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**Final Paper**:

Intercultural Communication Tensions in relation to Current US Weight Discourses

and the Fat Acceptance Movement

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In the US, the view that obesity stems from personal choice remains tacit and the marginalization, stigmatization, and/or discrimination of individuals of size is definitely not a new social practice. One of the primary competing messages in US media coverage is the emphasis of obesity as a problem of personal responsibility, a garden-variety character flaw, pointing to individualistic solutions rather than larger environmental, dietary, social, or cultural implications (Andreyeva, Puhl, & Brownell, 2008; Pollan, 2006). Moreover, the idea that individuals of size should be protected under anti-discrimination law is most often met with derision (Kirkland, 2008b). Consequently, we must continue critiquing these messages rhetorically because weight cannot be studied with a deterministic lens; it must be framed within a dialectical structure of what it is *not* (Kirkland, 2008b).

In the midst of these developing realizations, the above notions of the current status quo related to the unfair treatment of individuals of size have become the main premise for the founding of many organizations and groups associated with the Fat Acceptance Movement, although these assemblages and/or general messages of “fat rights” go virtually unnoticed by the mainstream media. Therefore, it is definitely important to examine this topic in relation to the wide body of literature pertaining to intercultural communication because it will further our knowledge concerning why, as I will argue, the shift towards the ultimate goal of rights *for all* (regardless of size/weight) has become fragmented due in part because of the unique, individualized facets associated with the individuals who are involved with the fat rights movement.

For these reasons, from an intercultural communication perspective, I would like to address the current conflicting rhetorical standpoints regarding the cultural differences of weight discourses as they are addressed by various groups implicated by/with the fat acceptance movement. Specifically, I plan to examine the rhetorics and perspectives of weight discourse as they have been reported by hard scientists and fat rights activists within the blogosphere and various academic and/or alternative media sources associated with the fat rights movement. In tandem with these texts, I intend to offer a rhetorical analysis of the policies and ideologies established by a range of intercultural groups. I think that it is necessary to further investigate what the media has included, what is argued publically, and to also address the rhetorical contributions of three prominent fat rights organizations because it is essential to critique the cultural intersections associated with these groups.

The following essay will serve to accomplish that agenda first by offering a review of literature, by identifying the rhetorical artifacts, and then by critiquing the intercultural intersections of the groups associated with the fat acceptance movement via a meta analysis in lieu of several guiding questions: (a) How are the aforementioned groups working for/against the common goal of fat acceptance/rights? (b) Why are some groups considered detrimental to the human rights message that should be associated with the movement? (c) What types of messages serve in promulgating more support for the fat rights movement and what types do not?

**Review of Literature**

*Current US Weight Discourses*

As established above, a complex combination of meaning is associated with the words “fat” and “obese.” Talk about weight in contemporary US popular culture is dominated among elites and in the mainstream media: obesity as unhealthy, obesity as costly, obesity as driving increased rates of diabetes, cancer, and heart disease. Medical researchers, physicians’ organizations, the food industry, and state/federal agencies have organized for decades around the notion that obesity is a medical problem; holding conferences, publishing standards, classifying it as a disease, researching treatments, assigning labels/measures, and developing an increasingly-influential institutional/hegemonic power structure with funds from major pharmaceutical, food, health insurance, and diet industry conglomerates. Similarly, as is the case with the vilification of weight in current social discourse, the mass media are perhaps the most influential and heterogeneous set of nongovernmental actors that function as key conduits to both informal and formal discourses and imaginaries within the spaces of obesity politics (Castree, 2006).Consequently, the stigmatization of individuals of size is both a pervasive and constitutive ideology of contemporary Western thought.

As is the familiar practice, when a person of size or difference is stigmatized it may also lead to their discrimination in both the public and private spheres. To be clear, discrimination is the unfair treatment of one person or group usually because of prejudice about race, ethnicity, age, religion, or gender (Wood, 2007). Weight discrimination is another, often overlooked, form of intolerance that is becoming more apparent with the rise of the “epidemic” ideology within American culture. The notion of obesity discrimination has spread in tandem with the obesity epidemic across America and among all population groups. Understood by many researchers of the topic that negative weight discourse is common in American society and escalating at disturbing rates, the prevalence of obesity discrimination has increased from 7% in 1995–1996 to 12% in 2004–2006, affecting all population groups but the elderly (Andreyeva et. al, 2008). Reported relatively close to rates of race and age discrimination, obesity discrimination has been well-documented in three areas: education, health care, and employment (Wanzer & Frymier, 1999). Virtually no legal or social sanctions against obesity discrimination exist except in Michigan where, in 1976, the state addressed obesity discrimination law by way of the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act which was amended in terms of employment.

As we know, the ideal of “rights” for all is a topos that often invents the rhetoric of many social movements, and coincidently, conversations regarding fat rights began to surface more so within the mainstream in the early 1990s whereas weight discrimination cases started becoming more pursuable (Black, 2003). For example, in 1993 Bonnie Cook, who was denied state employment solely because of her weight, was victorious in her case against the state of Rhode Island. A federal appeals court concluded: "In a society that all too often confuses 'slim' with 'beautiful' or 'good,' morbid obesity can present formidable barriers to employment" (Cook v. State of Rhode Island, 1993). This case exemplifies the rhetorical turn in the reevaluation of obesity discrimination, bolstering the case for supporters of the fat acceptance movement and for those concerned with its legitimacy within the public sphere.

Unfortunately though, for most intercultural scholars this terrain is customarily uncharted (Campos, 2004). We should be entering the fray, asking provocative questions, contributing various theoretical frameworks that analyze weight discourse, thus challenging the status quo, but little research has been offered with the intent to provoke social change. With the dominant “fault-based” paradigm concerning obesity, critical communication scholars should address and/or admonish such a standard in which the greater part of the general public are positioned within a social order and ranked below individuals of “normal” physique. This is my intent by examining the following intersections connected with an intercultural communication framework, the words used by various groups, and the fat rights organizations missions associated with diverse weight discourses.

*Obesity, Fatness, and People of Size*

Because weight is such a powerful, dangerous, slippery word, concept, ideograph, and discourse, eluding many of the most recent political, social, and cultural movements, it warrants an explanation for its use within this essay. With regards to language, many in the fat acceptance movement find the terms obese and overweight offensive, as they are often used to make overtly prejudiced statements seem more clinical or scientific. The word fat is generally preferred. In practice, the only way to know the position of any particular member of the group is to ask, or read specific position papers on the issue. As rhetoricians and intercultural communication scholars, we must be concerned with the axioms that academics prescribe to our research as well as the humanistic aspect involved in our work.

Social constructionist thought assists in framing our understanding of obese bodies as social and cultural processes *in progress* (e.g. between gaining and losing weight, normal and abnormal, health and disease, acceptable and unacceptable, notion of self, self-perception, other-perception, deviance, acceptance, denial, misrepresentation, etc.) Furthermore, 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 likelihood for weight stereotyping, body mass index (BMI) labeling, the dominance of medicinal discourse upon the etymological definition of obesity, and the contributions by international organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), etc. we can begin to theorize as to how *all* have become prominent aspects of the operationalization of obesity. To properly utilize the term obese within academic writings is to concede that it is “a complex occurrence caused by the interaction of genetic, cultural, socioeconomic, racial, behavioral, physiologic, performative, metabolic, cellular, and molecular influences” (Montague, 2003). Weight varies over a lifetime with contingencies upon genetic predispositions, caloric intake, dietary trends, medications taken, amount of activity, pregnancy, likelihood of illness and/or injury; its meanings change with racialization, sexualization, and gendering; and its probability varies geographically, regionally, and with income rates.

Similar to the intricate operationalization of obesity, proponents of the fat acceptance movement, as well as feminist, sociological, cultural, queer studies, and fat studies scholars have assigned rhetorical meanings to fat and/or “fatness” that are also dubious. 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.) Many individuals of size do not identify with the terms obese *or* fat, nor do they all agree with the mindset that it is a dominating characteristic of their persona.

Therefore, to move beyond overarching labels such as obese or fat, I describe people (myself included) that display an amount of weight that mainstream society deems "excessive" as "individuals who are overweight/obese" and/or “persons of size” (and will do so within this writing) because these phrases allow for our acknowledgement of a person’s individuality as the primary aspect of who they are. The key aspects to this change of phrasing are the inclusion of agency and sentience (Black, 2003). 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, that a human being must foremost possess the right to be a person without a signifier such as fat or obese before her/his name, and that this is an innate, ontological right common to all people. Consequently, I do not find any of the terms associated with weight comprehensible, nor are they politically correct. Every label implies otherness (after all, we are all human beings) yet it is a necessary, rhetorical move to address individuals of size with a more humanistic tone.

**Context/History**

*The Fat Acceptance Movement*

Beyond the variations of the words utilized within current weight discourses, it is essential to shed some light on the movement itself. The fat acceptance movement (also regarded as the fat liberation movement or the size acceptance movement) is a relatively new grass-roots effort established to change societal attitudes about individuals who are obese. “Fat acceptance” is generally framed as a human rights issue and has ties with the feminist movement and/or the larger civil rights movement (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). The fat acceptance movement, commonly agreed to having started in 1969, has gained steam since the 1980s and 1990s, and now includes several activist organizations, publications, and conferences. In the 1980s, new anti-dieting programs and models began to appear in the research literature in response to new information dispelling common myths about obesity. The current contemporary fat acceptance movement perceives negative societal attitudes as persistent and based on the presumption that body weight/size reflects negatively on one’s person's character. The subject of the movement is a humanist subject, and fat politics seems to insist on the unity of self. In declaring oneself to be fat, one assumes an unambiguous identity. One is ‘‘fat and proud’’ with no gray areas, no contradictions, no questions, no ambivalence.

And yet, the fat acceptance movement is not a unified or singular set of politics, and this itself suggests the resistance, difficulties, and vagueness present in identifying simply as fat. To further investigate this notion, it will be necessary to acknowledge that social movements and intercultural communication tactics are in constant flux even though there is usually an ultimate goal associated with the social organization involved. As with the main argument of Bowers, Ochs, & Jensen (1993), social movements respond to general agitation, resistance, deviance, power, and control. The continuous transformation by which a specific movement may/may not remain is influenced by these concepts. Ultimately some type of challenge to the status quo will be preferred.

In relation to the argument that social movements are continually transforming, fat acceptance covers several fronts but is mainly concerned with attempting to change societal, internal, and medical attitudes regarding individuals of size. The movement maintains that individuals who are overweight/obese are marginalized, stigmatized, and/or discriminated against in many sectors of their lives including the health care field, in the employment process, in the education system, and in the lack of equal accessibility to transportation. Internally the fat acceptance movement also posits that people of all shapes and sizes should accept themselves as they are. It promotes the "[health at every size](http://www.spiritus-temporis.com/health-at-any-size/)" (established by the Health At Every Size (HAES) approach) which places one's mental and physical health before physical appearance and size (Bacon, 2008; Robison, 2006). Furthermore, the movement is aimed at challenging the medical field in their treatment of individuals who are obese, arguing that doctors should treat the health problems of all people independent of their weight and/or size.

Inopportunely, the collective behavior of the groups which the fat acceptance movement is comprised does not necessarily allow for the overarching message to enter mainstream mediums and this is where the locus of the study will lie. Social movements progress by way of the six determinants that Smelser (1962) posited: a) structural conduciveness, b) structural strain, c) growth/spread of belief, d) precipitating factors, e) mobilization of action, and f) the operation of social control. These issues spur the agitators within movements to work communally towards a common goal or cause for an entire society to adopt. It will be beneficial to unearth the many reasons why the groups within the fat acceptance movement hold back its success. Consequently, we find that in the case of the fat acceptance movement one of the main issues that hinders the progression of the above determinants is the core intercultural differences of the groups within it. The following discussion will highlight several of the main premises of alternative media use within the movement so that we can later analyze the communication junctures in and amongst the various groups associated with the movement online.

*The Use of Alternative Media*

The fat acceptance movement is able to garner support primarily through the use of alternative media sources and by way of various “marketing” tactics (Bob, 2005). By analyzing various alternative media sources and non-profit organizations involved with the fat acceptance movement, we can gain a better understanding about the various constituencies involved. I will begin by establishing a framework by which alternative media can be constituted within the fat acceptance movement. I will then move on in discussing how these alternative media sources fall short in marketing the fat acceptance movement’s general principles within mass media contexts.

Alternative forms of media have become prominent vehicles for the distribution of information untouched by the control of the government or other powers that be. Rauch (2007) posited that alternative media aim to learn from people at the grassroots level as well as to inform them. Atkinson (2005, p. 78) defined alternative media as: “any media that are produced by non-commercial sources and attempt to transform existing social roles and routines by critiquing and challenging power structures” yet also emphasized that it should not be assumed to be static. Moreover, as we know, “’alternative’ inevitably begs the question of what the ‘dominant’ is” (Caldwell, 2003, p. 647). Consequently, alternative media can be categorized as an academic concept, as a media practice, and as a political project.

With this understanding, we can continue with the acknowledgment that the internet has enabled us with a substantial outlet for social activism, issue advocacy, and online protest. As Warnick (2007, p. 8) argued: “While the internet does not, in itself, constitute a public sphere, its potential for point-to-point communication, worldwide access, immediacy, and distribution facilitate offline and online protests and participation by widely distributed groups.” Because it has the potential to reach individuals all over the world, the internet has and will continue to serve to enable worldwide political movements such as the fat acceptance movement to support social justice and to challenge the status quo via the public sphere. Given the magnitude of these statements, I would like to further investigate how the internet can be *even more* influential to the fat acceptance movement when considering the intercultural aspects of the groups within it.

**Analysis**

As a process of interaction between groups of people, by its very definition, intercultural communication can serve as an ideal mode of study when considering the intersections, structures, patterns, and ideologies between fat acceptance factions (Philipsen, 1992). Identifying the various groups will allow us to initially address the cross-cultural differences in communication amongst the groups involved in the fat acceptance movement as well as touching upon the varying tensions regarding group identities, because, as we know, at its roots the meaning of culture is a system of shared meanings that are learned, inclusive, open to interpretation, and based upon experience (Geertz, 1973; Hall, 1976; Sorrells & Nakagawa, 2008).

Hall (1976, p. 16) argued that there are three characteristics of culture: “it is not innate, but learned, the various facets of culture are interrelated, and it is shared, defining the boundaries of different groups.” He further articulated that there is not one aspect of human life that is not affected by culture. This means personality, how people express themselves (including shows of emotion), the way they think, how they move, how problems are solved, etc. are all part of how groups function. In terms of the developments within the fat acceptance movement, we can see clear examples of intercultural workings contingent upon the intermingling of various group members.

James R. Andrews (1973, p. 198) posited that social movements create a rhetorical legacy in which “the strategies [a movement] employs, the values it embodies, the heroes and villains that it creates, form some part of the historical-cultural heritage and may prove an important source of invention for future spokespersons and/or further causes.” In the case of the fat acceptance movement, we see these elements occurring simultaneously in the present rhetorical situation. As with any heated social topic that requires an epistemological position, individuals who may or may not identify with the ideologies of the fat acceptance movement will and at some point do align with one or all of the groups that have been established.

From my perspective, I see at least three subgroups that should be studied and/or that have formed within the current public discourse considering the US weight norm and policy: constituents that support size/weight acceptance, constituents that do not support size/weight acceptance, and constituents that remain neutral on the topic. The following analysis will look further into the rhetorics of groups concerned with the feminization, queering, and racializing of size/weight acceptance. Accordingly, the reader should note that one can be considered an interloper, becoming a part of several groups at once, passing in between various borders, mediating and advocating several fat rights messages simultaneously and from various spaces. Interculturally we perform differently whilst among different factions, therefore it is imperative to consider that many individuals that align with some of the listed groups may or may not categorize themselves with or as a member of other groups. Likewise, some group affiliates may support more than one or several.

*Constituents that Do Not Support Size/Weight Acceptance*

To begin, it will be beneficial to discuss the factions associated with not supporting size/weight acceptance for chiefly capitalistic reasons: medical communities, governmental agencies, big business/diet and exercise idealists, and supporters of heteronormativity and “whiteness” in the US. Operating with the “us versus them” dichotomy, eliminating the possibility of a shared ethos, a dwelling place, wherein multicultural groups are allowed to equally “pass” in the public and private spheres regardless of their body size/shape, the following groups allow for weight discourse to unfold in an intrinsic matter; one where mainstream society (e.g. us) is pitted against people of size (e.g. them) (Black, 2003; Scoblic, 2008). The perception of the difference between individuals of size and everyone else constitutes the problem rather than the realization that we should question such a division instated by dominant US culture.

*Medical Communities.* Many individuals within the medical community domestically and abroad posit that the stigma of obesity is a disease in need of eradication. International and national entities such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) hold fast to body mass index (BMI) labeling, the characterization of obesity as unhealthy, and labeling bodies as such. In recognizing the historical practices concerning obesity, the preferences of smaller body images in the media, the partiality of sexual content in the media, and the general allegations of ineptitude amongst individuals of size, medical ideologies can be problematized, recognizing that even medical groups are socially constructed.

For instance, there remains an ongoing controversy over how medical communities measure obesity—with body mass index (BMI) labeling.[[1]](#footnote-2) In the last few decades, medical discourse has claimed a near-monopoly on weight calculations and statistics by way of the BMI. Some scholars argue that this flawed and overly reductive measure is skewing the results of research in public health (Singer-Vine, 2009). Furthermore, critics of the BMI have argued that it fails to distinguish between lean and fatty mass (e.g. muscular or tall bodies are often misclassified as overweight or obese.) The measure also neglects to address the distribution of body fat on different body types, disregarding cultural/genetic differences, which makes a big difference when it comes to reporting perpetual health risks (Singer-Vine, 2009). Furthermore, the BMI cutoffs for "underweight," "normal," "overweight," "obese," and “morbidly obese” have an undeserved air of mathematical authority. These techniques aim not only to literally reduce fat bodies, but to survey *all bodies*; a move premised on the ordering or scaling of bodies along a risk continuum where being a “normal” weight presents a risk of becoming “overweight” which in turn is a risk factor for becoming “obese.”

Tactics such as these identify particular population groups and their locations as more or less “at risk” and thus contribute to the production of particular embodied moralities and spaces where individuals of size are allowed or not allowed to access. Again, in relegating cultural differences, the medical community stands to profit from the categorization of bodies therefore doctors, nurses, and “health” enthusiasts that adopt the BMI and general medical ideology are all part of a group that do not stand to support size/weight acceptance. The medical industry would no longer depend on profits once ascertained by categorizing weight.

*Big Business & Diet and Exercise Idealists*. Because obesity has been characterized as a label instated by a capitalistic system concerned typically with economics and/or medicalization, there is a huge industry that benefits from widening the boundaries of fat acceptance including: weight loss centers, supplement makers, drug companies, purveyors of diet books, diet foods, and various exercise programs. Self-appointed “health enthusiasts” that identify first and foremost as supporters of this ideal continue to place a gap between individuals of size and themselves. One such example is evidenced by the travel industry. Southwest Airlines, United Airlines, and Alaska Airlines have all developed and served in prolonging blatant discriminatory actions against individuals of size by enforced weight policies, requiring individuals who are overweight/obese to pay for an extra seat. The average seat in economy class on a plane is 17 1/4 inches across between armrests (Miller, 2002). This can be considered constrictive and/or uncomfortable to many passengers, yet travel providers disregard the social implications of such guidelines and remain unaffected by their alignment with this group. Consequently, in associating with this group, individuals emphasize the importance of big business and diet/exercise ideals over fat acceptance.

*Supporters of Heteronormative and “White America” Standards.* Although there is no true essence of “whiteness” we perceive the word as if it has a normative existence within US discourse **(Nakayama & Krizek, 1995; Nakayama & Martin, 1993). Similarly, the discussion of weight is rarely considered from a multicultural perspective because the majority of the identities that address or problematize the issue of fat acceptance identify as Caucasian or of Eastern European descent. This realization limits the view that multiculturalism is and should be considered a diversifying aspect of the rhetorical contributions of the fat acceptance movement; therefore researchers must challenge the standards that “white America” has placed upon fat acceptance and the sequential alignment with this group. The issue of sexuality also plays a part in the types of perspectives that disallow fat acceptance to enter the mainstream. The patriarchal, heteronormative belief is that the fat female body is not sexually attractive and/or desirable to straight men, yet we know that the collective US culture is not comprised of only this identity.**

*Constituents that Support Size/Weight Acceptance*

In recognizing groups against size/weight acceptance, we must also address the groups discerned by their support of fat rights. Factions such as human rights and diversity advocates, fat studies scholars and academics, along with several organizations and activists all have differing perspectives regarding size/weight acceptance, but all work toward the common goal. The following examination will serve to give a richer description of these assemblies.

*Human Rights/Diversity Advocates.* Paralleling Johan Galtung’s (1990) framework of violence, structural and cultural violence instated by various institutions within US culture promote the eradication of obesity by condemning it as an unsavory disease that must be dispelled and/or cured because it is unhealthy. In the case of weight discourse, it is commonly understood that Puritanical notions of gluttony, the common prevalence that thin individuals are more aesthetically pleasing, that fat = deviant, etc. lead to weight discrimination, legitimizing it in US culture, straying from initiatives that support human rights and diversity initiatives.

As a result, individuals have formed under the larger umbrella of “human rights” promoting fat acceptance and diversity for all. For instance, Anna Kirkland (2008a) author of the book entitled *Fat Rights: Dilemmas of Difference and Personhood* addresses the politics of civil rights by providing a conceptual framework for the current social discourse regarding difference, discrimination, and rights within American contemporary culture, and specifically the law. By taking a legal perspective and using specific case studies, Kirkland showcases an intuitive, knowledgeable, and reasonably accessible inquiry of the politics of human rights issues such as weight discourse. Kirkland allows the reader to ask questions pertinent in framing the rights of all people, and argues that the Americans with Disabilities Act is the most likely lawto be used to combat fat discrimination (2008b). Her work is in alignment with other group members and associations such as The Fat Rights Coalition.[[2]](#footnote-3)

*Fat Studies Scholars & Academics.* Fat studies has emerged as a small but growing interdisciplinary field on several college campuses across the country, and several fat studies “hubs” are also becoming more evident within the academy. University of Wisconsin- Milwaukee professor Margaret Carlisle Duncan, for example, offers a class on “The Social Construction of Obesity.” And Sondra Solovay, an adjunct faculty member at the New College of California School of Law who authored “Tipping the Scales of Justice,” discusses weight discrimination in her courses (Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). There also exists a Yahoo! Group solely dedicated to the study of weight discourses by academics within the US and several other ties with online blogs associated with fat acceptance.

Arguably so, the best thing about the fat acceptance blogosphere has been the sense of community that it can create online (Harding & Kirby, 2009). The majority of the blogs encourage readers to comment and discuss weight as a point of commonality and shared experience. Most of the content has been uploaded by various people (although media corporations and various other organizations offer some of their material via the same websites) thereby signifying autonomy of the individual contributors, as well as establishing active relationships between “actors who interact, communicate, influence each other, negotiate, and make decisions” (Atton, 2002, p. 82). For example, Sarah Baker’s (2009) *Fat Activist Network* has allowed for some multicultural collaboration regarding fat rights and is one node in the intricate web of other collective fat studies sites. Many bloggers and readers alike have found a social circle within the fat acceptance blogosphere that indicates proponents of the movement are working toward a common experience and shared discourse that probably would not be possible without an alternative media sources such as online blogging, yet there is still some criticism because these types of interactions occur online, therefore away from the mainstream.

*Fat Rights Organizations & Fat Activists.* It is crucial to also address the rhetorical contributions of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA), the Association for Size Diversity and Health (ASDAH), and the International Size Acceptance Association (ISAA.) NAAFA, ASDAH, and ISAA have instituted their own policies and missions that encompass the rhetoric involving the activism associated with fat acceptance (See Appendix A.) Beginning the late 1960s on the heels of the second wave feminist movement, organizations like NAAFA, ASDAH, and ISAA hold fast to the ideology that some people are just bigger and no less deserving of the same rights as mainstream society. All fat rights organizations promote awareness of fat issues by holding national conventions/meetings, publishing websites, raising funds, distributing press releases, lobbying congressional leaders, volunteering, and staging image events such as plus-size fashion show and “fat-ins.” For instance, NAAFA, celebrating its 40th anniversary of establishment, is an all-volunteer group, and is comprised of over 11,000 members nationwide. NAAFA, ASDAH, and ISAA all have differing approaches to engaging the public in terms of fat rights: from the nonchalant rally to more confrontational/radical protests and/or demonstrations (Fletcher, 2009).

In response to various mediated messages constituting weight as deviant and/or objectionable in terms of economical gains, fat rights organizations such as NAAFA, ASDAH, and ISAA (and bloggers alike) have begun to address the notion of weight many times synchronically with other groups and with fervent opinions regarding fat rights. There are many deliberate connections between fat rights organizations and individual bloggers who identify as “fat activists,” and there exists an intricate network online of overlapping writings pertinent to the topic. Where national and international non-profit organizations fall short in displaying unique narratives, personal photos, videos, and writings other forms of alternative media serve to bridge this gap. Currently there are daily online publications within the blogosphere that also speak to and uphold the underlying ideology of the fat acceptance movement (e.g. online zines and other forms of alternative online media.)

Comprised of national and international supporters of general fat acceptance, these organizations have the potential clout to publicize the movement within the public sphere, yet the growing argument is that this type of consciousness-raising is nearly undetectable on a main stage. Whether it is because of the lack of funding or other infrastructural issues, groups like NAAFA, ASDAH and ISAA have undergone recent scrutiny due to their conference locations (most are held in only specific regions of the country), and lax on what fat activists would describe as activism. For example, NAAFA has received flack with their addressing of intersecting oppressions, or in recognizing the connections. Critics say that NAAFA has various "special interest groups," but they don't seem particularly concerned with the connections between sexism, racism, sizeism, heterosexism, etc. Moreover, organizations like NAAFA, ASDAH, and ISAA have all been questioned regarding the actions being taken, policies being challenged, and messages being distributed regarding fat rights. Concerning this issue Sheana Director (2007) wrote:

“Whoever is in charge of their public face to the world, whoever is getting the word out about fat prejudice and how [these groups are] fighting it, and how everybody can fight it is doing a terrible job. Why can't the organization make the time to inform the rest of us? Why is their website so horribly not-user friendly, and why do their ‘news archives’ stop at 2004? I know (or at least I assume) this organization is mostly, if not entirely volunteer-run, but seriously, they need to either fire their webmaster or put them through a serious web accessibility/user-friendliness course. And maybe get someone to give their public relations person a tip-off to, you know, relate news (more frequently) to the public.”

With general observations such as these, we can see that many factions that are aligned with the overall ideology of the fat acceptance movement may find that it is being underrepresented. The following section will take a closer look at some of the reasons why other constituents remain neutral on the topic of size/weight acceptance.

*Constituents that Remain Neutral on the Topic of Size/Weight Acceptance*

Beyond the groups that do not support size/weight acceptance and groups that do, there are also factions that regard the topic as a neutral position. The present US surgeon general, members of impoverished communities, and identities that consider themselves otherwise stigmatized and/or marginalized beyond their size are also prominent groups that influence the rhetorical climate of the overall fat rights movement. The following discussion will explore their positions.

*Members of Impoverished Communities*. Essentially, weight discourses and the experiences of many individuals of size are left out of many intercultural dialogues because of the assumption that obesity is an unsustainable occurrence by a class that over-consumes. This is simply not the case. To support this argument, Michael Pollan, author of *In Defense of Food: An Eater's Manifesto* posits:

“Because we subsidize calories, we end up with a market in which the least healthy calories are the cheapest. And the most healthy calories are the most expensive. That, in the simplest terms, is the root of the obesity epidemic for the poor—because the obesity epidemic is really a class-based problem. It’s not an epidemic, really. The biggest prediction of obesity is income” (Pollan, 2008, p. 191).

To address this profound notion, researchers must begin by reconceptualizing the meaning and global desire for sustainable resources.

For instance, the rise of the “food desert” has become pervasive even in the US. Diet-related health outcomes in both Detroit and Metro Detroit are worse in areas of food imbalance, even after accounting for differences in income, education, and race. Roughly 550,000 Detroit residents – over half of the city’s total population – live in areas that are far out-of-balance in terms of day-to-day food availability (Grossinger, 2010). This means that residents must travel twice as far or further to reach the closest mainstream grocer as they do to reach the closest fringe food location, such as a fast food restaurant or a convenience store. Meanwhile, many groups of people are bombarded with the underlying consumerist messages that we can have “healthy lifestyles” while viewing television programming on channels such as *The Food Network* and *The Travel Channel,* promoting lifestyles and boasting the healthy variety (e.g. “choices”) that many US citizens do not have access to regionally, cannot afford, nor have time to gather or prepare in their homes.

And perhaps worst of all, our food is increasingly bad for us. The U.S. agricultural industry can now produce unsustainable quantities of meat and grains at remarkably cheap prices but it does so at a high cost to the environment, animals, and humans. “Empty” calories and food that has low nutrition is easier and faster to produce, thereby accumulating in more available forms for members of impoverished communities. A study released at the European Congress on Obesity also found that it is the calories that are solely to blame for the obesity epidemic—lack of physical activity has played virtually no role (Swinburn, 2009). The researchers measured food intake, energy expenditure and body size in 1000 children, then developed an equation to predict increases in their weight, based on USDA figures on how much food was delivered between 1970 and 2002. They found that the mean weight gain in children matched their predictions, so the kids were no less active; they just ate more unsustainable food. With these arguments it can be understood that members of impoverished communities in the US are finding it increasingly difficult to afford nutritious meals, therefore the notion of considering weight discourses such as the stigma of obesity as a chief concern is not necessarily a priority for most members of this group, perhaps rendering them neutral on the topic of fat acceptance.

*Othered/Stigmatized/Marginalized Identities.* As one exemplar of numerous other identities who recognize themselves as the other in current US weight discourses, Wilson (2009) drew upon her individual experience as it is atypical to mainstream American culture, contrasting the context of Black lesbian and bisexual women’s discourses with the dominant heteronormative perspective that “fat is bad.” Wilson (2009, p. 54) argued: “In a Black lesbian and bisexual women’s cultural context, we see evidence through Web sites, photos, and poetry that there is a consciousness that women of all sizes need to be valued and respected, and that larger women can represent ideals of beauty, healthy, and spiritual-physical balance.” With this understanding, the author worked through a nuanced argument regarding the personal, political, oppressive, and scientific intersections that are common areas of study within the intercultural communication field. In acknowledging that African American women are compared to European American women, lesbians are compared to heterosexual women, and in turn, African American lesbians are compared to lesbians of other ethnic groups, Wilson strategically addressed the status quo concerning health amongst populations that are marginalized due to cultural differences regarding the perception of weight and/or larger body sizes in US culture. Most importantly, the reader is spurred to realize that there are far greater enemies to the health and well-being of Black lesbian and bisexual women (and other marginalized groups) than the fat on their bodies (e.g. violence, poverty, and psychological oppression.)

To entertain the idea of multiculturalism within weight discourses, Wilson (2009) suggested adopting a cultural health psychology as a framework for health development. This framework uses an integrated approach to health that seeks a balance of emotional, mental, and physical health, and specifically views cultural values and norms as a major factor in how health is socially-constructed and practiced. Furthermore, she addressed the notion that the current health model is a limited framework within healthcare circles (as well as many others) and that the assumption that weight loss is key to maintaining health across all populations is a problematic paradigm that perpetuates the adverse treatment of various communities such as fat Black lesbian and bisexual women. Clearly this is only one example of many different variations on race, gender, sexuality, and group alignment pertinent to weight discourses within the US, but we see that by problematizing these issues we can gain richer perspectives about this group as one facet within the fat rights movement.

*The Surgeon General.* As the leading health authority for the US, and “America’s family doctor,” Surgeon General Dr. Regina Benjamin announced plans January 28th, 2010 to help Americans lead healthier lives through better nutrition, regular physical activity, and improving communities to support healthy choices. She stated:

“Americans will be more likely to change their behavior if they have a meaningful reward--something more than just reaching a certain weight or dress size. The real reward is invigorating, energizing, joyous health. It is a level of health that allows people to embrace each day and live their lives to the fullest without disease or disability” (Benjamin, 2010).

Benjamin (2010) also posited in a public announcement on the Office of the Surgeon General governmental website:

“…we can be healthy and fit at any size or any weight… I want to change the national conversation from a negative one about obesity and illness, to a positive conversation about being healthy and being fit. So let’s start with making healthy choices. Eat nutritious food, exercise regularly, and have fun doing it” (Benjamin, 2010).

With these statements we see that Benjamin is giving a nod to the changing atmosphere regarding size and weight expectations within the country, but does not take a palpable position regarding fat acceptance. Perhaps because it will be viewed as overly political or for other personal reasons, Benjamin remains calculated in her rhetorical contributions on size acceptance for all Americans, but interestingly she herself displays the nonverbal message that neither race, class, nor size can account for one’s overall health—she is reported to be a size 20 and an African-American woman.

**Conclusion**

As we know but rarely study or consider viable aspects of dominant discourse, weight marginalization, stigmatization, and discrimination is a pervasive aspect of individual, interpersonal, intercultural and systemic levels of communication amongst cultures. To parse out the intricacies associated with weight discourse, it is imperative to gain richer perspectives and consider dismantling the power of interlocking oppressive systems through the lived experiences of individuals. We must address the structurally violent factors that many other individuals identify within their daily discourse pertaining to weight (e.g. the belief that weight levels affect poorer communities, the lack of access to open, safe space for exercise, over-access to high-fat, high-caloric food, etc.) In terms of the ideologies adopted by various groups associated with the fat acceptance movement, intercultural scholars must initiate research and unveil the cultural intersections associated with the food industry, the diet industry, drug companies, the medical field, travel providers, Congressional contributions, the CDC, the WHO, legislative progressions, lobbyists, etc. that have served to prolong the underlying tensions by group members. Calls for culturally grounded health programs intended for various communities and respect for body diversity will continue to arise as we prolong these types of exchanges interculturally.

As Conquergood (1991) posited, “communication is about creating shared time and a shared place [moving] from ‘centers’ to ‘borderlands.’” The relational components of culture must allot for the interactional aspects of *all* of the groups associated with the fat acceptance movement because that co-presence would focus more on the zones of similarity/difference that remain overlooked. In realizing that bodies are continually changing and cannot be fixed “as simple objects,” we must recognize that our rhetorical strategies are also shifting and disparate (Butler, 1993). Not only will this allow for an interdisciplinary space for all types of scholars to collaborate, it will also begin to challenge the general public to consider the policy changes and dominant ideologies associated with the main understanding of weight/size acceptance stand to be challenged.

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**Appendix A**

*ASDAH Mission/Goals*

“The ASDAH is an international professional organization composed of individual members who are committed to the principles of Health At Every Size [(HAES)](http://www.sizediversityandhealth.org/content.asp?id=76) .The mission of the ASDAH is to promote education, research, and the provision of services which enhance health and well-being, and which are free from weight-based assumptions and weight discrimination. Long Term Goals: 1. To develop a forum for discussion, support, and continuing education for professionals who endorse the HAES philosophy. 2. To provide information, education, and resources to professionals who are interested in the HAES approach, or who are considering using the HAES approach in their work. 3. To promote acceptance of, and respect for, size diversity, and to address cultural and societal issues related to body size and health. 4. To facilitate access to quality health care for every individual, regardless of their body size or shape. 5. To develop and maintain a website, e-group and other appropriate on-line resources for on-going communication between ASDAH members. 6. To develop a Speaker's Bureau to represent the HAES approach in educational, medical, political, legislative, research, and other appropriate venues. 7. To identify qualified HAES representatives to inform, educate, and respond to medical professionals, obesity/weight researchers and the media. 8. To develop and make available resources for implementing HAES in health, fitness, and related industries. 9. To develop and maintain resources for review and analysis of health and weight-related research, in order to encourage scientific literacy and accurate reporting of scientific news. 10. To organize a self-supporting annual conference for ASDAH members and supporters to further the mission and goals of the organization. 11. To provide policy makers with information and educational resources about the HAES approach, and to support public policies that advance the philosophy and goals of HAES” (ASDAH, 2009).

*ISAA Mission/Purpose*

The mission of the ISAA is to promote size acceptance and fight size discrimination throughout the world by means of advocacy and visible, lawful actions. ISAA's primary purpose is to end the most common form of size discrimination and bigotry--that against fat children and adults; ISAA will strive to defend the human rights of members affected by other forms of size discrimination as well. ISAA defines size discrimination as any action which places people at a disadvantage simply because of their size. ISAA defines size discrimination as acceptance of self and others without regard to weight or body size” (ISAA, 2009).

*NAAFA Vision/Mission*

“Founded in 1969, the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) is a non-profit, all volunteer, civil rights organization dedicated to protecting the rights and improving the quality of life for fat people. NAAFA works to eliminate discrimination based on body size and provide fat people with the tools for self-empowerment through advocacy, public education, and support. Our Vision: A society in which people of every size are accepted with dignity and equality in all aspects of life. Our Mission: To eliminate discrimination based on body size and provide fat people with the tools for self-empowerment though public education, advocacy, and support. Our Promise: NAAFA will be a powerful force for positive social change. Using our collec­tive will, talents and resources, we will improve the world — not just for fat people, but for everyone.

We Come in All Sizes…Understand it. Support it. Accept it” (NAAFA, 2009).

1. Based on a simple equation developed by Belgium statistician Adolphe Quelet in the 1800s (Singer-Vine, 2009) Body Mass Index (BMI) is the medical definition of overweight/obesity ranges as determined by using age, gender, weight, and height to calculate a number correlative with size/shape via the following mathematical formula:

   |  |  |
   | --- | --- |
   | BMI = ( kg/m² ) | (weight in pounds \* 703 ) |
   | ———————————— |
   | height in inches² |

   [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. The Fat Rights Coalition seeks to establish and defend equal rights and opportunities for all people regardless of weight or body size. Fat Rights is a coalition of activists working in concert to advance fat rights, both as a practice of self-acceptance and as a culture-wide exercise in social justice. Fat Rights strives to eliminate fat hatred and fat phobia while supporting individuals through education and empowerment (http://www.fatrights.org/mission) [↑](#footnote-ref-3)