

Madeline Ward

On Fat Oppression

ABSTRACT. Contemporary Western societies are obsessed with the “obesity epidemic,” dieting, and fitness. Fat people violate the Western conscience by violating a thinness norm. In virtue of violating the thinness norm, fat people suffer many varied consequences. Is their suffering morally permissible, or even obligatory? In this paper, I argue that the answer is no. I examine contemporary philosophical accounts of oppression and draw largely on the work of Sally Haslanger to generate a set of conditions sufficient for some phenomena to count as oppression, and I illustrate the account’s value using the example of gender oppression. I then apply the account to fat people, examine empirical evidence, and argue that the suffering of fat people counts as oppression (and therefore, generally, discriminating against fat people in virtue of their being fat is morally wrong).

Examples abound of the use of the phrases “fat oppression” and “weight-based oppression,” both in feminist literature, and in the emerging fat studies field (e.g., MacInnis 1993; Brown 1989; Schoenfielder and Weiser 1983; Wann 2009, xii, xviii; Braziel and Lebesco 2001, 2–7). However, in these fields, it seems taken for granted that there is such oppression. Furthermore, no argument that there is fat oppression exists in related philosophical literature (i.e., feminist philosophy).

Indeed, there is an abundance of empirical evidence that people are *biased* against fat people. We can immediately agree that fat people face discrimination. But the existence of bias

and discrimination do not constitute oppression. (For example, Peter Singer argues that fat people [morally] should be the targets of discrimination. One ought never be oppressed, though, so if Singer is right, fat people can't be oppressed. I'll return to Singer's view later.)¹

In this paper, I aim to make a case that fat people are oppressed. In section 1, I motivate the need for a philosophical argument concluding that fat oppression exists. In section 2, I draw largely on the work of Sally Haslanger, among others, to provide conditions jointly sufficient for oppression, and then demonstrate that those conditions are sufficient for oppression using an uncontroversial example. In section 3, I argue that fat oppression fulfills these conditions. In section 4, I consider and reply to some objections, before concluding by discussing the significance of the claim that fat people are oppressed.

1. FAT OPPRESSION: SO WHAT?

Why should we care whether there is fat oppression? Because, as we will see, fat people suffer, and they suffer in virtue of being fat. When people suffer, we ought to care about whether they should suffer. If fat people are oppressed, it follows that fat people ought not suffer in virtue of being fat, because one ought never be oppressed.

Furthermore, body shape has never been more socially significant.² There is a thinness norm in America; normative body types are thought to be both healthy and beautiful. As stated on the website of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's Division of Nutrition, Physical Activity, and Obesity, U. S. government officially endorses the view that we are in the midst of

¹ Another example is Jim, a heterosexual white male who is fired from his job because of a supervisor's discriminatory attitudes about white people. Although Jim has been the victim of discrimination, we wouldn't want to say that Jim is oppressed (cf. Frye 1983, 1–2).

² I limit my discussion in this paper to Western societies and in particular, the United States, although there is evidence that anti-fat bias is taking root worldwide (Brewis et al. 2011).

an obesity epidemic and claims that the number of obese adults has risen “dramatically” in the past 20 years. People who violate the thinness norm are socially acceptable targets for shaming and hate speech.³ There is a general public vitriol aimed at fat people, who are seen as failures of self-discipline, and therefore moral failures (Guthman 2011).⁴

Given the social significance of weight, research on obesity has become increasingly abundant in the past 20 years. Moreover, a corresponding social science field has emerged—fat studies—wherein geographers and other social scientists study fatness as a social construct. Fat studies combines sociological analysis with political agitation.⁵ For example, in her introduction to *The Fat Studies Reader*, Marilyn Wann (2009) claims that “the field of fat studies as a whole does not just map the contours of the vexing boulder of weight-based oppression; it also helps move that obstacle from our shared path, freeing us to enjoy authentic—rather than alienated—embodiment.”

If fat studies scholars are correct, there is something wrong with discriminating against fat people: it is oppressive. But it’s not obvious that fat people are oppressed; discrimination against fat people might be justified. For example, we might not think that all forms of discrimination are morally wrong (Lippert-Rasmussen 2006), and it might be rational for employers to favor people with normative rather than nonnormative body types when making hiring decisions (cf. Roehling 2002; Tietje and Cresap 2005). Peter Singer (2012) has argued that, among other things, charging fat people more money for airline tickets and encouraging people to lose weight through the use of federal regulation and taxation are morally permissible

³ Examples of this phenomenon are abundant. Consider the recent comment of Geoffrey Miller, a visiting Professor at NYU, who tweeted “Dear obese PhD applicants: if you didn’t have the willpower to stop eating carbs, you won’t have the willpower to do a dissertation #truth” (King 2013).

⁴ “Overweight” and “obese” are medically defined terms with implicit normative content. I therefore use the normatively neutral term “fat” throughout this paper to describe the relevant body type.

⁵ However, feminist authors and academics connected fat activism and the goals of feminism as early as the late 1970s (e.g., Orbach 1978; Wooley et al. 1979).

and perhaps required.

Essentially, if we care about social justice, we need to figure out whether the suffering of fat people in virtue of violating the thinness norm is permissible; we need to figure out how fat people ought to be (or may be permissibly) treated. An argument that fat people are oppressed will show that their suffering ought not occur. In the rest of this paper, I aim to make such an argument.

In the next section, we'll draw on contemporary philosophical accounts of oppression to generate a set of conditions jointly sufficient for some phenomenon to count as oppression, and then apply the account to a group—women—to demonstrate the account's adequacy.

2. WHAT IS OPPRESSION?

We cannot offer a completely novel account of oppression here, but we can draw on contemporary accounts of oppression, and in particular, Sally Haslanger's (2012) account of oppression to get a set of conditions jointly sufficient for its occurrence. In short, oppression occurs when unjust systematic harms are suffered by the members of some group, *as members of that group*, and oppression can be grounded in institutions or individuals.

To begin with, it seems clear that oppression requires *unjust* harms against some X (where X is a person or a group of persons). A full consideration of contemporary views of justice is beyond the scope of this paper.⁶ For our purposes, we can note that one of Rawls's (1971) requirements for justice in his seminal work was the fair equality of opportunity, which rules out discrimination based on traits like sex and race. The concern about fair equality of

⁶ On her view of oppression, Haslanger remains neutral about which conception of justice is correct, although she endorses “a broadly liberal sentiment that requires of a social structure that it be one that reasonable equals could accept” and notes that her view makes implicit background assumptions about democratic, egalitarian, and materialist “sensibilities” (321).

opportunity and hence the concern about discrimination based on race and sex is that these seem like traits that are out of one's control, and so it seems unfair that these traits can affect one's welfare (Barry 1988). Race and sex are assigned at birth by a natural lottery (or more precisely, the physical traits used to mark race and sex are assigned at birth by a natural lottery). One doesn't choose one's own race or sex. Consequently, it seems unfair and therefore unjust to structure society such that one is at a disadvantage (or advantage) in virtue of some trait over whose possession one has no control. We therefore hold the following principle:

Fair Equality of Opportunity (FEO): An inequality is just only if it doesn't exist in virtue of some X's possessing a trait assigned by natural lottery.

FEO puts forward a necessary condition for just inequalities, and so if FEO isn't fulfilled, an inequality is unjust. FEO is plausible because it accounts for the injustice of inequalities one experiences due to one's race, gender, abilities, and so on.⁷ Inequalities that fail to respect fair equality of opportunity are unjust inequalities. When these inequalities are harmful, they are unjust harms.⁸

However, as Haslanger claims, an account of oppression cannot merely hold that oppression occurs when X suffers unjust harms, unless more can be said about the difference between an unjust harm and an immoral harm (2012, 314). Otherwise, the account of oppression

⁷ At the very least, we should accept a principle equivalent to FEO insofar as it rules out as just discrimination based on those kinds of traits. We'll consider a modified FEO in section 4.

⁸ I prefer a nondistributive standard of justice (i.e., a standard of justice whereby justice isn't measured in terms of material goods or welfare), but we will see that my argument for fat oppression will follow given any theory of justice that holds FEO (or an equivalent principle). The theory of justice I favor claims that justice requires people in a society to instantiate relationships wherein they respect each other as equals (Fraser 1995; 1997; Anderson 1999). I think justice requires recognition because this accounts for the desiderata of egalitarian social justice movements. For example, the gay rights movement wasn't merely concerned with correcting or compensating for systematic inequalities of material goods and economic opportunities. The movement also sought the freedom for gay people to be themselves—that is, to publicly acknowledge and display their sexual identities with the same freedom as heterosexuals. The recognition requirement of justice explains why justice therefore requires that gay couples be able to hold hands in public without fear of retributive verbal or physical assault.

fails to distinguish between oppression and other types of immoral harm. Plausibly, one way oppression is distinguished from other types of immoral harm is in its systematicity. The systematicity of oppression is the way in which oppression manifests in many different aspects of an oppressed individual's life. One who is oppressed suffers harms publicly and privately, intra- and interpersonally, economically and socially. According to Cudd, "oppression that begins in one sphere, such as the political, economic, or legal sphere, can then come to permeate the consciousness of the people, both oppressed and oppressors" (2006, 10). Furthermore, the harms in these spheres are related to one another in such a way as to create in the oppressed a feeling of being squeezed from all sides. Marilyn Frye uses the analogy of a bird trapped in a cage to convey the sense in which oppression is systematic (1983, 4–5). By looking at only one wire of the cage at a time, we might wonder why the bird didn't simply fly out. But when we view the entire cage all at once, we see that escape is impossible. Thus, oppression reduces the options of the oppressed, in subtly connected ways. The systematicity of oppression is also revealed by the phenomenon of the double bind (Frye 1983). The double bind refers to how an oppressed group is damned-if-they-do, and damned-if-they-don't. They are squeezed in between extremes, forced to adopt certain norms, and suffer restricted freedom of choice. For example, one way that women are in the double bind is sexually. Women are slut-shamed if they have "too much" sex, but they are called frigid and their sexual orientation is questioned if they don't have "enough" sex. Another example might be blacks who act either "too black" (usually referred to using a racial slur) or "not black enough" (e.g., called "Oreos": black on the outside but white on the inside). Thus, the double bind illustrates the systematicity of oppression by showing how the restrictions on how a member of an oppressed group "should" act given a social norm relate to one another; the restrictions press in on all sides and reduce the options of the oppressed.

Let me be clear: there is more to oppression than merely suffering multiple harms. The systematicity condition for oppression requires not only that harms permeate many aspects of the oppressed individual's life, but that those harms are related to one another. The relation can be causal, as suggested by Cudd; an initial harm in one sphere of an individual's life, like being born in a poor urban school district, causes that individual to have reduced options socially and economically later in life, which in turn causes further harms to that individual. Moreover, as Frye's discussion of the double bind illustrates, systematic harms can be related such that they reduce the options of the oppressed by forcing them to conform to a strict norm. In short, as the word "systematicity" suggests, the harms that constitute oppression "work together" to reduce the options of the oppressed. Thus, the systematicity condition rules out cases where someone suffers multiple harms but still doesn't count as oppressed. For example, suppose Jim, a heterosexual white male, has a terrible day. A passing bus splashes Jim while he is walking to work. Jim arrives at work to find that he's been fired because his supervisor has a discriminatory attitude about white people. On his way home a group of teenagers lean out of a car's windows and call Jim mean names. Finally, before reaching home, a police officer stops and unjustly searches Jim. No doubt that Jim has had a bad day. Yet, we don't want to say Jim is oppressed (even in spite of the fact that Jim suffers several *unjust* harms). Why? We don't want to trivialize claims about oppression. Part of why we care about an account of oppression is that such an account allows us to identify and thereby intervene on a special type of unjust harm that people suffer. An account of oppression should therefore distinguish, for example, between a white heterosexual male who happens to suffer numerous (unjust) harms, and an individual who is actually oppressed. Frye rightly points this out in her reply to the claim that like women, men are oppressed:

Human beings can be miserable without being oppressed, and it is perfectly consistent to deny that a person or group is oppressed without denying that they have feelings or that they suffer. (2)

The systematicity condition distinguishes between human beings who are merely miserable and those that are oppressed. Both the former and latter suffer, but the oppressed suffer in ways that are related to one another. Systematicity is evident when harms work together to cause suffering in many spheres of life, putting the oppressed in the double bind.

Moreover, respecting that systematicity is importantly characteristic of oppression allows us to capture the ordinary sense in which we use the term. When we speak of ending oppression, we are talking about a large-scale phenomenon, one whose scope is greater than a single act. Consequently, token acts, such as a rape or a lynching, might be *oppressive*—that is, in part constitutive of the larger phenomenon, *oppression*—but those token acts themselves don't count as oppression. Here, I differ from Haslanger because she suspects that the conceptual core of oppression is the misallocation of power (2012, 313), whereas I think the conceptual core of oppression has to do with a restriction of freedom. I think my view is preferable because it seems to mesh more with our intuitions about oppression in cases in which an institution is oppressive. For example, Haslanger offers a case in which black women aren't allowed to enroll in certain college courses because of an official university policy (316). This policy is obviously oppressive, but Haslanger claims that the policy is oppressive in virtue of the distribution of power—presumably, the lack of power that black women have to enroll in certain courses. However, I think it's more intuitive that these cases are oppressive in virtue of a lack of freedom in the oppressed, because talk of a “distribution” or “misallocation” of power implies that some amount of power isn't possessed by whom it ought to be, and conversely, that some amount of

power is possessed by someone it ought not be. But this isn't necessary for an institution to act oppressively. In the case of the black women who are prevented from registering for particular college courses, it's clear who doesn't have a particular power: the black women viz. enrolling in the course. But who has power they ought not have? It doesn't seem like anyone does; certainly, it's not the case that the students who aren't black women shouldn't be able to register in the course. So, it seems more intuitive to think that the policy is oppressive in virtue of its restricting the freedom of black women, rather than the policy's misallocation of power, and so it seems more intuitive that the conceptual core of oppression is a restriction of freedom rather than the misallocation of power.

Another part of what distinguishes oppression from other types of immoral harm is that oppression is group-based (Frye 1983; Haslanger 2012); oppression "targets" some group and group members suffer oppression in virtue of being members of that group. Here, we can follow Haslanger's account of what it is for oppression to target a group or its members: oppression targets some X when X is F, and being F is nonaccidentally correlated with suffering some unjust harm. For example, suppose that all and only the women applicants for a job at GloboCo have brown hair. The hiring manager at GloboCo is a sexist and decides that he will not hire a woman for the open position. There is a nonaccidental correlation between being a woman and not being hired for the GloboCo job, whereas there is only an accidental correlation between being a person with brown hair and not being hired for the job. Thus, the manager's decision not to hire women is oppressive; his act harms members of the group of women in virtue of their womanhood, not in virtue of their having brown hair. For any woman not hired by that manager, she is oppressed qua woman, not qua brown-haired person.

What does it mean for X's being F to be nonaccidentally correlated with X's suffering

some unjust harm? Haslanger claims that “a correlation counts as nonaccidental because it supports certain kinds of counterfactuals; the idea is that the group’s being a group of *F*s is causally relevant to the injustice” (328). Her locution suggests that she takes counterfactual support to be equivalent to causal relevance. In other words, Haslanger seems to claim the following:

- (A) *X*’s being *F* is nonaccidentally correlated with *X*’s suffering some harm *H* iff certain kinds of counterfactuals *C*s are true, and
- (B) *C*s are true if *X*’s being *F* is causally relevant to *X*’s suffering some harm *H*.

The idea seems to be this: we have nonaccidental correlation where we have counterfactual dependence, and we have counterfactual dependence where we have causal relevance. So, on Haslanger’s view, *X*’s being *F* is nonaccidentally correlated with *X*’s suffering some harm just in case it’s true that:

- (C) If *X* were not *F*, *X* would not have suffered some harm *H*.

Haslanger’s account is not always going to get the right result, though. Consider the GloboCo case above. Suppose that Nancy is one of the women who doesn’t get hired. Furthermore, suppose that Nancy is less qualified for the position than other applicants who are men.

According to Haslanger’s view, if Nancy is oppressed in this case, the following counterfactual would be true:

- (α) If Nancy were not a woman, she would have gotten the job.

But (α) is false. In the closest worlds in which Nancy is not a woman, Nancy wouldn’t get the job because she isn’t most qualified for the job. However, despite the fact that (α) is false, we still want to say Nancy counts as oppressed in the GloboCo case because there is a causal connection between her being a woman and her not getting hired.

Haslanger might reply that her account requires only that nonaccidental correlations support *certain kinds* of counterfactuals, and that once we have the right counterfactual semantics, her account will generate the correct counterfactual truth values. However, I worry that we aren't able to actually figure out the right counterfactual semantics. For example, for (α) to be true, Haslanger's counterfactual semantics must order the set of possible worlds in which Nancy is not a woman such that in those worlds, she is also the most qualified for the GloboCo job. There are further considerations as well; for instance, in the closest worlds where Nancy is not a woman, she must also exist (but there's nothing that *prima facie* guarantees that she exists in the closest not-a-woman worlds). The point is that there are several factors that importantly affect the truth value of (α) , and the same holds for any case in which we try to distinguish between accidental and nonaccidental correlations. I'm therefore skeptical that we're epistemically capable of figuring out the counterfactual semantics that can correctly generate truth values and adequately distinguish between accidental and nonaccidental correlations.

Consequently, distinguishing between the relevant accidental and nonaccidental correlations using *only* a causal condition seems more promising. I propose that X is oppressed only if X is F and X's being F nonaccidentally correlates with X's being unjustly harmed, and X's being F nonaccidentally correlates with X's being unjustly harmed only if X's being F causes X to be unjustly harmed *in the right kind of way*, i.e., under certain conditions, and in particular, oppressive conditions. That is, the unjust harm caused to X has to occur within a context of oppression as a constituent part of a *systematic* phenomenon.

Consider the GloboCo case once more. Nancy is a woman and the hiring manager at GloboCo is a sexist. Nancy's being a woman causes her not to get the job. This can be true in spite of the fact that Nancy isn't qualified for the job. We don't have to consider any problematic

counterfactuals. Furthermore, Nancy wouldn't count as oppressed in a world where women aren't oppressed (say, because men are the subordinate gender). This is because there is the right kind of causal connection between Nancy's being a woman and Nancy's not getting the job; Nancy's being a woman causes Nancy not to get the job, *within a context of oppression*.⁹ In a world where Nancy isn't in a context of oppression, the causal connection between her being a woman and her not getting the job isn't the right kind of causal connection, so we end up with the correct verdict that Nancy's not being hired isn't oppressive. We can now see how placing the causal connection between one's group membership and one's suffering unjust harms in the context of a system of unjust harms shows that one's group membership is nonaccidentally correlated with one's being unjustly harmed (and therefore oppressed). It is no mere accident that one is harmed *as an F*, inside a system that connects up the harms suffered by Fs.

One might worry that my account of oppression is circular insofar as it relies on the notion of oppressive conditions. I admit that the account is circular, but not viciously so. Firstly, my aim in this paper is not to give a reductive account of oppression, so explaining oppression using concepts related to oppression isn't inherently problematic. Furthermore, there is still useful theoretical work to be done by giving a nonreductive analysis.¹⁰ So, even though I explain oppression in terms of oppressive conditions, that isn't a problem for my account.

Finally, we know that both institutions and people can oppress other people (Haslanger 2012; Ezorsky 1991; Garcia 1996).¹¹ But interestingly, oppression can also be psychological,

⁹ Frye also uses context to determine whether some individual harm is oppressive (1983, 11). Indeed, for Frye, the right kind of causal connection is one in which some oppressive conditions make the property of belonging to a particular group causally relevant to one's suffering some harm (18–19). This seems right to me, although admittedly, it won't help us give a reductive account of oppression.

¹⁰ For example, in the contemporary metaphysics of causation literature, some accounts of causation make use of causal notions in evaluating the relations between causes and effects, but these accounts still illuminate interesting aspects of causation; see, e.g., Weslake (forthcoming).

¹¹ Again, note that my view differs from those cited because these views claim that some people or institution can act such that the act is oppression, while my view claims that people and institutions act oppressively; such acts and

when an oppressed person internalizes oppressive beliefs about herself.¹² Psychological oppression dehumanizes the oppressed and by internalizing the claims of their oppressors, the oppressed become their own oppressors, resulting in self-abuse, reduced self-esteem, and victim-blaming (Bartky 1990; Pharr 1988, 53–4). Psychological oppression also demonstrates once more the double bind; the oppressed feel limited in their capabilities and are therefore squeezed into a grossly magnified, caricatured stereotype:

Suppose that I, the object of some stereotype, believe in it myself—for why should I not believe what everyone else believes? I may then find it difficult to achieve what existentialists call an authentic choice of self, or what some psychologists have regarded as a state of self-actualization. . . . It is hard enough for me to determine what sort of person I am or ought to try to become without being shadowed by an alternate self which, with work and encouragement, might sometime have emerged. For the talented few, retreat into the *imago* is raised to the status of art or comedy. Muhammad Ali has made himself what he could scarcely escape being made into—a personification of the Primitive Man; while Zsa Zsa Gabor is not so much a woman as the parody of a woman. (Bartky 1990, 24)

Thus, the psychologically oppressed have restrictions imposed upon them by societal norms, and consequently restrict their own opportunities. These norms threaten the autonomy of the psychologically oppressed and dehumanize them by reducing them to stereotypes.

institutions constitute oppression. Thus, my view is more similar to Roberts's (1997) view on which she distinguishes between the material condition or phenomenal manifestation, i.e., the instantiation of oppression, and the theoretical structure of oppression itself.

¹² Another virtue of the view that oppression's conceptual core is its restriction of freedom is that the view can account for psychological oppression. In contrast, it's unclear how the view that oppression's conceptual core is the misallocation of power could account for this type of oppression.

Summarily, on our view, some harms constitute oppression if they are unjust, systematic, and suffered as an F, in virtue of being an F. Moreover, according to FEO, when Fness is the result of a natural lottery, inequalities caused by one's Fness are unjust.

Applying the Conditions to Gender Oppression

Now we can examine an example of an obviously (or at least less controversially) oppressed group—women—to see how the above account rightly counts some group as oppressed.

We'll consider first how the harms suffered by women are unjust. Woman and man are gender categories, and gender is socially constructed (de Beauvoir 1952). Since we accept FEO, we conclude that inequalities are unjust when they result from one's having a trait assigned by the natural lottery. Since gender is socially constructed, one might think that gender isn't assigned by the natural lottery, and so inequalities that result from one's being a woman aren't unjust. However, although being a woman is a trait that one has in virtue of social construction, one is assigned a gender at birth, usually in virtue of some secondary sex characteristics. One is then usually socialized as a member of the assigned gender group. Since one's gender results from socialization that is based on secondary sex characteristics that *are* the result of a natural lottery, it therefore turns out that given FEO, inequalities that result from one's gender are unjust.

One might object that one can change one's gender because gender is socially constructed. Thus, one might continue, the inequalities that result from gender aren't unjust, because one's gender can change regardless of the secondary sex characteristics assigned by the natural lottery. This objection seems ridiculous, though; otherwise, we might suggest that we end

women's oppression by having all females (who are women) become men, and this solution seems absurd. The objection fails for two reasons.

Firstly, although gender is socially constructed, one cannot change one's gender simply by intending to be some other gender. For example, some transgender people aim to "pass" as the gender they prefer. Passing occurs when one is perceived by others as the gender one desires to be perceived as. The fact that one might not pass as one's preferred gender suggests that one's gender cannot be changed solely in virtue of what one thinks or does; it depends in part on how one is perceived by others (cf. Haslanger 2000). My point is that sex marking (i.e., the marking of one's sex by others) is connected in some way to gender assignment, and sex marking is the result of the natural lottery in virtue of its dependence on secondary sex characteristics. So, inequalities resulting from gender assignment (which occurs on the basis of sex marking) are unjust.

Secondly, it is true that a female who identifies as woman could probably change her gender in most cases. However, in many cases, this would require a great and unusual amount of effort (in part due to the above reasons regarding sex marking, and perhaps in part due to the social history of the person, i.e., her socialization as a woman). Consequently, it seems unreasonable to expect that a female who identifies as a woman change her gender to man to stop suffering harms qua woman. Rather, society should be structured such that women simply do not suffer harms qua women.

The oppression of women is also systematic. Harms done to women are related to one another in subtle ways, generating a sense of crushing hopelessness that presses down on women from all angles. Women are subordinated in all areas of their lives: sexually, socially, and economically. Moreover, all the "little things nipping at one's heels" (Frye 1983, 3) further the

sense of overwhelming stress and reinforce the restricted options of women. Not only must women deal with “significant” challenges at work or home, but they also have to suffer the daily little things: catcalls, being told to smile more, wondering whether the man walking behind her on the street intends her harm. Furthermore, we see the double bind in action; women are restricted whether they have or raise children or not, whether they marry or not, whether they have sex or not. Oppression manifests in all of these harms; their connections form the structure of the oppression of women. And I think it’s (at least) promising that we can truthfully say that women are oppressed qua women; that is, some unjust harms suffered by women are suffered by them *as women*. Oppression targets the members of the group, women, in virtue of their being members of that group.¹³

Finally, institutions can act oppressively towards women (like insurance companies not covering abortions or breast pumps) and people can act oppressively towards women (as when a family forces a girl into a child marriage), but women can also oppress themselves psychologically. For example, women who internalize body type norms suffer as a result of an unattainable ideal that they think is intrinsically desirable. Such internalization can lead to depression, reduced self-esteem, and the development of eating disorders (Kilbourne 1999). Women psychologically oppress themselves over body weight and perceived imperfections, feeling guilty about and obsessing over what they eat and how thin they are (Bartky 1998; 2002, 18–20). Another case in which a woman internalizes some oppressive attitudes and beliefs is one

¹³ One of the foremost problems in feminist philosophy is solving the unity problem, i.e., the problem raised by feminist critiques of the gender categories. For example, gender roles are not constructed in the same ways across cultures, nor does the gender distinction map neatly onto the sex distinction. It is therefore unclear what unifies women as a group. Feminism is about ending the oppression of women, but the unity problem calls into question our ability to even refer to the group ‘women,’ since it’s unclear that such a group actually exists. If there are no women, how can we end their oppression? How is it that they are even oppressed? Without an account that unifies women as a group, the political efforts of feminism seem unable to succeed in principle. However, scholars have done much recent work trying to develop such an account (e.g., Alcoff 2006; Frye 2011; Haslanger 2000; Young 1997).

in which a woman convinces herself that she wants to stay in an abusive relationship with a spouse, by internalizing the belief that her spouse commits abuse out of love, and that she deserves the abuse she receives.¹⁴

Women are oppressed, and as our analysis above shows, our account correctly rules that women are oppressed on the basis of their suffering unjust, systematic harms qua women. In the next section, we'll apply the account to fat people to show that they are oppressed.

3. WHY THERE IS FAT OPPRESSION

Recall that on our account, some phenomenon counts as oppression if the phenomenon is unjust, systematic, and harms members of a group as members of that group. On this account, it will turn out that fat people are oppressed.

Firstly, the harms suffered by fat people are unjust. We appeal to FEO to find out which harms are unjust. On our view, inequalities that are caused by traits assigned by a natural lottery are unjust, and when those inequalities harm people, those inequalities are unjust inequalities. Fat people experience many inequalities in virtue of being fat, but why should we think that fatness is a trait assigned by the natural lottery? Because of empirical evidence. In short, genetics and one's environment play a significant role in weight gain and loss (Bouchard et al. 1990; Stunkard et al. 1986; Kolata 2007). Since genetics and one's environment are determined in virtue of a natural lottery, so too is one's ability to gain or lose weight.¹⁵ Consequently, one's being fat and one's ability to conform to the thinness norm are the result of a natural lottery. So, it follows that

¹⁴ In the feminist autonomy literature, these desires are called "deformed desires": desires formed in the context of an oppressive social structure (Cudd 2006, 181; Superson 2005, 109; Taylor 2009, 71).

¹⁵ It should be uncontroversial that (at present) genetics are determined by natural lottery. Furthermore, environment is at least initially determined by natural lottery, and arguably future environmental influences on a person are causally connected to those initial conditions.

any inequalities that are experienced in virtue of one's being fat are unjust inequalities. These inequalities harm fat people, making these unjust inequalities unjust harms.

Many would reject the claim that fatness is a trait assigned by natural lottery, or at least hold that whatever body shape one is assigned at birth is irrelevant to one's ability to conform to the thinness norm later. In fact, there are powerful social institutions at work that obfuscate the amount of control one has over one's own weight. We'll return to this objection in the next section, and our reply will reveal why the claim that fatness is a trait assigned by the natural lottery is so controversial.

We'll now consider how fat oppression is systematic. Farrell claims that “the various forms of discrimination that fat people experience, in schools, at doctors' offices, in the job market, in housing, and in their social lives, mean that, effectively, their life chances—for a good education, for fair and excellent health care, for job promotion and security, for pleasant housing, for friends, lovers, and life partners . . . in other words, for a good and safe life—are effectively reduced” (2011, 7).

There is ample empirical evidence to support Farrell's claim.¹⁶ Fat stigma and its resulting shame begin in childhood, and extend through adulthood. What's more surprising is that the consequences suffered for being fat in childhood and adolescence aren't merely social. Fat kids are bullied more and are lonelier and more anxious about their futures than their thinner peers (Rimm 2004), but there are also economic costs to fat children and teens. Parents are willing to pay less for a car for a fat teen compared to a thinner teen, and parents pay less for college for fat kids, even when controlling for income and grades (Kraha and Boals 2011; Puhl and Brownell

¹⁶ I will survey only enough evidence here to support this claim, but there is an abundance of evidence to consider; interest in fat studies and the correspondent collection of empirical data has grown extremely quickly in the past 15 years. A fairly brief but comprehensive overview of the evidence of fat discrimination is found in Wann (2009, xviii–xxi). Solovay (2000) devotes nearly an entire book to collecting and analyzing this evidence.

2001). These economic and social harms continue into adulthood. For example, fat women earn on average less money over a lifetime than women of average weight, who themselves earn less money over a lifetime than women who are 25 pounds under the average weight. Similarly, fat men earn less money than men of average weight (Judge and Cable 2011). This might be linked to the social costs of being fat; negative characteristics associated with being fat can prevent people from getting raises or promotions comparable to their thin peers (Finkelstein et al. 2007). And social costs extend to the dating market (Solovay 2000, 101–2). In one study, men rated “obese” women as less attractive than women who were in a wheelchair, missing a limb, had a mental illness, or had a sexually transmitted disease (Chen and Brown 2005).

The discrimination faced by fat people is systematic because its presence in one aspect of their lives can extend its influence to another, distinct aspect of their lives. Fat prejudice begins early in life and continues throughout it. Earlier harms beget and compound later ones. Reduced self-esteem in adolescent years might induce greater weight gain or depression, affecting success. Being a fat teen might cause one to attend a less prestigious college than one would have otherwise, leading to an even more reduced income later in life. Moreover, the harms suffered by fat people extend to every aspect their lives. Not only is there pervasive and obvious discrimination (that is, discrimination that isn’t intended to be subtle, as when the CEO of Abercrombie and Fitch publicly claimed that he didn’t want fat kids wearing his company’s clothes) there are “all the little things nipping at one’s heels”: difficulty fitting into airline seats or rides at an amusement park, unaccommodating restrooms, or having to shop at a specialty store to find clothes that fit. All of these harms are connected and omnipresent in the fat person’s life.

Fat people are also in the double bind. People in the double bind can’t act in the “right”

kind of way, i.e., according to a norm. In the case of fat people, this means that if they don't try to lose weight, they suffer ridicule and discrimination, as we saw above. Fat people can try to lose weight, but because weight is governed by the natural lottery, these attempts are unlikely to succeed, and if they do, people who lose weight are likely to regain it (or become ill as a result).¹⁷ So, for fat people, the other side of the double bind is to attempt to lose weight, fail, and endure reduced self-esteem, and accompanying feelings of failure and self-loathing due to the internalization of the thinness norm. Thus, although fat people are harmed by oppressive institutions and other people, fat people are also psychologically oppressed. It's important to note this because it accounts for phenomena like repeated weight-loss dieting (and therefore, why people keep trying in spite of failure to conform to the thinness norm). People who fail to adhere to a diet, or fail or re-gain lost weight, are subject to immense anguish and shame. Thus, fat people self-police and thereby become their own oppressors.

Furthermore, oppression harms members of the group of fat people *as members of that group*. We saw above empirical evidence that controls for other factors and shows that fat people suffer harms in virtue of having fat bodies. In other words, in the cited studies, the only thing that makes a difference between the experiences of two people who have thin and fat bodies respectively is that they differ in their body types. There is a causal connection between having a fat body, and e.g., making less money, and when placed within the context of the other harms suffered by fat people (i.e., when observed within the system of oppression) we can see that the causal link is nonaccidental; it's *the right kind* of causal link.

I have argued that fat people suffer unjust systematic harms qua fat people. Therefore,

¹⁷ We'll see in greater detail the tendency of the fat to re-gain lost weight and experience poor health as a result in the next section.

our account of oppression counts fat people as oppressed. In the next section, I'll consider some objections and replies to the claim that fat people are oppressed.

4. OBJECTIONS AND REPLIES

I have argued that fat oppression fulfills jointly sufficient conditions for some phenomenon to count as oppression. So, one might respond to my argument that fat people are oppressed by claiming that my account of oppression is inadequate, and that I have left out some condition necessary for oppression. I don't find this objection compelling because, as I argued in section 2, a phenomenon that consists in unjust, systematic, group-based harms counts as oppression. For example, I claimed that women are oppressed in virtue of their suffering unjust, systematic harms qua women. So, these conditions taken together are at least sufficient for oppression. A set of minimally sufficient and necessary conditions for oppression must be among the conditions I've given. Thus, fat oppression needn't fulfill any conditions other than the ones I've already given. To be compelling, the rejection of my account of oppression must be accompanied by a counterexample: a phenomenon that fulfills all of our conditions yet does not count as oppression. Until a counterexample is presented, I hold that my account of oppression is adequate.

I also argued that fat oppression *is* unjust, systematic, and group-based. One who rejects that fat people are oppressed must therefore reject that one of these conditions is fulfilled.

I'll first consider one who argues that the harms suffered by fat people are just. One might either accept FEO and argue that the inequalities created in virtue of one's fatness still don't count as unjust, or one might reject FEO. I'll deal with each objection in turn.

Suppose one accepts FEO. Recall that FEO says that an inequality is just only if it

doesn't exist in virtue of some X's possessing a trait assigned by the natural lottery. For one to accept FEO and hold that the inequalities created in virtue of one's being fat are just, one must therefore hold that fatness is not a trait assigned by the natural lottery.

I claimed in the previous section that body shape is determined by genetics and environment. This claim is supported by empirical evidence. Since genetics and environment are traits assigned by natural lottery, so too is body weight. Consequently, with respect to the requirements of justice given FEO, body weight vs. fatness is relevantly analogous to traits like race and sex.

However, many believe that weight, unlike race and sex, is "flexible." A widely-held view in Western society called healthism claims that one's weight is causally related to one's health, and one's weight is one's own personal and moral responsibility. Healthism persists because of official government endorsement (recall the Center for Disease Control's claims about the "obesity epidemic" and their recommendations for personal efforts one can take to control obesity), as well as a diet and fitness industry that profits from the view's dogmatic status (Campos 2004, xix; Heyes 2007). On healthism, violating the thinness norm is a vice and a personal moral failing (cf. Guthman 2011; Crawford 1980).¹⁸ Healthism in the media, according to Dworkin and Wachs (2009, 11), "operates to promote neoliberal ideologies that obscure the impact of government and structural contributions to health disparities." If that's right, then healthism obscures the actual level of responsibility an individual has for her own health (including her body weight). Not only are there institutional and social forces at work on one's health that go beyond the scope of one's own efforts, there are biological forces that keep one's

¹⁸ The fact that healthism connects health and weight provides an excuse for fat shaming and scorn, explaining why fat shaming is still publically acceptable; one can claim that moral concern rather than aesthetic disgust is what motivates shaming.

weight out of one's control. Because of a widespread belief in healthism, many think weight is flexible, but this simply is not the case.

I will concede that weight is flexible in one sense. It seems to be the case that people who are fat can lose weight in the short term. However, even so, they tend to gain it back over the long term (Andersen et al. 2001). Given the genetic and environmental influences on one's weight, and the tendency towards a particular body size over time, we can conclude that fatness is a trait assigned by the natural lottery. Claims to the contrary either wrongly reject the empirical evidence that supports our conclusion, or overestimate the amount of influence one has over one's own weight in the long-term.

Suppose one instead rejects FEO. One might hold, for example, that no natural variations in human traits are intrinsically just or unjust; rather, it is how society *responds* to these variations that is just or unjust. In light of this, we could accept a modified Fair Equality of Opportunity principle:

Fair Equality of Opportunity* (FEO*): Society's response to an inequality is just only if the inequality doesn't exist in virtue of some X's possessing a trait assigned by the natural lottery OR the inequality does exist in virtue of some X's possessing a trait assigned by the natural lottery and correcting or compensating for that inequality is unreasonable.

This principle corresponds well to our intuitions about disability and other traits that naturally vary in humans (like skin color, race, and fatness). It doesn't seem intrinsically unjust that some people have different abilities than others, but the fact that society is structured in such a way as to provide those with certain abilities advantages, and disadvantage those without those abilities does seem unjust (Andersen et al. 2001, 331). However, society's being structured in that way

might be just if it is unreasonable to accommodate those with some natural variation in a trait. For example, suppose the very tall were worse off for being tall, and in order to make everyone equally well off, everyone had to be made worse off, or the cost of making everyone equally well off was exceedingly high. We might conclude that in such a case, the inequality between the very tall and everyone else was justified and therefore just.

On FEO*, what justice requires will depend on what's reasonable to demand of people, and what people can reasonably demand of others. What's reasonable will depend on weighing costs and benefits in particular cases. Consider Peter Singer's argument on consequentialist grounds that "obesity is an ethical issue, because an increase in weight by some imposes an increase in costs on others" (2012). Singer gestures at some potential costs, like an increase in the amount of fuel needed to fly an airplane a particular distance when carrying fat versus thin passengers, and he also references a study that claims that fat people are partly responsible for global warming because they have a larger carbon footprint.¹⁹ Other potential costs are increased health care costs; fat people are thought to require more frequent and more expensive care than thinner people. Singer explicitly claims that these costs justify differential treatment of fat people with respect to airline tickets; they should pay more, because they cost more. He further claims that we ought to have public policies aimed at discouraging weight gain.

If we assume FEO*, one might think that Singer's claim that fat people ought to pay more is reasonable given that they cost more, and therefore the inequality is just, despite the fact that fatness is a trait assigned by the natural lottery. One might also maintain that because weight is flexible in a relevant way (because it is possible for fat people to lose weight in the short term), it is reasonable for us to discriminate on the basis of weight.

¹⁹ The study in question is by Edwards and Roberts (2009).

However, I do not think that it is reasonable in most cases to discriminate against fat people in virtue of the economic and social costs they purportedly impose. We do not hold people in wheelchairs financially responsible for building appropriate accommodations like ramps in new buildings. It might be reasonable to make some accommodations and not others for those in wheelchairs, but still, for the accommodations we do make, we make them because society should have been structured as not to disadvantage those in wheelchairs in the first place.²⁰ Similarly, in cases in which, e.g., amusement park rides must be retrofitted for larger seating, or larger clothing sizes must be made available in greater quantities, fat people should not bear the costs of these accommodations, because society should not have been structured in such a way as to disadvantage fat people in the first place.

Moreover, as in the case of gender, although some traits assigned by the natural lottery can be changed, we should not (in most cases) reasonably expect people to change these traits when it would require great and unusual effort. In the case of fat people, while it's true that fat people could lose weight in the short term, the costs of doing so are too high to reasonably demand it. We might demand that fat people repeatedly diet for fleeting weight loss, but due to re-gained weight, repeated weight-loss dieting often results in illness and metabolic problems (Brownell et al. 1986; Brownell and Rodin 1994; Campos et al. 2006). Furthermore, permanent weight loss is possible through the use of elective surgery, but it is dangerous. There are complications that arise from surgery, and operative mortality is more than 1 percent for some procedures (Buchwald et al. 2004). So, because of the risks and great burdens that weight loss imposes on the fat, it seems that demanding they either lose weight or suffer is unjust, even on

²⁰ Likewise, we did not *compensate* women for accommodating them in workplaces by adding additional bathrooms or stalls. Rather, we *accommodated* women because we ignored their needs when we mistakenly structured workplaces based on the assumption that women ought not work (Wendell 1996; Wasserman 1998, 178–9).

FEO*. There might be some cases in which fat people suffering an inequality is reasonable and therefore just, but this must be determined by a careful cost and benefit analysis. Generally, it isn't actually the case that inequalities suffered by the fat are just and therefore these inequalities count as unjust harms.

Essentially, the point regarding FEO and FEO* can be summed as follows: if you think it's unjust that people are suffer inequalities based on traits like race and sex, you ought to think it's unjust that people suffer inequalities based on weight, because race, sex, and weight are all relevantly analogous. With respect to FEO*, some inequalities might be justified, but in most actual cases of fat people experiencing inequalities, they are unjust inequalities.

Instead of rejecting that fat people suffer unjust harms, one could reject that fat people are oppressed by claiming that fat people aren't oppressed *qua* fat (i.e., one who rejects that fat oppression is group-based and targets fat people *qua* fat). For example, Fikkan and Rothblum (2012) argue that anti-fat bias is gendered to such a degree that there is an absence of empirical evidence that men suffer harms for being fat. They conclude that fat women suffer a disproportionate amount of harm compared to fat men, and indeed, that while women suffer for being fat in a variety of domains, men suffer only in the workplace, to a lesser degree, and only at the highest of weights. One who rejects the existence of fat oppression might therefore argue that since fat men don't suffer as much or in as many domains compared to women, it's not the case that fat people are oppressed; rather, fat women are oppressed *qua* women, while fat men happen to suffer some harms. (Recall that just because someone suffers an unjust harm, that doesn't make that person oppressed. We don't want to say that white men are oppressed *qua* men.)

I cannot adequately adjudicate an empirical dispute here, but I will say that Roehling

(2012) provides compelling responses to Fikkan and Rothblum's analyses of the supposedly problematic data. Roehling claims that while the studies they cite *do* support the idea that "fat is a feminist issue" (i.e., anti-fat bias is a concern for feminism), anti-fat bias is actually a more complicated phenomenon than it appears. The empirical data require subtle analysis, which shows that anti-fat bias affects both women and men. According to Roehling, in most areas of life, men have a broader range of acceptable body types, but they still suffer harms economically (in the workplace and employment) and socially (in the dating marketplace, for example).

Roehling notes that

Fikkan and Rothblum's review demonstrates that fat women, and to a lesser extent, fat men, are vastly underrepresented and treated poorly in their media portrayals. The Western culture does, indeed value a slender build in women. It is therefore not surprising that women are "punished" more than men for violating societal standards of beauty. (596)

However, it is consistent with my claim that fat people are oppressed qua fat that fat women suffer more than fat men. Analogously, racialized men and women can both be oppressed in virtue of being members of the racialized group, while suffering unequal consequences. (For example, in many cases, black men and women suffer in virtue of being black, but black women suffer more than black men.) Similarly, fat men and women are oppressed in virtue of being members of the group of fat people, even if they are also oppressed in virtue of being members of other groups. Thus, for my reply to the objection above to succeed, it is enough that fat men suffer in virtue of being fat, even if they suffer less than fat women. There is a group—fat people—that suffers qua fat, and that group contains both men and women. Fat may be a feminist issue, but fat oppression affects men and women both.

5. WHY FAT OPPRESSION MATTERS

So, what's at stake with respect to fat oppression? Why should we care? Obviously, there are political implications given fat oppression. Denying that fat people are personally responsible and morally culpable for their weights has ramifications for how we ought to shape public policy. Furthermore, concluding that there is fat oppression can raise awareness about anti-fat bias and why it's wrong.

Moreover, what seems most important in my view is that fat people can develop more autonomy with respect to their relationships with their bodies, dieting, and exercise. Fat people suffer psychologically in virtue of deformed desires: desires formed within an oppressive framework. By exposing oppressive body-type norms, we see that complex societal forces at work cause people to internalize the thinness norm, and can thereby undermine the norm.

I have argued that certain conditions are jointly sufficient for a phenomenon to count as oppression, and that fat oppression fulfills these conditions. I have also considered some objections and offered replies. In brief, fat people needn't, and oughtn't, suffer because of the thinness norm. The positive case that fat oppression occurs helps us to move towards positive social change, better public policy, and at the individual level, a healthier self-image and lifestyle.

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