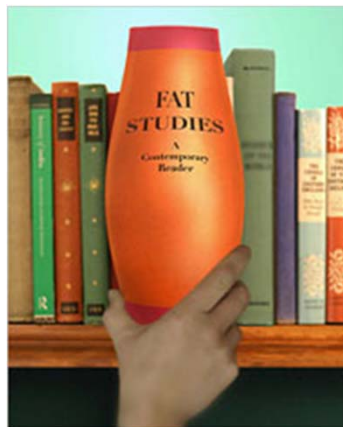


# 1. Weapons of Mass Distraction

- My strategies:
- Placing weight obsession into historical and cultural focus
- Linking weight to income
- Exposing methodological flaws in the “But aren’t they unhealthy” myth
- Exposing methodological flaws in the “Why can’t they lose weight” myth
- The Health at Every Size Movement and strategies for overcoming student resistance



## 2. CONTROL OF WOMEN'S APPEARANCE

Susan Brownmiller's book FEMININITY (1986):

- Women are expected to look and dress in ways that immobilize them
- These constricting norms are thought to be the invention of women themselves
- Without conformity to these norms, women cannot marry or function in society
- The fashion exaggerates the smallness of a feature that is already smaller in women than in men
- The fashion is considered trivial when in fact nonconformity to this fashion has vital consequences for women
- The medical establishment endorses the practice as health-promoting while at the same time treating large numbers of women for medical complications resulting from the practice

### 3. HISTORY OF FAT

Early “goddess figures”

Venus of Willendorf, 4.3 inches, estimated to be from 24,000 and 22,000 BCE

Venus of Hohle Fels, estimated 35,000-40,000 years ago, made from woolly mammoth tusk

Venus of Dolní Věstonice, 4.3 inches, oldest ceramic figure



## 4. HISTORY OF FAT IN THE U.S.

- From the 1880s to the 1920s, the image of fat as pleasant and prosperous began to change in the U.S.
- The agricultural economy shifted to an industrial economy
- There was a huge wave of immigration, and people of Northern European descent wanted to distinguish themselves physically and racially from immigrants
- Thinness was a sign of morality
- Medical profession switched from advocating weight gain to advocating weight loss

Laura Fraser, *The Fat Studies Reader*

## 5. History of the Fat Liberation Movement

- Arose from civil rights movement and gay liberation movement
- National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), founded in 1969 by Bill Fabrey
- The Fat Underground, Los Angeles 1973-1977
- Fat Liberation Manifesto, by Judy Freespirit and Aldebaran, 1973: “Fat people of the world, unite! You have nothing to lose.”



## 6. Media Focus on Fattest Nations

“Somewhere along the way, [Americans have] supersized ourselves into becoming the fattest nation on earth” (MSNBC, 2003).

“Australia has become the fattest nation in the world, with more than 9 million adults now rated as obese or overweight, according to an alarming new report” (Stark, 2008)

“Canadian adults, both men and women, are the most obese in a survey of 63 nations that raises new health warnings for our country.” (Spears, 2008).

“Fat German citizens—the fattest in the European Union?” (Müller-Nothmann, 2008).

“Now heavyweight Brits are the fattest people in Europe” (Macrae, 2008)

“South Africans among world’s fattest people, survey finds” (Smith, 2012).

## 7. INTERNATIONAL DATA ON WEIGHT

WHO statistics 2006 of 10 countries with the greatest “obesity” for adults:

- Nauru (75%), Cook Islands (63%), Samoa (60%), Marshall Islands (46%), Micronesia (44%), United Arab Emirates (33%), Bahrain (29%), Kuwait (29%), Jordan (26%), and Fiji (24%)
- United States is 20<sup>th</sup> and Canada is 37<sup>th</sup>
- WHO statistics 2006 of countries that have 10% or more of “overweight” children:
- Albania (22%), Ukraine (20%), Comoros (14%), Uzbekistan (14%), Bosnia and Herzegovina (13%), Serbia and Montenegro (13%), Georgia (13%), Lesotho (12%), Kiribati (11%), Algeria (10%), Armenia (10%)

# 8. The “War on Obesity”

Surgeon General C. Everett Koop declared War on Obesity in 1995 as part of the Shape Up America Campaign with over \$1 million in funding from Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Slimfast (Patricia Lyons, *Fat Studies Reader*)

Weight in the U.S. rose in the 1990s:

- 1991: average weight 179 lbs for men and 143 lbs for women
- 1998: average weight 186 lbs for men and 151 lbs for women (Glen Gaesser, *Fat Studies Reader*)

But remained the same in the first decade of 2000:

- JAMA 2010 (Flegal et al.): no change in average weights of children or adults in the past decade

Also, we are living longer and longer:

- Life expectancy for people born in 1930: 58.1 years for men and 61.6 years for women
- Life expectancy for people born in 2014: 76.4 years for men and 81.2 years for women



# 9. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN WEIGHT AND INCOME IN U.S.

**Why are poor people fat and rich people thin? This relationship is especially true for women**

Fatness is highly correlated with poverty. Fatness and poverty can often be used as synonyms

**THIS IS WHAT PEOPLE ASSUME:**

**POVERTY -----> FATNESS**

First you are poor and this causes you to become fat

**BUT THIS IS WHAT RESEARCH SHOWS:**

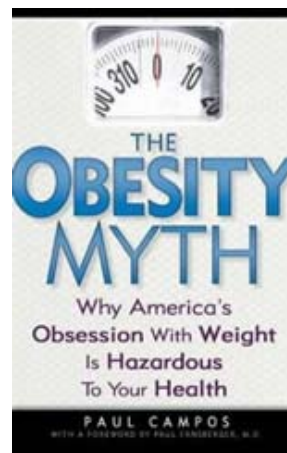
**FATNESS -----> POVERTY**

**First you are fat and this causes you to become poor**

“While there is evidence that poverty is fattening, a stronger case can be made for the converse: fatness is impoverishing” (Paul Ernsberger, *Fat Studies Reader*)

## 10. WEIGHT, RACE, AND CLASS

- Given the strong relationship between weight and income, author Paul Campos (2004) has argued that fat prejudice is a subtle way to discriminate against poor people (and thus also people of color) without being overtly racist and classist
- Research shows that African American and Latina adolescent girls are happier with their bodies, less focused on weight, lower rate of eating disorders, and weigh more, than white adolescent girls
- Campos: these findings are being used by Weight Watchers and Jenny Craig to develop more “culturally sensitive” weight loss programs for women of color



# 11. Sexual Orientation

- In the 1980s, 2 articles about lesbians and body image that have been cited in nearly every study on sexuality:
  - 1. Sari Dworkin: women are told how to look and lesbians are women
  - 2. Laura Brown: lesbian communities are more accepting of diversity, including awareness of fat oppression
- One could also argue that it is being sexually involved with men that influences concerns about weight and dieting. This would predict that it is heterosexual women and gay men who would be more affected by weight norms than lesbians and heterosexual men.
- Little research on bisexual women and men and weight/body image
- Because bisexuals may have been sexually involved with both women and men, do body image concerns vary with gender of partner?

## 12. Gender Identity

- Bear Bergman, *Fat Studies Reader*:
- Whether I'm fat or not depends on whether the person or people looking at me believe me to be a man or a woman.
- As a man, I'm a big dude, but not outside the norm for such things.... As a big guy, I'm big enough to make miscreants or troublemakers decide to take their hostility elsewhere, big enough to walk calmly through the streets because I'm safe unless there's no easier target.
- As a woman, I am revolting. I am not only unattractively mannish but also grossly fat. The clothes I can fit into at the local big-girl stores tend to fit around the neck and then get bigger as they go downward, which results in a festive butch-in-a-bag look - all the rage nowhere, ever.

# 13. BUT AREN'T THEY UNHEALTHY?

Confounds in the research that claims to demonstrate a relationship between weight and health risks:

1. NO CONTROL FOR INCOME. Fat people tend to be poorer than thin people, and income in the U.S. is associated with access to health care, health insurance, etc.
2. NO CONTROL FOR DIETING. Fat people in the U.S. have dieted more than thin people, and dieting is associated with health risks (e.g., high blood pressure, craving for fat, high cholesterol, heart disease, and death).
3. NO CONTROL FOR THE STRESS OF LIVING AS A MEMBER OF AN OPPRESSED GROUP
4. RELUCTANCE TO SEEK MEDICAL TREATMENT
5. Let's suppose that even when all these confounds are controlled, there is still a difference between fat and thin people in health. This does not necessarily mean that putting fat people on a diet will improve their health; formerly fat people (successful dieters) are not the same as always thin people.

## 14. Weight and the Pharmaceutical Industry

- NY Times Nov. 3, 2011 “Health Guideline Panels Struggle With Conflicts of Interest”:
- “When a federal panel recently recommended against prostate cancer screening for most men, it tried to steer clear of any suggestions of commercial bias....But three other federal panels that are quietly developing major health guidelines on the leading causes of cardiovascular disease—hypertension, cholesterol and obesity—operate under less stringent ethics recommendations....At least eight of the 19 members of the obesity panel have financial ties to a phalanx of private business interests, records show. GlaxoSmithKline, maker of Alli, an over-the-counter product, has made payments to four of them. Four have financial ties to Allergan, maker of the Lap-Band stomach device. One is paid to speak or advise 11 companies with obesity products. And others consult for companies like Nestlé or Weight Watchers.”

# 15. CHANGING DEFINITIONS OF WEIGHT AND HEALTH IN THE U.S.

- Lisa Schwartz and Steven Woloshin (from Paul Ernsberger, ASDAH 2007)
- **“OVERWEIGHT”:**
- BMI for “overweight” changed from 27 to 25 in 1998
- 30,500,000 new cases of “overweight” people based on the stricter definition
- **DIABETES:**
- Glucose levels changed in 1997 from 140 mg per dl to 126
- 1,700,000 new cases of diabetes based on the stricter definition
- New category of “pre-diabetes” defined as 110 mg per dl; changed to 100 in 2003
- **HYPERTENSION:**
- High blood pressure changed in 1997 from 160/100 to 140/90
- 13,500,000 new cases of hypertension based on the stricter definition
- New category of “prehypertension” defined as 120/80
- **CHOLESTEROL:**
- Changed in 1998 from 240 mg/dl to 200
- 42,500,000 new cases of high cholesterol based on the stricter definition

# 16. MORTALITY

- Everyone will die—the mortality rate is one per person
- “World Death Rate Holding Steady at 100%” The Onion, 1997
- When mortality rates go down, this does not mean that some people have eternal life
- Healthy countries have high rates of cardiovascular disease and cancer
- Countries with high rates of infant mortality, war-related death, natural disasters, accidents, malnutrition, and infectious disease will not have many people live to an old age
- If we cure some types of cancer, cardiovascular illness will go way up, and vice versa



# 17. WEIGHT AND MORTALITY

- Summary of Paul Ernsberger:

## **Studies that find fat people at high or moderate risk for mortality:**

Life insurance policy holders, Harvard alumni, residents of Framingham MA, American Cancer Society volunteers, residents of Finland, white women in Charleston SC

## **Studies that find no differences in weight and mortality:**

Black people in Charleston SC, Black women insured by Kaiser, residents of rural Italy, residents of American Samoa, Maoris in New Zealand

## **Studies that find fat people at LOWER risk for mortality than thin people:**

German construction workers, San Francisco longshoremen, residents of rural Scotland, residents of Fiji, elderly populations

## 18. WHY CAN'T THEY JUST LOSE WEIGHT?

- Research on weight loss:
- -randomly assigns people to one of several “treatment conditions” including a waiting list control group
- -weighs people before and after treatment and during a follow-up period (e.g., 6 or 12 months later)
- -has a high drop-out rate, especially when participants are in the waiting list condition, or don’t like the treatment to which they were randomly assigned, or don’t lose weight
- -reports pounds/kilos lost instead of focus from “clinical” to “non-clinical” levels of BMI (body mass index)
- -at least 50% of people who lost 5% of their weight regained it after two years. 80% of people who lost 10% of their weight regained it after one year (Fildes et al., 2015, AJPH)

## 19. The Health at Every Size Movement

- Focus on health, not on weight:
  - access to nutritious food free of toxins and pesticides
  - access to health care and health insurance
  - ability to engage in fun sports and activities
  - access to a secure job
  - adequate sleep
  - supportive community  
of family and friends

## 20. SO WHY HAVEN'T FAT PEOPLE ORGANIZED?

- Thinness is one of the major criteria in determining physical attractiveness in the U.S. It is difficult for women to violate appearance norms--they are not trivial.
- Fat people, particularly women, tend to be poor in the U.S., and thus have little political power.
- Fat people are blamed for their weight--most people believe that diets are effective if the dieter has "will power."
- A multi-billion dollar economy would collapse if people stopped focusing on their weight

## 21. What is Fat Studies?

In the tradition of critical race studies, queer studies, and women's studies, fat studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body.

- The scholarly field of fat studies advocates respectful treatment of all people regardless of body size.
- Fat studies scholars ask why we oppress people who are fat and who benefits from that oppression, arguing that weight, like height, is a human characteristic that varies across any population.
- Fat studies, then, resembles other academic disciplines that question discriminatory practices based on race, ethnicity, gender, or age.

Marilyn Wann: "Weight discrimination will continue to thrive so long as efforts to end it focus on changing people's bodies rather than changing people's minds."

## 22. What can we do to throw our weight around?

- Read original research articles about weight, not media summaries
- Follow the money: “If you’re not scared, they’re not making money” (Rachel Maddow)
- Speak out about oppression—it is not ok to discriminate against any group based on appearance
- Ask ourselves what we would be thinking and talking about if we weren’t focused on weight and dieting
- Follow the lead of other civil rights movements and organize! To quote Phyllis Chesler, “Women, you are only as safe as I am brave.”

## 23. NAOMI WOLF QUOTE

A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience....The nations seize with compulsive attention on this melodrama because women and men understand that it is not about cholesterol or heart rate or the disruption of a line of tailoring, but about how much social freedom women are going to get away with or concede. The media's convulsive analysis of the endless saga of female fat and the battle to vanquish it are actually bulletins of the sex war: what women are gaining or losing in it, and how fast.

THE BEAUTY MYTH, 1991