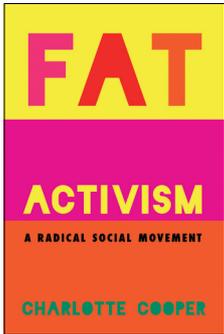


Book

Action against body shaming



Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement
Charlotte Cooper.
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For the *Lancet* obesity Series see
<http://www.thelancet.com/series/obesity-2015>

Fatphobia is one of the last acceptable prejudices in public spaces. Fat people endure outright abuse, not-so-covert photography/filming, and assumptions about their intelligence and education. Although workplace equal opportunities policies technically outlaw discrimination based on difference, there are many ways to express prejudice other than abuse or obvious criticism.

One popular method of purportedly non-discriminatory put down, is when the speaker expresses criticism of a fat person in the guise of concern about their health. Mention of costs to the state and taxpayers often follows. For balance, the Health At Every Size movement in the USA has provided a counterpoint to the health-related body shaming that some fat people experience.

One barrier between fat people and the medical establishment is prejudice. As William Dietz and colleagues pointed out in their paper in the *Lancet* 2015 Series on obesity, “Weight bias by preclinical and medical students includes attitudes that patients with obesity are lazy, non-compliant with treatment, less responsive to counselling, responsible for their condition, have no willpower, and deserve to be targets of derogatory humour, even in the clinical-care environment.” This bias is a failure of training, and a cultural failure too. Obesity has very real negative health effects, but the current climate does not always encourage people to make changes that could benefit them. Anecdotally, I am aware that some people who are overweight dread going to the doctor because every health problem they have is likely to be attributed to their weight. Doctors who don’t do this are talked about with great happiness.

The *Lancet* obesity Series also pointed out the “false and unhelpful dichotomies” around how obesity is seen and responded to: “obesity as a disease versus sequelae of unrestrained gluttony; obesity as a disability versus the new normal; lack of physical activity as a cause versus overconsumption of unhealthy food and beverages; prevention versus treatment; overnutrition versus undernutrition”. In the media, the talk is of epidemics and of timebombs—the same sort of language, in fact, that has been used about single mothers.

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There is also classism around weight issues in high-income countries. Many people struggle on low incomes, and something cheap, filling, and tasty is going to win over fruit every single time, especially if you need some energy. The idea that people will simply learn to cook healthy food cheaply echoes the very top-down idea that extended pub opening hours were going to teach British people to enjoy a Parisian style cafe culture.

In this public discourse the voices of people who would be identified as obese are rarely heard. Enter Charlotte Cooper, researcher, performer, and therapist who has devoted most of her adult life to fat activism. Her book is a personal account of the fat activist movement.

Cooper defines fat activism as “cultural work”. She critiques ideas about body positivity and a “monolithic ideal of trite self love”, and calls out careerist researchers for “reproducing fat people as fascinating but passive specimens”.

As with other marginalised groups, she discusses how there are many who wish to rescue fat people from themselves. Cooper suggests that a focus on health has been to the detriment of a focus on politics and human autonomy. She brings a lot of herself into her work, at some emotional risk—“Trashing, social exclusion, and a lot of stress are facts of life for activist researchers working with their own communities”, she notes. Her own activist projects reveal great creative energy and theatricality—they include the Chubsters (a queer fat girl gang), a Queer Chub Harvest Festival, and the Fattylympics, a public response to the corporatisation of east London for the 2012 Olympics.

Cooper charts the history of the fat activist movement, including incidents of cultural appropriation when it needed to call itself out for being too insular and white. And she explores the gentrification of activist movements, “when activists gain access to power but fail or decline to transform it”. Cooper also examines “Fatshion” blogging, and how although these blogs partly promote the corporate fashion industry they can also be a form of activism, highlighting the needs and desires of plus size people. She ties it all together by quoting Zoe Meleo-Erwin about how activism “moves fat people beyond a discourse of shame to reclaim the messy, disobedient aspects of ourselves”.

Cooper argues that obesity research itself is inadequate because of the built-in marginalisation of its subjects. Her book guides the reader into a fertile place of growth a million miles from timebombs and epidemics, and gives a human face to a large segment of the population who are too often dehumanised.

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