

Issue/Opinion:

Fat Bodies and Embodiment: Advancing Sociological Approaches

Carla A. Pfeffer, Purdue University North Central (cpfeffer@purdue.edu)

Michaela A. Null, Purdue University (mnull@purdue.edu)

The formation of the new section on the Body and Embodiment encourages exciting new possibilities for expanding understandings of the body beyond the anatomical and medical and into the social and relational. Further, sociology of the body and embodiment also serves a critical role in production of scholarship that dares to critique existing medical models of the body which often assume an authoritarian presence in mainstream dialogues. Yet, it is often difficult to challenge prevailing understandings of the body when particular forms of understanding and discourse are hegemonic. Often resigned to the “health and society” or “deviance” sections of introductory sociology texts (if mentioned at all), fatness is a prime example of the difficulty of seeing outside of our own limited and limiting paradigms. Sociology has often been more complicit with (than critical of) understandings of fatness and fat people as primarily a “social problem” or population that needs “fixing” or rescuing. The implicit assumption underlying some of these approaches to fatness is that the elimination of social inequality would likely remedy “the problem of obesity” by rendering nonexistent an entire body type--the fat body. Fat Studies, a subfield garnering more attention both within sociology and across other disciplines, is characterized by critical attention to fatness as a social construct, a political and social justice issue, and as identity or lived experience. Fat studies is critical of obesity discourse and trends toward medicalizing the body, and also questions assumptions--both societal and within the academy--about fatness and fat people.

Sociologists have begun to study the ways in which fatness intersects with gender, race, sexuality, and disability, as well as how understandings of fatness differ by culture and perhaps even by geographic region. Fatness is a pervasive topic both in the media and in political and public policy discourse, with even the fatness of babies up for public and scientific debate (see Franklin 2006; Gillman 2008). Fat is also a structural and institutional issue, as anti-fat stigma and discrimination cut across the areas of health care, education, and employment (Puhl and Brownell 2001). Recent efforts have compelled more critical analyses of fatness in sociology. Papers in the area of fat studies were presented at The North Central Sociological Association as early as 2006, and Jason Whitesel organized two fat studies NCSA panels during the 2008 meeting. A special issue of the *Sociology of Sport Journal* on “The Social Construction of Fat” was published in 2008, and 2009 marked the publication of two anthologies featuring contributions by sociologists--*Fat Studies in the UK* and *The Fat Studies Reader*. In 2010, Charlotte Cooper’s “Fat Studies: Mapping the Field” was published in *Sociological Compass* and sociologist Abigail Saguy organized a fat studies-focused “Gender and Body Size” lecture series at the UCLA Center for the Study of Women. The 2010 ASA Meeting in Atlanta marked the first Fat Studies-specific roundtable, which was the most well-attended roundtable in the Body and Embodiment section. All of these recent developments are illustrative of growing interest in fat studies. Similar levels of interest can be found in other national interdisciplinary conferences, such as the National Women’s Studies Association conference and the Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association conference. And there is more in the works. February 15, 2011 marks the deadline for submissions for the upcoming “Fat Masculinities” special issue of *Men and Masculinities*.

continued on page 4

Fat Bodies and Embodiment: Advancing Sociological Approaches, *continued from page 3*

Envisioning a sociology of fatness and fat identity allows us to imagine social processes of the body and embodiment that have remained largely unexplored to date. For example, how might explorations of how fat people's bodies move and take up space in the world shape our theories of body comportment and social distancing? How might we conceive of fatness as a form of identity or social resistance and what are limits to such approaches? How might we study fatness to determine merely why people are fat, but in what ways living in a fat-averse society might convey systematic advantage or disadvantage for particular bodies across the contexts of health care, families and relationships, social well-being, and access to employment and housing? Are there ways in which a fat-averse society generates not only stigma against those who are fat, but unhealthy behaviors amongst all those who have ever feared becoming a member of this stigmatized group? To be sure, it is rarely those who are actually fat who are featured in the ubiquitous commercials for diet and weight-loss products. How might sociological empirical investigation of the multi-billion-dollar weight-loss industry, at the interstices of the medical and pharmaceutical industries, provide new insights into other relationships between consumerism and (fear of) fatness? We think these are important questions deserving closer attention and look forward to future contributions to studies of fatness as the genesis of our section catalyzes cutting-edge work on sociology of the body and embodiment.

References

2008. "Fat Studies I" and "Fat Studies II." *Sessions at the Annual Meeting of the North Central Sociological Association*. Cincinnati, Ohio.
2010. "Faculty Curator Series: Gender and Body Size Lecture Series." *University of California Los Angeles Center for the Study of Women*. Los Angeles, California. Available online at: <http://www.cswucla.edu/research/conferences/gender-and-body-size>
2010. "Fat Bodies: Discourses, Frames, and Inequalities." *Section on Body and Embodiment Roundtable at the Annual Meeting of the American Sociological Association*. Atlanta, Georgia.
- Cooper, Charlotte. 2010. "Fat Studies: Mapping the Field." *Sociology Compass* 4(12): 1020–1034.
- Duncan, Margaret Carlisle, ed. 2008. "The Social Construction of Fat." *Special Issue of the Sociology of Sport Journal* 25(1).
- Franklin, Deborah. 2006. "Can a Baby be Too Fat?" *Morning Edition on National Public Radio*. Available online at: <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=6417869>.
- Gillman, Matthew W. 2008. "The First Few Months of Life: A Critical Period for Development of Obesity." *American Journal of Clinical Nutrition* 87: 1587-1589.
- Kwan, Samantha. 2006. "Framing Fat: Government, Activists and Industry Frame Contests." *Presented at the Annual Meeting of the North Central Sociological Association*. Indianapolis, Indiana.
- Null, Michaela A. 2006. "Admirers of Large Women: Formation and Maintenance of Sexual Preferences and Identities." *Presented at the Annual Meeting of the North Central Sociological Association*. Indianapolis, Indiana.
- Puhl, Rebecca M. and Kelly D. Brownell. 2001. "Bias, Discrimination, and Obesity." *Obesity Research* 9(12): 788-805.
- Rothblum, Esther and Sondra Solovay, eds. 2009. *The Fat Studies Reader*. New York: New York University Press.
- Tomrley, Corinna and Ann Kaloski Naylor, eds. 2009. *Fat Studies in the UK*. York, UK: Raw Nerve Books.
- Whitesel, Jason. 2006. "Sexual Imagery in Fat Gay Male Subcultures." *Presented at the Annual Meeting of the North Central Sociological Association*. Indianapolis, IN.