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**Position Paper: The Importance of Developing an Academic Obesity Studies Curriculum from a Communication Perspective**

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The American obesity “epidemic” is a societal conundrum that has sustained several decades and continues to challenge the world of academe. Obesity is defined as 30 or more pounds over a healthy weight; it is a physical condition that is impossible to hide and is often the dominant characteristic that defines an individual’s perception of self, shaping her or his interactions and relationships with others (Hellmich, 2007). Individuals who are obese and/or overweight have found that issues of weight overshadow their communication skills and everyday standards of living. Moreover, approximately 66 percent of people in the USA are now either overweight or obese, yet most individuals who are obese are marginalized, stigmatized, and discriminated against; it is widely accepted to discredit the greater part of Western society because of body size/shape (Hellmich, 2007). Therefore, this topic is significant because it is becoming increasingly apparent that weight discourses affect the *majority*, even though the current hegemonic power structure would lead mainstream society to believe that individuals who are obese are or should be classified as the “other.”

In lieu of these statistics, communication scholars must look beyond conventional modes of study that only chip away at past research concerning “body image” or “physical attractiveness” in relation to individuals who are obese. We must consider taking a more in-depth approach to the topic; one that is not only concerned with health communication, but that also allows for an interpersonal and/or critical-cultural perspective. As a multi-faceted discipline, it is vital for the field of communication to develop a higher education obesity studies curriculum because: (a) it is an innate human rights issue that should be addressed at an intellectual level, (b) it would offer a more comprehensive look at the social construction of obesity, (c) it would open doors to continued/sustained scholarship, and (d) it would challenge the status quo that equates obesity with unhealthiness, laziness, and an epidemic to be feared. These reasons, along with corresponding counterarguments, will be addressed in the following essay.

To begin, it is first essential to discuss why I am a viable adherent of and for obesity studies. For various epistemological assumptions I am adept at providing a link between scientific research and practical application with a rare dual perspective combining academic expertise and pragmatic experience; this enables me to bring authority and compassion to my research. Additionally, I am a dynamic role model for the ideas that I present. My personal life experiences and auto-ethnographic familiarity with weight gain and loss provide an important perspective and inspiration for my work. As a good number of individuals who are obese, I too have “struggled” (for lack of a better word) with the display of “excess” weight for my entire life, whereas my body shape/size does not necessarily comply with the societal norm.

My world view continually spurs me to address the intersections of weight issues in relation to interpersonal communication, nonverbal communication, display of artifacts, the media, performance, facework, gender, race, age, socioeconomic background, impression formation, humor use (as well as other specific communication tactics), and stigmatization/discrimination/marginalization. I hope to inspire the communication discipline to consider a new paradigm where these concepts are discussed by a more diverse population of researchers. I'm interested in shedding light on topics addressing male perspectives, voices of individuals who cannot separate weight from their own discourse (e.g. have dealt with being overweight/obese for a lifetime), of individuals who adopt the "jolly fat person" stereotype as a means to cope with their stigma, etc. Topics associated with obesity continue to surface as we acknowledge that it is a given point of reference within American culture and cannot be determined as one specific axiom.

Central to this argument is the assumption that the effects and discourses associated with obesity are fluid. Obesity cannot be studied with a deterministic lens; it must be framed within a dialectical structure of what it is *not* (Anderson, 1996). Whether an academic or a nonintellectual, there is no authentic, credible space where the oppression associated with obesity can be spoken about without some sort of intolerance; therefore it is difficult to begin formulating a theory associated with obesity studies (Young, 2005). Yet, given these assumptions, we have a humanistic obligation to press forward because “fat” is such a powerful, dangerous, slippery word, concept, and discourse. It has eluded many of the greatest political, social, and cultural movements of the twentieth century—including feminism.

I do not claim to be a feminist scholar, nor do I adopt all of the fervent convictions of the ever-developing field of “fat studies.” I do realize though, that the discipline has become more prominent after the phrase “fat is a feminist issue” was coined by Susie Orbach in 1978, even now that the rise in obesity and the increased prevalence of eating disorders suggests that women and men have learned a lesson other than the one Orbach wanted us to learn. Fat is still a feminist issue, however not quite the same feminist issue Orbach identified. Individuals who are obese are, in fact, much better readers of the media: our bodies enact our critique. Orbach offered us with the insight to recreate the relationship to food and to our bodies; insight that amounted to tools for reflecting on the personal effects of the media. Currently individuals who are obese confront less distinct boundaries between themselves and the media. Today, we mediate as we are mediated. Our bodies, regardless of the shape and size, are the medium of the message (Hood, 2005). Therefore, communication scholars must look beyond the feminist critique to strive for more enriched, supplemental research.

Beyond the standard medical and biological views of weight and obesity, “fat studies” examines the political and social ramifications of being overweight/obese. According to Hill (2006), fat studies has emerged as a small but growing interdisciplinary field in universities across the country, yet at present it seems that it is a field that is dominatingly researched by lesbian researchers with a “feminist axe to grind” or, conversely, a body of hard science researchers only concerned with the concept of morbid obesity as a health construct. Proponents of fat studies see it as the sister subject to women’s studies, queer studies, disability studies, and ethnic studies. Many of the terms and phraseologies associated with fat studies are very similar to those adopted by the gay rights movement (e.g. “coming out” as fat is similar to “coming out of the closet” if one is homosexual.) In many of its permutations, then, fat studies is the study of a people its supporters believe are victims of prejudice, stereotypes, and oppression by mainstream society (Lawrence, 2006).

Unfortunately fat studies proponents (individuals who challenge the accepted message that obesity is both avoidable and unhealthy) face stiff opposition. Though fat studies has begun to enter classrooms on several college campuses, the area still has a long way to go before becoming mainstream (Hill, 2006). Challengers of the fat studies offshoot say that it is a way of masking the epidemic instated by the medical industry by attempting to make it a part of social discourse. Moreover, Stephen Balch, president of the National Association of Scholars, gave a more traditional view of higher education in regards to fat studies:

“In one field after another, passion and venting have come to define the nature of what academics do. Ethnic studies, women’s studies, queer studies — they’re all about vindicating the grievances of some particular group. That’s not what the academy should be about. Obviously in the classroom you can look at issues of right and wrong and justice and injustice. But if the purpose is to vindicate fatness, to make fatness seem better in the eyes of society, then that purpose begs a fundamental intellectual question” (Lawrence, 2006).

Understandably, fat studies has been tagged with the assumption that this is a personal injustice that must be addressed in academe. Too often the ambitions of the postmodernist academy reflect narcissistic faculty interests rather than student needs; academic freedom without academic responsibility. In the case of fat studies I believe we must put aside political research agendas and begin to think critically about obesity as an all-encompassing topic that affects *everyone* on an interpersonal level. Journals such as the *Feminist Media Studies* and *International Journal of Obesity* cover the gamut of topics associated with obesity at one end of the spectrum or the other, yet wane in covering topics in the “middle ground” of obesity studies (e.g. how men are effected by obesity, how obesity influences communication tactics of various races, etc.) There are many nuanced aspects and underexplored gray areas associated with obesity studies (beyond feminist studies, queer studies, scientific studies, etc.) that must also be researched.

Another point to consider when addressing the necessity of an obesity studies curriculum from a communication perspective is to also recognize it is *not* merely a new social movement. With the rise of organizations such as the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), Health At Every Size (HAES), and the Association for Size Diversity & Health (ASDAH), obesity is characterized as a label instated by a capitalistic system concerned mostly with economics. For example, one of the objectives of NAAFA is to create a social environment where people of size would be accepted without fear of being ridiculed or mocked (Dave, 2006). Unfortunately this only assists in reifying the “us” versus “them” pattern. Indeed, there is a huge industry that benefits from widening the boundaries of what is considered a problematic weight and/or size including: weight loss centers, supplement makers, drug companies, physicians, and purveyors of diet books, foods, and programs, yet by framing obesity as a new social movement, where individuals who are obese should “protest” the current hegemonic power structure, we only create another realm of media that implies individuals that are obese are different and should be pitied. A new interpersonal perspective could assist in acknowledging that the minority *is* the majority when discussing obesity.

Moreover, I do not agree with the characterization of fat studies that feminist scholars have assigned to the discipline. In reclaiming the term "fat" as a badge of defiance, in the same way that many lesbians associate with terms like "queer" and/or "dyke" (Hill, 2009), feminist researchers unfairly brand the individuals associated with their work. Because of my unique interpersonal communication perspective, I'm very concerned with the labels that academics prescribe to our research, as well as the humanistic agency involved in our work. Therefore I describe people (myself included) that display an "excess" amount of weight as "individuals who are overweight/obese" because it first allows for our acknowledgement of a person’s individuality. At this point I've found that none of the aforementioned terms (including "fat") accurately operationalize the notion of weight, nor are they politically correct. Every label implies otherness; and after all, we are all human beings. The key aspect to this change of phrasing is the element of agency. By first indicating that any person displaying extra weight is an individual, it signifies that that person should not be objectified by her/his body or size. Obesity should not be considered the only characteristic that influences a person’s sense of self, and an interpersonal communication approach will allow for the reevaluation of this paradigm.

The above discussion begins to unpack the complex understanding associated with weight that I find to be imperative in understanding the humanistic aspects of obesity discourse. Further, in terms of my second point and in consideration of my own sense of awareness via auto-ethnographic work and other narratives that I’ve collected, it is becoming much more evident that obesity studies should be approached from a communication perspective because it would offer a more comprehensive look at the social construction that is typified by a multifarious construct such as obesity. As communication scholars, we will hopefully begin to address the idea that obesity is “a complex occurrence caused by the interaction of genetic, cultural, socioeconomic, racial, behavioral, physiologic, performative, metabolic, cellular, and molecular influences” (Montague, 2003).

Social constructionist thought would also assist in framing our understanding of obese bodies as social and cultural processes *in progress*. Obesity as an experience (e.g. between normal and abnormal, gaining and losing weight, health and disease, acceptable and unacceptable, notion of self, self-perception, other-perception, acceptance, denial, misrepresentation, etc.) would be considered more fluid and not simply a deviation to the norm (Goffmann, 1963). In recognizing the historical practices concerning obesity, the preferences of smaller body images in the media, the partiality of sexual content in the media, the general allegations of ineptitude amongst individuals who are obese, the CDC/BMI labeling, and the dominance of medicinal discourse in the definition of obesity, etc. we can begin to theorize as to how *all* have become prominent aspects of the ongoing discussion concerning weight.

Because the media have also been regarded as key contributors to the global rise in obesity, and most research attempts to demonstrate a direct effect between media consumption and obesity (Boyce, 2006), communication scholars should consider social construction as a core theoretical framework regarding obesity studies. There exists an intricate combination of meaning associated with the words overweight and/or obese that is gregariously associated with negatively connotative messages in the media. Newspapers, magazines, videos, and television bombard every age group with exercise and diet regimens, while self-help groups, parenting magazines, and professional conferences address the surge of eating disorders in the same population (Cramer & Steinwert, 1998). We are inundated with messages of consumption and deprivation in various media contexts—from commercials urging us to purchase calorie-laden meals to viewing all types of programming on the Food Network; astronomic annual revenues for the US diet industry were more than $55 billion in 2006 (Marketdata Enterprises, 2007). Paralleling these statistics, many individuals within the medical community and abroad posit that the stigma of obesity is not a disease, but a lifestyle choice.

One of the primary competing messages in the national news coverage was the emphasis of obesity as a problem of personal responsibility, pointing to individualistic solutions rather than larger environmental or societal changes (Andreyeva, Puhl, & Brownell, 2008). Messages reinforcing the notion of personal responsibility for weight gain are also evident from the diet industry, which relies on framing obesity as a self-inflicted problem requiring individual solutions through various weight loss products. The notion of choice illustrates Goffman’s (1963) definition of stigma by emphasizing the “otherness” that individuals who are obese encounter as well as the weight responsibility that is indefinitely deemed their own. Consequently, with all of these points it is clear that studying obesity from a communication perspective is intrinsically axiological in nature because *it concerns everyone*. Social constructionist thought would allow for an improved academic premise and emphasize the value of researching obesity in regards to many of the common ideas associated with weight.

A third reason why it is vital for the field of communication to develop a higher education obesity studies curriculum is because it would open doors to continued/sustained scholarship. Communication researchers have studied stereotyping as it pertains to race (Giles, 2000; Domke, McCoy, & Torres, 1999), gender (Popp, Donovan, Crawford, Marsh & Peele, 2003; Wood, 2007) and social class identity (Hughes & Baldwin, 2001; Jeffres, 1983), yet the scholars within our discipline have neglected to explore obesity as a characteristic that influences individual communication practices. Specifically, the use of various strategies as a means of coping with the stigma of obesity and managing relationships with others has been overlooked. “Gatekeepers” within our field should be more aware of the relevance to the communication discipline because of the vast statistical and sociological implications concerning all human beings. We must look beyond the formulaic theories such as those within the health communication realm that generally associate obesity with body image or a lackluster construct of a faceless/nameless group of people, and consider deepening our postulations in a way that will provide for richer investigations of weight in relation to individual communication practices.

A final motivating factor for the communication discipline to develop a higher education obesity studies curriculum is because it would challenge the status quo that equates obesity with unhealthiness, laziness, and an epidemic to be feared. In the dominant mainstream discourses regarding obesity, the BMI, media influences, others’ perceptions of the normal body, and medical attempts to create an optimally “healthy” body combine with somewhat Puritanical, Christian-philosophical conceptions concerning morality, virtue, and moderation (Carr & Friedman, 2005). This allows for little or no endorsement for individuals who are obese because their weight is viewed as a self-inflicted problem.

Individuals who are obese must adopt lifestyles that adhere to the notion of “being good” or having ample discipline and willpower to overcome their condition if it is their desire to strive closer to the norm. In the case of women, the general ideals of bodily normality and virtuosity of character are further linked with gender-bound expectations concerning the female body and women’s role in society. It is also important to note that the stigma of obesity is somewhat unique from that of other marginalized groups, in that individuals who are obese internalize societal anti-fat and pro-thin biases. Individuals who are obese tend to agree with society's assessment that an imperfect body represents an imperfect person (Puhl & Brownell, 2006). Unlike the relatively unchangeable stigmas of race or gender, excess weight is considered a blemish of an individual’s character that results in blatant discrimination.

Given the social and psychological acceptability of negative attitudes toward individuals who are obese, it may not be surprising to learn that weight discrimination is an innate form of intolerance that is becoming more apparent with the rise of the epidemic ideology in Western culture. The notion of the obesity epidemic has spread internationally and among all population groups. By displaying the explicit stigmatization of extra weight, individuals who are obese encounter discrimination in many aspects of their lives including: employment, educational, and health care settings. The prevalence of obesity discrimination increased from 7% in 1995–1996 to 12% in 2004–2006, affecting all population groups in the US (Andreyeva et. al, 2008). Its prevalence is relatively close to reported rates of race and age discrimination, but virtually no legal or social sanctions against obesity discrimination exist. Accordingly, communication researchers can and should play a more integral part in examining this phenomenon more critically because we are in a unique position to work in changing the status quo and to challenge the sordid actions/messages directed at and pertaining to individuals who are obese.

Truly, the above assumptions influence my research because they allow me to continue contemplating my epistemological position in the communication field. I value the imperative sociological nature of obesity studies and the core supposition that the human rights aspect of excess weight should be explored more thoroughly. Many of us are raised with the assumption that obesity is “bad” and permanent weight loss can be achieved through dietary change and exercise; so much so that it has become innate. Societal anti-obesity attitudes are such a pervasive part of our cultural landscape that they are regarded as self-evident, and few even consider questioning them. Unfortunately many researchers who dedicate their lives to examining obesity are not immune from these attitudes despite wishing to avoid prejudice (Puhl & Brownell, 2006). As a result, many well-intentioned, caring people (including many feminist scholars) unknowingly collude and transmit this cultural bias through their work.

Indeed, for a communication scholar to examine obesity discourse is tantamount to career suicide unless a concise position is claimed and defended in regards to the epistemological, axiological, and ontological assumptions associated with it. I hope to have achieved this in arguing my position. In simple terms: as a discipline we must being to acknowledge the humanistic aspects of studying obesity from a communication perspective because weight is a complex, socially constructed phenomenon. In this vein, body size, shape, and weight should be taken into account when theorizing various interpersonal perspectives— the foundations of which should be rooted in a traditional human rights approach. After all, “to be a human is to be related to all other human beings… every single living human being is biologically related to every other human being who has ever lived or will ever live… [yet] every human is unique” (Condit, 2006, p. 7). As matchless, distinct people we should look beyond size and/or shape as factors that determine our character.

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