

TEACHING AS TRANSGRESSION: THE AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF A FAT PHYSICAL EDUCATION INSTRUCTOR

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This Girl

*This girl is fat...
She is not obese
(as labeled by her doctors)
and though she is often pathologized
She will not be marginalized
Today.*

*This girl is fat...
Though the braces on her legs, her cat-eye glasses and Goodwill fashions
Oh yeah – not to mention –
Her “slanted” eyes and “funny” last name
did as much to mark her as different
as those ten extra pounds did.*

*This girl is fat...
And surprise! She teaches PE
She frequently faces a sea of skeptical eyes
that try to envision a fat dance yoga football teacher
or even, a fat sport history or sociology professor.*

*But dancing a Viennese waltz with a fat girl
makes a person re-think what fat is or is not
what fat can or cannot do
and who can glide, twirl and shimmy
and who can charm, entrance and seduce on the dance floor.*

*As I teach, my students shift
and adjust their “inner eyes” (Wynter 1994)...
They see my fat but they come to see me more.*

*However many faculty eyes,
keep seeing fat.*

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Weightism and the Social Construction of Fat

In the summer of 1993, I was collecting interview data for my first graduate research project. During my interview with an African-American basketball coach at a Division 1A university, I asked him if he saw or experienced racism in collegiate sport. He remarked, given the existence of racism in society, there is, of course, racism in sport. Continuing, he added, "Why wouldn't you expect to find it here?" Similarly, given the prevalence of weightism or fat prejudice in society, shouldn't one expect to encounter it in kinesiology departments? In light of kinesiology's and physical education's purported interest in understanding and improving the function and experience of the body, I anticipated greater empathy and less judgment of fat individuals. However, in a field that emphasizes the body, perhaps it would have been more rational to expect the classification of fat individuals as the "other" against which physical educators, exercise scientists, and health promoters define themselves (Evans and Davies 2004, 8; Foucault 1980).

Rather than using the terms "weight prejudice," "fat prejudice" or "fat discrimination," I label prejudice against fat individuals as "weightism." Building on Sandra Solovay's (2000) discussion of weight prejudice and Jay Coakley's (2007) definition of ableism, I define weightism as the assumption or belief individuals of a certain weight or body size are superior—intellectually, morally, physically—to those who exceed the ideal weight or body size. This definition of weightism also parallels how racism is often defined as "a belief that race is the primary determinant of human traits and capacities and that racial differences produce an inherent superiority of a particular race" (<http://www.m-w.com/dictionary/racism>). As with other "isms," weightism relies on socially constructed ideals, in this case the "right weight" and its conflation with positive traits. With weightism, body weight or size, rather than race, becomes the determining factor in classifying individuals' character, capability, and potential. Like Solovay (2000, 2-4), I contend weightism functions much like racism, sexism, and heterosexism—to uphold hegemonic ideals of body type, size and shape. Understanding weightism as a web of social beliefs and practices that maintain the privilege and status quo of the ideal (or thin) body over the fat body allows for a critical assessment of the conceptualizations of fat and "proper weight."

By recognizing weightism as a social construction we all continually uphold and contribute to (and can, therefore, challenge and deconstruct), I demonstrate bias against fat people is more than individual taste. For example, my friends will tell me, "Well, I can't help it, I'm just not attracted to fat men/women," while failing to recognize their standards of beauty are at least partially informed by social forces such as the media (Wolf 1991, 2-5; Poulton 1997, 2) and the medical establishment (Schwartz et al. 2006, 446; Gasser 2002, 37-55), which denigrate and ridicule fat bodies. Similarly, former colleagues from my graduate program informed me they did not have anything against fat people, other than the fact they are unhealthy.

However, these same colleagues never felt compelled to criticize fellow graduate students who smoked, drank to excess on a regular basis, or drove over the speed limit. By defining weightism in terms of power and hegemony, I am asking all of us to take responsibility for the continued construction and practice of weightism.

Currently, fat is socially constructed as a great social, economic, and moral evil. Fatness is conflated with indulgence, gluttony, and laziness (Campos et al. 2006, 55-56; Schwartz 1990, 2-3; Schwartz et al. 2006, 440). In light of this conflation, it is not surprising that in employment contexts fat people are generally perceived as less intelligent, incompetent, lazy, socially unpleasant and emotionally unstable (Fikkan and Rothblum 2004, 16-19; Paul and Townsend 1995, 133-135). Similar to the stigmatization of fat people in employment is the stigmatization in educational settings. For example, teachers and school health care workers tend to attribute negative characteristics to obese students (Puhl and Brownell 2001, 800). In their survey of college students, Latner, Stunkard, and Wilson (2005) found the majority of students—even the fat ones—express a dislike of fat people. Interestingly, as the number of overweight and obese Americans increases, the stigma against fat Americans appears to be intensifying (Puhl and Brownell 2001; Saguy and Almeling 2005). In her article, "For a World of Woes, We Blame Cookie Monsters" for the *New York Times*, Gina Kolata (2006) notes in the popular press, fat Americans are blamed for everything from rising health care costs to causing car accidents to most recently, increasing the country's gasoline consumption by creating extra drag in automobiles (Hilkevitch 2006). Unfortunately, these accounts rarely move beyond the headlines or soundbites: for example, they do not mention the author of the gasoline consumption study acknowledged "the amount of fuel consumed as a result of the rising prevalence of obesity is small compared to the increase in the amount of fuel consumed stemming from other factors such as increased car reliance and an increase in the number of drivers" (Jacobson and McLay 2006, 317). Though the "economic strain on the health care system" argument is repeated unquestioningly in news stories on obesity, recent fact checking (*St. Petersburg Times*, 2007) and research challenges these assumptions (val Baal et al. 2008, 1-2). According to Daniel Engber, who covers science for *Slate*, an online magazine, the findings of the val Baal study have caused some anti-fat activists to acknowledge the link between obesity and increased health care costs may have been overstated (Engber, 2008).

On Autoethnography and Critical Race Theory

Autoethnography can be defined as a self narrative that critiques the situatedness of the self in relation to others in social contexts (Ellis and Bochner 2000; Reed-Dahanay, 1997, 9). In addition, the autoethnographic account is used to interrogate and critique broader social issues (Foster, et.al., 2006, 47). Autoethnography meets critical race theory in the celebrating and valuing of narrative and storytelling as ways of knowing. In addition,

both respond to/react to the realist agendas in research that “privilege researcher over subject, method over subject matter and outmoded conceptualizations of validity and truth over insight” or learning/knowing (Denzin 1992). However, autoethnography is not autobiography or confessional, but as with research grounded in critical race theory, a weaving together of story and theory (Delgado & Stephanic 2001; Ladsen-Billings 1998, 8; Spry 2001, 713). Those who create autoethnographies are open about their desire to transform and transport the reader/audience. Spry (2001, 716) and Ellis (1997, 116) contend good autoethnography should move people or create a dialogue with the reader/audience by allowing the reader/audience to recognize his/her difference vis-à-vis the author. In order to promote this dialogue and self-reflexivity in author and audience, Ellis and Berger (2002) advocate the use of personal, accessible writing as well as engaging alternative means of expression.

Critics of autoethnography claim it is non-evaluative, allows for anything goes, encourages self-therapizing, lacks objectivity and generalizability, promotes self indulgence and privileges marginalized voices while excluding voices in the mainstream (Holt 2003, 3; Grupetta 2006; Kaufman 2000). Starting with the last critique, methodologies that welcome historically marginalized voices ought to be celebrated for expanding the conversation. That aside, researchers with at least some forms of privilege e.g. a white female tenured professor (Spry 2001) and a white male proctor at Oxford University (Walford 2004), utilized autoethnography to raise educational concerns and publish their work. While these two researchers felt disempowered in certain ways, their use of autoethnography in the context of some race and professional privilege seems to contradict the critique that only those on the margins are allowed to employ it. As for critiques regarding objectivity and generalizability, autoethnography, like other qualitative methodologies, deliberately challenges the illusion of researcher objectivity. Furthermore, it does not seek to produce findings or generalizability, but to illuminate the privilege and position of the reader/audience relative to the author and the culture at large. Lastly, autoethnography challenges what counts as knowledge, making the case for first person knowledge and life experience as data: i.e. an autoethnography of one fat girl offers **different** (and valid) knowledge and truth than that gained through a survey of 500 fat girls.

Finally, this autoethnography challenges the Western European mind-body dualism, which grants the mind importance over the body (Kleinman 1995; Spry 2001, 718). Historically, the mind has been characterized as rational and capable of higher thought, while knowledge from the body has been discounted or dismissed. In placing the experiences of my fat body at the center of this examination of the social construction of fat, I am re-integrating mind and body. Additionally, I am injecting body knowledge into this intellectual domain—I am asserting a claim of legitimacy for this kind of knowing and for the body as a site of knowledge. As a result, I bring the body into research, rather than theorizing about (and

ultimately, objectifying) it. Autoethnography gives this fat body a voice, allowing me to disrupt and dismantle prevailing discourses, narratives, and assumptions about fat/fatness in kinesiology – and hopefully, to destabilize myself as researcher and you as audience.

Teaching physical education (PE) at the university: intersections of race, gender and body type

In analyzing my teaching of physical education at a large, Midwestern university, I am blending autoethnographic accounts with comments collected from my students' journals. When I taught activity-based PE courses as a graduate student, my students kept informal journals to record their process of engaging with the activity. I provided some questions for guidance (to be used or not) as students reflected on their thoughts, feelings, experiences, shifts, etc. versus evaluating instruction (as they would have an opportunity to do so at the end of the term). Nonetheless, some students did comment on me, specifically how my body did or did not meet their expectations. While the students who did comment on my fitness often expressed surprise at having a fat PE teacher, they did come to see me as a competent, engaging instructor. Surprisingly, depending on what I was teaching, my race/ethnicity appeared to mitigate my fatness, positioning me as a qualified teacher from the onset, i.e. because I am Asian American, I did not have to prove/demonstrate my competence or ability in tai chi chuan. For example, when my office mate and I taught tai chi chuan, he complained students joined my section over his because my Japanese-ness gave me legitimacy over his whiteness. (However, no student ever backed up his assertion either in person or in his/her journal.)

Senorita Morimoto, I presume?

Social dance, though different from competitive ballroom dance which emphasizes form and aesthetics over social interaction, includes many of the same dances: waltz, foxtrot, swing, cha cha, and rumba. For many students, their first impressions of social dance are informed by films (such as *Dirty Dancing* or *Strictly Ballroom*) or competitions broadcast on public television. In competitive ballroom dance, while couples are evaluated on dance technique, floorcraft (how the lead negotiates the crowded dance floor), and frame (posture and connection between dancers), the physical attractiveness of the couple plays a critical role in the judging (Wong 2000, personal communication). Generally speaking, a long, lean line—most easily achieved with tall, thin bodies—is favored. Because of these dominant images of ballroom/social dancing in the mainstream media, it is not surprising most of my students conceived of dancers as slender or skinny.

Over several years of teaching, I developed tactics for countering my fatness in the PE classroom. For social dance classes the strategy was simple. As students arrived for class, I would dance with another instructor, one of our volunteer assistants (usually former students), or a friend from the competitive ballroom squad. For those

who missed this pre-class performance, there were plenty of opportunities for me to exhibit my dance expertise/skill through in-class demonstrations. Even after witnessing my dancing ability, some students still seemed surprised my normal-sized partner was not the official instructor. Though by the end of the first class session, it seemed students overcame their expectations and accepted me as the instructor.

As previously mentioned, I asked students to keep a bi-monthly journal about their experiences relevant to the class or activity. They were aware I was reading these journals, but had the option of simply showing me the journal entry, then requesting I not read it. Over several years of teaching social dance, the journals often reflected their surprise at having a fat dance teacher. For example, a typical comment made by a male student in Social Dance 1 noted, "I was expecting a Latin or English lady maybe... definitely someone thin and pretty." Interestingly, along with expectations of a certain body type, this student conceptualized the social dance teacher along racial and national lines, something I had not even considered.

As opposed to social dance where my ethnicity and race defied expectations, in tai chi chuan, my Asian-ness bestowed or granted me a certain level of competence. Apparently, Asian fit with most students' expectations of a tai chi chuan instructor, which bothered my colleague since he had studied for much longer than me and had more experience teaching the subject. Although I met students' expectations in regard to race/ethnicity, my fatness still countered student expectations. As one of my male tai chi chuan students noted, "I thought the teacher would be Asian, but I expected someone skinny... But Lauren surprised me. Even though she is bigger, she is real graceful and light." While I am appreciative of the fact this student could come to see/get past his original expectations (for as Mark Snyder (1992, 325-26) contends, many hold onto a stereotype even in the face of contradictory evidence), I am also saddened and angered at the presumption of competence for thin bodies (and mildly amused by the competing competence-determining categories of fatness and Asian-ness).

As opposed to social dance and tai chi chuan, where race, ethnicity, and body shape intersected, for yoga students, my body shape and weight trumped other factors. Because most students considered yoga an activity requiring flexibility and balance, the fat (or merely not thin) body did not seem capable of engaging in the activity. As in social dance, I developed strategies in order to answer potential questions regarding my competence. While addressing my fatness was the initial motivation, these strategies brought an unexpected bonus of improving my teaching. The first tactic called for me to hold certain postures with apparent ease that challenged the normal sized and generally athletic students registered for the class. Demonstrating postures where my weight did not compromise my flexibility or strength established my competence, which allowed me to "hold on" the students when we moved into postures that were more difficult due to my size. Instruction-

ally, this demonstrated the limits of relying on muscular strength and emphasized the need to use skeletal support to ease into the postures – and challenged students' ideas of strength, fitness and ability. The second tactic was to initially teach certain postures using props, e.g. a chair for weight support in Warrior 2 position. By having everyone start with the chair, then choosing whether or not to lift off the chair (and therefore, support one's weight fully), it created an environment that made it more comfortable for students to work within their abilities and often, to do postures more correctly. Finally, I emphasized my understanding of yoga as a practice that asks us to work where we are with the body we have, but with a willingness to address our limitations. In addition, yoga is about how we practice, with attention and engagement, not how our postures look relative to some external standard. I shared with my students teaching yoga was my way of putting my money where my mouth is, i.e. I was willing to teach postures I had not perfected as well as those that challenged me. Strangely enough, my willingness to expose my "weaknesses" encouraged students to accept me as a yoga teacher.

While there were the usual student comments about expecting a thin teacher, some students remarked how my body size/fatness was a positive factor. Because yoga can be conceptualized as an activity for the already flexible and fit, some students (who might feel their bodies do not measure up to the standards of society) hesitate to register for yoga. (I suspect this worry about body size keeps students from signing up for other activities as well, though I lack student comments to confirm this.)

I was happy to read my fatness actually encouraged the following two female students to remain in the class. Student A commented, "I signed up for yoga, but I wasn't sure I was going to go. I didn't know if I could do it... When I walked into the classroom and saw you there, then I knew it was okay." Her comments are echoed by Student B, who wrote, "I was nervous about going to class, you know, because only skinny people do yoga, but then I saw you." Though some might interpret this as the students saying they assumed the class was less challenging, I read it as the students feeling they would fit in because they saw themselves in the front of the room.

Although physical educators, health promotion specialists and sport sociologists speak to the value of diversity, the discussion tends to focus on race, gender, and class diversity. During this current crisis of obesity, experts argue it is critical to increase people's activity levels. Yet I have not read an academic article calling for the dismantling of weightism in the field, for either pragmatic (it might make fat students/clients feel more welcome in the gym class or exercise facility) or social justice reasons. Similarly, I have not encountered an article discussing or investigating how diversity of body sizes and shapes of instructors might make some students more comfortable (as in the situation above), and therefore, more likely to stick with an activity or class. In fact, there is an assumption a fat instructor would not be accepted. Certain students

might have dropped the course because of my weight or body size; the students who stay accept a fat teacher (as seen in journal comments, repeat students, full class rosters and years of positive student evaluations). While students might be initially uncertain or skeptical even, my experience encourages me, because they are able and willing to re-think their positions and to critically assess their assumptions. Unfortunately, I have yet to see that same willingness from many of the faculty in kinesiology and related fields.

Because of the weightism in society, teaching physical activity as a fat woman becomes an act of transgression—it reconfigures known categories, confounds expectations, and rearticulates meanings of sport/physical activity. While even the most ardent students may forget the steps of the foxtrot, the best way to ease into cobra or the plow or how to look at football through a critical feminist theory lens, I am confident they will remember their fat dance/tai chi/yoga/self defense/flag football teacher. They will recall she was funny, fierce, competent, strong, graceful, outspoken, generally fair, direct, and occasionally bitchy...and when they see another fat person, they will pause and possibly check their assumptions and re-construct and re-define fat. And perhaps, more importantly, since many kinesiology students will teach PE, coach sport, organize recreation leagues, work as personal trainers, and create physical therapy programs, they might rethink what it means to be fit, redefine health, and re-conceptualize who can/should join the kinesiology community.

The fat PE practitioner and the PE/kinesiology faculty

The question of who belongs and who can serve as a good role model in sport, PE, and recreation is not a purely theoretical one. In 2002, the National Association for Sport and Physical Education issued guidelines about maintaining an acceptable fitness level: though the paper focuses on fitness, it implies someone engaged in an appropriate level of activity would see positive results and present a certain physical image (www.aahperd.org, 2002). While kinesiology has wrestled with questions of inclusion and diversity regarding race, gender, class, sexuality, and ability, there have not been similar discussions in terms of fat/fatness. In 2007, I was given the opportunity to respond to an opinion piece in a kinesiology journal entitled “I’m FAT and a HYPOCRITE: So Physical Educational Professionals, What Are You Going to Do About It?” (Hodge and Vigo-Valentin, 2007) that opened by uncritically reiterating stereotypes about fat individuals. The article went on to question whether fat people could be good PE professionals. Given the chance to respond to my response, Hodge argued I misread his piece: he claimed he was not prejudiced against fat people and certainly did not engage in weightiest thinking or actions. However, the title with the capitalization of fat and hypocrite alone points to (or certainly intimates) worries about fat professionals in PE, as well as a particular position on fat people and fatness in general.

For this part of my autoethnography on my life as a

fat kinesiology professional, I offer four anecdotes, two from my years as a graduate teaching associate and two from my job search, and let you, the reader make of it what you will.

Anecdote 1: Because of my research interest in collegiate sport and race, I accepted admission to kinesiology-type department at a large Midwestern university. Based on my undergraduate education, my advisor nominated me for a Presidential Fellowship for the first year (which I was awarded) and convinced the department to commit to three to four years of graduate teaching assistantship for the remainder of my program. During my first year, in the course of a casual conversation with a faculty member from the department, he commented to me that had they (I assume he meant the departmental faculty) known I was overweight, they probably would not have offered me a teaching assistantship for the post-fellowship years.

Anecdote 2: During my graduate tenure, professors in the department and in other educational departments asked my fellow social dance instructors to demonstrate dance activities and/or lessons to their students. Despite being the senior instructor in social dance and the sole instructor for intermediate and advanced social dance for a few years, these professors never approached me. Even though the other instructors explained I was the strongest, most advanced dance teacher on the basis of content as well as student evaluations of teaching, these professors never offered me the opportunity to present and/or teach in their classes. In the end, I wonder if they were incapable of seeing me as a dancer, much less a teacher of dance.

Anecdote 3: During my job search for a faculty position, a colleague and I were invited to interview for the same position. My colleague interviewed first and while touring the department’s “home,” the department chair noted faculty had access to work-out facilities in the building. He commented, “I figure since we study sport, we should look like athletes.” (Which raised the question, like which athlete? Like Cheryl Haworth, the 300-pound 2000 Olympic bronze medalist in weight lifting?) With my campus interview still to come, I was concerned whether this chairperson’s statement reflected the sentiments/assumptions of the faculty in general. Upon calling a faculty member on the search committee to discuss it, his reaction assured me the chair did not represent the thinking of the department and I would feel welcomed and accepted there.

Anecdote 4: As I discussed the job search with one of my mentors at Miami University, I expressed frustrations with the process. Specifically, I commented on how difficult it is to be a fat woman looking for work in a kinesiology department, given many departments’ concerns with activity, health, and wellness. Given this mission, I remarked I understood why faculty interviewing me for a position that includes the teaching of physical activity classes or sport history and sociology to an audience of kinesiology students might have concerns with my weight. My mentor stated, “Oh, they got you.” I asked what he meant and he repeated, “They got you.” He went on to ask me the

following questions: Can you teach these activities? Can you teach sport sociology? Have you taught them well in the past? When I replied yes, in fact, I had taught several activities, some at advanced levels—all while earning excellent teaching evaluations, mentoring new instructors and attracting repeat students. Plus I had been the sole instructor for multiple lecture courses since 1995, and again, with very good evaluations. My mentor mused, “Isn’t that what should count? Isn’t that the issue, whether or not you’re competent to teach, not what you look like?”

At that moment, I realized what he meant: “They got me.” “They got me” apologizing for their biases. “They got me” accepting the rightness and righteousness of their prejudices. “They got me” questioning my competence. As Foucault (1978) argues, power is about consent to a certain extent—about succumbing and internalizing social norms and practices. As a result, power worms its way into individuals, who end up self-disciplining themselves. When my mentor repeated, “They got you,” I recognized “I didn’t have the culture” of the kinesiology department—meaning I had not risen over it, conquered it or mitigated its effects—the culture of the kinesiology department “had me.” I was buying into, contributing to, and validating my own oppression. That realization, as well as my frustration and anger regarding the biases and boundaries in the field of kinesiology, led to this paper.

I did not want my frustration or anger at the center of this autoethnography. To focus on that would detract from the objectives of using narrative to examine the social construction of fat and from there, to investigate how that construction impacts the practice of kinesiology and its related majors (i.e. physical education, exercise science, dietetics, etc.), particularly in terms of teaching, community, and inclusion in kinesiology.

Re-envisioning sport and community

Because I developed this autoethnography to critically examine sport, PE, physical activity, and recreation, I would like to bring my assessment/analysis back to possibilities for change, for re-envisioning sport and community. Though I assume I am preaching to the choir to some extent: after all, you are reading an article with the words “fat” and “autoethnography” in the title, I want to serve as a catalyst for reflection on how fat/fatness is constructed, as well as how this informs the practices (in research, employment, teaching) of your colleagues, department and field. While this paper is grounded in the subject matter and experiences in kinesiology, the issues are relevant across other fields and contexts. As I consider the potential for change and try to instigate that change, I hope you will consider some of the following questions:

Where and how is the fat body or fat person welcomed in your community? Would a fat student majoring in your field be conceptualized as a “good” student or positive representative for your department? Would a fat professional be accepted or (feel) welcomed in your department?

How do your colleagues/your community view the fat body? What meanings do they construct around fat and fatness? How can you challenge their constructions and those of your students? What are the implications of continuing to construct fat primarily in terms of personal responsibility or failure, social risk factor or morality?

If you are in a kinesiology department, is the obesity epidemic presented unproblematic? Are fat and fit presented as incompatible concepts? Is health automatically conflated with thin? Is the fat body pathologized or defined as a problem in activity or laboratory classes?

What privileges do you carry, re-produce and challenge in terms of body size? What are you willing to give up to re-imagine/re-conceptualize and expand the communities that comprise physical education, exercise science, sport sociology, dietetics, health education, and human wellness? Or your academic field, even if not directly related to the body?

Finally, I present this autoethnography as a critique because I am invested in the sport history and sociology, and more broadly, kinesiology. While I do interdisciplinary work, the fact is, I choose to remain in this field, to carve out space for myself in this community of scholars. However, I am asking some of you to help me pry open the gate and allow me to enter...not because you should accept the fat girl, but because I have earned my place.

The Weight

Carrying the weight is not so hard

After all, my bones are strong

Mom fed us powdered skim milk and nutritional yeast

Occasionally trying to fool us with a teaspoon of Nestlé's

Quick

whose scent held such great promise

and hid such disappointment.

My bones are strong

because they are rooted in the red dirt of Kaua'i

because I have the blood of grandmas and grandpas

who worked harder than I've ever had to or

will ever have to...

Unless you count the 25 minute sessions on the elliptical machine

That are supposed to lessen the load on these bones

But somehow ... don't.

Although Susan Bordo calls it an “unbearable” weight (2003)

It's not so heavy

These bones can take it

This spirit can take it

Because I have faith that some of you will help me shoulder the load.

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