

Grab a Slice of Pizza: Let's Talk About Fat Shaming

Recently on the social media app, Yik Yak, an anonymous Davidson student wrote: “It’s hard being overweight at Davidson because at a school obsessed with perfection people look at you and see laziness and failure” (Yik Yak, personal communication, October 21, 2014). This initial post was flooded with a variety of different comments. One user disagreed saying, “I am overweight and I support fat shaming. It’s a powerful motivator to change your habits...and if you feel bad, it’s because you probably should” (Yik Yak, personal communication, October 21, 2014). Another user however concurred with the original poster arguing, “I know people believe weight is a fixable issue but don’t discount other factors [of weight gain]” (Yik Yak, personal communication, October 21, 2014). Eventually the discussion turned into an argument on fat shaming .

The term “fat shaming” has garnered attention in the past few years in the psychological community. Society views obesity as a large public health concern but most people consider it to be acceptable to shame those who are overweight (Krik, 2014, p. 790). The trend of fat shaming brought up the following two connected questions: “why does society view it as acceptable to fat shame overweight individuals? And what is the effect of fat shaming for obese individuals?”

To examine the trend of fat shaming it is important to first examine the trend of obesity in the United States in recent years. According to data collected in 2012, over half of the residents of all 50 states are categorized as overweight or obese (Cook & Mueser, 2013, p. 129). In 2002 the first obesity litigation was filed by Caesar Barber on behalf of obese fast food restaurant clients in the case *Barber v. Burger King* (Thomson, 2009, p. 2). This case sparked dialogue about the strong obesity trend in the United States and asked the question who is to blame for this trend.

In 1981 Kim Chernin coined the term the “tyranny of slenderness” to highlight the

social pressure to be thin in a “fat-loathing culture” (Thomson, 2009, p. 8-9). This tyranny of slenderness can be witnessed by obese individuals who are told to “eat less, move more” by the media and health care professionals alike (Krik, 2014, p. 793). Currently from Michelle Obama’s healthy lunch campaign to Jennifer Lawrence’s avid love of pizza, obesity and body image have captured the media space. This media focus has fed into a culture of fat shaming.

The media encourages this by stereotyping obese individuals. In 2014 Burmeister and Carels conducted a study which sought to discover the relationship between participants reactions to jokes about obesity in comedies and their overall views on obesity. The study found that obesity is “one of the few stigmatized conditions still considered ‘fair game’ for public joking and ridicule” (Burmeister & Carels, 2014, p. 223). The results also stated that many television shows portray “overweight characters in a stereotypical and disparaging manner” (Burmeister & Carels, 2014, p. 223). The media often also cruelly ridicules celebrities who gained weight especially during pregnancy. For example, when Kim Kardashian gained weight while carrying her daughter, North West, the press compared her to a Killer Whale and the unflattering image was plastered all over the internet with cruel comments mocking her weight gain.

By ridiculing and mocking obesity, the media has sought to dehumanize overweight people in society. In most media coverage, “the fat body most often appears without a face” and when talking about weight trends the camera pans to an overweight woman leaving a cookie store (Thomson, 2009, p. 8-9). The anonymity of the individuals therefore feeds into the culture of fat shaming. Since Yik Yak is an anonymous app this dehumanizing effect could also be seen. Yakkers got personal throwing around rude terms such as, “bitch,” “a special class of idiot,” “twit,” “douche,” and one user saying to another, “I’ll call the short bus for you” (Yik Yak, personal communication, October 21, 2014). These hurtful comments from both sides of the discussion highlighted the dangers of dehumanization of anyone.

The idea of fat shaming is not just a media construct but rather a large-scale social issue. According to research published in the *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, students show a high level of obesity bias (Robinson, 2014). This particular study questioned students both in health and non-health related fields of study about their attitudes towards obese individuals (Robinson, 2014). The results found not only obesity bias but also that participants assumed a lack of willpower in those who were overweight. (Robinson, 2014). The idea of lack of will power also came up in the heated Yik Yak conversation when one Yakker made the following suggestion to the overweight individuals on campus: “1. Eat green fucking vegetables 2. Eat chicken and fish 3. Drink water 4. Snack on almonds if you must...It's not that fucking hard” (Yik Yak, personal communication, October 21, 2014). This comment is indicative of the type of attitude which initiates and justifies fat shaming in society: when people believe that losing weight is solely about a person's desire to do so.

Therefore, society believes it is acceptable to fat shame those who are overweight based on what the literature suggests due to the overwhelming belief that there is an internal locus of control and a lack of willpower which drive individuals to gain weight. As a result, overweight people are “highly stigmatized” despite their personal efforts to lose weight (Gostin, 2013, p. 5). People fat shame because they believe that with a quick diet fix (like the one mentioned above) that the obese would shrink six sizes and become supermodels overnight. But ironically, when people suggest such basic diets as the Yik Yak user did, it doesn't help because the literature suggests that overweight people do want something different for themselves and if it was as easy as following a simple diet they would do so (Gostin, 2013, p. 5).

Since many people believe the only thing standing between being overweight and skinny is self-control, they believe that it is okay to “gently encourage” those who are struggling with weight to better themselves. One person on Yik Yak agreed saying that being

overweight is only a “weak excuse for lazy people” (Yik Yak, personal communication, October 21, 2014). Another agreed adding, “being overweight is absolutely something you can avoid if you do hard work” (Yik Yak, personal communication, October 21, 2014). When people believe weight gain and weight loss are entirely controllable, they are much more likely to engage in fat shaming.

In short, fat shaming occurs because society believes obesity is the result of laziness and a lack of desire or attempt to be healthy on the part of the overweight individual. Now that justification for fat shaming has been revealed, it is important to look at the impact of this discrimination on overweight individuals. As Jennifer Love Hewitt once said, “to all girls with butts, boobs, hips and a waist, put on a bikini—put it on and stay strong (2013). Or as Lawrence O. Gostin appropriately titled his article, “If Shaming Reduced Obesity, There Would Be No Fat People” (2013).

There are measurable effects of fat shaming, which percolate throughout the overweight community. In fact, according to a study conducted by Gostin in 2013, “obese people are already the most openly stigmatized individuals in our society” (p. 4). His newly published data suggests that stigma about weight is more pervasive than that of racism or sexism and is “one of the few legal forms of discrimination that remain in America” (Gostin, 2013, p. 5). Fat shaming justifies these discriminatory measures. Even at the age of three children describe other overweight children as “‘mean,’ ‘stupid,’ ‘lazy, and ‘ugly’” (Gostin, 2013, p. 4). Overweight children are 1.6 times more likely to be bullied (Gostin, 2013, p. 4). Since fat shaming is acceptable for adults, these attitudes trickle down and effect the playground hierarchy for grade school children as well.

Obese individuals are often bullied which in turn greatly effects their self-esteem and self-image. In fact, one recent conducted 42 interviews with people in California who self identified as being overweight (Kirk, 2014) The study found that “individuals living with

obesity shared feelings of shame and embarrassment with their inability to control their weight on their own” (Kirk, 2014, p. 973). Fat shaming reinforces the negative and damaging psychological effects of weight gain, which can include “increased societal and internal stigma, reduced self-esteem and self-confidence, and persistent social isolation (Cook & Mueser, 2013). Kirk’s study essentially found that fat shaming is not necessary or effective because obese individuals are aware of their weight and are normally already attempting to and ashamed about their inability to lose a few pounds.

Animosity toward persons with obesity ignores the other facts involved with weight gain and/or loss (Burmeister & Carels, 2014, p. 224). There are a multiplicity of other factors which might cause weight gain. For example, “all classes of psychotropic agents have been implicated in the development of obesity” (Cook & Mueser, 2013, p. 129). One Yik Yak commenter even said, “I am overweight and have a medical condition. The medication I am on makes it very difficult to lose any weight” (Yik Yak, personal communication, October 21, 2014). However, a fat shaming user responded, “the medical condition and genetic explanations are weak excuses for lazy people” (Yik Yak, personal communication, October 21, 2014). Because fat shaming blatantly rejects other causes of weight instability, it reinforces psychological and emotional distress in the lives of many obese individuals.

Not only does fat shaming effect the self-esteem of the individual at the time, but also recent research suggests that fat shaming has permanent psychological effects. Girls who were labeled fat as young children are 1.7 times more likely to increase their weight over the next ten years (Wolpert, 2014). Therefore the more fat shaming occurs the more likely it is to actually cause a permanence of weight gain in the individual being shamed. A recent study by Sutin and Terracciano had participants rate their daily-perceived weight discrimination on a self-report diagram (2013). The results of this study suggest that participants who reported repeated instances of weight discrimination i.e. fat shaming in their every day lives were 2.5

times more likely to be categorized as obese during the follow-up study (Sutin & Terracciano, 2013). Therefore, the effects of fat shaming on obese individuals are overwhelmingly negative. Not only is fat shaming not effective, but also it causes a decrease in self esteem and can actually increase an individuals weight gain.

So how can the culture of fat shaming be counteracted? The solution: fat acceptance. No, fat acceptance is not about celebrating those who live unhealthy lifestyles or who are medically at risk. But fat acceptance does mean celebrating people no matter what the scale reads. One recent study conducted by *Radiance Magazine* found that fat women who endorsed the idea of fat acceptance “endorsed the need for social change in attitudes towards fat people” (Nita Mary McKinley 2004). These woman actually had higher self-acceptance, and lower body shame (Nita Mary McKinley 2004). Although obesity is a serious health concern in the USA, that does not make fat shaming an acceptable solution. Rather, the solution to the problem of fat shaming is to foster a community of acceptance for obese members of society. Or as one person said adding to the Yik Yak discussion, “you don’t have to personally find them [overweight individuals] attractive but calling them unattractive and undesirable is wrong and is the type of psychological fear which perpetuates eating disorders” (Yik Yak, personal communication, October 21, 2014).

Based on the research presented, a group of Davidson College students on Yik Yak took part in fat shaming because they felt that the overweight individuals on campus merely lacked motivation to lose weight. However, the current research suggests that these harsh comments would not help members of the Davidson community, but would only cause psychological distress and body image issues. Maybe instead of having the conversation on Yik Yak, the students who were part of the dialogue could have taken a page out of Jennifer Lawrence’s book and sat down in a circle with a box pepperoni pizza and talked about body acceptance and maybe even have felt comfortable enough to eat a second slice of pizza.

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