WEIGHING IN: COPING WITH STIGMATIZATION THROUGH THE FAT ACCEPTANCE MOVEMENT AND WEIGHT LOSS SURGERY

JaeLyn Forthun, Linfield College, 2012
INTRODUCTION

- This study investigates the personal experiences and discourse of both members of America’s Fat Acceptance movement and those who went through, or are about to go through, weight-loss surgery, paying special attention to advocacy and personal struggles for both groups.

- The study specifically investigates the ways in which these individuals cope with stigma and discrimination, and investigate the ideological differences between the Fat Acceptance movement members and the Weight Loss Surgery community members.
Mary Douglas (1966); The body is a societal symbol for values.

Scheper-Hughes & Locke (1987); Health, in American culture, is “an achieved rather than an ascribed status.”

Erving Goffman’s “Stigma,” (1963); A stigma is that which “discredits the bearer” as having a moral failing. The stigmatized may join together to share their stories and gain strength and even demands.

Frame Alignment; Bridging discourse between the group, potential members, and the public.
Conducted 6 individual semi-structured interviews with members of each community (3 Fat Acceptance advocates, 2 WLS patients, a WLS psychologist, and an internal adult care doctor),

Posed open-ended questions regarding their experiences with discrimination.

Obtained supplemental information from blogs and forums from each community over the course of several months.
Members of either community’s forums cite negative personal experiences as a person of size before they joined the group and how their lives have changed as a direct result of joining the group.

Members, while not arguing for each other’s causes, made many of the same arguments as the other, and even commented similarly on the same pop culture events.

From the interviews, several patterns that mimic the words of those in the online forums arose.

Everyday occurrences of discrimination against people of size were reported from every interviewee, including those who work with people of size but are not fat themselves. They even discussed “shared experiences” as a form of group connection (interviewee #2).
One WLS patient described a feeling of “rage,” that had grown after a lifetime of “self-loathing” and “hate (by others)” and persisted even after he lost weight (Interviewee #5).

“I mean we are one of the few groups that they are still allowed to make jokes about. Everybody will laugh. But I won’t. And that, it makes it especially difficult because it’s humiliating; you’re not accepted.” (Interviewee #5)

“Personally I was a fat kid, and it really, well really made my world difficult. And I never was a super obese kid, but I was very kind of husky and athletic. And it really was the kind of thing where if you were only 10 lbs thinner you would be terrific…” (Interviewee #4, a Fat Acceptance advocate).
Fat Acceptance and WLS patients are not on opposite sides of a battle. Both groups are fighting the same battle against discrimination although both are doing so in different ways. To fight against these daily struggles, weight loss surgery patients change themselves generally to ACCEPT themselves rather than to ‘fit’ into society. Fat Acceptance advocates want society to change to allow everyone to ‘fit’ in AFTER they accept themselves and join groups which promote that.
REFERENCES

CONTACT

JaeLyn Forthun,
Linfield College
2012.
jforthu@linfield.edu