

Social Construction of Fat Phobia and Its Impact on Body Image, Media and Society

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Description

Fat phobia is a socially constructed phenomenon, particularly prevalent in the Western world, where societies tend to shape the ideal body type based on certain cultural norms and values. In Western societies, the ideal body is often associated with strength, agility, and endurance, reflecting an emphasis on achievement, individual responsibility, and success. These ideals not only align with the values of the Western world but may also reflect historical preparations for war, as suggested by Lloyd deMause, who argues that the obsession with fitness and resilience may stem from such motivations.

In contrast, in places like Nigeria, the perception of body size is different. Here, overweight individuals, particularly women, are seen as symbols of health, wealth, and fertility. Obesity in such cultures is often linked to self-esteem, sexuality, and social status, making it an ideal characteristic rather than something to be stigmatized.

The range of fat phobia

Fat phobia is not rooted in a genuine fear of fat itself, but rather in the prejudice, discrimination, and social rejection faced by overweight individuals. This discrimination is a result of complex social, political, historical, economic, and cultural factors that do not operate in the same way in other cultures. Consequently, fat phobia is a socially constructed issue that affects people's relationships with food and influences body image, especially among women. Societal patterns of blame, shame, and guilt contribute to the growing stigma against fatness, which often leads to the development of body acceptance movements and activism that challenge dominant views on body size and health.

Anti-fat bias is pervasive, leading many to associate overweight individuals with negative personality traits, such as a lack of discipline or laziness. This bias extends beyond those who are clinically obese to include individuals whose body shape is perceived as deviant from the ideal but may still fall within the overweight or normal BMI ranges. Fat-shaming is particularly common in the United States, where the majority of adults are classified as overweight or obese. According to the Huffington Post, two-thirds of American adults are overweight or obese. Despite these statistics, overweight individuals face

discrimination in various spheres of life, including employment, healthcare, and relationships.

Research has shown that anti-fat bias can be influenced by the way a person's weight is framed. When individuals are told that someone is overweight due to overeating and a lack of exercise, there is a stronger bias toward that person compared to when the explanation focuses on genetics. This suggests that the societal context in which body size is discussed plays a significant role in how individuals are perceived.

The prevalence of fat phobia

Fat phobia is not limited to Western cultures. Instances of historical anti-fat bias can be found across various societies. Studies on body image and weight discrimination suggest that negative perceptions of one's own appearance may sometimes lead people to judge overweight individuals more harshly in an attempt to feel better about their own bodies. Media representation plays a significant role in reinforcing these biases. The media tends to over-represent underweight individuals while under-representing those who are overweight. For example, one study found that a third of women on TV were depicted as underweight, whereas only 5% of the population actually fits that category.

Conversely, a study of over 1,000 major TV characters from 2003 revealed that only 14% of female characters and 24% of male characters were depicted as overweight, despite the fact that the actual rates of overweight individuals are more than double these numbers. When overweight characters do appear on television, they are often relegated to minor or stereotypical roles. Furthermore, nearly two-thirds of popular children's movies feature negative portrayals of fat characters, often casting them as unintelligent, lazy, and villainous. These characters are frequently shown eating excessively and are less likely to be involved in romantic relationships or meaningful social interactions.

In contrast, slim characters are often depicted as active, intelligent, and attractive, reinforcing societal ideals of beauty and success. A study in 2007 that analyzed 135 TV and film scenes featuring overweight individuals found that anti-fat humor was prevalent, especially in situations where a male character mocked a female character's body. This dynamic highlights the gendered nature of fat phobia, as the same kind of

ridicule was not typically directed at male characters in the same way.

The media plays a central role in perpetuating the idealization of thinness while marginalizing overweight individuals. It tends to focus on slim celebrities, models, and public figures while rarely featuring overweight individuals in a positive or central role. This creates a distorted view of body image and reinforces the idea that thinness equals beauty, success, and worth. Overweight individuals, particularly women, are often underrepresented and when they do appear, they are either portrayed negatively or as comic relief.

Research supports the idea that the media's portrayal of ideal body types contributes to unrealistic standards and fat phobia. Television shows and films that focus on weight-related humor or present overweight characters in a derogatory manner can shape public perception, reinforcing the belief that fatness is undesirable and associated with negative qualities.

Conclusion

Fat phobia is a complex social construct that is deeply ingrained in many cultures, particularly in the West, where body

ideals are shaped by historical, social, and economic forces. It leads to prejudice and discrimination against individuals who are overweight, contributing to negative perceptions and biased treatment in various spheres of life. However, the impact of fat phobia extends beyond individual experiences, influencing media representation, self-esteem, and societal attitudes toward body size.

As awareness of body diversity and fat acceptance grows, there is hope that these harmful biases will be challenged, both in the media and within society at large. The ongoing efforts of activists and body acceptance movements provide a platform for advocating for more inclusive, realistic, and positive representations of all body types. By confronting fat phobia and questioning societal standards, we can move towards a more compassionate and equitable world where all individuals, regardless of their body size, are valued and respected.