Tales of Ordinary Fatphobia

Fatphobia refers to all the hostile attitudes and behaviours that stigmatize and discriminate against fat[1] people. Ignorance and misunderstanding are at the root of many of the negative beliefs and perceptions propagated by this phenomenon. Before we can even think about laying the foundations that would encourage the inclusion of people of size, we must deconstruct the myths on which this discrimination and these stereotypes were built.

DECONSTRUCTING THE MYTHS

In the population as a whole, we know little about what influences weight, be it over or under. And yet, we're constantly hearing that food and physical activity are determining factors. Now, it's been proven that weight is a much more complex process than a simple matter of calories in and calories out.[2]

When it comes to fatphobia, words matter. Think of the expression a "fat cheque"; here, the adjective "fat" has positive connotations. Who doesn't want to find, win or cash a fat cheque? So why does this adjective become negative when it describes a person? There are many explanations, including the legacy of Judeo-Christian culture (gluttony, one of the seven deadly sins, is associated with fat people, as is sloth) and inaccurate messaging from the media (and elsewhere) that still often associates what's medically considered to be a heavy weight with poor health. (Fact: It's been shown that weight discrimination has an impact on the overall mortality of individuals.[3])

Other stereotypes associated with not having a "standard" weight include stupidity, cowardice, and poor personal hygiene. While we can't always trace the origins of these stereotypes, we CAN quickly establish that they are wrong and unjustified.

Many people also believe that bullying can motivate people to lose weight. But it has also been shown that humiliation can contribute to the development or exacerbation of behaviours that can lead to… weight gain.[4]

RAISING AWARENESS

There are important steps that need to be taken to help people of size—such as the teenagers in the film—integrate into society and thrive.

We need to think about our attitudes and actions. Are we contributing, either individually or collectively, to making the world more hostile towards people whose bodies do not meet current beauty norms? Are we rejecting, either actively or passively, fat people through our behaviour? Remember: Fatphobia is not only a thin-people phenomenon. Many larger people can also demonstrate this behaviour, with regard to either themselves or to others.

Normalizing larger bodies is also crucial to eliminating body-weight stigma. As long as we persist in having a negative view of bodies that don't conform to existing standards, we can't expect people of size to feel at ease in public spaces. These negative perceptions can manifest in a number of ways, such as:

- thinking that a fat person is necessarily sick or unhealthy;
- considering people of size to be uglier or to have less beautiful bodies;
- believing that a person of size should not be doing certain things (wearing certain clothes, eating certain foods, etc.).

Tales of Ordinary Fatphobia

A MINI-GUIDE TO JOSIANE BLANC'S
SHORT DOCUMENTARY

Fat people are not responsible for their exclusion. Who would choose to become a laughingstock? To become a pariah?

Negative perceptions of larger people may make them feel like they have to compensate for their weight. In the face of bullying (especially of children) or rejection (more frequently among teenagers), young people are sometimes ready to do anything to be accepted by their peers. This can lead to:

- being overly nice or generous, which often opens the door to various types of abuse from others;

- losing one's sense of self-worth, and extreme humility, which in turn could result in manipulation, low self-esteem, and contempt from others;

- the development of unhealthy behaviours (food-related, psychological, etc.), often adopted to try to change and achieve that much-needed inclusion.

The results of exposure to weight-related hostility and rejection are also worrying, both physically and psychologically. They include:

- internalizing fatphobia (unconscious assimilation of the inaccurate stereotypes, beliefs, feelings or attitudes of others);

- social anxiety;

- voluntary isolation;

- developing eating or body-image disorders that could lead to serious health consequences.

SENSITIZING AND EDUCATING

Rather than foisting the responsibility for developing a thick skin against cruelty on victims of bullying and exclusion, we have a duty to educate and make everyone aware of this form of discrimination (and all other forms of discrimination, as well). It's crucial that we create environments that educate people about fatphobia—environments that refuse to tolerate it, and that promote safe spaces where fat people can develop and thrive.

But how can we, as individuals, not be fatphobic towards others? By examining our own perceptions and behaviours on a regular basis. As soon as we associate something negative solely with the size or weight of a person, there's a good chance that this is discrimination.

We also have to stop seeing a higher body weight as a temporary situation or as something that must—or will—change. It's possible that an individual who was larger as a child or teenager will remain so all their lives.

Correcting such deeply entrenched attitudes and reflexes may seem impossible. But there are simple actions we can take to turn things around: Avoid giving compliments based on looks (you're handsome/pretty, you've got beautiful eyes/a nice smile, etc.), for instance, and emphasize the person's talents and skills (you're generous, you have a good sense of humour, you are creative, etc.).

Accepting others is important, but we can't ask ourselves to accept others until we've first learned to accept—and to love—ourselves. It's not an easy task; everything in our environment seems to disparage fat people. It's a constant challenge. But until people of size see themselves as having just as much value as the next person, they won't deem themselves worthy of thriving alongside everyone else.

Once we've realized that one young person out of two doesn't like their physical appearance, as revealed in the film, it quickly becomes crucial, even vital, that we start to value people for reasons other than their bodies. For many of these young people, this could be the key to turning the tide.

RESOURCES

BOOKS:

Fearing the Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia by Sabrina Strings (2019)

Fat! So? Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size by Marilyn Wann (1998)

ONLINE:

Body Brave:
A charity that provides accessible eating-disorder treatment and support, and advances community training and education on body diversity, as well as on other topics.

bodybrave.ca
(Body Brave is also on social media.)

Body Confidence Canada (BCC):
BCC advocates for equitable and inclusive images, messages, practices and policies supporting body diversity.

bodyconfidencecanada.com
(BCC is also on social media.)

IF YOU ARE IN DISTRESS:

Kids Help Phone – Jeunesse, j'écoute
Phone (24/7): 1-800-668-6868
Text (24/7): 686868

kidshelpphone.ca – **jeunessejecoute.ca**

Suicide prevention hotline
Phone (24/7): 1-866-277-3553

Anorexie et boulimie Québec (French and English)

Help and referral line for individuals with eating or body-image disorders. Also aimed at their loved ones and at community counsellors and educators.

Phone (8 a.m. to 3 a.m.): 514-630-0907 (Montreal) or 1-800-630-0907 (elsewhere in Quebec)

anebquebec.com

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Edith Bernier is an author, public speaker and consultant. A Journalism Bachelor, she is known for taking a stand against fatphobia and encouraging the inclusion of fat people in society. After dedicating over six years to *The Plus-Size Backpacker* blog, she created *Grossophobie.ca – Infos & référence*, the first French reference platform on fatphobia, in August 2019. Her second book, *Grosse, et puis ?*, was released in September 2020.

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[1] Though some readers may be shocked at the use of the word "fat," which is still frequently deemed to be derogatory, it's the preferred term for organizations such as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance in the U.S. and other advocates who seek to destigmatize and reclaim it.

[2] HANN, Alison, Ashley FRAWLEY and Gillian SPEDDING. "Not Very NICE: Deviance, Stigma and Nutritional Guidelines Related to Healthy Weight and Obesity," *The International Journal of Health Planning and Management*, 2016, 32(4):416-432. doi:10.1002/hpm.2350

[3] SUTIN, Angela R., Yannick STEPHAN and Antonio TERRACCIANO. "Weight Discrimination and Risk of Mortality," *Psychological Science*, 2015, 26(11):1803-1811. doi:10.1177/0956797615601103

[4] VOGEL, Lauren. "Fat Shaming Is Making People Sicker and Heavier," *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 2019, 191(23):E649-E649. doi:10.1503/cmaj.109-5758