

Fatphobia in Healthcare: A Fat Studies

Perspective and Reading List

Dr. Sarah A. Shelton

In their “Joint International Consensus Statement for Ending Stigma of Obesity” published in *Nature Science* in March 2020, thirty-six medical professionals and academics argue that fatphobia harms the physical and mental health of fat people.



People with obesity (sic) commonly face a pervasive, resilient form of social stigma. They are often subject to discrimination in the workplace as well as in educational and healthcare settings. Research indicates that weight stigma can cause physical and psychological harm, and that affected individuals are less likely to receive adequate care. For these reasons, weight stigma damages health, undermines human and social rights, and is unacceptable in modern societies (Rubino et al., 485).

For decades, fat activists, the fat-acceptance movement, and fat studies (the resulting academic field) have worked tirelessly to make these very points. While it is encouraging to see them made by scientists and doctors in a medical publication, we only have to look around us in our daily lives to see (in both our media and medicine) that such discrimination is the norm, not the exception. Indeed, the consequences of fatphobia are all too easily ignored or even dismissed entirely in a culture where most arguments against fat bodies (i.e., the “war on obesity”) ground (and shield) themselves in “concern” about the health of “obese” and “morbidly obese” people. But this joint statement pulls together research that confirms that the fatphobia fat people face is actually a critical factor in fat people’s health precisely because it directly affects the quality of healthcare they do (or don’t) receive. The joint statement outlines several points that fat studies and activism have long argued:

- Physicians tend to spend less time consulting with fat patients
- Fat patients often report being prescribed weight loss *first*, whether or not they come in for issues related to weight
- Fat patients who have experienced such weight bias in consultations (or just in their general lives) are more likely to avoid seeking care in the first place
- Such avoidance often leads to a (too) late diagnosis or leaves issues undiagnosed
- Shaming and declaring war on fat bodies more often has the opposite effect than the one hoped for as, buried under such shame and aggression, fat people may also avoid gyms and exercise (to avoid being made fun of or even accosted) and may self-medicate with food through disordered eating

While the first instinct might be to dismiss fatphobia as less impactful than “obesity” itself, imagine for a moment (if you aren’t fat) that an entire country—or world—has declared war on your body. That one-size-fits-all desks in the classroom don’t fit you, signaling to your peers and professors that you don’t belong here. That a nurse trying to take your blood pressure is rough with your arm when the cuff is too small or rolls her eyes and clicks her tongue in clear disgust as she has to leave the room to find a medical device that fits your body. That you decide to get out and take a walk only to have someone roll down their window as they drive by and yell at you that you’re a pig or, even, that you should die. Though anecdotal here, these imaginings are all based on common occurrences in the lives of fat people. I’ve personally experienced some version of them all myself. As author Lisa Fipps (2021) points out in the acknowledgements of her book *Starfish* (discussed in the list below),

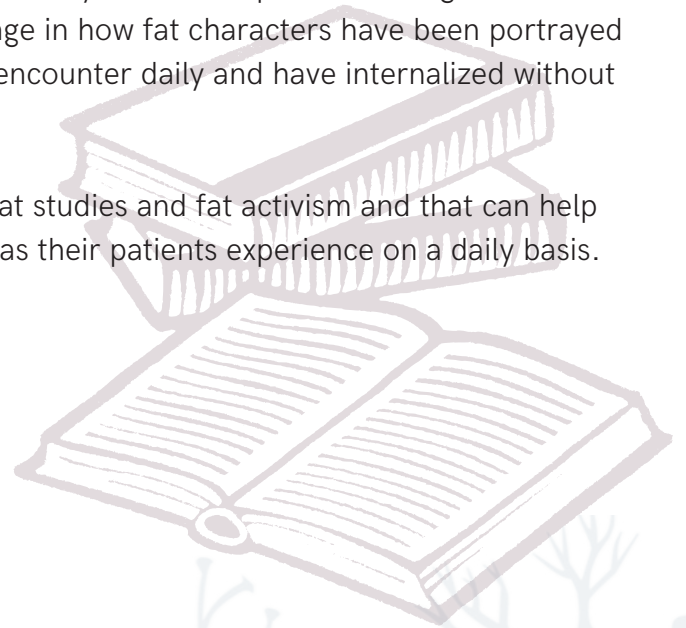


Starfish is a work of fiction, and a lot of people will read this and think, “It’s definitely fiction because people would never say or do such cruel things.” But a variation of every single mean thing people said or did to Ellie happened to me when I was a child (245)

Though the kind of healthcare bias listed above might seem fictional, the joint statement professionals, fat studies scholars, and fat activists know they are very real and very damaging.

In my Disability Studies: Fat Fiction (ENGL 2303/DS2301) course that first ran in Spring 2020 and will run again in Spring 2023, I use fiction, specifically Young Adult (YA fiction) to expose students to such bias and fatphobia through novels. At the beginning of that first semester, a nursing student explained that she’d specifically chosen the course to purposefully better understand the experience of her future patients who are fat and have experienced such bias. And as we worked our way from reading about Piggy in *Lord of the Flies* (a fat sidekick character who only exists to be sacrificed (literally) so that the others can learn a lesson) to Juliet in *Juliet Takes a Breath* (a fat, Puerto Rican, lesbian activist who is the protagonist but rarely mentions her size unless she’s talking about loving her body), all my students reported (through reflection assignments and our final class meeting) that seeing the change in how fat characters have been portrayed over time brought home for them how much fatphobia they encounter daily and have internalized without realizing it.

Below is a brief list of readings that offer an introduction to fat studies and fat activism and that can help healthcare professionals better understand the stigma and bias their patients experience on a daily basis.



Non-Fiction

The Fat Studies Reader edited by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay and *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies* edited by Cat Pausé and Sonya Renee Taylor are the go-to anthologies that explain the field and show its theories in use.

Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture by Amy Farrell maps the roots of fatphobia in the U.S., showing that fat stigma predates “health concerns” and is, rather, a result of cultural anxiety about consumer culture, immigration, and race.

Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight by Lindo Bacon founded the HaES movement that directly opposes diets, diet culture, and the damage both have done to our bodies.

Shrill: Notes from a Loud Woman by Lindy West is the author’s memoir about growing up trying, “unsuccessfully, to hide her big body and even bigger opinions.” It is also the source material for the Hulu series by the same name.

Fattily Ever After: A Black Fat Girl’s Guide to Living Life Unapologetically by Stephanie Yeboah tells the author’s story of “navigating life as a Black, plus-size womxn in a world obsessed with body image” and of how she advocates for fat-acceptance within a culture whose “body positivity” more often than not erases and silences fat people, especially fat people of color.

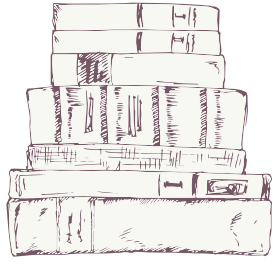
Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement by Charlotte Cooper traces the history of and different conversations within fat activism.

Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body by Roxanne Gay is a difficult (and possibly triggering) read but gives readers a better understanding of the damage internalized fatphobia does in fat people and how trauma, shame, and body image and acceptance are often intertwined.

Fiction

My Big Fat Manifesto by Susan Vaught is exactly that: a manifesto. One of the first of its kind, this novel gives a fat character center stage and lets her talk and write back against all of the fatphobia she’s endured in her young life. Both the main character and her boyfriend face a decision about bariatric surgery, showing the different sides of that conversation as well as the consequences when such medical intervention goes wrong.

The Clover City Trilogy (*Dumplin’, Puddin’, and Pumpkin’*) by Julie Murphy heralded the proliferation of novels with fat protagonists after its publication in 2015. Between the three books, readers get multiple fat perspectives, encountering several characters who all have different experiences of being fat. The first book *Dumplin’* was the source material for the Netflix Original film of the same name.



The Faith comics from Valiant star something we've seen very little of: a fat superhero. Part of a trend that sidelines or completely leaves out fat storylines (whether fat manifestos or weight-loss plotlines) in favor of letting the fat protagonist have the storylines thin characters usually enjoy by default (coming of age, romance, grief, struggles with identity, etc.), these comics/graphic novels are doubly productive. A visual medium, they don't let readers get away with imaging the character as thin even as he or she is described as fat. Faith is drawn unapologetically fat, whether in her work clothes or spandex and cape.

Fat Chance Charlie Vega by Crystal Maldonado gives readers an inside look at just how damaging "willpower" narratives and shaming methods can be as it chronicles the mental and physical harm a mother's "health concerns" and disordered eating (through diets) do to the main character. It also realistically portrays the difficult push and pull, back and forth many fat people experience as they struggle, like the novel's protagonist, to replace their own fatphobia (learned from her parents and peers) with fat acceptance.

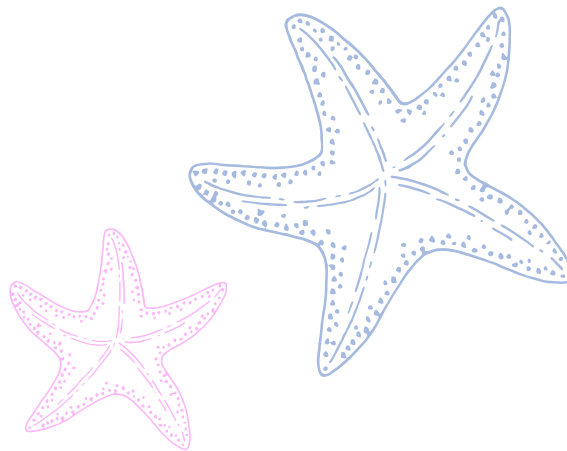
Starfish by Lisa Fipps is a novel-in-verse that, one poem at a time, embodies the same struggles with a fatphobic parent found in *Fat Chance Charlie Vega*. The protagonist, however, is still a child instead of a teen, and faces a parent willing to force her into bariatric surgery when she doesn't want it. This novel also addresses mental health as the protagonist works with a therapist and her father to face and heal from the trauma her mother has caused.

Though not research as listed in the joint statement, the last lines from *Starfish* (Fipps, 2021), speak for all fat people, patients or not.

I deserve to be seen.
To be noticed.
To be heard.
To be treated like a human.

“To be treated like a human.”

I starfish.
There's plenty of room
for
each
and
every
one of us
in the world (244)



Bibliography

Fipps, L. (2021). *Starfish*. New York, NY: Nancy Paulsen Books.

Rubino, F., Puhl, R. M., Cummings, D. E., et al. (2020). Joint international consensus statement for ending stigma of obesity. *Nature Medicine*, 26, 485-497. <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41591-020-0803-x>