & Gaubatz, 2000;

Moore, 1997), non-White (e.g., Hendrix, 1998; Johnson & Archana, 2003; Mitchell & Rosiek, 2006; Warren, 2005), and gay (Russ et al., 2002) instructors. It should not be surprising, then, that participants in this study articulated associations between perceived credibility and fatness.

Participants also talked about the ways that their bodies acted as discursive constructions that inscribed dominant obesity discourse through such things as student comments on course evaluations. Given the growing importance of evaluations for tenure and promotion (Fisanick, 2006), these faculty members were not only emotionally hurt, but also potentially hurt materially by the degrading and demeaning comments made about their bodies. As Braziel & LeBesco (2001) articulate, acts such as these can be deployed in order to “construct and erase the fat body, attempting to expel it from representation at the very moment that defines it” (p. 1).

Participants also articulated ways that students’ bodies are disciplined through such things as classroom desks. Hetrick and Attig (2009) argue that, “classrooms of higher education, bent on homogeneity, are sites in which sight—the disciplining gaze, with its acute awareness of dangerous difference—operates as an instruction of control and punishment” (p. 200). For example, the act of trying to squeeze into and out of a classroom desk is so shamefully *seen* that it acts as a disciplinary action. While some scholars have highlighted how weight plays a factor in academic achievement (Ball, Crawford, & Kenardy, 2004; Crandall, 1991; Crosnoe, 2007; Crosnoe & Muller, 2004; Fowler-Brown, Ngo, Phillips, & Wee, 2009), size privilege is the most significant challenge facing fat students in post-secondary education (Brown, 2012).

Participants focused primarily on the discursive production of bodies in the academy, but they also referred to the fleshiness of their *lived* body. Participants spoke about their

vulnerability in challenging dominant obesity discourse and the specific ways in which their bodies were emergent and generative in this process (Grosz, 1994; Shilling, 2005). One participant compared the process to “coming out” which echoes ideas articulated by a number of fat studies scholars who identify as fat (Murray, 2005; Pause, 2012; Wann, 1998). What is unusual here is that seven thin scholars in this study also referred to their experience of becoming a fat studies scholar as a “coming out” as a way of acknowledging the role that their embodied identity played in such a practice. This process is well articulated by Sedgwick in her dialogue with Moon (Moon & Sedgwick, 2001) in the final chapter of “Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression,” whereby she states that coming out is a process 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...[and] a way of staking one’s claim to insist on, and participate actively in, a renegotiation of the representational contract between one’s body and one’s world” (p. 230).

Based on my participants’ experiences, it seems highly evident that more efforts need to be made to address body size as a social justice issue within post-secondary institutions. Bodies are, in effect, excluded from diversity discourse. Such actions will require that changes be made to the everyday lived practices of “an academy that is built for a tiny minority of Americans, which at its heart is overwhelmingly racist, classist, patriarchal, straight, and Western” (Torres, 2006, p. 67). I want to add to this list “sizeist” (Monaghan, 2007, p. 70), referring to size privilege. Participants in this study, alongside those working in critical pedagogy generally (such as Giroux, 1988, 1997; Kumashiro, 2004) know full well that it is not enough to focus on challenging oppressive structures. Rather, we educators need to develop a fat pedagogy that asserts that body size serves as an important mechanism of pedagogical work.

### **Conclusion: Moving Bodies Forward**

This paper highlights how the bodies of faculty challenging dominant obesity discourse are being taken up within the academy and can, in themselves, do pedagogical work. Traditionally scholars have kept “the body out of speech, sight, and investigation” (Freedman & Holmes, 2003, p. 7), but participants in this study have drawn attention to how body size can help inform and disrupt dominant obesity discourse inside and outside the university classroom. The idea that the body size of instructors matters is likely not a huge surprise to readers of this journal but may be in the academy generally. The instructor’s weight is inevitably present in the classroom: it speaks. I assert that developing a fat pedagogy can do more than let it speak; it can inspire it to roar and will allow it to sing.

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To be submitted to the *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*

CHAPTER FIVE—“WEIGHTY MATTERS”: FACULTY EXPERIENCES WITH  
CHALLENGING DOMINANT OBESITY DISCOURSE IN HIGHER EDUCATION

As universities become more international and culturally diverse, there is growing pressure on them to become more equity-conscious and diversity-focused. While racism, classism, sexism, and (dis)ableism have been identified as key diversity issues in higher education, sizeism, expressed as fat phobia and fat discrimination, has received less attention. While some research has explored the presence of weight bias and size privilege in higher education, few studies have examined the experiences of scholars working in the field of critical fat scholarship. Through the following research questions, this study examines the experiences of twenty-six faculty members who address dominant obesity discourse: “*What are the experiences of faculty who challenge dominant obesity discourse in the academy and how might this shed light on enhancing fat-inclusivity in higher education?*” and “*What are the philosophical perspectives of faculty challenging dominant obesity discourse and how might this shed light on the emerging field of critical fat scholarship in higher education?*” The findings shed light on how emerging nuances within the field of critical fat scholarship are productive and generative, and how scholars working in this field are thriving despite tremendous resistance. This paper argues that more needs to be done within higher education to address this important social justice issue.

**Keywords:** *Fat Oppression; Fat Studies; Resistance; Higher Education*

## Introduction

Fatness has become the subject of intense scrutiny around the world. Since the late 1990s, the idea of fatness as a health risk and economic concern has become popularized as an “epidemic” (Lupton, 2013). Books now warn against *Planet Obesity* (Egger & Swinburne, 2011), media headlines blare “Fat Nation” (Ambinder, 2010), popular reality TV programs distinguish the biggest winners from the “biggest losers” (biggestloser.com), and whole websites are dedicated to “weighty matters” (weightymatters.com). Public personalities are publicly ostracized for being considered too fat, such as Wisconsin news anchor Jennifer Livingston who was told by a viewer, “Surely you don’t consider yourself a suitable example for this community’s young people, girls in particular” (Gray, 2012). National leaders like Michelle Obama tout national slimming programs like “Let’s Move” (letsmove.gov) to fight against “obesity.” This “epidemic” has even been described as “more threatening than weapons of mass destruction” (Carmona, 2003, para. 66), contributing to a growing moral panic (Campos, Saguy, Ernsberger, Oliver, & Gaesser, 2006) that is said to be fueling today’s thriving obesity and dieting industries (Oliver, 2006).

University culture is not immune from this dominant obesity discourse. For example, academic researchers are increasingly funded by private companies from the health service economy, leading Oliver (2006) to claim that “academic obesity researchers and scientists often exaggerate or play up the dire impact of obesity to help them secure more research funding, heighten the importance of their own work, or advance their own political causes” (p. 619). At the same time, universities increasingly promote themselves as diversity-focused (Mitchell, 2003) and equity-conscious (Ahmed, 2007) in order to be, or to appear to be, more socially

responsible. Some critical scholars argue that such rhetoric merely serves to obscure the oppressions that persist (Wagner & Yee, 2011). Weight-based oppression is one such example.

While issues of race, class, sex, and (dis)ability have been taken up by scholars concerned about oppression in the academy, body size as a social justice issue has received less attention (Watkins, Farrell, & Doyle-Hugmeyer, 2012). So far, scholars have examined fat phobia within the tenure and promotion process (Fisanick, 2006, 2007), credibility gained by professors by becoming smaller (Longhurst, 2012), the process of coming out as a fat scholar (Murray, 2005; Pause, 2012), lessons learned from size privilege (Bacon, 2009), and experiences of teaching critical fat scholarship in university classrooms (Boling, 2011; Guthman, 2009; Tirosh, 2006). This paper contributes to this growing body of literature by highlighting the academic experiences of scholars who challenge obesity discourse and problematizing dominant notions of fatness. It draws upon work in fat studies (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009) and critical pedagogy (Darder, Baltodano, & Torres, 2009; Monchinski, 2008) to argue that university administrators and educators need to pay attention to the embodied injustices being enacted on fat scholars.

### **Research Design and Method**

This research was part of a doctoral study conducted from June to August 2013 that examined the academic experiences, philosophical approaches, and pedagogical practices of faculty members in the social sciences, humanities, human sciences, behavioural sciences, and education who are known for their critical approaches to obesity discourse and dominant notions of fatness. A qualitative methodological approach was used to capture the complexity of faculty experiences in higher education (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), where “faculty member” is defined as someone who has taught or is teaching in a university or college, including current

and previous faculty members, full-time lecturers, and contract instructors. Participants were recruited through professional networks, university websites, and academic journals. Semi-structured interviews (that were between 60-120 minutes in duration) were conducted by Skype and telephone to collect data on participants' experiences. A scripted invitation was sent to all potential participants and only those who responded with an expression of interest were contacted. Additional participants were recruited using snowball sampling, where participants involved in the study provided names of other potential participants (Lichtman, 2010).

### **Description of Participants**

Twenty-six faculty members participated in this study. The 23 females and three males were from five different countries (Canada,  $n = 9$ ; United States,  $n = 11$ ; England,  $n = 2$ ; New Zealand,  $n = 3$ ; and Australia,  $n = 1$ ) and 12 different disciplines (Kinesiology,  $n = 4$ ; Nutrition,  $n = 4$ ; Geography,  $n = 3$ ; Sociology,  $n = 2$ ; Medicine,  $n = 2$ ; Nursing,  $n = 2$ ; Education,  $n = 2$ ; Women's Studies,  $n = 2$ ; Writing/Rhetoric,  $n = 2$ ; Psychology,  $n = 1$ ; History,  $n = 1$ ; Community Studies,  $n = 1$ ). Of the 26 participants, seven had taught full courses or units and 16 had infused critical fat scholarship into their classes. Their years of teaching experience ranged from one to over 30 years. Six self-identified as fat, four identified as having been fat, three identified as "innies" (in-between), and 13 identified as being a "normal" weight and/or having thin privilege. Given that most participants are well-known academics within their respective disciplines, little to no linking information is provided in this manuscript that might unwittingly identify someone.

### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

The 26 interviews produced 446 pages of transcription. Upon transcribing each interview, the transcript was sent to the participant to ensure the trustworthiness of the

transcript. After validating transcripts, coding was done in conjunction with data collection. This process involved taking notes after every interview, rereading each transcript with minimal editing to ensure legibility and flow, and then coding the transcript using ATLAS.ti 7.0. A combination of structural coding and initial coding was used in first-cycle coding, a way of identifying both content-based segments of data and discrete parts in the data (Saldaña, 2012), to develop a code list. This list was then put through a second-coding cycle in an effort to develop data around similar dimensions, eventually leading to seven main categories and three main concepts. This paper focuses on the data and the major themes related to the academic experiences and philosophical perspectives articulated by the participants.

## **Results**

This section highlights the voices of participants through representative quotations from the interviews related to: emerging nuances in the field, academic interests in the field, and struggles in the field. The term “critical fat scholarship” is used to denote the emerging field offering “important *critical* perspectives on the dominant view of obesity” (Monaghan, Colls, & Evans, 2013).

### **What’s in a Name? Emerging Nuances within Critical Fat Scholarship**

Scholars who disrupt dominant obesity discourse and dominant notions of fatness work in a variety of disciplines and with diverse theoretical lenses. The nuanced perspectives within the emerging field were articulated by all the participants. Evelyn, for example, suggested that there is a distinction between those who say obesity exists and those who say it does not, making a specific distinction between fat studies scholars and non-fat studies scholars:

I think there is a difference between . . . . some people who are, like, no, obesity exists, the numbers are right and there are some health consequences versus everything is made

up, all these things are forms of biopolitics or biopedagogies or whatever and these are all open for critiquing and interpretation including the idea of health consequences. I think there seems to be this sort of split happening, which I think is really interesting because I don't know where that's going to go, maybe nowhere.

Other participants articulated similar sentiments and suggested that these divergent perspectives are important to pay attention to as some scholars situate themselves very strongly within a particular "camp." For example, Jennifer does not identify as a fat studies scholar, saying, "I'm not strictly in the fat activist camp. Katie LeBesco<sup>1</sup> and I have conversed and I think she's terrific, but I just don't fall into the camp easily." In contrast, Autumn very strategically and politically situates herself within fat studies:

I had a professor who told me you really should just say that you're doing obesity studies because fat studies is too political. I was, like, well, it's meant to be. Obesity studies is also political, but you may not see it that way. Obesity studies isn't an accurate representation of what I'm doing so I think I will stick with my political category.

Bella too was clearly aware of the complexities in the emerging field of critical fat scholarship and suggests that it is very important to clearly define the type of perspective you work from:

I am careful in the sense of trying to acknowledge the complexity and not being too radical. In other words, not failing to have a nuance when a nuance is required. You can get away with pushing fields as a scholar if you're willing to draw boundaries of what you are or are not doing, and be careful of the claims. I have tried to do that.

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen LeBesco is a key scholar in fat studies and is best known for her books *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity* (UMass Press, 2004) and *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression* (UCalifornia Press, 2001).

One of the most common ways participants clearly defined their perspectives and how they drew boundaries around the work was their position on body size and health. For all the participants, talking about health evoked very different and often quite emotional responses. For example, Sarah clearly positions her perspective on health within a fat studies perspective:

The problem I have with a lot of that weight stigma literature is that it begins with the premise that obesity is a bad thing. I think the key to reducing obesity stigma is not to say, "Treat fat people nicely." To me that's horrible because I think it's condescending. To me, it's about recognizing that people come in all shapes and sizes and that we not only need to accept diversity, but we need to embrace it and celebrate it because it's a good thing, in fact. So, I think that's the difference.

Compare Sarah's perspective to Brenda who suggests obesity can be an unhealthy thing in some cases:

I very much am with the idea that some children become overweight because of lifestyle issues. They are too sedentary, they are eating nothing but junk food, and there's a consequence obviously. They gain too much weight. Then there's another group of kids that are just meant to be large. What we need to do is create an environment that supports all children in making healthy choices.... We've got to stop selling junk in schools, ... signing contracts with soda companies, ... get quality physical education back in the schools.... Those kinds of things are really important and although they've used obesity as an excuse, which really bothers me, but I have to admit they wouldn't be able to do it if they had just advocated for health.

Unlike Sarah and Brenda, Jessie does not align with a specific health perspective but suggests that the emerging field of critical fat scholarship needs to engage with the health debates and obesity science in order to effectively disrupt dominant obesity discourse:

There seems to be a kind of sense which some people want to say that the science and the statistics are too complicated and I don't want to know what they are saying and I'm going to say what I want to say. That happens in fat studies.

Part of the tension between these different perspectives seems to come from the language people feel comfortable using or what is more common in the various disciplines. Evelyn, who comes from a social sciences and humanities background and now teaches in a science faculty, suggests that language plays a big part of engaging audiences:

I'm learning that there are certain ways of saying things, a certain language or certain argument that you can put your work into where people are more receptive... You want people to be receptive and so you have to kind of guide them through what you're trying to say.

This point is also clearly articulated by Autumn who suggested that even the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) seems to be struggling with language and is considering changing its name so as to get more social support:

NAAFA is currently debating whether to take Fat out of their name. That just came up ... Sunday they had a town hall meeting about it. So, I think part of the reason they're doing that is to go more mainstream and have corporate support because people will say we agree with your mission, but we don't like this word. It turns us off. That's true and I think it's different in a class context when it's a one-off rather than an organization. But, the politics of that word and whether to use it or not is interesting.

Regardless of how they oriented themselves in the emerging field of critical fat scholarship and what language they used, all participants described having witnessed huge growth of the field. Bella articulated this changing landscape, highlighting the influential role fat studies has had on the field, “The development of the field has obviously been crucial. Only 10 or 15 years ago it was only activists, academics hadn’t come on board as much.” Rebecca is excited by where the field is going and that the growth of the field is a source of inspiration and community for many:

There’s all kinds of exciting stuff out there. And really now, this field because it’s a field where there’s a lot happening all the time, it doesn’t feel lonely anymore at all. It doesn’t.

The emergence of critical fat scholarship has been relatively swift and draws on a long history of feminism and fat activism. Many of the participants stated that feminist and poststructural theorists inspired their interest in the field. In her interview, Samantha, for example, highlighted the work of Grosz:

I’ve been very interested in the idea from Liz Grosz and other feminist theorists that knowledge is always embodied, knowledge comes from somewhere. So I’ve always been, I suppose, mindful of the way in which my own body is used in the production of particular kinds of knowledge. So, all the way through I’ve thought about fatness not just broadly in terms of men and women, but I think about how it intersects with other aspects of subjectivity.

In her interview, Wendy highlighted the work of Foucault and Bourdieu as key theorists who informed her understanding of bodies and fatness.

I was starting my grad training at a time in anthropology where this new field of

anthropology of the body was developing theoretically, so drawing on Foucault and Bourdieu, and some of the early feminist work on body and body studies. It was just exciting to think about the fact that the field that I was working in was all about health and the body on the one hand and completely disembodied in another way in that we didn't think about, I guess what I might refer to now as the experiential aspects of the embodiment, so our lived body experience. So, reading that work was really exciting for me and gave me an opportunity to reflect back on my own experience as well. I think making those kinds of connections made the work interesting to think about. I think also because some of the different areas in health that I worked in were areas where especially interviewing women, it was really clear whether they were young women, middle-aged women or older women that experience of the body was really central to one's sense of self and often a point of tension.

Participants also felt empowered by the fat acceptance movement and their fight for fat rights. As with many other fields (e.g., queer, feminist, and environmental), academic studies often followed the actual social movement (Wann, 2009). There is no doubt that the fat acceptance movement helped to propel investigation of fat in the academy. The concern for fat justice, particularly with regards to fat phobia, stigma, and discrimination, was very important to participants who passionately spoke about social justice as the ideological and theoretical grounding of their work. Lydia, for one, suggested that social justice is one of the biggest responsibilities of a post-secondary educator.

I think social justice is probably one of the most important responsibilities that post-secondary educators have. I don't think that should just stop at certain things either, and that's why a lot of what I do is about issues of power and privilege because I can talk

about sexism, or I can talk about racism, or I can talk about sizeism. And I do, to an extent, but I'm much more interested in getting them to appreciate the larger conceptual things that all of those things would fall under like oppression in general. That's probably too because of the topics I teach and how it blends itself with that.

Lydia's commitment to social justice was echoed by 23 of the participants, all of whom felt that introducing sizeism, or what some referred to as weight-based oppression, into their classes helped students to think more broadly about oppression because of how prevalent dominant obesity discourse is within society.

### **Critical Fat Scholarship: Encounters, Connections, and Community**

All participants shared experiences about how they first found, connected to, and established community with others challenging dominant obesity discourse and problematizing dominant notions of fatness.

**First encounters.** Some noted how their own childhood experiences tuned them into the idea that weight is not necessarily a marker of health. For example, Rhonda suffered from an eating disorder when she was younger and while she fit the "thin ideal," she was far from healthy growing up:

I suffered with bulimia off and on for 15 years from when I was 13-years-old until I was 28. So, that includes through my college career of studying nutrition when people asked why I got into nutrition. I was thinking about food from the moment I woke up so that just seemed like a logical thing in college... Issues around body image, body weight definitely were shaped by my passion for my critical approach to weight and the idea of thin privilege and my personal experience knowing that thin doesn't necessarily equal

healthy I think gives me a perspective that allowed my mind to be fairly open to the idea that just because you're fat doesn't make you unhealthy.

Others, like Ginette, spoke about how professional experiences gave her insights into the injustices that are enacted upon bodies:

It probably started shortly after I graduated and started my [dietetic] internship ... I began to become more and more aware of how bodies were differentially positioned in an unfair way in my profession. Then I began to think about how we were trained to position bodies in that way, with people and humans with feelings and the unfairness of it and the injustice of it. So, I became more and more aware of that injustice.

Participants also identified specific moments in their academic careers when they were first introduced to critical ideas of fatness. For many, it was reading key texts such as *Fat!So?* by Wann (1998), *The Obesity Myth* by Campos (2004), and *The Obesity Epidemic* by Gard and Wright (2005). John, for example, discussed his general discomfort with how kinesiology had latched onto obesity science as a way to justify itself, which made him interested in new perspectives:

I guess I just felt really uncomfortable with [dominant obesity discourse] and I guess reading the work of Michael Gard, Jan Wright, and John Evans really had an impact. Once Gard and Wright's book came out, I think that was it. Also to recognize this isn't just pathologizing fat people, it's also some of the evidence that we're using to do this might be problematic and not as certain as we're led to believe was compelling for me.

Jessie also spoke about how his own discomfort demonstrated the importance of the topic and the need to speak out against the harm being done:

I guess the contrarian in me was aware that something kind of interesting was happening in a kind of discursive environment. I knew that there was important stuff for researchers to do in terms of contesting that [obesity] discourse. It was very clear from the beginning that it was going to affect the children. That those kind of moral panics were going to be visited on kids.

Like John and Jessie, other participants described their growing discomfort with dominant obesity discourse and how it propelled them to learn more. As two examples, Autumn joined a fat studies listserv and Brenda joined the NAAFA.

Participants also spoke of feeling inspired by other scholars, activists, and bloggers who continue to push the field of critical fat scholarship in new directions. As Alexa articulated, It was Marilyn Wann and her stuff and actually interacting with her and Linda Bacon's work and the earlier [work of] Paul Campos, Eric Oliver and Glen Gaesser. Now, the bloggers Marianne Kirby and Lesley Kinzel and some of those types of people. That stuff played a role, and some of those are academics. The men I listed are academics and Linda is an academic. The work they did before influenced me and of course I built on top of it. But, the bloggers, to me, especially trying to understand fat acceptance and how it works, how fat prejudice has ... worked in individuals' lives, reading peoples' experiences have helped me more than anything.

Rhonda shared,

I heard Linda Bacon speak at a California Dietetic Association meeting and what she was saying about the Health at Every Size approach...It resonated with me...She spoke more broadly about bodies and how we look at our bodies. Not just the fat. But I still remember and I share with students, I share this with her, we're now friends and

colleagues, said something about: if people are making money off of us feeling bad about ourselves, and took it to something that had nothing to do with fat, but rather women's bodies. And that if we don't think our eyelashes are good enough then we'll spend money to buy mascara. I don't know why that touched me, but it did and after that I stopped wearing makeup.

Others identified numerous people who had inspired them; most frequently mentioned in the interviews were Marilyn Wann, Linda Bacon, Paul Campos, Michael Gard, and Jan Wright.

**Personal connections.** All but three of the participants stated that their professional interests in fatness and challenging dominant obesity discourse also stemmed from their own personal experiences with fatness. For most, studying fatness was both a professional and personal endeavour. For example, June shared her negative experiences with gastric bypass surgery and how reading the literature afterwards further fueled her interest in fat studies:

My interest in fat studies sort of grew out of a couple of different things. One is that about ten years ago, I had gastric bypass surgery and I got really, really sick after it. I was really struggling to sort of reconcile my experience with all of the promises that I had received... That combined with, as I started reading all the research about the experiences of women in the higher ed. environment and how when you read the literature, it's almost disgustingly in your face that no matter what the data says, all of these individual girls were being blamed for whatever they were experiencing. The only solution that anyone in any of the literature had was just lose the weight and then there won't be any more problems.

John recounted his family's struggles with weight and how that influenced him:

I grew up in a family where we did worry about weight. I can remember fairly early on my parents would go on a diet and so would we. I was also a competitive swimmer, which meant I had to squeeze into very small bathing suits. I do recall having body sensitivity issues. I don't think you'd ever call me fat when I was younger [but] I certainly worried about things. I wasn't a small lean swimmer. I had big quads even as a kid and I used to think that they were fat. [Now] I don't think they were fat, but I used to worry about it endlessly because my peers would have very small bodies. But then I think the main one would be my older brother really struggled with weight and very, very far back I can remember a lot of, sort of, family tension and whatnot around his weight and him getting bullied because of his weight.

While some participants, such as June, shared personal stories of struggles with their own weight, others such as John, shared stories of witnessing close friends and family members policing themselves and their discomfort standing witness to the harm being caused by contemporary ideas about weight and bodies; this was enough to make them critically reconsider obesity discourse. Jennifer told a story about how she has been influenced by her mother's negative experience with weight:

I think, to be honest, my awareness of the impact of weight and body shape and size comes from my mother. She is a twin and I can remember, I don't think she told me stories when I was younger, but when I went to university we would just talk about growing up in the area. She remembers vividly always being picked last, not being very physically skilled, and always being called a cow.

Evelyn articulated how having a daughter has brought newfound awareness of how young girls are so vulnerable to dominant obesity discourse and beauty ideals:

I also think that raising a kid, my daughter is four and she's already started, when she was two she said something about.... It was really horrifying and it was around being pretty and she's two years old and I'm, like, oh my god this is how it happens. This is how it's so deep how women have these body issues. I think that experience of having a daughter and knowing that I don't want her to go through what I went through or what other women go through or what our moms went through around bodies and fatness.

That's something that pushes me too now in a way I didn't expect.

Other participants shared experiences from their professional careers as clinicians, nurses and dieticians, where working with clients and patients allowed them to see firsthand the harm being caused by obesity discourse. As a dietician, Nicole talked about how she witnessed the suffering women faced with trying to lose weight:

I could see, oh my goodness, some of the women suffered so terribly, especially when the doctor would tell them to lose weight and they would be walking [for hours each day to lose weight] and eating, ... I remember one woman particularly was eating about 800 calories a day and walking an hour a day and her weight didn't budge. The doctor didn't believe her and she would be in tears in my office. It was just terrible. Just the shame and the guilt and then there, yeah, it was just a horrible thing to be doing as I think about it now. I knew that there had to be a better way, but at that point I didn't know what it was. As I said, I thought maybe if I opened up a large clothing store for women they might have been happier and healthier. So, probably that's where it started.

While they felt excitement about how far the field of critical fat scholarship had come and where it is going, six participants spoke about now wanting to shift their research focus away from fatness. They felt confident about their role in helping to establish the field and now

wanted to explore other academic interests. Yet, as articulated by Elizabeth, some found themselves getting drawn back into research in the field because of its relevance to people's lives:

I think having a baby has been an interesting, yet another interesting point of reflection on this issue and thinking about how I treat myself, how people talk about babies and narrate their bodies. It's funny because I keep thinking I'm getting away from this topic, but it is true that it sucks you back in.

**Establishing community.** As a result of the growth in the field of critical fat scholarship, participants in this study felt a growing sense of community. Although there are certainly differences within the field, participants expressed the importance of establishing a community of scholarship focused on fatness. Based on her own experiences, Sharon stated that community can be established with even just one other person:

We just started realizing together this passion and this interest and have been researching together ever since. I think that was a huge piece, just having somebody else to bounce ideas off of and to discuss topics with. I guess someone who I felt very safe with, and I just felt like the two of us could tackle the rest of the department together. We could help others in their paradigm shift if we stuck together. And just not being alone.

Just as Sharon gained strength from not being the only one offering a critical perspective on fatness, Alexa too felt that establishing community is key to the success of the field given the constant resistance critical fat scholars face in working to disrupt obesity discourse in the academy:

I believe in community. I believe the only way that we can survive this stuff is with community. In fact, that's one of the quotes I use of bell hooks, to live in the margin requires "a community of resistance".

Ginette also spoke about the integral role community played in her experiences with tenure when she faced what she called "the darker" side of the academy:

So, that is an important aspect of the story, the darker, the shadow story is the reality of taking risks in the academy. I was pretty lucky that I had support. I have incredibly supportive colleagues outside of my department and an incredibly supportive union who stood beside me and fought hard and defended me against a lot of pretty bad things.

### **Sites of Fat Resistance: Students and Institutions Support Dominant Obesity Discourse**

While five participants explicitly stated that the resistance they encountered within the academy was minimal, the remainder of them shared experiences of significant resistance and articulated how it had altered their academic journey. Two main sites of resistance were identified, namely, student resistance and institutional resistance.

**Student resistance.** Many participants illustrated how divisive an issue fat can be in the classroom. Sarah, for instance, went so far as to talk about the different "camps" in their classes, with some students intrigued and excited by the critical approach taken and others who found it hard to get past obesity discourse:

There's a whole range. There are always people who are, like, "Yes, this is what I've been waiting for"...They get very excited about it. Then there are the ones who sit there and you watch them. They're mulling it over and you can tell there's a dissonance there. Then there are the ones who stand up and say, "No, this can't be right. This is wrong."

June shared how her students would not even acknowledge weight-based oppression, making it hard to teach:

I think for me the big challenge was I wanted to talk about oppression and my students were, like, “What are you talking about? There’s no such thing. We don’t see this. Does that really happen? Someone’s making that up.” For example, we looked at some of the websites about fat women and childbirth.... They were, like, “All these people must be lying. No doctor would ever do that.”

Some talked about how they could easily see what they perceived to be resistance in the body language of their students. Alexa said,

When we talked about medical rhetoric in general, they were interested. They talked about all of these ideas of health and all that kind of thing. The minute that fat came up and I suggested that fat wasn’t bad, you could see them sit back. You could see their arms crossed and you could see that their body language was very much, very resistant.

Some of the participants talked about how student assignments were also a place where students expressed their discomfort with the subject matter. For example, Jennifer suggested that she would never use journals again because of how they became a vehicle to vent their anti-fat sentiments and frustrations with the class. Kuna, on the other hand, suggested that for precisely that reason, journals are an important vehicle to allow students to express themselves and struggle with their resistance. She felt that it helped the students “get out” some of the oppressive comments and thoughts, which is an important part of the learning process:

I showed a film clip and they were responding to the film clip... The new title is *Being Big*, but there’s like a ten-minute trailer and I showed that... [A student] wrote, “I find fat people to be disgusting and I’m only taking this class because I need a four credit

elective to graduate.” A guy in that class, in response to a site for bariatric surgery [which he reviewed for an assignment]... wrote that he doesn’t feel sorry if people die during bariatric surgery; he doesn’t feel sorry if they’re stupid enough to do it.

Participants also noted how students from different disciplines react to course content that challenges obesity discourse. Bella suggested that students in women’s studies tend to be more open to critical approaches to fat:

I get a really receptive bunch. They’re almost all women’s studies majors, people who are taking a lot of women’s studies classes for that seminar that you have to fill this for.... They were, I would say, most uniformly accepting.

In contrast, participants in the health-related disciplines, such as medicine, nursing, psychology, and kinesiology, suggested that often the biomedical narratives about “obesity” are stronger in these disciplines and therefore students tend to resist more. As Rebecca suggested, obesity is often positioned as “the biggest problem facing the world, above war, inequality, and poverty,” and students have had a limited exposure to critical perspectives. As someone who teaches students from various disciplines, Wendy articulates the differences she sees:

What I would say is in the Women’s Studies classes where students are already from Intro onwards developing a kind of critical reflective approach to media, to advertising, to ideas about gender and embodiment...[and can] really articulate in a very critical and thoughtful fashion the limitations of media and can deconstruct that and challenge it in ways that’s quite powerful... Typically the [students] that have come in from fields like kinesiology have a very strong sense of lifestyle determinants as the imperative defining health. So, their response to a critical social perspective is to say yes BUT that person is making poor choices or how do we direct things in a way that is going to get that person

to diet, to get out and exercise more. So, it's really an individualistic and what I might think of as a very reductionistic approach to thinking about weight and weightism.

Participants also talked about how maturity plays a role, and that their older students with more life experience have generally been more open to critical perspectives, particularly in graduate degrees.

While participants shared stories of facing student resistance in the classroom and the different possible reasons for that, such as age of the students and their life experiences, fewer spoke about the actual outcomes of such resistance. Some suggested that resistance is productive and an important part of learning, whereas others felt that it was disruptive in the classroom and can leave students feeling very confused and conflicted, particularly when they are constantly hearing different perspectives.

**Institutional resistance.** By far the most common form of resistance experienced by the participants is what I call institutional resistance. All participants shared experiences of facing both overt and covert weight-based oppression within the academy. Samantha captured it well when she said, "Universities can be harsh, unforgiving kinds of places, I think, if you're in any way different."

Many participants expressed how body privilege is consistently and covertly enacted on the bodies of students, staff, and faculty within the academy. For example, Alexa spoke about how furniture at her university reinforces obesity discourse:

There's a lot of covert, like I said, there's a lot of things associated with stigma. There are places that I can't fit into a chair or barely. That's not true, I almost always fit, but sometimes it's barely, like going to the Dean's office and talking to him and the chairs

in his office I barely fit into. So, there's a lot of underlying or covert *just simply* not making room for me.

Kuna talked about fat phobic health insurance policies at her university that enforce BMI and weight circumference measurements, which serve to reinforce dominant obesity discourse:

We have to report our waist circumference and our weight and if we refuse to report them, we pay higher premiums. If your BMI or weight circumference designates you as unhealthy, then you have to participate in Weight Watchers or in some other way demonstrating that you are trying to lose weight.

Samantha talked about how, after losing weight, she had the sense of having more credibility among her administrative colleagues:

I do feel that when I go to meetings with the Vice-Chancellor and senior executive, senior members of the university, I do feel that I am, in a sense, I'm taken more seriously as someone who is now a much slimmer, lighter person. I always felt like the fat woman, and again, there's nothing you can put your finger on because nobody is going to say you're a fat woman, we're not really listening to you. But, you do feel it.

While Alexa, Kuna, and Samantha provided examples of covert resistance, other participants identified many examples of overt resistance. For example, Jessie shared experiences about how he's had people discredit him publicly during presentations:

There was once where somebody stood up in the middle of a presentation and turned their back on me and said to the audience, of which there were quite a few, that they shouldn't listen to anything I should say... [On another occasion] there was one guy who was really head in the sand about this stuff, just exploded towards the end of the question time and basically said out loud to everybody that my work was a disgrace and

I wasn't taking the subject area seriously and that people like him were trying to make the world a better place and basically I was undoing all of their good work.

Brenda shared an experience where someone called her department chair after a conference to suggest that her work was "misinformation":

I was at a conference where a nutritionist from UC Davis was... advocating bariatric surgery and I was advocating Health at Every Size (HAES). So, she actually called up my department chair and told him I was spreading misinformation and he told her that he thought it was just a difference in style and philosophy. He called me in to tell me this and he said it's not going to affect anything in your performance review or anything. I don't actually believe it did, but I was really pissed at her.

June shared a similar experience with a senior faculty member who told her that what she was doing was invalid:

We started talking about my fat studies work and she said, "You can't put this on your CV. Nobody will take you seriously." I said, "Well, that's what I do. That's the framework I come from and that's sort of what guides my work. What would you recommend that I use?" She responded by saying, "Well, we call that monstrous bodies or you have to frame it as disability studies" and she had a couple of other suggestions. So, I was, like, "So, you're just basically saying the whole field is invalid and therefore I would never be taken seriously."

Some participants also talked about having to face challenges with top-down politics and funding opportunities. Jessie speaks about both challenges in the following statement:

There have been certain opportunities that have been denied to me or not entertained because of the position I have taken. There was an honorary position that was discussed

and recommended and knocked down. I think, as far as funding goes, I can't prove it, but... if you're not declaring war on obesity then you really do narrow down the kind of areas that you can get funding from.

Participants also talked about the resistance they have faced in publishing. As Wendy expressed, "Where I have encountered [resistance] is in the arena of publishing and having to be careful about the journals that you're submitting things to." Samantha shared a particularly horrifying experience related to publishing:

Even though I didn't know who the reviewers were, but they had identified who I was because it was autobiographical I suppose. They wrote in their feedback, they wrote things like, "[She] should put this paper back in the drawer for a few years until she gains the weight again." Wow. When you open yourself up to putting in the personal, I guess you sometimes get personal back in a way that you don't want or anticipate.

As well, four participants specifically spoke of their reduced job marketability due to their work challenging dominant obesity discourse. For example, Elizabeth suggested that both she and her doctoral supervisor feel that she does not have a full-time position yet because her dissertation topic related to fat:

It's a really difficult job market right now so it's really hard to know. I talked about this with my dissertation advisor and she feels, yes, that [my fat studies topic] has impacted my job marketability. I think that she may be right. Her theory is that in some topics that are social justice issues it's very clear what side to be on. So, if we teach about racism or government practices that were normative around race, Aboriginality, around gender, people clearly know that's wrong. But because the discourse on weight is so much on the side of the obesity epidemic in general, because the body is very uncomfortable, it's

a very uncomfortable topic to bring into the classroom. She feels that this has perhaps resulted in some challenges for me in getting permanent work.

Throughout the interviews, participants talked about needing to be careful how they framed fat within the academy, particularly those who were in science-based faculties. Many felt a tension between wanting to be critical and also needing to fit into university agendas that promote neoliberal ideologies, such as dominant obesity discourse. Sophie, for example, stated,

I'm quite vocal about the bullying that happens around obesity. I'm quite vocal about that. Or the bullying that happens around LGBT issues. I name that. So, I'm not sure why I can't regularly name critical weight studies or my fat politics. I don't know what's up with that, to be blatantly honest. I think it's because I too am in a culture that I'm worried about how people are going to respond to it. Or if I'm going to offend this colleague that has a research project on obesity, but I don't think she worries about offending me in terms feminism and aging, I don't even think she's aware of it, to be honest.

John compared discussing his critical fat scholarship to “coming out of the closet”:

I think you come out of the closet as somebody who is critical of the obesity epidemic. In the health field, in particular, you have to do that very carefully and there are certain things that you can say that are accepted. I think the more critical it is between the relationship between the social determinants of health and obesity, the environmental critique, I think those things are fairly okay. But, to actually critique the science itself, to actually move, I often refrain from doing that because I know that I'm in an audience that will not be receptive to that.

In discussions of student and institutional resistance, five participants also spoke about potential sites of counter-resistance. For example, Bella suggests that while other social justice issues, such as gender, race, and class have become more common to students, critical fat scholarship is so new and provocative that it immediately challenges students to think differently:

I think, just in terms of where we are in history about talking about this topic, just raising it, it's like shooting fish in a barrel now. Just raising it and talking about it is to teach them something. Nobody's ever talked to them this way before. It might be like teaching LGBTQ studies twenty or thirty years ago or something like that.

Rebecca shared an experience she had with a colleague who, to her surprise, valued her perspective.

I remember once the Chief Medical Officer sent me a medical student to talk to me about obesity and I said to my colleague, "You know, if I talk to him, you know what I will talk about. It won't be what you want." And he said, "No, I want him to get it." So, slowly it's happening. There's still a lot of resistance. I think most of them have the dominant approach, but I think it's slowly changing.

Overall, participants expressed a sense of hope for the future and felt that the work that they were doing within the academy had deep purpose and meaning. As Lydia stated, "As more and more every day fat people are less willing to be treated like second class citizens because of their weight, then hopefully it will become something that's a regular part of the discourse."

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This paper is grounded in the academic experiences of scholars known for their work that challenges dominant obesity discourse and dominant ideas of fatness. The interviews

focused on their emerging nuanced perspectives of the field, their personal interests and connections to the field, and their struggles against student and institutional resistance. In support of existing literature, it is clear that weight-based oppression in post-secondary institutions remains a significant social justice issue (Brown, 2012) that is resisted by students (Guthman, 2009) and institutions (Fisanick, 2006, 2007). But these issues are part of the story, not the whole story.

Resistance is sometimes understood as a manifestation of oppositional or anti-school behaviours such as “an unwillingness to consider,” or a “denial or recalcitrance...to learning” (Moore, 1997, p. 128). This has been challenged and resistance is increasingly being seen as a form of human agency (Zine, 2010). For example, student resistance can stem from students being pushed too quickly towards thinking critically and students being ill-prepared to cope with the emotions that arise from alternative praxis (Breunig, 2006). By reframing resistance as a form of agency and a natural part of the learning process, particularly when encountering new and critical perspectives, scholars can begin to focus on the process and consider that students are indeed engaging with the content, perhaps just in a different way than an instructor had initially hoped or intended (Davis, 1992).

All participants shared experiences about some level of student or institutional resistance, and approximately 80% reported that significant resistance has actually altered their career paths. Participants offered insights into how higher education reinforces dominant obesity discourse through such things as teaching, tenure, funding, publishing, supervising, and positionality (i.e., how comfortable they feel “coming out” with their theoretical, ideological, and pedagogical perspectives). Despite this oppression and resistance, participants also offered insights into why they continue to pursue critical fat scholarship. Some participants reported

that their interest in the field stems from their own personal experiences with weight, others talked more broadly about being witness to and feeling discomforted by obesity discourse and the negative consequences of fat oppression. Participants also talked about the growth in the field and how that and the growing sense of community fuel their continued interest.

I will not attempt to generalize these findings to all scholars working in the field of critical fat scholarship, nor will I suggest these data represent all faculty members' experiences challenging obesity discourse and dominant notions of fatness. However, readers may find the findings evocative of their own experiences and contexts, and thus may be able to identify ways in which they do generalize more broadly. Nonetheless, I do think that the findings offer two important contributions to higher education and diversity literatures.

First, participants demonstrated the nuanced perspectives emerging in the field of critical fat scholarship, something that has also been recently identified within the literature (Lupton, 2013). While some scholars have problematized the science, morality, and politics of the "obesity" epidemic (Campos, 2004; Campos et al., 2006; Flegal, Kit, Orphana, & Graubard, 2013; Monaghan, 2005; Oliver, 2006; Saguy & Almeling, 2008), others have focused on fat subjectivity, embodiment, and acceptance through research on the lived experiences of fatness (Brown, 2012; Colls, 2004; 2006; Hopkins, 2012; Kwan, 2010; Norman, Rail, & Jette, 2014; Scott-Dixon, 2008; Sykes & McPhail, 2007). The focus on lived experience has brought attention to the lives of those targeted by anti-obesity initiatives and weight loss regimes (Evans & Colls, 2009; Throsby, 2007; Wright & Harwood, 2009) and the experiences of fat activists (Cooper, 1998; Ellison, 2007, 2013; McKinley, 2004; Wann, 1998).

While different foci, perspectives, and approaches in the field may create certain tensions (Cooper, 2010), the participants in this study suggest that it also has profound positive

impacts. Their sense of connection, purpose, and community proposes that such tensions may be productive and demonstrates how the field is growing in new and interesting ways that speak to its interdisciplinarity and relevancy in today's culture. This mirrors Monaghan et al.'s (2013) conclusion that critical fat scholars are overwhelmingly "united in their refusal to simply reproduce/legitimate/endorse biomedical narratives" (p. 251). This common purpose gives the participants hope in their continued efforts in promoting fat-inclusivity in the academy and in responding to student and institutional resistance.

Second, this study illustrates how scholars who challenge obesity discourse and dominant notions of fatness face significant resistance, both inside and outside the classroom. This has not only been shown to affect their careers, but it may affect the emerging field of critical fat scholarship given the potential for fatigue from facing resistance on multiple fronts. While critical fat scholarship has provided important critiques that have led to new understandings of fatness, more scholarship is needed in higher education that specifically highlights ways to learn, teach, work, and create spaces that embrace *every body*. As Wann (2009) argues, "[u]ntil the fat studies bookshelf is longer than the diet book shelf... There is more than enough fat studies work for all of us to do: connections to make, freedom to envision, liberation to embody, and implications to comprehend" (p.xxii).

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To be submitted to *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*

CHAPTER SIX—TOWARD A FAT PEDAGOGY: A STUDY OF PEDAGOGICAL  
APPROACHES AIMED AT CHALLENGING OBESITY DISCOURSE IN POST-  
SECONDARY EDUCATION

Over the last fifteen years, a growing body of literature has challenged dominant obesity discourse and advocated for fat acceptance. Scholars in this field have found that discourses that link fat with personal irresponsibility and lack of willpower have led to significant increases in weight bias within social institutions, including schools and universities. Some critical fat scholars have articulated the need for more research on effective pedagogical strategies to address weight-based oppression in the classroom. Results from interviews conducted with twenty-six faculty members who challenge obesity discourse and dominant notions of fat in university classrooms highlight pedagogical strategies they have found to be most effective in addressing fatness in the classroom. Building on insights from critical pedagogy, this paper offers insights into an emerging fat pedagogy.

***Keywords:*** *Pedagogy; Instructional Strategies; Fat Studies; Obesity Discourse; Higher Education*

### **Introduction**

Media headlines blare “Big Fat Crisis” (Hutson, 2014) and “Obesity Epidemic Becomes Worldwide Phenomenon” (Millner, 2014), reflecting and further fueling societal concerns about a supposed global “obesity” epidemic (World Health Organization, 1998). Some scholars

challenge these hyperbolic claims, and obesity discourse in general, and suggest that it is driven by a moral panic, the false linking of fatness with personal irresponsibility, laziness, and lack of willpower, and primarily profits the weight loss industry (Campos, 2004; Demello, 2013). In fact, a significant body of research has highlighted that many overweight people do not suffer from poor health or incur more health care costs; rather, it is only at extreme ends of the Body Mass Index spectrum that serious health problems predominantly occur (see Durazo-Arvizu, McGee, Cooper, Liao, & Luke, 1998; Flegal, Graubord, Williamson, & Gail, 2005).

An emerging body of evidence challenges obesity discourse (Gard, 2011; Gard & Wright, 2005). Yet, fat panic continues to flourish and blaming and shaming narratives abound (e.g. Russell, Cameron, Socha, & McNinch, 2013). Pop culture media commonly uses photos of what Cooper (2007) calls the “headless fatties,” that is, depictions of headless fat people that serve to reinforce notions of the fat body as non-human. She writes, “the body becomes symbolic: we are there but we have no voice, not even a mouth in a head, no brain, no thoughts or opinions. Instead we are reduced and dehumanized as symbols of cultural fear” (para 3). Such depictions, alongside the digitally modified photos that trim people in magazines, on television, and in the movies, serve to inform readers about normative bodies; they privilege and idealize thin bodies and mock the failed and “grotesque” fat body. Bordo (1993) suggests that such visual texts serve as pedagogical tools that teach media consumers about their bodies and the bodies of others. Significantly, she argues they are “training our perception in what’s a defect and what is normal” (p. xviii).

A growing number of educators address critical issues of fat in their classes, yet there remains little research that examines pedagogical approaches to problematizing dominant obesity discourse. What does exist, for the most part, relies on anecdotal evidence (Boling,

2011; Escalera, 2009; Guthman, 2009; Koppelman, 2009; Watkins & Doyle-Hugmeyer, 2013). While some writing has explored ideas that could inform a fat pedagogy more generally (e.g., Cameron et al., 2014; Fullbrook, 2012; Sykes, 2011), the main focus has been on specific pedagogical strategies for reducing anti-fat attitudes (e.g., Daníelsdóttir, O'Brien, & Ciao, 2010; Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Watkins, Farrell, and Doyle-Hugmeyer (2012) call for more research in this area that is broader in scope and based in a range of perspectives. This paper, then, outlines the pedagogical approaches of post-secondary faculty members known for problematizing dominant notions of fatness, including their choice of course topics, readings, assignments, and activities, and then situates the findings within educational research, specifically critical pedagogy.

### **Literature Review**

Within public health discourses, “obesity” is conceptualized as a choice, a personal responsibility, and a medicalized illness in need of treatment (Lupton, 2013). It is no surprise, then, that we live in a culture of fat hate and fat phobia (Cooper, 1998). Dominant obesity discourse has triggered what Daghofer (2013) calls a “shadow epidemic” (p. 6) whereby as ‘obesity’ concerns have escalated so have anti-fat attitudes leading to increasing weight bias and discrimination. This trend is evident within educational research where scholars draw attention to increasing rates of weight-based oppression, often expressed as fat phobia and fat bullying (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). For example, school policies and curriculum focus on very limited notions of health and as a result are having potentially damaging consequences for young people’s developing sense of self (Evans, Rich, Davies, & Allwood, 2008; Quennerstedt, Burrows, & Maivorsdotter, 2010; Rice, 2007).

Much of the educational research has focused on the prevalence and impact of weight bias in K-12 school contexts. For example, teachers tend to have significant weight bias and report lower perceptions and expectations of fat students compared to “normal” weight youth (Greenleaf & Weiller, 2005; Peters & Jones, 2010). Curriculum acts as a site that reinforces dominant obesity discourse and marginalizes fat bodies (Azzarito, 2007; Gard, 2008). And lastly, Evans et al. (2008) suggest that schools are “totally pedagogised micro-societies...driven by a culture of individualism, one of whose manipulating mantras is ‘obesity discourse’” (p. 6).

In post-secondary contexts, weight bias has been found to be significant among university students in the fields of medicine (Puhl & Heuer, 2009), nursing, psychology (Waller, Lampman, & Lupfer-Johnson, 2012), nutrition (Puhl, Wharton, & Heuer, 2009), physical education and kinesiology (Greenleaf, Martin, & Rhea, 2008; O’Brien, Hunter, & Banks, 2007), and outdoor and environmental education (Russell et al., 2013). Faculty members are also not immune to weight bias; as an especially egregious example, Geoffrey Miller, an evolutionary psychology, tweeted, “Dear obese PhD applicants: If you don’t have the willpower to stop eating carbs, you won’t have the willpower to do a dissertation. #truth” (Kingkade, 2013). Miller’s tweet caused far-reaching outrage, motivating his university to conduct size acceptance and diversity training throughout the university (Wentworth, 2013). Miller’s is a recent example of how weight can have a direct impact on post-secondary educational experiences, acceptances and achievement.

While research on weight bias continues to grow, few studies have examined pedagogical strategies for addressing dominant obesity discourse. For the most part, scholars have focused on specific instructional strategies aimed at reducing anti-fat attitudes in post-secondary classrooms (Dánielsdóttir et al., 2010; Puhl & Heuer, 2009) and anecdotal experiences of teaching critical

approaches to fatness (Boling, 2011; Fisanick, 2006, 2007; Guthman, 2009; Tirosh, 2006).

Additionally, five resources offer some practical pedagogical strategies to challenging dominant notions of obesity and fat, namely: The Rudd Center for Food Policy website ([yaleruddcenter.org](http://yaleruddcenter.org)), the Teaching Tolerance website ([tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org)), the Health-At-Every-Size curriculum resource (Clifford, 2013), *Am I Fat? Helping Young Children Accept Differences in Body Size* (Ikeda & Naworski, 1992), and Hopkin's (2011) scholarly "Teaching and Learning Guide for: Critical Geographies of Body Size." There clearly is a need for more research in this area and for sharing of resources to aid educators in having "critical discussions and lessons with students about bodies in an attempt to avoid or at least mitigate the detrimental impacts of living in a fat-hating society that pathologizes fatness and vilifies fat bodies" (Fullbrook, 2012, p. 68).

### **Research Participants and Design**

This research was part of a larger doctoral study on the academic experiences, philosophical approaches, and pedagogical practices of faculty in post-secondary institutions who take critical approaches to addressing obesity discourse and fatness in the classroom<sup>1</sup>. Participants who have taught full courses, class units, or had infused critical issues of fatness in their classes were recruited through professional networks, university websites, and academic journals, and snowball sampling. In total, 26 faculty members (23 females, three males) from five countries around the world and from a diverse range of science and social science, and humanities disciplines participated in the study. Their teaching experience ranged from one to 30 years. Seven had taught full courses related to critical fat scholarship, two taught full units focused on critical fat scholarship, and 16 infused critical fat scholarship into their classes.

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<sup>1</sup> Within this larger field of critical fat scholarship there are a number of subfields, such as critical obesity research (Colls & Evans, 2009), critical weight studies (Monaghan, Hollands, & Pritchard, 2010), critical geographies of body size (Hopkins, 2008), and fat studies (Cooper, 2010). These subfields represent different perspectives, paradigms, and ideologies. This study included participants from all of these various subfields.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and teaching materials (course syllabi, PowerPoint files, lecture notes, and assignment outlines) between June and August, 2013. Interviews were typically between one to two hours in duration, audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, with transcriptions verified by the participants. All of the participants were assigned pseudonyms for purposes of anonymity. Data were analyzed using thematic analysis and Lichtman's (2010) three C's approach (codes, categories, and concepts) and six-step process (initial coding, revisiting coding, developing categories, modifying categories, revisiting categories, moving from categories to concepts) with the aid of ATLAS.ti 7.0.

While I draw upon 446 pages of interview transcripts and 94 course materials (1890 pages) for the analysis, I predominantly use quotations from the interviews to support the interpretation of data in order to protect the identity of the participants; references to course materials could easily make participants identifiable given the public nature of course materials. Also, given that many of the participants are well known scholars in their fields, it was important that I not associate demographics with interview quotations and teaching materials for reasons of confidentiality.

### **Findings**

This section highlights the four main themes identified by the participants in this study: framing, layering, connecting, and teaching. These are not meant as recipes for fat pedagogy, but instead should be seen as contributions to emerging ideas about what fat pedagogy could include. While these findings employ the language used by the participants, some of these themes could also be identified as instructional scaffolding, a term used in educational literature to refer to the skillful structuring of the learning environments to support students in developing new skills and abilities (Engin, 2014).

### **Framing: Setting the Context**

All but one participant spoke about the need to pay attention to how they framed their courses or lectures that related to challenging dominant obesity discourse and dominant notions of fat. They spoke about creating an environment that built trust and respect from the very first day, where students could feel socially, emotionally, and physically safe enough to share their voices. Kuna talked about how she uses her first class to set the tone for the course:

I do a talk, I learned this from my Women's Studies colleagues, at the beginning of the class about a respectful classroom environment and to consider that the people sitting around you may be characterized by the things we're talking about, like differences in sexual orientation, or physical ability, or abuse histories and that kind of thing. So, it's about creating an atmosphere where everybody is allowed to speak to an issue. It's not about anybody in particular.

While wanting to create an atmosphere where everybody might feel empowered to speak to an issue, it was also recognized that doing so is hardly straightforward. Andrea articulated this well when she said, "I want it to be a place where we can talk and think and not be afraid to ask a question, but at the same time, not be offensive, yeah, not be offensive and sometimes that can get tricky too." A number of participants articulated how challenging it is to balance the desire to make students feel comfortable to speak openly while needing to moderate potentially harmful and oppressive comments. To aid in doing so, three participants used specific guidelines in their course syllabi, such as a list of statements that were meant to help create a respectful classroom atmosphere. For example, Lydia highlighted how she has borrowed "Assumptions for a Feminist Classroom" from Women's Studies colleagues and Brenda highlighted how she has used "The Tenets of Size Acceptance" in her courses. While

using the syllabus to help guide the tone of the course has potential, Autumn found it most effective to explicitly warn students about the discomfort that would inevitably be created within the class:

We're going to get really uncomfortable but we're going to get through it and we'll be fine. But just know that if we're not uncomfortable at some point, I'm probably not doing my job right. So, we'll be uncomfortable and we'll get through it.

The importance of framing also emerged in discussions about course objectives and resources. Participants talked about planning for the course and how they had thought about wanting to get students to think more broadly, become better critical thinkers, question their assumptions, be engaged citizens of the world, and be more aware of the complexity in life. These broad goals, which echo common approaches in critical pedagogy and social justice education and are not specific to fat pedagogy per se, helped to guide their planning for the course and the development of the course syllabus.

Evidence of framing was also present in the teaching materials. Out of eleven course syllabi that were submitted for this study, all had objectives related to social justice and raising awareness about power, privilege, and prejudice. Within these syllabi, then, it was clear that a social justice lens provided a framework for their teaching. Participants suggested that while many social sciences and humanities students had been exposed to critical ideas around racism, classism, sexism, and ableism, many had never heard of sizeism and so it offered a very real, relevant, and contemporary issue to get students to think differently. For students in disciplines heavily influenced by the sciences, addressing sizeism provided a very real way to begin to think differently about the dominant health discourses to which they are commonly exposed.

Participants also articulated that bodies particularly mattered in fat pedagogy. As suggested by Nicole, bodies were an important part of the pedagogy because body size is so visible and personal in the context of dominant obesity discourse. “No one can talk about this without getting engaged themselves, right? We all have bodies. We all have anxieties about our bodies. We have fears and we all have desires about our bodies.” But there were differences, however, in how participants chose to frame their bodies within the context of the classroom. Thirteen participants explicitly talked about putting their own weight on the table and explicitly addressing their own body size. For example, Autumn, who self-identified as fat, suggested that in fact she couldn’t *not* talk about her weight:

I think if I tried to make that distance when talking about fatness, it would be false.

People can see that I’m fat. I’m not slightly fat. I could just say this is the research and it’s not anything on my experience, but I would be lying. If I were a thin person, maybe I could pull that off.

But even participants who self-identified as thin suggested that it is important to address weight and thin privilege. Rhonda, for example, said,

I walk in and I talk about the stuff with thin privilege. I make no mistake about that and I bring that up. I bring up things like our cognitive dissonance and how it can be uncomfortable. I bring up that I come to this knowing that privilege. I want the thin students to see the privilege they have.

Five participants, predominantly those in nutrition-related fields, expressed a need to be careful with disclosure about their own experiences given the prevalence of body dissatisfaction in the university student population. For example, Kuna said,

I self-disclose and I imagine the people you talk to vary on this. I self-disclose but in a way that I have learned as a clinician. You only do it to an extent that it is a learning experience and helpful therapeutically. I'm not up there crying "poor me" and "help me with my body image issues."

Bella, for one, suggested that she was concerned that too much "naval gazing" might make body dissatisfaction worse for some students:

College students can be really self-focused...[and] the topic is obviously so much about the body, but I'm trying to get them to see it as social and political issue. I don't want them talking about, "Oh, I used to be fat and then I lost a bunch of weight." I don't want that kind of stuff. I mean if somebody starts talking like that in class, I don't shut it down, but I don't encourage it... it's hurtful for some of them and I'm not sure that they're really learning anything.

Andrea articulated a similar concern. She shared that, at the beginning of the course:

I do talk about the fact that I suspect that much of this reading for people could really be triggers for eating disorders because there's so much discussion about the body. I think that's important for us to lay out, and I do always talk about that at the beginning of the class.

In general, then, participants paid close attention to how they framed their courses with regards to atmosphere, boundaries, course objectives, and their bodies and their students' bodies. This intentional and strategic frontloading of the course was instrumental to the participants' sense of success in developing a fat pedagogy.

### **Layering: Strategic Starting Points and Political Maneuvering**

The second theme of pedagogical importance is what Autumn called a “layering” approach, described by Ginette as starting off cautiously, carefully moving forward, and then becoming more direct over time. The main idea behind Autumn and Ginette’s idea is the need to provide intentional guidance with regards to language, information, and classroom activities that support student (un)learning of dominant obesity discourse. In other words, participants talked about purposefully starting their classes in ways that helped students to look inward (examining such things as personal beliefs, attitudes, and biases, etc.) and then building outward from there. As Jessie said, “my job is to hook them into the things that they already think and then kind of waltz them around in a particular direction and get them talking and get them kind of reacting.”

While, for some, this can be a frustratingly slow approach, Sharon suggested that she finds it useful to think about her own experiences and to remember that her criticalness didn’t happen overnight.

The biggest thing is to remind myself that my journey did not happen overnight.

Reminding myself that I was there too is probably the most useful thing when I start to get frustrated and reminding myself that we all have our own pair of lenses from our experiences as children.

Kuna argues that a fat pedagogy needs to recognize the developmental nature of individual change and that students may be at various stages in this process. She articulates this to her students: “I try to reinforce how far along they are already with their body acceptance.” Sarah described her layering approach as requiring her to be “a little bit of a chameleon” given her need to change depending on the different contexts she finds herself in:

I will utilize whatever tools I can... I use different language depending on the environment that I happen to be in. So, in an academic environment, I can talk discourse all day long. When I'm meeting with the people in the Department of Health or Department of Education, then you have to change it up a little bit, recognizing that people don't necessarily understand the language. So I try to do it in a respectful way in terms of recognizing where they're coming from, recognizing the type of stress and pressure they have to develop certain policies and certain procedures, and try and come at it from that angle.

Similarly, Evelyn suggested that it may be too great a leap to delve right into fat theory in disciplines more entrenched in biomedical, scientific epistemologies where there has been little engagement with critical theory:

It's more about critiquing the health perspectives, critiquing the science, using the science to appeal to people's medical sensibilities in order to allow them to start questioning their perspectives. While I think that fat theory is really important and useful, I don't know if it always works in audiences where people really haven't taken a lot of theory.

Participants also suggested that layering requires an awareness of language, context, and discourse. For example, John, who is situated in a science discipline, said he has to be very careful with how he positions his work: "I'm very careful because I think it's a quick way to lose credibility in our field to say that there absolutely is no obesity epidemic." While more participants from the science disciplines articulated a need to take a layering approach, presumably because of how embedded dominant obesity discourse is within health discourse, some participants from social sciences and humanities disciplines argued that layering is

necessary depending on where students or audiences are at. For example, Jessie suggested that, in some instances, it is important to start within the biomedical perspective.

I think you would have to deal with the science because it speaks to some people. I do know that a pedagogically skillful deployment of statistics and epidemiological research can help students to turn a few light bulbs on.

Autumn suggested, in the end, that it just really depends on the audience. As she said, sometimes “you just have to start at ground zero.”

Participants also shared how going too hard too fast only resulted in a lot of resistance and loss of instructor credibility if students felt like they were being preached at. When discussing the need to start where students are at, many of the participants gauged and engaged students’ assumptions, knowledges, and ideas about fat. For example, Samantha found that determining what students already knew or perceived was where she needed to begin to minimize resistance:

I kind of strip some of the threat out of it. I don’t think that the students necessarily therefore perceive me coming in as a fat activist for example necessarily championing the rights of fat people. Of course I am kind of in a sense championing the rights of fat people, but I’m coming at it a little bit differently I suppose that’s where I think you could end up with a bit of a backlash. I don’t want that because I want all the students to stay in the classroom and not stand up and stage some walk-out like they did the first year. If they’re there and they’re kind of open to the learning, I think that’s a much better way to go.

### **Connecting: Introducing Students to Different Theories and Perspectives**

A third theme identified by participants focused on ways they made the content meaningful and relevant to students by using various theories, lenses, perspectives, accounts, and frameworks about how we have come to understand fat. For example, Jennifer said that she found going through the different “problem frameworks” of obesity was a useful approach, beginning with obesity as “medical problem”:

The kind of framework I have for that class was definitely thinking about the four kind of different ways in which obesity was problematized: as a medical problem, as a food environment problem, as a moral problem (as with the personal responsibility arguments), and as not a problem at all with fat acceptance and fat activism.

Andrea has used an activity where she has students brainstorm all the things they think they know about fat:

[W]e cover on the board all things we know about fat. How fat is very dangerous. We have an obesity epidemic that’s hurting all Americans. We are exporting that problem internationally, and all of these common sense things that the students already know.

They can really talk in detail about the health risks of fat. I mean, they know a lot.

Sophie used a slightly different activity to find ways to encourage students to locate both themselves and their disciplines within broader debates:

I try to get students questioning why they hold particular views. I try to get them thinking about the complexity of people's lives and how it has positioned them as being obese, and why in society we have come to have such a narrow range about what a normal body shape should be and why weight even factors into notions of health. I try to use student examples in ways that allow them to move past the barriers that they erect.

The most common strategy used by participants to connect students to the material, however, was real people's stories as told through having guest speakers visit class, sharing their own personal experiences, and/or circulating narratives found in books, online, and in the newspaper. For twenty participants, storytelling served as the vehicle to make their classes and the content more personal, meaningful, and relevant. From these participants' point of view, such stories helped the content come to life for students. Sarah stated that stories spoke louder than statistics and that when she shared participants' stories from her research, it drew students in and often changed their perspectives. Similarly, Jessica asserted that, "I think anything that can bring the human side to some of the research and the discourse is really powerful for the students." Alexa also shared how their students' perceptions changed when they used stories about the lived experiences of fat people:

[The students] were very skeptical until I started talking about the people. I started talking about the experiences of the fat kid running down the street and having a shake thrown at him. The person who had a doctor tell them, "Just don't eat." Things like this and then they started connecting. So, I think the numbers, it certainly makes us think when we do the numbers thing... But, I really do think in reality it's an illusion.

While Sarah, Jessica, and Alexa found that using peoples' stories helped change students' perceptions, others talked about the power of telling stories from their own lives and their own everyday lived experiences. For example, Sharon talked about her struggles with being a muscular woman:

At the time in the 1990s, being really muscular as a woman was not cool. It was not cool when I was in that body. So, I do share that story because I think it's a great example of how [body size ideals] can come in all forms.

Samantha talked about how sharing her experience losing a lot of weight was pedagogically useful:

I use a lot of stories in my lectures and in my teaching. Certainly a lot of stories, I mean teaching this particular area there are stories around my own personal experiences of what it was like to be a fat body and what it's like to be a slimmer body. They're often quite surprised about those. I say, "Really? You found it oppressive being large?" And I'm, like, "Yes." ... So the stories are useful.

Ginette went beyond merely suggesting stories of weight-based oppression to help connect students to the content and argued that they work to deconstruct systems of oppression within the academy. In her case, explicitly discussing her own body and experiences was helpful to fat pedagogy:

One of my foundational beliefs is that when we peel back this expert façade that is untouchable and unreachable, then we allow ourselves to be seen. When we allow ourselves to be seen by our students in a generative way...in a way that shows that we are human and that we are vulnerable and that they too can learn from that, to be human and vulnerable in their work. I think it has a potential to revolutionize.

June also made a similar point about sharing her own embodied experiences and explained further why she believes such stories work particularly well in contemporary post-secondary institutions:

I'm really interested in auto-ethnography as a teaching tool. So, not only did I talk about my own stories, but then we used storytelling in general, like write a story, tell a story, read a story. I wanted to get it out of that realm of that lecture style, "I am the master teacher. I will give you all my knowledge, oh acolytes." I don't go for that too much...I

also think storytelling actually worked really well. I think it plays into especially with the current age group of 18-25 and that they're used to media presence, they're used to entertainment so essentially turning things into a story is kind of like entertainment, but teaching them at the same time. I think that was a pretty effective pedagogy.

### **Teaching: Engaging with Language, History, and Privilege**

The last theme focuses on specific topics, resources, and content that participants used in their classes. While the breadth of teaching materials described in participants' course syllabi and within the interviews is far too extensive to share in a short paper, here I focus this last section on the three main course content areas participants identified: the politics of language, the importance of history, and the role of social justice.

Language was a consistent topic addressed by all of the participants in their classes. They talked about paying attention to language to acknowledge that language is political, particularly the use of terminology, definitions, and rhetoric. Alexa, for example, talked about how she draws attention to the power of rhetoric in her classes and always starts her courses by trying to get students to think critically about "how the way we talk about medical, and [how] science is [perceived as] neutral and has no persuasion in it. Yet, because of that, we are often bombarded with persuasion in these areas. We are often not aware of them." Most of the participants also included a section about language in their syllabi and in their introductions on the first day of class. For example, Elizabeth talked about how she introduces the word "fat" in her classes:

I never introduce this topic without explaining why I use the term fat. So, I think it's about drawing attention to the words we use just like in Women's Studies and drawing attention to the politics of different words.

Samantha also talked about how she addresses issues of language and power in her classes:

Who can say fat? Can everyone say fat? Can you only call people fat people if you are a fat person? What makes you a fat person?...What should I say? Should I say obese? Does that sound too clinical and medical? Should I say large?... I put some of those issues out on the table about how we talk about it and who can talk about it and what terms do we talk about it and so on.

While language was a key focus for participants, so was providing a historical context to help students understand where ideas have come from and how they are still emerging. Twenty participants talked about the importance of including a social and cultural history of fat within fat pedagogy. As Samantha suggested, contextual understanding helps students “to think about their own knowledge and where it’s come from and where they’re situated and why and how.” Jessica explained that a historical perspective can help students to examine their assumptions and perceptions:

I find taking a historical perspective with things can be very effective in having them kind of challenge what they have taken for granted now. You can show them that doctors used to prescribe women diet pills in pregnancy...Then, you kind of fast forward and show the development of knowledge and ways of thinking. I try to illustrate how these power relations are in effect and these issues are happening, but in the moment we often don’t think about them critically.

Sarah argued that a historical perspective also helped her students to better understand social and cultural politics. She described how she uses Foucault’s work in her classes to show how bodies have come under control through mechanisms of conformity and homogeneity:

I think that's really important in terms of bringing that whole governance piece in because unless you challenge that piece and people really recognize that that is fluid and can change, then we just continue to draw on that and utilize that without recognizing that there's something much bigger than we necessarily should be thinking about.

While Sarah articulated how a historical perspective can help students understand structures of power, other participants suggested that using a social justice perspective can accomplish a similar goal. Twenty-three participants discussed how they used a social justice lens to introduce students to topics such as systems of power, privilege, and oppression. Most importantly, they talked about introducing students to the idea that everyone is affected by body privilege. As Sophie stated, it is important for students to become aware of "the oppressive practices that individuals are confronted with daily based on their body shape and size." Participants believed that by using a social justice lens, students might be able to think more broadly about size privilege and fat oppression within society. For Rhonda, problematizing dominant notions of fatness in the classroom helps make fat a social justice issue: "I think it's about social justice and I want students to recognize the interrelationship between all oppressions; I want students to become engaged citizens."

Others focused on thin privilege as a way of getting at social justice issues. Jennifer described her efforts in that regard:

For me, it's become getting the thin and privileged to see their investments in their thin privilege. It's just like when you teach race, you can teach that race is about people who are raced. But I really think the analog is about how you teach whiteness and how you decentre whiteness. So, it's not about teaching about fat people, it's about teaching the

investments that thin people have to the norm and to see bodies as constructed and worked on, etc.

Many also used ideas of intersectionality in their fat pedagogy, that is, how size intersects with other better-known forms of oppression such as racism, sexism, and classism. Given that 61% of the participants in this study infused fatness into their classes rather than taught a stand-alone fat studies course, it is not surprising that fatness was constructed as another form of oppression. For example, Bella said that when she teaches about fat, she genders it right away.

There's so much about the fact that it is very gendered. I always say, I kind of bracket the ways that fat discrimination affects men, because it does. But it's sort of like I don't want to talk about domestic violence against men in my [Women's Studies] class. It happens and I acknowledge it, but I bracket it. We're talking about the main thing we know, which is that this thing mostly happens to women.

Many of the participants, in both the sciences and social sciences disciplines, also addressed the idea of healthism, that is, that health is a moral imperative that we as individuals should all aspire to achieve. For example, Lydia teaches in the social sciences and gets her students to think about the nature of health:

When it comes to questions specifically about fatness, I often kind of introduce or get them to consider questions around issues of: what is healthism, in the sense of, do people have a moral obligation to be healthy? Is health the new social contract, if you will? If so, what does that mean and how can we define it?

Jessica, who teaches in a science discipline, also tries to engage with healthism discourse to challenge her students to think differently about bodies and health:

The whole class is about kind of challenging and having them think a little bit more critically, about what is health in general, but more than just how much someone weighs and whether they exercise or eat well, and we talk a lot about what are the social determinants of health. So access to food, being able to live in safe housing and a safe neighbourhood, all of those elements...We talk about and I critique the idea of healthism and health discourses. I draw attention to how we read bodies and assign moral values to bodies often by their shape and size.

While everyone suggested that health is an important topic to address, some participants argued that it should not be the primary focus of a fat studies class. Rather, they asserted that fat rights, fat stigma, and fat activism should be the primary focus, with students being introduced to the idea that fat people deserve human rights, dignity, and respect and that there are many scholars and activists who work to address this within society.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

Based on my analysis of the reflections of the twenty-six faculty in this study, fat pedagogy as they are practicing it can be characterized into four elements: (a) recognizing one's context and intentionally creating an atmosphere of fat-inclusivity (framing); (b) gauging what students already know about fat and building on that knowledge, slowly increasing complexity of topics and analysis (layering); (c) using different theories and perspectives of fat that can engage students in ways that allow them to access new ideas (connecting); and (d) paying attention to how language, history, and privilege are used in the construction of fat (teaching). Many of the pedagogical approaches identified in the study are not, in fact, remotely new to anyone with knowledge of educational theory and practice but instead echo what has already been articulated both in constructivist and student-centred approaches to education in general

and in feminist pedagogy, critical pedagogy, and social justice education in particular. What is illustrative through this study, however, is that education and educational research could help to inform a developing fat pedagogy in not reinventing the wheel but helping it to pay attention to other forms of social justice education.

The past century has seen a growing number of critical pedagogues committed to and drawing attention to the need for social transformation and change. Various labels have been used to describe their work, such as education for liberation, transformation, empowerment, anti-oppression, and/or social justice (see Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Breunig, 2006; Darder, Baltadano, & Torres, 2009). This larger body of scholarship, according to Quin (2009), “explicitly aims to be anti-oppressive through *seeking to empower educators and learners to act in anti-oppressive ways for social justice*...[it] is therefore about *being and becoming* a social-justicer” (p. 110, emphasis in original). Critical pedagogy is not *just* about justice and fairness, but it is also about dialogic learning (Britzman, 2003) on the part of those who aim to educate for social justice. As such, fat pedagogy can be seen as being part of a bigger effort to “make sure that the future points the way to a more socially just world” (Giroux, 2007, p. 2).

In his study of approaches to critical pedagogy, Kumashiro (2004) highlights four different foci: (a) improving the experiences of students who have been oppressed; (b) changing the knowledge about people labeled as different; (c) challenging the social dynamics of power and privilege within society, and (d) addressing reasons why anti-oppressive education is challenging. Building on Kumashiro’s work, I would argue that the fat pedagogy described in this study incorporates all of these various approaches in specific and important ways.

First, the way in which participants focused on the importance of framing and layering suggests that fat pedagogy pays attention to the social dynamics of the classroom and the

experiences of all students, regardless of size, with regards to who speaks, who listens, and what gets valued. Considering the depth at which dominant obesity discourse is entrenched, participants articulated a desire to create a space where *every body* feels safe to express themselves while being aware of the need to minimize harm caused by anti-fat or fat-phobic comments made by students. Participants thus recognized that they play an important role in guiding the critical process within a classroom so that it is not destructive but productive, as have those working in critical pedagogy (see Hickey, 2004; Jakubowski & Visano, 2002; Monchinski, 2008). This idea of guided instruction is often referred to as scaffolding within education theory and refers to “an instructional process in which a teacher supports students cognitively, motivationally, and emotionally in learning while helping them to further develop autonomy” (Meyer & Turner, 2002, p. 18). It is considered a particularly useful strategy when challenging dominant ideologies in the classroom that may evoke strong resistance (Briscoe, 2013).

Participants also suggested that it is important to frame the discomfort that might arise for students in a class that challenges dominant obesity discourse. As Wagner (2005) points out in discussing critical pedagogy, such an approach “involves a change in thinking that will necessarily be unsettling for some students, as it requires them to move beyond their comfortable, deeply rooted views of the world” (p. 263). Like the participants in this study, Wagner advocates being explicit about the goals to disrupt and deconstruct normative views so that students are able to anticipate the challenge of learning to think against the grain and be able to support one another. The importance of addressing emotion in classroom situations is articulated well in the “pedagogy of discomfort” literature (Boler, 1999; Boler & Zembylas, 2003), where it is argued that, to disrupt normative ideology, one must also disrupt normative

emotional dimensions that “frame and shape daily habits, routines, and unconscious complicity with hegemony” (Zembylas & McGlynn, 2012, p. 44). This is substantiated by scholars who suggest that weight-focused initiatives in educational contexts can and have caused inadvertent harmful effects on students’ sense of selves and self-worth (such as Brumberg, 2000; Isono, Watkins, & Lian, 2009; Pinhas et al., 2013).

Second, participants spoke about needing to build upon students’ existing knowledge and experiences. The idea of starting where students are at is a key part of instructional scaffolding which, as articulated earlier, is standard fare in constructivist approaches to education (e.g., Dewey, 1938; Vygotsky, 1986) as well as in critical pedagogy (e.g., hooks, 2003; McLaren, 2003), to the point of being a bit cliché. Nonetheless, for those working in disciplines other than education, this may not be obvious and so remains an important element to name in a developing fat pedagogy.

Third, participants suggested multiple strategies they found useful strategy for challenging obesity rhetoric and problematizing dominant notions of fatness. One, for instance, one was using different frames for understanding obesity and fat (e.g., medical problem, social problem, political problem, moral problem). This approach is regularly used in scholarly research in critical fat scholarship (see Gard, 2011; Saguy, 2013), but few have written about it as a pedagogical approach. For this reason, Pringle and Pringle’s (2012) work is insightful as they too have used this strategy in post-secondary classrooms to help health and physical educators deconstruct dominant obesity discourse. While they suggest the approach has been successful and advocate its use, they also argue that such an approach needs to include a postmodern framework that supports students learning how to deconstruct multiple knowledges/truths. As they argue “a postmodern deconstructive framework, therefore, could

help students recognize, via analysis of competing obesity discourses, that knowledgeable people (e.g. obesity scientists/skeptics) can and do at times disagree, ‘truths’ are contested and change over time, and, there is value in treating all knowledge claims with a degree of critical skepticism” (p. 11). In other words, the goal is not to tell students *what* to think about obesity, but to offer guidance to help them learn *how* to think and then to involve them in the process of deconstructing obesity discourse so that they can develop their own understandings.

Another way participants focused on changing the knowledge about fatness was through dialogue and narrative. Dialogue is said to be a fundamental element to critical pedagogies (Ellsworth, 1992) that can empower “students to become subjects of their world” (Darder et al., 2009, p. 13). While research on addressing weight bias has not shown that using stories to evoke empathy alters anti-fat attitudes (see Gapinski, Schwartz, & Brownell, 2006; Teachman et al., 2003), participants in this study nonetheless found that using such strategies inspired students to go beyond their own personal and disciplinary paradigms to thinking more broadly about other possible social and cultural realities. Clearly, more research needs to be done to unpack this contradiction between existing research and participants’ experiences.

Lastly, the final theme addressed by participants focused on power and privilege through bringing attention to language. As Wann (2009) writes, “word choice is a good place to begin to examine assumptions” (Wann, 2009, p. xii). For example, the term “overweight” assumes that an ideal or normal weight exists and that being “over” this norm is abnormal (in a biomedical sense), and thus is a linguistic symbol of a socially normative category that serves to stigmatize (Brown, 2012). Using the word “fat” can be seen as an act of social justice as “it is about reclaiming a word which has been used to hurt, and substituting its destructive power for a more positive and descriptive meaning” (Cooper, 1998, p. 9).

Of the four approaches to critical pedagogy outlined by Kumashiro (2004), the one that participants in my study focused on the least was addressing the reasons why fat pedagogy may be so difficult to do effectively. While all participants described the resistance they faced in challenging dominant obesity discourse in post-secondary institutions (e.g., student resistance, institutional resistance, pervasive size privilege, weight bias), many admitted to not having spent much time thinking about their pedagogical approach. Some even suggested that participating in this study was insightful because it made them critically reflect on their fat pedagogy. This is not terribly surprising given we know that academics working in disciplines, other than fields such as education and women's studies, are rarely given much encouragement or space to reflect on their pedagogy (see Clark, 1994; Lingard & Mills, 2007), which is important when teaching content that is emotionally and intellectually charged (Bell, Love, Washington, & Weinstein, 2007).

Fat pedagogy is not simply about content, but is, in and of itself, work that can contribute to disrupting weight-based oppression. Thus, like Lee and Green (1997), I argue that pedagogy needs to take a more central role in critical fat scholarship. A number of the participants made similar comments and expressed a need for more scholarship and teaching resources on how to challenge obesity discourse and dominant notions of fatness in the classroom. To date, research related to fat pedagogy has examined such things as the prevalence and impact of weight bias, the ways in which K-12 schools (re)produce dominant obesity discourse, the experiences of fat learners, and specific strategies for reducing anti-fat attitudes in the classroom. But fewer studies have ventured to explore the wider pedagogical approaches being used to address dominant obesity discourse. Through my analysis of the pedagogical approaches used by 26 faculty members from different parts of the world and working in

different disciplines, I hope that this paper will offer current and future scholars, activists, and enthusiasts ideas for addressing critical fat scholarship in higher education. Clearly, there is no single approach to fat pedagogy, nor should there be given the importance of making teaching context specific. Rather, I hope more research will continue to grow our understanding of what it means to do fat pedagogy.

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To be submitted to *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*

CHAPTER SEVEN—TEACHING RESOURCES FOR POST-SECONDARY EDUCATORS  
WHO CHALLENGE DOMINANT OBESITY DISCOURSE

Biomedical narratives of obesity have become a key issue in contemporary society and regularly appear in pop culture, mass media, and policy debates. As a result, a growing number of scholars challenge this dominant obesity discourse by questioning its science, ethics, and morality and highlighting how it privileges some bodies and marginalizes others. Given their growing interest in the topic, many of these scholars also now include this scholarship into their courses or offering specific fat studies courses that critique a weight-centred health paradigm. This article is a resource of teaching strategies and materials gathered during a research study that examined the pedagogical approaches of twenty-six faculty members from around the world who challenge dominant obesity discourse and dominant notions of fatness in university classrooms. The diverse topics, resources, assignments, and activities are offered here as resources for those wishing to incorporate critical fat scholarship into their own teaching<sup>1</sup>.

***Keywords:*** *Instructional Strategies; Pedagogy; Fat Studies; Higher Education*

### **Introduction**

I cringed, but knew that it was a great question. My students and I had just finished talking for over an hour about the damaging effects of dominant obesity discourse within society, particularly within educational contexts. For many of the students who had majored in

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<sup>1</sup> This article is intended to be submitted as a companion piece to the article: “Toward a fat pedagogy: A study of pedagogical approaches aimed at challenging obesity discourse in higher education.”

kinesiology and were in their final and fifth year of university gaining the credentials to become high school health and physical education teachers, it was the first time they had ever heard a counter-narrative to the pervasive “fat is bad and thin is good” story that permeates society and their academic disciplines. Many wanted to learn about the research stemming from critical fat scholarship<sup>2</sup>, and inevitably, it seems, the conversation drifted towards tangible and practical steps for changing the discourse. The question that made me cringe was, “What resources exist that can help us as future health and physical education teachers?” I simply had few fat-inclusive teaching resources to offer them that would support them in their professional pursuits.

Scholars doing critical fat scholarship within K-12 contexts have highlighted such things as the growing incidence of fat bullying (see Puhl & Latner, 2007; Puhl, Luedicke, & Heuer, 2011), the negative perceptions and expectations of K-12 teachers towards fat students compared to “normal” weight students (see Greenleaf, Martin, & Rhea, 2008), health curriculum that marginalizes fat bodies (see Azzarito, 2007; Gard, 2008), and the harmful impact of obesity discourse on the developing sense of self and identity among fat youth in schools (see Evans, Rich, Davies, & Allwood, 2008; Rice, 2007). Researchers who have focused on higher education contexts have highlighted the prevalence of weight bias among students in many of the health related fields (see Puhl & Heuer, 2009), the prevalence of size privilege in university settings (Brown, 2012), and the impact weight has played on admission and educational attainment in higher education (Wann, 2009). Fewer scholars have examined the pedagogical strategies of those addressing dominant obesity discourse in the classroom, and of those who have, the focus has been on specific strategies for reducing anti-fat attitudes (e.g.,

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<sup>2</sup> Critical fat scholarship broadly refers to all of the scholarship that challenge obesity discourse and dominant notions of fat. It is inclusive of all of the subfields/labels emerging within this larger project such as fat studies, critical obesity studies, critical weight studies, critical geographies of body size, and health at every size.

Daníelsdóttir, O'Brien, & Ciao, 2010) or providing anecdotal accounts of teaching critical fat scholarship (Boling, 2011; Escalera, 2009; Guthman, 2009; Koppelman, 2009; Watkins & Doyle-Hugmeyer, 2013). Some have drawn attention to this gap and have called for more empirical research that examines and offers effective teaching practices related to critical fat scholarship (Watkins, Farrell, & Doyle-Hugmeyer, 2012).

While some writing has explored ideas that could inform a fat pedagogy more generally (e.g., Cameron et al., 2014; Fullbrook, 2012; Russell et al., 2013, Sykes, 2011), only a handful of teaching resources specifically address teaching practices related to critical fat scholarship. This article compliments such resources, such as those listed on the Rudd Center for Food Policy ([yaleruddcenter.org](http://yaleruddcenter.org)) and the Teaching Tolerance ([tolerance.org](http://tolerance.org)) websites, the recently released Health At Every Size curriculum resource (Clifford, 2013), the book *Am I Fat? Helping Young Children Accept Differences in Body Size* (Ikeda & Naworski, 1992), Hopkins' (2011) article, "Teaching and Learning Guide for Critical Geographies of Body Size" and Watkins et al.'s (2012) article published in this journal.

### **Methods**

This paper is part of a larger study that examined the academic experiences, philosophical perspectives, and pedagogical approaches of faculty from around the world who employ critical fat scholarship in their university teaching. Participants were identified through reviews of relevant academic journals, personal networks, and searches of websites, and then, were contacted through their university email addresses. Additional participants were generated using snowball sampling. Table 1 offers an overview of the twenty-six faculty members who participated in this study. Given that many of the participants are well known scholars in their

fields, it was important that I not associate demographics with teaching materials for reasons of confidentiality.

Table 1

*An Overview of the Participant Characteristics in the Research Study*

Demographics	Participants
Sex	Female ( $n = 23$ ), Male ( $n = 3$ )
Location	Canada ( $n = 9$ ), United States ( $n = 11$ ), England ( $n = 2$ ), New Zealand ( $n = 3$ ), and Australia ( $n = 1$ )
Science Disciplines	Kinesiology ( $n = 4$ ), Nutrition ( $n = 4$ ), Medicine ( $n = 2$ ), Nursing ( $n = 2$ ), and Psychology ( $n = 1$ )
Social Sciences and Humanities Disciplines	Geography ( $n = 3$ ), Sociology ( $n = 2$ ), Education ( $n = 2$ ), Women's Studies ( $n = 2$ ), Writing/Rhetoric ( $n = 2$ ), History ( $n = 1$ ), and Community Studies ( $n = 1$ )
Years Teaching	1-5 years ( $n = 11$ ), 6-10 years ( $n = 5$ ), 11+ years ( $n = 10$ )
Teaching Experience Related to Fat	Full courses ( $n = 7$ ), Full unit focused on Fat ( $n = 2$ ), Infused fat into classes ( $n = 16$ )
Body Size Identification	Fat ( $n = 6$ ), Fat identity (they identified as fat but had lost weight; $n = 4$ ), "Innies" (in-between; $n = 3$ ), "Normal" weight and/or having thin privilege ( $n = 13$ )

*Note.* The information in this table could not be further broken down to indicate, for example, how many Canadian male Geography faculty members there were, to protect confidentiality since doing so would make participants potentially identifiable given this is such a small research community. For example, by linking the following characteristics: female, Canada, education, teaching experience of two years, taught full fat studies course, identifies as "normal" weight and with thin privilege, one may easily recognize that this participant is me.

The research data included in-depth interviews of one to two hours in duration and teaching materials (course syllabi, PowerPoint files, lecture notes, and assignment outlines) to explore not only *why* faculty address critical fat scholarship but also *what* and *how* they address it in the classroom. All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim, and sent to participants for verification to ensure validity. In total 446 pages of transcripts and 94 teaching materials (1890 pages) were analyzed using ATLAS.ti 7.0 and Lichtman's "Three C's Analysis Approach" (Coding, Categorizing, Concepts), which is a content-driven, thematic analysis approach that is particularly suitable for exploratory studies (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2012).

In this paper, I specifically highlight the key topics, texts, assignments, and classroom activities articulated by the participants. The information represented here describes materials and practices that were articulated by more than one participant in the study. I have also included a brief description of course assignments and classroom activities, along with learning outcomes articulated by the participants. As the participants in this study represented all of the subfields currently part of critical fat scholarship (i.e., Critical Obesity Studies, Critical Weight Studies, Critical Geographies of Body Size, Fat Studies, and Health at Every Size), the following incorporates a variety of strategies, from a variety of courses (in both the sciences and social sciences/humanities) and within a variety of disciplines (kinesiology, nutrition, medicine, nursing, psychology, geography, sociology, education, women's studies, writing/rhetoric, history, and community studies).

### **Developing a Resource for Reciprocation**

While participants suggested that, over the last ten to fifteen years, there has been an explosion of critical fat scholarship, many of the participants articulated the need for more

teaching resources related to teaching critical fat scholarship in post-secondary education. Some spoke about the need for a resource consortium that highlighted potential readings that an instructor could use. For example, Alexa articulated the need for a central resource of scholarly and non-scholarly articles that could be used by instructors in university classrooms.

You know, one of my issues is that we don't have a central resource and I think we need one desperately... it's frustrating, but I would love to see somebody have a student who was doing an independent study and have that independent study putting that together... I mean we need some kind of organized thing because you know, in fat studies, we're getting requests for the same, for statistics and it sucks that so many of us have to go looking for the statistics again.

While Alexa spoke about creating a general resource, other participants explicitly articulated the desire to have more instructional resources developed that highlight potential classroom practices, teaching strategies, and specific content. For example, at the end of her interview Jessica suggested that I ask all participants for specific resources that they found useful and then she suggested I distribute this resource at the conclusion of the study to help instructors, like herself, develop ideas for teaching critical fat scholarship in post-secondary classrooms. Later in her interview, Jessica went on to say why she thinks such a teaching resource would be a valuable contribution to the field of critical fat scholarship and more broadly within the academy:

I think that's why I was asking you to ask that question; so, that you can gather info and then you can share it back. I think one of the biggest challenges too, and it might be different if you're going through a Faculty of Education, but when I went through my graduate work we just were not trained how to teach. So, any tips I can get on ways to

engage students would be helpful. I'm trying to learn as I go, but I'm probably not the most creative of people when it comes to that or at least not yet... That's why for me that would be so helpful to have just some ways to teach. I find that even just a few suggestions... and then you can even carry that over into other things and then I find that once you get the ball rolling it gets better.

### **Teaching Resource**

Given the time, energy, and perspectives participants shared with me, the following teaching resource has been developed in the spirit of reciprocity. Within qualitative research, reciprocity is identified as a key characteristic of ethical practice that involves the act of “giving or paying back those who participate in research” (Creswell, 2007, p. 24). The following list of teaching resources aims to offer current and future scholars, activists, and educators practical ideas for addressing critical fat scholarship in post-secondary classrooms.

### **Course Topics**

This category includes some of the key topics used by the participants who taught courses, units, and/or lectures on critical fat scholarship or infused it in the classroom.

#### **Introductory topics.**

- Critical theories of weight, obesity, and fat
- Social constructions of fatness
- Rethinking the “obesity” epidemic (medicalization of obesity)
- Fat stigma and discrimination (history of fat stigma, living with fat stigma)
- History of fat, beauty, health, and embodiment
- Language/rhetorical use of weight, obesity, fat
- Tenets of size acceptance (see Appendix A)

**Specific topic areas.**

- Obesogenic environments
- Health at Every Size (HAES)
- Fat and the law
- Media representations of fatness
- Fat across time and space
- Healthism
- Deconstructing Body Mass Index (BMI)
- Risk, responsibility, and subjectivity
- Intersections with gender, sexuality, religion, race, class, ability, and citizenship
- Food and fat
- Fat in policy and science
- Fatness in pregnancy, childhood, and aging

**Concluding topics.**

- Fat acceptance movement
- Fat activism

**Course Readings**

This category includes some of the key readings (books, research articles, and blogs) used by the participants in this study. As more critical fat scholarship related books, research articles, and blogs are published every day, many of these may become outdated quickly. Nonetheless, these can provide a point of departure and showcases the key readings used by my participants at the time of the study.

**Books.**

- Bacon, L. (2008). *Health at every size*. Dallas, TX: BenBella Books.
- Bordo, S. (1993). *Unbearable weight: Feminism, western culture and the body*. Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press.
- Brownell, K., Puhl, R., Schwartz, M., & Rudd, L. (2005). *Weight bias: Nature, consequences, and remedies*. New York, NY: Guildford Press.
- Campos, P. (2004). *The obesity myth: Why America's obsession with weight is hazardous to your health*. New York, NY: Penguin.
- Davis, K. (1997). *Embodied practices: Feminist perspectives on the body*. London, UK: Sage Publications.
- Edut, O. (Ed.). (2003). *Body outlaws: Rewriting the rules of beauty and body image*. Emeryville, CA: Seal Press.
- Evans, J., Rich, E., Davies, B., & Allwood, R. (2008). *Education, disordered eating and obesity discourse: Fat fabrications*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Erdman, C. (1996). *Nothing to lose: A guide to sane living in a larger body*. San Francisco, CA: Harper.
- Farrell, A. (2011). *Fat shame: Stigma and the fat body in American culture*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Gard, M. (2011). *The end of the obesity epidemic*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Gard, M., & Wright, J. (2005). *The obesity epidemic*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Guthman, J. (2011). *Weighing In: Obesity, food justice, and the limits of capitalism*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Kirkland, A. (2008) *Fat rights: Dilemmas of difference and personhood*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Kolata, G. (2007). *Rethinking thin: The new science of weight loss and the myths and realities of dieting*. New York, NY: Picador.
- Kulick, D., & Meneley, A. (2005). *Fat: The anthropology of an obsession*. New York, NY: Penguin Group.
- LeBesco, K. (2004). *Revolting bodies? The struggle to redefine fat identity*. Boston, MA: University of Massachusetts Press.

- Lupton, D. (2013). *Fat*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Maine, M. (2000). *Body wars: Making peace with women's bodies*. Carlesbad, CA: Gurze Books.
- Maurer, D., & Sobal, J. (Eds.). (1999). *Interpreting weight: The social management of fatness and thinness*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine de Gruyter.
- Moore, J. (2006). *Fat girl: A true story*. New York, NY: Hudson Street Press.
- Orbach, S. (1994). *Fat is a feminist issue: The anti-diet guide to permanent weight loss*. New York, NY: The Berkeley Publishing Group.
- Rhode, D. (2010). *The beauty bias: The injustice of appearance in life and law*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Rothblum, E. D., & Solovay, S. (Eds.). (2009). *The fat studies reader*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Saguy, A. (2013). *What's wrong with fat?* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Stearns, P. (1997). *Fat history: Bodies and beauty in the modern world*. New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Wann, M. (1998). *Fat!So?* New York, NY: Ten Speed Press.
- Wright, J., & Harwood, V. (Eds.). (2009). *Biopolitics and the obesity epidemic: Governing bodies*. New York, NY: Routledge.

#### **Research articles.**

- Anderson, J. (2012). Whose voice counts? A critical examination of discourses surrounding the body mass index. *Fat Studies*, 1(2), 195-207.
- Aphramor, L. (2005). Is a weight-centered health framework salutogenic? Some thoughts on unhinging certain dietary ideologies. *Social Theory & Health*, 3(4), 315-340.
- Bacon, L., & Aphramor, L. (2011). Weight science: Evaluating the evidence for a paradigm shift. *Nutrition Journal*, 10(9), 3-13.
- Campos, P., Saguy, A., Ernsberger, P., Oliver, E., & Gaesser, G. (2006). The epidemiology of overweight and obesity: Public health crisis or moral panic? *International Journal of Epidemiology*, 35(1), 55-60.

- Elliott, C. D. (2007). Big persons, small voices: On governance, obesity, and the narrative of the failed citizen. *Journal of Canadian Studies*, 41(3), 134-149.
- Gard, M. (2011). Truth, belief and the cultural politics of obesity scholarship and public health policy. *Critical Public Health*, 21(1), 37-48.
- Hopkins, P. (2008). Critical geographies of body size. *Geography Compass*, 2(6), 2111-2126.
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- O'Hara, L., & Gregg, J. (2012). Human rights casualties from the “war on obesity”: Why focusing on body weight is inconsistent with a human rights approach to health. *Fat Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society*, 1(1), 32-46.
- Oliver, E. (2006). The politics of pathology: How obesity became an epidemic disease. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 49(4), 611-627.
- Pearl, R., Puhl, R., & Brownell, K. (2012). Positive media portrayals of obese persons: Impact on attitudes and image preferences. *Health Psychology*, 31(6), 821-829.
- Puhl, R., & Heuer, C. (2009). The stigma of obesity: A review and update. *Obesity*, 17(5), 941-964.
- Saguy, A., & Almeling, R. (2008). Fat in the fire? Science, the news media, and the “obesity epidemic.” *Sociological Forum*, 23(1), 53-83.
- Solovay, S., & Rothblum, E. (2009). Introduction. In E. Rothblum & S. Solovay (Eds.), *The fat studies reader* (pp. 1-7). New York, NY: New York University Press.
- Wann, M. (2009). Forward: Fat studies: An invitation to revolution. In E. Rothblum & S. Solovay (Eds.), *The fat studies reader* (pp. ix-xxv). New York, NY: New York University Press.

### **Blogs.**

- Big Fat Blog, <http://www.bigfatblog.com/>
- Obesity Timebomb, [www.obesitytimebomb.blogspot.com/](http://www.obesitytimebomb.blogspot.com/)
- First, Do No Harm, <http://fathealth.wordpress.com/>
- Shapely Prose, <http://kateharding.net/>
- FemmeCast, <http://www.femme-cast.com/>

- Two Whole Cakes, <http://blog.twowholecakes.com/>

### **Films/Documentaries.**

Breillat, C. (Director). (2001). *Fat girl*. France: Canal+

Cardoso, P. (Director). (2002). *Real women have curves* [Motion Picture]. USA: HBO Films.

Daniels, L. (Director). (2009). *Precious* [Motion Picture]. USA: Lee Daniels Entertainment.

Farrelly, B., & Farrelly, P. (Directors). (2001). *Shallow Hal* [Motion Picture]. USA: Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation.

Jhally, S. (Director). (2010). *Killing us softly 4*. Canada: Media Education Foundation.

McKay, J. (1994). *Fat chance: The big prejudice*. Canada: National Film Board of Canada.

Pennick, F. (Director). *Weightless*. USA: Organized Chaos Mediaworks.

### **YouTube videos.**

- Flabulous09 (Producer). (2009). *Flabulous* [Youtube]. Available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=F59weTEA2gA>
- MedGenMed (Producer). (2006). *End the war on obesity: Make peace with your patients. Linda Bacon talks about Health At Every Size*. [video]. Available from <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1868359/>
- UCLA Center for the Study of Women (Producer). (2010). *Paul Campos: Fat and identity politics* [YouTube]. Available from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x-GgXY0oLjI>
- UCLA Center for the Study of Women (Producer). (2010). *Marilyn Wann: Fighting fat fear* [YouTube]. Available from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_g8-QWDqTdM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_g8-QWDqTdM)
- UCLA Center for the Study of Women (Producer). (2010). *Dr. Katherine Flegal. Weight and mortality: The population perspective* [YouTube]. Available from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cUqhR9cYMaA>
- Canadian Obesity Network (Producer). (2011). *Keynote address by Dr. Rebecca Puhl on*

*weight bias and discrimination: A social injustice and public health priority.* Available from <http://hosting.epresence.tv/obesitynetwork/1/watch/61.aspx>

### **Course Assignments**

This category includes some of the assignments used by the participants in this study.

- **Activist Assignment** – In groups, students were asked to study an implicit or explicit example of fat activism and then conduct a 15-minute presentation based on their findings. This helped students to gain insight into how activism works, what motivates activists, and repercussions of activism.
- **Group Presentations** – Students teamed up with other students from different disciplines (sociology, physiology, cognition, etc.) and presented a specific topic related to the class. This helped students to gain insights into the challenges and opportunities of working with students who have different ontological and epistemological perspectives.
- **Social Media Project** – Students were asked to create social media projects (ranging from videos to blog pages) that demonstrated their engagement with the class topics. This helped students to be creators of new knowledge related to the topic and to share their deepening knowledge of the content with others.
- **What's in the News Assignment** – Students were asked to review a weekly newspaper article related to the topic and write a response to it. This helped students open their minds to how fat is represented in the news media and helped make the class topics current, relevant, and meaningful for the students.
- **Writing Assignments (response papers, final writing assignments, etc.)** – Students were asked to critically engage in the course topics through writing assignments that varied in length, from one page response papers to final papers that were anywhere from 6-25 pages

in length. This helped students to not only reflect on their learning but also to articulate what they learned. These types of assignments were the most common of all assignments.

### **Classroom Activities**

This last category describes the types of activities participants used in the classroom to encourage students to engage with the class material. Some participants described activities that were embodied and hands-on. Other participants described activities that used pop culture and multimedia, particularly films, documentaries, and YouTube videos. And lastly, most (if not all) participants described activities that encouraged student reflection. For each activity, I have included a brief description and the outcome of the activity as described by participants.

#### **Embodied (hands-on) activities.**

- **Sized Society Activity** – Students were asked to go out and take pictures of things in their environment that stereotype people based on body size. The pictures were then used to engage discussion about size discrimination. This helped students begin to see their environment in a new way. It opened their eyes to fat stigma and discrimination.
- **Four Corners Activity** – Students were given sample statements and were asked to move to one of the four corners in the room based on their level of agreement with the sample statement: strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed. This helped students engage in the discussion because they could visibly see the different perspectives within the room. This activity can also be done using a straight continuum line from one end of the classroom to another or by using sticky notes on the wall to represent different positions.
- **Fat Positive Activities** – Some of the classes engaged in fat positive activities such as attending a fat positive aerobics class. This helped students to deconstruct the working-at-being-fat myth; for many students, this was the first time they began to see the many

limitations (equipment, space, instructional posters, and fat phobic staff) that fat people face in order to exercise.

- **Mindfulness Eating Activity** – Based on Geneen Roth’s YouTube video on mindful eating, which can be found at [www.oprah.com/spirit/Geneen-Roths-Raisin-Chip-and-Chocolate-Exercise-Video](http://www.oprah.com/spirit/Geneen-Roths-Raisin-Chip-and-Chocolate-Exercise-Video), students were asked to eat certain foods and pay attention to different senses (i.e., taste, touch, smell). This helped students discover the essence of a mindful eating practice.
- **Modeling Activity** – Students were asked to mimic poses from advertisements and then asked to share their experiences. This helped students to critically reflect upon the subjectification of women and men in advertisements and to consider the hidden curriculum of advertisements.

### **Pop culture.**

- **Headless Fatties Activity** – Based on Cooper’s (2007) article, “The headless fatties,” which can be found on her website (<http://charlottecooper.net>), students were asked to reflect upon multiple images in the media taken of fat people whose heads and arguably humanity have been deleted. This was followed by a discussion of the role of media in perpetuating fat oppression. This raised students’ awareness of the dehumanizing images found everywhere in the media and was a good introduction to fat stigma and discrimination.
- **Show and Tell Activity** – Students were asked to bring examples of advertisements, websites, programs, etc. into class (depending on the specific topic and intent of the class) and then to discuss why they chose that example. This helped to connect students to difficult topics being discussed in class and helped engage them in class discussions.

- Health Promotion Activity – Students were asked to watch a health promotion video and reflect on the social, political, and cultural implications of the video. Instructor-led dialogue helped students to consider the video from multiple angles. This helped students to begin to think critically about popular culture.

**Reflection.**

- Thin Privilege Checklist – Students complete a thin privilege checklist and discuss their results (either in small groups or in a large lecture); examples of thin privilege are available at <http://thisisthinprivilege.tumblr.com/>. This checklist helps to illustrate privilege and the complexities of the lived experience of both fat and thin people.
- Storied Encounters Activity – Ask students to write and share a paragraph about an early childhood experience related to weight or body image. This activity has worked well as an early semester activity that breaks down barriers and makes students realize their thin privilege and the harmful experiences others have encountered with regards to weight.
- Adjectives Activity – Show pictures of people of different sizes and shapes. Have the students write down three adjectives that come to mind and then as a class reflect on the findings. This helps students to realize their implicit biases.
- Attitudes Scale Activity – Have students take the Antifat Attitudes (AFA) Scale (Morrison & O'Connor, 1999). In small groups talk about fat stigma (what does it look like, how can it be avoided, etc.). This helps students to recognize how biases can manifest themselves in our day-to-day interactions.
- The Size of the Messenger Activity – Give students different scenarios and have them reflect on their reactions (e.g. How would you feel if I walked into the room weighing what I do now holding a McDonald's plastic cup, and how would you feel if I was 100 pounds

heavier and I was doing that? How would you feel if I looked like Gwyneth Paltrow and I did that?). This can also be done using two TED talks back to back that are the same in content, but delivered by different speakers. Find one that is delivered by a thin person and one that is delivered by a fat person and discuss which one students related to more and why. These activities help to get students thinking about their personal biases and how biases influence perceptions.

- Intersectionality Activity (credited to Marilyn Wann) – Ask students to come up with characteristics that we associate with fat people and characteristics that we associate with slim people and write them on the board in two lists. Then cross out the words fat and slim and replace them with the words poor and rich and you ask how well the list still fits. Then, cross out poor and rich, and write down two different races (white/black, white/Aboriginal). Then help them unpack where these ideas came from. This helps students to begin to think about stereotypes and the social, political, and cultural contexts in which they arise.
- Obesity Myth Activity – Break the class into four groups and give each group a statement (e.g., fat people should lose weight, fat is a disease, fat people cannot live healthy lives). Ask each group to talk about whether or not they think the statement is true or false. At the end of the activity, let the students know that all the statements are false and take them through why that is. This activity helps students to unpack common sense knowledge.
- Body Confidence Survey – Have the students complete a survey prior to or during class then later present the data back to the students. This activity helps students to critically consider the social construction of bodies and why so many people are made to feel badly about their bodies.

### **Conclusion**

The intention of this article is not to reinforce a “methods as ends” model of teaching (Britzman, 2003) that reduces the complexity of teaching to prescriptive classroom practices (Gore, 1993; Shor, 1996); rather it aims to address the gap in teaching resources specific to fat pedagogy. Britzman (2003) might argue that this gap suggests that thus far there has been a lack of attention to classroom practices so that a concern about over-prescription is likely unwarranted at this moment in time. It is my hope that by offering this resource, it will inspire scholars interested in critical fat scholarship to critique and reflect upon the distinctive classroom practices that characterize fat pedagogy. In doing so, I hope to stimulate further research that will expand our knowledge base of classroom practices that help to problematize rather than promote dominant notions of fat.

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### **APPENDIX A: Basic Tenets of Size Acceptance**

- Human beings come in a variety of sizes and shapes. We celebrate this diversity as a positive characteristic of the human race.
- There is no ideal body size, shape, or weight that every individual should strive to achieve.
- Every body is a good body, whatever its size or shape.
- Self-esteem and body image are strongly linked. Helping people feel good about their bodies and about who they are can help motivate and maintain healthy behaviours.
- Appearance stereotyping is inherently unfair to the individual because it is based on superficial factors which the individual has little or no control over.
- We respect the bodies of others even though they might be quite different from our own.
- Each person is responsible for taking care of his/her own body.
- Good health is not defined by body size; it is a state of physical, mental, and social well-being.
- People of all sizes and shapes can reduce their risk of poor health by adopting a healthy lifestyle.

Source: Fact sheet developed by dietitians and nutritionists who are advocates of size acceptance; their efforts coordinated by Joanne P. Ikeda, MA, RD, Nutrition Education Specialist, Department of Nutritional Sciences, University of California, Berkeley, CA

## CHAPTER EIGHT—LOOKING FORWARD

### **Introduction**

This final chapter summarizes the findings from my research study, highlights the limitations within the study, and offers three recommendations to the field of critical fat studies in higher education that will help address fat-inclusivity inside and outside university classrooms. The recommendations stem from both my reading of the literature and my research findings. They are targeted to current and future university faculty and administrators, educators working in other sites, and anyone interested in learning more about the burgeoning field of critical fat studies and the emerging area of fat pedagogy. My hope is that this chapter and the whole dissertation will serve as a discursive and critical space to inspire new questions, recruit new allies, and offer ways of addressing weight-based oppression inside and outside the classroom.

While the major themes and key findings from this study reflect the experiences, perspectives, and approaches of the participants in this study, readers may discover that the findings are similar to their own experiences and thus may be able to identify ways in which the findings generalize more broadly.

### **Summary of Findings**

The key ideas and themes that surfaced from my study all relate back to my main research question outlined in Chapter One and specifically address one or more of the sub-questions related to academic experiences, philosophical perspectives, and pedagogical approaches. The first research article, Chapter Four, highlighted the ways in which participants experience their bodies within the academy and how body size serves as a site of pedagogical work in the university classroom. The second research article, Chapter Five, articulated how

participants' philosophical perspectives (i.e., worldviews, paradigms, theoretical lenses) have influenced the development of different subfields within the broader field of critical fat scholarship, and that this should not be seen as a detriment but a strength of the growing field. Further, the article also highlighted the significant resistance participants experience doing critical fat scholarship and what has helped sustain them in the face of this resistance. The third and fourth research articles, Chapters Six and Seven, describe participants' teaching approaches and strategies and what these might tell us about a developing fat pedagogy. My intention in highlighting the four main themes (i.e., *bodies* that teach, *why* I teach, *how* I teach, and *what* I teach) in this manuscript-style dissertation and putting them into succinct statements is not to propose that these are neatly packaged findings, nor to suggest they are the only themes to have arisen from the data. Rather, I hope they serve as an opening to critically reflecting upon how we theorize, research, and practice fat pedagogy.

Fat pedagogy has much to learn from the paradoxical tensions in critical pedagogy and feminist pedagogy. In her dissertation examining the practices of critical pedagogues, Breunig (2006) suggests that one of the greatest challenges facing the field of critical pedagogy is clarity. She argues that some of the claims made in critical pedagogy, such as its potential to achieve social justice goals, need to be interrogated and problematized. She writes, "there may be a need for critical pedagogues to continue to broaden their understanding of the justice-orientated nature of critical praxis and to begin to articulate this intent more explicitly within their post-secondary classroom practices" (p. 283). Breunig's work, and the work of feminist scholars such as Manicom (1992) and Stake and Hoffmann (2000), points to an important consideration for future research in fat pedagogy: we need to continue to interrogate and problematize fat pedagogy and its potential to effect change in the classroom and beyond.

I have also argued throughout this dissertation that there is a need for more empirical research on fat pedagogy and praxis. While I still believe this to be true and that there is value in continuing to explore how fat theory is practiced in the classroom in an effort to understand its potential, I also suggest that future research should examine and question fat pedagogy itself. Only through continued efforts to understand fat pedagogy will we come to know its potential. Given that critical fat studies is a relatively new field and the term “fat pedagogy” only appeared in print in a refereed journal article in the last year (Russell et al., 2013), there is much work to be done. As Wann (2009) writes, “until the fat studies bookshelf is longer than the diet book shelf... There is more than enough fat studies work for all of us to do: connections to make, freedom to envision, liberation to embody, and implications to comprehend” (p. xxii).

To date most of the critical fat studies research in the area of education has focused on reducing or eliminating weight bias and anti-fat attitudes. This could suggest that the main goal of scholars challenging obesity discourse and dominant notions of fatness in post-secondary classrooms is to reduce weight-biased attitudes. But is that really our only goal? While undoubtedly important, my analysis shows that fat pedagogy is much more than that. I have illustrated how the goals of fat pedagogy include such things as improving the experiences of fat students, changing the knowledge people have about obesity and fatness, challenging fat oppression and the systems that serve to reinforce it within post-secondary classrooms, acknowledging thin privilege and becoming a thin ally, highlighting how (un)learning can be difficult and personal, and accepting that teaching and learning *are* embodied and that bodies talk. While we can empirically measure weight bias, we need to find ways of assessing and examining other goals of fat pedagogy. In my view, this is a necessary area of future research.

Another area of future research is related to the participants' specific claims about their classroom practices. As outlined in Chapter Six, four major approaches to fat pedagogy were identified (i.e., framing, layering, connecting, teaching) and many teaching materials were shared in Chapter Seven. However, due to the scope of my research, which was to examine both the pedagogical practices and academic experiences of participants, I did not probe into the practices as deeply as I could have nor did I problematize any of their assumptions about educational theory and practice with participants. In my view, a number of ideas emerged that require further interrogation, some of which intersect with Breunig's (2006) research on the rhetoric/reality gap of critical pedagogues, and I would argue, feminist pedagogues. For instance, like critical pedagogy, the very nature of fat pedagogy needs to continue to be troubled and complicated, and there needs to be ongoing articulation about the implementation of fat pedagogy in postsecondary classrooms. Furthermore, there needs to be interrogation of the specific pedagogical approaches used by the participants in this study. Many questions arose based on the findings presented in this dissertation, such as: Can an instructor ever truly set boundaries to create safe environments?; Can such efforts exist in contradiction to a pedagogy of discomfort?; How can "starting where students are" go beyond cliché and be further developed in a fat pedagogy context?; How can science be used to combat dominant obesity discourse so prevalent in the health sciences?; What are the limits of storytelling?; How does one incorporate intersectionality further?; How is fat pedagogy seen, or not, as form of activism?; and, How is fat pedagogy a feminist issue?

In hindsight, I now see that perhaps my research was too broad in scope. Initially I had planned to interview both faculty members who teach critical fat scholarship and the students in their classes, but I was encouraged early on to just focus on the faculty members to make this

“do-able” dissertation research. While this was sage advice, given the amount of data I collected, I now believe that I could have narrowed my focus even further to focus on either the pedagogical strategies used by the faculty members or their academic experiences, to gain more depth, even if at the expense of breadth.

In total, I had 2336 pages of data (both transcriptions and teaching materials) to analyze, and I focused my writing on the three most salient themes. Other themes emerged about which I also could have written full papers. For instance, the second research article (Chapter Five) touches upon the emerging subfields in critical fat studies and the resistance participants experienced by the students and the institution. Both of those themes could have been a separate chapter based on the amount of data I collected and the richness within both. I also had to be ruthless in cutting out other themes that emerged such as: academic identities within critical fat studies; self-care strategies to help endure fat oppression; and sites of counter-resistance, places of hope, and resilience to fat oppression. These will all be areas for continued investigation and future publication.

My study also hinted at interesting questions that could provide the basis for future research. For instance, while gender came up in some of my interviews and is addressed somewhat in Chapters Four and Six, it would be illuminating to examine how gender plays a specific role in fat pedagogy and how feminist pedagogy and queer pedagogy, in particular, might inform a developing fat pedagogy. I also think that there were a number of ways in which gender intersected with body size in interesting ways that would be worthy of further examination. For example, while a few participants in this study suggested that they felt they had gained credibility within the academy when they lost weight, it would be interesting to examine this within the context of feminist theory. Consider how Orbach (1994) suggests that

when women conform to normative ideals within Western society it is often hard to separate one social construction, such as fit (thin), from another, such as (sexy female). She suggests that even when women lose weight, their thinness is contextualized within a Western culture that sexualizes, objectifies, and marginalizes women.

I also think that, while the research manuscripts highlighted some of the different perspectives and experiences of participants, particularly with regards to the different disciplines (sciences versus social sciences and humanities), years of teaching (specifically with regards to those who are tenured versus non-tenured), and the academic experiences of fat versus thin faculty, more work needs to be done to specifically understand the complexity and consequences of these differences. For example, four participants articulated the fact that they believed that doing critical fat studies had hindered their job marketability. At the time I did not make much of this, but now believe it could have revealed some of the interesting ways that institutional resistance is enacted on young scholars, thus altering their career paths.

While many of the themes that have surfaced within this research may sound familiar to education scholars who situate themselves within critical pedagogy, some of the strength of this study in fact comes from such similarities. It is beneficial that fat pedagogy is not altogether different from critical pedagogy and that future scholarship in the area of fat pedagogy can build on the rich history in critical pedagogy. Reciprocally, critical pedagogy stands to benefit from fat pedagogy in important ways as it draws attention to the specific and important ways in which body size acts as another site of oppression and injustice. In this way, sizeism is another important topic for critical pedagogy and the everyday classroom.

Before highlighting three specific recommendations related to addressing fat-inclusivity in higher education, it is important to first reflect on some of the limitations within this study.

However, it is important to note that the majority of these limitations can also be viewed as strengths.

### **Limitations of the Research**

The three main limitations in this study are related to practical limitations, population sample limitations, and my limitations as a researcher. Practical limitations within this study are the most discernable. For example, face-to-face interviews and participant observation would have garnered rich data by allowing me to get to know my participants at a deeper level. Observing their pedagogical approaches and strategies in the classroom would have afforded me the opportunity to observe student reactions to the content being delivered. However, the financial support and institutional access required to conduct such a study would not have been feasible. Therefore as part of the research design, I asked participants to recall their experiences. Given that most of these experiences happened in the past and that time can distort memories (Seidman, 2006), some of the experiences shared by the participants should perhaps better be considered *recollections* of experiences. While Oakley (2012) suggests that emotionally charged experiences are more likely to be accurate, some loss of clarity is expected given that some participants were recalling teaching experiences that were over ten years old. This research design, combined with the fact that the data was not triangulated by observations of teaching or by seeking out their students' perspectives, presents limitations; expanding the data collection in this way, however, would have been beyond the scope of what is reasonable for a dissertation.

There were also limitations in the population from which participants were drawn for this study. First, there were not enough faculty members around the world teaching full critical fat studies courses to meet my initial participant criteria. While this was not altogether

surprising, it inevitably led to a change in criteria and thus a slight change in scope of the research. Second, of the twenty-six participants, only three were male. Given the feminist origins of fat studies, this too was not altogether out-of-the-ordinary, but the fact that gender did not emerge as a salient theme was surprising. My participants did mention gender, mainly with regards to bodies that teach and the intersectionality of body size and gender, but otherwise it remained an implicit theme within the study, one that perhaps was almost too obvious to identify explicitly. So, one could argue that the gender matrix of my participants did indeed play a role in terms of who, at this moment in time, is most engaged in raising issues about the subjection and objectification of fatness in our society and also most interested in developing a fat pedagogy.

Third, the participants represent those who feel comfortable sharing their experiences, perspectives, and approaches. Thus, this research does not capture or address the concerns of those who may not have felt comfortable nor had the time to participate in the research. As a result, it could skew the data somewhat in that participants who participated might most represent those who are overly confident or overly critical.

Lastly, I also recognize my own limitations as a researcher. As someone relatively new to the field of critical fat studies, my knowledge developed throughout the unfolding of the study. While this may not be perceived as a limitation per se, it definitely impacted the study and may have led to some confusion for participants. For instance, my understanding of the perspectives within the various subfields was limited and, thus, the language I used in the first few interviews may not have been specific to a participant's specific subfield. For example, I used the term fat studies exclusively in the interview guide when referring to the field. This may have confused or even mislead participants to think a certain way prior to the interview.

Very quickly, however, and indeed after the first couple of interviews, I realized that not everyone identified as a fat studies scholar and so I began to find other ways of asking the questions that were more inclusive of the field of critical fat studies. While I identified strongly with fat studies at the beginning of the research study, I have come to see that I often work from a critical obesity studies perspective due to the fact that my work is often situated in health education, physical education, and health promotion, areas typically more dominated by biomedical health discourses (Kirk, 2006; Pringle & Pringle, 2011; Quennerstedt et al., 2010; Sykes & McPhail, 2008).

In the following pages I make three recommendations that arose directly from the research findings that I hope will serve to further the field of critical fat studies and help to promote fat-inclusivity within higher education contexts.

### **Three Recommendations For Fat-Inclusivity in Higher Education**

#### **1. Weight should be added as a form of discrimination in education policies.**

As articulated in Chapter Four and by the participants in this study, size privilege is prevalent in post-secondary institutions and is enacted on the bodies of students and faculty in potentially harmful ways. Participants who self-identified as fat shared many examples of how fat oppression is perpetuated through credibility discourse and obesity discourse. While some of the participants in this study alluded to some existing broad diversity-related training in their universities and faculties, many of them articulated the need for more formal and effective training that explicitly addresses weight bias. Drawing from the example of the University of New Mexico and the case of Geoffrey Miller, perhaps all universities should consider recruiting an obesity stigma expert to conduct sensitivity training.

Weight discrimination is illegal in the state of Michigan and in six U.S. cities (San Francisco, CA; Santa Cruz, CA; Madison, WI; Urbana, IL; Binghamton, NY; Washington, DC; Minnesota Department of Human Rights, 2010). It has also been proposed as part of the new Icelandic constitution, where body weight would be added as a protected form of discrimination. In other words, this would make it illegal to discriminate against individuals on the basis of their body weight (Yale Rudd Center, 2012). While these represent the few examples of legislation focused on preventing overt discrimination based on body size, there arguably is a need for more. Given most academic institutions strive to be equitable, now is a good time for critical fat scholars to advocate for the inclusion of body weight into diversity-related university policies and processes. Lastly, while this study focused on post-secondary institutions, weight bias has also been shown to be a significant issue within K-12 schools (Puhl & Heuer, 2009). For this reason, I also believe that scholars in critical fat studies have a role to play in helping schools develop fat-positive language and policies and curriculum that help address the rising rates and negative impacts of fat bullying.

## **2. Critical fat studies should actively engage educational theory, research, and practice.**

While critical fat studies has much to offer education, it also could benefit from actively engaging with educational theory, research, and practice to develop a thoughtful fat pedagogy. Many of the participants articulated the fact that they had spent little time reflecting upon their pedagogy, but that it would be worthwhile to do so. The academic experiences articulated by the participants in this study suggest that doing fat pedagogy goes beyond the content of courses. Rather, they suggest that fat pedagogy involves the body of the instructor and the students, and the body of the institution (i.e., the physical structures and design, the faculties represented, the types of courses offered, and the funding that gets awarded). This follows what

Giroux (1999) has called “public pedagogy,” the idea that pedagogy is a cultural practice occurring beyond classrooms that informs knowledge and meaning.

As articulated in the introduction and literature review of this dissertation, dominant obesity discourse is perpetuated in schools and through curriculum (see Azzarito, 2007; Gard, 2008; Quennerstedt et al., 2010; Sykes, 2011), weight bias is on the rise and significantly impacts students, teachers, administrators in both K-12 schools and post-secondary institutions (Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Wann, 2009), and anti-fat prejudice reduction strategies have had limited results so far (Danielsdóttir et al., 2010). In considering these findings, Puhl and Heuer (2009) write that, “more work is clearly needed to examine the key factors that are necessary for effective stigma reduction and to determine particular approaches and strategies that work best” (p. 18). As articulated earlier, while reducing weight bias is an important area of research, more work is needed to explore other fat pedagogical practices.

Given the breadth of disciplines already contributing to and engaging in the field of critical fat studies, the move towards education is not such a stretch. Like Evans et al. (2008), I suggest that it is particularly generative when fields are actively seeking new interrelationships in order to better understand the complexity of phenomenon. My hope is that this dissertation serves as a call to both critical fat studies scholars and education scholars to engage one another in developing a fat pedagogy.

### **3. Critical fat studies should develop fat-inclusive teaching materials and resources.**

As articulated in Chapter Six, participants shared many different pedagogical strategies and practices that they found useful in the classroom. Many of the participants noted that one of the challenges in addressing dominant obesity discourse and dominant notions of fatness in post-secondary classrooms has been the lack of available resources. While participants

suggested that this is starting to change as more research articles and books related to the topic are written, a number of participants indicated a desire for more resources or ideas related to practicing critical fat studies in the post-secondary classroom. Thus, I felt a responsibility to my participants and to all those who wish to teach critical fat studies in the future to at least share some of the fat pedagogical practices gathered from my participants. These appear in the fourth research article, Chapter Seven.

An area for future research related to this finding is the need to investigate the efficacy of fat pedagogy strategies currently being practiced in post-secondary classrooms and also in K-12 school classrooms. While many critical pedagogues warn of the dangers of prescriptive classroom materials and resources (Gore, 1993; Shor, 1996), it is also problematic when classroom practices are avoided altogether in the literature (Britzman, 2003). While I am reluctant to recommend the development of teaching materials, which can inevitably be perceived and used as a “methods as ends” model of teaching (Britzman, 2003) that simply “reduces the complexity of pedagogical activity to a technical solution” (p. 62), I think more harm arises by not having such materials and resources available for inspiration at the very least. For example, this past year, I taught a methods course in Health and Physical Education at Lakehead University. It is a course designed to prepare pre-service teachers to teach health and physical education in high schools. I referred to my doctoral research a number of times in the class and, upon request from the students, gave a lecture on fatness and education. However, when they asked me for resources on how to teach in a more fat-inclusive way, I could only refer them to two websites, The Rudd Center for Food Policy website and the Teaching Tolerance website, the recently released *Health at Every Size* (Clifford, 2013) curriculum document, and

the book titled *Am I Fat? Helping Young Children Accept Differences in Body Size* (Ikeda & Naworski, 1992). I felt embarrassed that I could not provide them with more.

I believe this is a huge area for future research and an important area of focus for critical fat studies. While this dissertation may serve as one resource, I am already working on other projects also designed to fill a gap, such as the co-edited book titled *The Fat Pedagogy Reader: Challenging Weight-Based Oppression in Education* to be published in the “Counterpoints” series for Peter Lang Publishers in 2015. There is a need for more.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

Given that a growing number of scholars have drawn attention to the harmful consequences of size privilege, weight bias, and fat oppression within formal educational contexts (see Brown, 2012; Brownell et al., 2005; Fisanick, 2006, 2007; Puhl & Heuer, 2009), it is clear that more work needs to be done to address an educational climate that, as Aphramor (2005) asserts, “pathologizes, insults, and oppresses difference and fatness” (p. 334). Consequently, there is a great need for research that explores potential strategies for, and approaches to, addressing weight-based oppression that is empirically based, broader in scope, and based in a range of perspectives (Watkins et al., 2012). This study was a direct response to that call.

Analyzing and sharing the insights of post-secondary educators from around the world and from various disciplines on their pedagogical practices to teaching about critical fat studies serves to highlight connections among teaching practices, teacher embodiment, and social and cultural discourses, and in doing so, helps to inform an emerging fat pedagogy. Such pedagogy aims to promote safe learning spaces for all students, regardless of size, and to disrupt weight-related oppression, intolerance, insensitivity, and discrimination.

It is not uncommon to see in the field of education toolkits for teaching, complete with strategies that could be tried and used by anyone seemingly with the same results. That was not the goal of my research although, as noted above, I do see value in having more resources for educators. In addition to describing the pedagogical approaches of the participants in this study, I also highlighted some of the lived experiences of those working to address weight-based oppression. Consequently, I hope that this research will contribute to various fields of literature, such as critical fat studies, higher education, social justice education, and body studies. Drawing upon the nascent field of critical fat studies, my aim was to avoid further reproducing weight-based oppression, and to instead promote learning that values learners of all sizes and weights and that offers learners a complex understanding of fat and fatness. Given that scholarship challenging dominant obesity discourse is relatively new, I also ventured to illustrate some of the emerging nuances within the field of critical fat studies and to articulate how the various subfields are distinct and important.

The purpose of this study was to examine the academic experiences, the philosophical approaches, and the pedagogical practices of scholars doing critical fat scholarship. My interest was in exploring not only the *what* and *how* of teaching critical fat studies, but also the *why*. Doing so elicited rich experiences of how bodies talk in classrooms, how the field of critical fat studies has emerging subfields, how the field faces significant resistance in post-secondary institutions, and how fat pedagogy has many similarities to critical pedagogy. It exemplified how instructor/student bodies are implicated in the politics of obesity (re)production within the academy and how the emerging field of critical fat studies may offer new ways of conceptualizing body pedagogies. The findings also revealed how different perspectives within the field and sites of resistance outside the field are contributing to challenging academic

experiences. Lastly, this study articulated key characteristics of an emerging fat pedagogy that draws upon critical pedagogy but offers a unique framework for teaching about fat in the classroom.

This dissertation is a call for higher education to start recognizing the harmful impact of size privilege and to seek ways to address this important social justice issue. In a time of increased body standardization, testing, and measurement, and a context in which obesity discourses continue to wreak havoc on *everybody*, there is a need for educational institutions to play a critical role in redefining “healthy” body ideals so that fewer students continue to believe that fat is bad and thin is good.

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## APPENDIX A: RESEARCH INVITATION



Faculty of Education

(807) 343-8478

(807) 346-7882

emcarte1@lakeheadu.ca

May 10, 2013

**Letter of Invitation to Participate in Doctoral Study**

Dear Potential Participant:

I would like to invite you to take part in a research project conducted as part of my Doctor of Philosophy degree. For this work, I wish to address the paucity of research on weight-based oppression in higher education, expressed as fat phobia and fat bullying. As a scholar and educator in this field, your perspective and experience would be highly valuable to this work.

For my research, I aim to examine the philosophical perspectives and pedagogical approaches used by faculty in the social sciences, humanities, health, behavioural sciences, and education, who are known for their work addressing weight-based oppression. As a faculty participant you will be invited to submit your course outline(s) and any relevant descriptions of assignments prior to a 75-90 minute telephone or skype, digitally recorded interview. This will help me to tailor the interview to your specific teaching experiences. Interview topics will include your teaching background, interests in weight-based oppression, teaching approach and philosophy, and any challenges or barriers you have faced while teaching about weight-based oppression. Of course, your participation is entirely voluntary. Should you choose to participate you may decline to answer any question. There are no foreseeable risks or harms to participating in the study, and you may choose to withdraw from the study at any point without repercussion. No identifying information will be used (i.e. institution affiliation, name, etc.) and participants will be encouraged to suggest a pseudonym for use in the reporting of results. The data collected from the interviews will only be viewed by me and my supervisor, and will be securely stored in the Faculty of Education for five years, at which point it will be destroyed. It is my hope that you will consider participating in this important research study and/or that you might suggest other colleagues doing important work in this area. I am aware that this may be a charged issue as shown through the literature. Should you wish to discuss the topic beyond the scope of this study, I am happy to assist you in seeking support people and/or clinics at your university.

Your participation will contribute to a growing body of research in fat studies. As a participant, your interview transcript will be returned to you for verification and if you are interested in receiving a summary of the research results at the completion of the research, please let me know. Furthermore, at the completion of the research I will invite all faculty to collaborate on future publications in this area. It is my hope that the research will be presented at conferences, published in academic and non-academic journals, presented as a Professional Development workshop, and used to support organizations addressing weight-based oppression.

Thank you for your consideration. Should you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me, my supervisor, or the University Research Ethics Board (contact info below).

Erin Cameron, PhD Student (emcarte1@lakeheadu.ca tel: 807-343-8478)

Teresa Socha, Doctoral Supervisor (teresa.socha@lakeheadu.ca tel: 807-343-8052)

Lakehead University Research Ethics Board (research@lakeheadu.ca tel: 807-343-8283)

## APPENDIX B: CONSENT FORM

**Lakehead**  
UNIVERSITY

Faculty of Education

(807) 343-8478  
(807) 348-7882  
emcarte1@lakeheadu.ca

### Consent Form

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in the study *Reclaiming the Other F-Word: Addressing Weight-Based Oppression in Higher Education*. I have read and understood the purpose and intent of this study. I realize that this is a chance to share my philosophical perspectives and pedagogical approaches to teaching about weight-based oppression in higher education.

As a faculty participant I realize I will be asked to submit course outline(s) and any relevant descriptions of assignments prior to a 75-90 minute telephone, digitally recorded interview. Should I choose to participate I may decline to answer any question and may choose to withdraw from the study at any point without repercussion. I also realize that no identifying information will be used (i.e. institution affiliation, name, etc.) and that I will be invited to provide a pseudonym. The interviews will be audiorecorded and transcribed, and the transcripts sent to me for verification. This data will be securely stored at Lakehead University for a period of five years, at which point it will be destroyed.

I recognize that this study is intended to inform fat pedagogy in higher education and will contribute to the available research on teaching strategies that address weight-based oppression. I support the research to be presented at conferences, in academic and non-academic journals, workshops, and to support organizations working to address weight-based oppression. If I am interested in receiving a summary of the research results at the completion of the research, I will indicate so below by including my email address. Also, if I am interested in collaborating in the publication of these research findings once the research is completed I will include my email below the primary researcher.

Yes, I would like to receive a summary of the research results at the completion of the research.

Yes, I am interested in collaborating on future publications and presentations once the research is completed.

Please email me at \_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

- 1) Agenda
  - a) Introductions and thank them for sending a signed informed consent form.
  - b) Begin Recording
  - c) Interview Commences
  
- 2) Interview Questions
  - a. Personal Background (Prior to each interview I will attempt to find out as much information about each faculty member but in case information is minimal I will ask the following questions regarding their background.)
    - i. Please briefly describe your academic career as a faculty member (i.e. years teaching, which institutions, etc.).
    - ii. Do you have a specialty? If so, what?
    - iii. Tell me about the post-secondary setting and department in which you teach now.
    - iv. What else do you do professionally? In the way of service, scholarship, consulting, etc.?
    - v. Any other relevant professional experience that would help me to understand your professional background?
  - b. The Field of Fat Studies
    - i. Where does your interest in the field of fat studies come from?
    - ii. What people, events, or other things have influenced your interests and/or commitment?
    - iii. Please give a brief description of how you have employed fat studies within your research and teaching to date.
    - iv. How has the field of fat studies shaped your teaching?
    - v. In your experience, what are the core assumptions, beliefs, guiding philosophies and/or theories that inform fat studies?
    - vi. What bodies of knowledge and/or theories do you believe are most important to the field of Fat Studies?
    - vii. What do you believe are some of the essential core tenets or non-negotiable aspects that constitute the field of Fat Studies?
  - c. Course information
    - i. How long have you been teaching the course?
    - ii. When and by whom was the course first developed?
    - iii. Students taking the course are predominantly from which programs?
    - iv. How many students are in the course?
    - v. What is the gender distribution of the course? Of your department?
  - d. Pedagogical Approaches
    - i. How do you approach teaching about weight-based oppression in your course? Please describe in detail what you do.
    - ii. Do you feel weight-based oppression is different than other oppressions? If yes, why? If no, why?
    - iii. Do you teach weight-based oppression differently than other topics? If yes, why? If no, why?
    - iv. When you teach about weight-based oppression, what do you hope students walk away understanding, and/or believing?
    - v. Are there any topics pertaining to weight-based oppression that you believe should be covered? If so, what?

- vi. What would I see if I observed you teaching about weight-based oppression? What strategies do you use?
- vii. Can you tell me a story about a time from your teaching about weight-based oppression that has impacted your teaching positively and negatively?
- viii. What do you feel has worked for you teaching about weight-based oppression? Explain.
- ix. What do you feel didn't work for you teaching about weight-based oppression? Explain.
- x. What questions did you ask students to ponder and/or consider regarding weight-based oppression?
- xi. Do you have any further thoughts on how we can support the learning of students about weight-based oppression?
- e. Philosophical Perspective
  - i. Why do you address weight-based oppression in your classes?
  - ii. What are some of your own beliefs, values, and philosophies about weight-based oppression?
  - iii. How do these underlying beliefs, values, and assumptions inform your teaching practices around weight-based oppression?
  - iv. Do you have stories that illuminate these beliefs?
  - v. Do you have any thoughts on how your own identities, fears, and biases have influenced your perspectives on weight-based oppression?
- f. Challenges and Barriers
  - i. The literature suggests that teaching about weight-based oppression is challenging, has this been your experience? If yes, explain. If no, explain.
  - ii. The literature suggests that teaching about weight-based oppression causes discomfort for students, has this been your experience? If yes, explain. If no, explain.
  - iii. Have you ever had an experience when you have confronted overt weight bias or discrimination in your class? If so, what did you do? If no, what would you do?
  - iv. When teaching about weight-based oppression, have students ever overtly challenged the legitimacy of what you are teaching? If so, what did you do? If no, what would you do?
  - v. Do you have any thoughts on how we encourage ally building? And/or how we might inspire students to reflect upon how bodies enact power and privilege?
  - vi. As an academic working within the field of fat studies, have you personally encountered resistance and/or barriers to your work? If so, how did you respond?
  - vii. As an academic working within the field of fat studies, how have you felt supported in your teaching about weight-based oppression?
  - viii. Within ethics of care, self is said to be critical to ones teaching. As such, how do you ensure care for self? What does that entail for you?
- g. Further Comments?
  - i. Is there anything else you would like add?

C. Thank them for their time and remind them that they will get a copy of the transcript so that the participant can check its validity and to ensure the data is correct.

## APPENDIX D: FIRST-CYCLE CODING

Through the first cycle coding process, 76 different codes emerged (see Figure 3).

✖ ACA_ACADEMY {0-0}	✖ bod_unborn body {1-0}	✖ P_PEDAGOGY {0-0}
✖ aca_academy resistance {44-0}	✖ CAR_CAREER {0-0}	✖ ped_atmosphere {18-0}
✖ aca_different disciplines {31-0}	✖ car_career barriers {10-0}	✖ ped_bodies matter {58-0}
✖ aca_dominant discourse {19-0}	✖ car_career journey {11-0}	✖ ped_challenges {57-0}
✖ aca_fat studies policing {2-0}	✖ car_coming out process {5-0}	✖ ped_dialogue {21-0}
✖ aca_institutional oppression {45-0}	✖ car_finding community {14-0}	✖ ped_different meaning {32-0}
✖ aca_shifting attitudes {9-0}	✖ car_future ideas {3-0}	✖ ped_objective {11-0}
✖ aca_student resistance {17-0}	✖ car_introduction {13-0}	✖ ped_pedagogy {25-0}
✖ aca_student response {32-0}	✖ car_mentor {3-0}	✖ ped_science {18-0}
✖ aca_thin privilege {2-0}	✖ car_personal interest {37-0}	✖ ped_social justice {52-0}
✖ ACT_ACT CLASSROOM {0-0}	✖ car_research interest {36-0}	✖ ped_socio-cultural-political {53-0}
✖ act_activism {1-0}	✖ car_responsibility {9-0}	✖ ped_story {38-0}
✖ act_assignments {6-0}	✖ car_success {9-0}	✖ ped_strategic {18-0}
✖ act_course topics {91-0}	✖ class size {17-0}	✖ ped_student learning {40-0}
✖ act_embodiment {11-0}	✖ classes taught {17-0}	✖ ped_student-oriented {16-0}
✖ act_pop culture {15-0}	✖ FAT_FAT STUDIES {0-0}	✖ ped_WHAT DOESN'T WORK {35-0}
✖ act_reflection {26-0}	✖ fat_fat studies emerging {18-0}	✖ ped_WHAT WORKS {21-0}
✖ act_text {32-0}	✖ fat_fat studies literature {35-0}	✖ S_SELF-CARE {0-0}
✖ BOD_BODIES {0-0}	✖ fat_fat theory {49-0}	✖ self-care_community {19-0}
✖ bod_body acceptance {5-0}	✖ fat_influences {5-0}	✖ self-care_reflective practice {14-0}
✖ bod_bodys matter {25-0}	✖ fat_intersectionality {12-0}	✖ self-care_seperate {7-0}
✖ bod_researcher body {8-0}	✖ fat_language {4-0}	✖ self-care_teaching {3-0}
✖ bod_student body {9-0}	✖ fat_nuances {31-0}	✖ student population {13-0}
✖ bod_teacher body {29-0}	✖ fat_pedagogy {71-0}	✖ university climate {4-0}

Figure 3. First-cycle code list

## APPENDIX E: SECOND-CYCLE CODING

Through a process of second-cycle coding, I used ATLAS.ti 7.0 to develop hierarchies and networks for ‘at a glance’ user reference. This was an extremely useful tool as I went through a second-cycle coding process of reorganizing and condensing the data. Through ATLAS.ti, I used ‘at a glance’ formats, such as cloud hierarchies (see Figure 4), to help see the emergent categories.

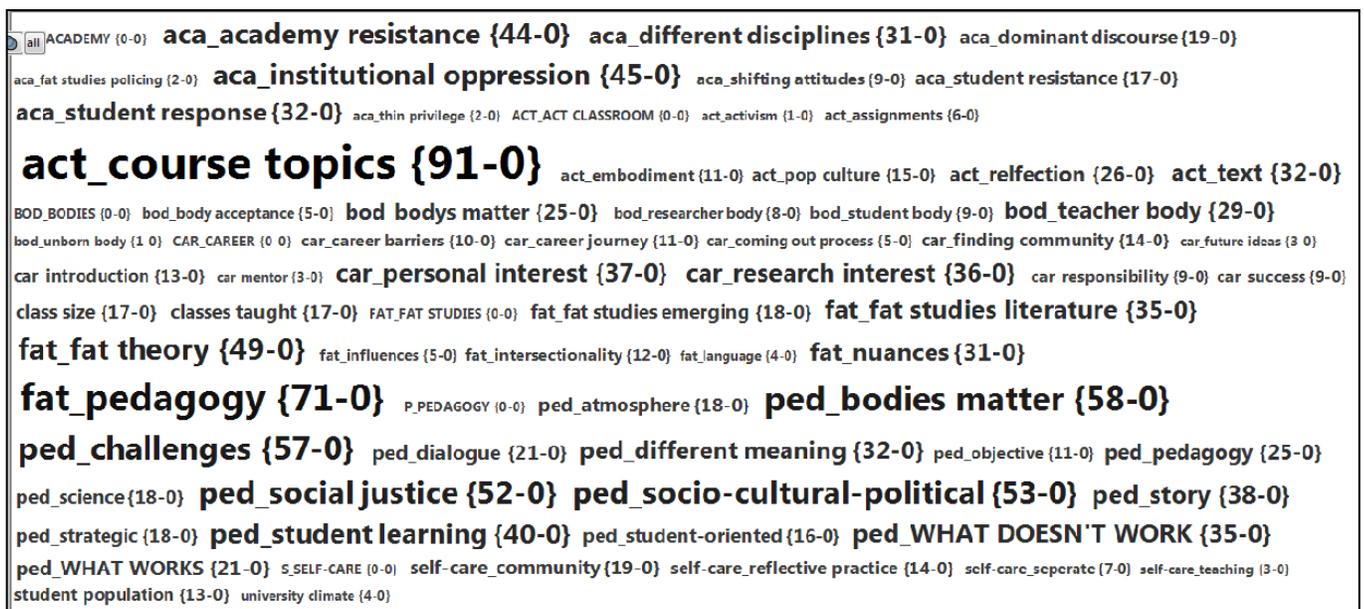


Figure 4. Second-cycle coding word cloud

As a result of the second-cycle coding process, developing categories emerged that later became the four major themes and focuses of my dissertation.

- a) *Bodies* that teach (BOD\_BODIES)
- b) *Why* I teach (ACA\_ACADEMY; CAR\_CAREER; S\_SELF-CARE)
- c) *How* I teach (FAT\_FAT STUDIES; P\_PEDAGOGY)
- d) *What* I teach (ACT\_CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES)