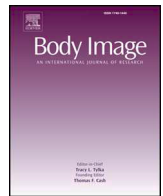




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Weight as a social identity: Theoretical and empirical advances



1. An introduction to weight as a social identity

Research and theorizing on social identity are widespread across the social and behavioral sciences. For example, in sociology there is a rich tradition stemming from identity theory, which represents a unified approach to two dominant perspectives of sociological thought on identity (Stryker & Burke, 2000). Namely, identity theory bridges work focused more on how broader social structures impact our sense of self and related social behaviors (e.g., Stryker, 1980), with work that is more concerned with the intrapersonal dynamics related to self and identity (e.g., Burke & Stets, 1999). In the field of anthropology, identity as an analytic lens has proven somewhat more controversial, with some scholars arguing that it is too diffuse to prove useful (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000) and others fervently asserting that identity – and its personal, social, and cultural construction and deconstruction – showcases its usefulness (Sokefeld, 2001). So too have the fields of political science (Kalin & Sambanis, 2018) and economics (Shayo, 2020) waded into work on social identity, highlighting how identity-based motivations and in-group biases shape outcomes like voting behavior and resource allocation, respectively. Social identity also features prominently across sub-fields of psychology, tackling issues of social identity development (Umaña-Taylor et al., 2014), the role of identity in mental health (Haslam et al., 2016), and social identity processes in the organizational context (Haslam et al., 2014), to highlight just a few.

In this special issue on weight as a social identity, we draw on the rich history in social psychology studying social identity and its consequences. This is important and has broad relevance given that the majority of adults in the United States (58 %) perceive themselves as heavier, and a substantial proportion (42 %) report experiencing and anticipating discrimination on the basis of their weight (Lee et al., 2021). Likewise, in a large international study, the majority of participants across countries (56–61 %) reported experiencing weight stigma, primarily from family members, classmates, doctors, coworkers, and friends (Puhl et al., 2021). Yet little is understood about the process of fat identification, and conceptual models specifically addressing fat identity are lacking. Nevertheless, there are several theories of social identification that may be applicable to our understanding of weight-based identity. Social identification, or the process through which people define themselves in terms of their group memberships and derive a sense of connection with ingroup members, is psychologically meaningful and socially consequential. Social identification can be broadly conceptualized as positive or negative identification with social

groups that vary in strength (e.g., level of social identification; Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). However, many researchers tend to conceptualize social identification as positive social identity value, specifically focusing on the positive evaluative and emotional relationship between the self and the ingroup (Postmes et al., 2013). Although overall strength of social identification is the focus of some research, social identification is broadly recognized as a multi-dimensional construct that consists of multiple components such as centrality, solidarity, ingroup affect, and ingroup ties (for reviews, see Cameron, 2004; Leach et al., 2008).

Social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) articulates the psychological processes that distinguish people's social identities and personal identities. Through social categorization (the process through which individual people are grouped together), social comparison (the process through which features considered characteristic of groups are evaluated), and social identification, the self is implicated in the group, motivating people to perceive their group as positively distinct from others (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). This is generally straightforward for people who belong to privileged groups, but also applies to people who belong to groups that are socially devalued. Fat people are generally devalued in society given the pervasiveness of weight stigma: the expression of negative attitudes toward fat people is considered relatively socially acceptable (Crandall et al., 2002), stereotypes about fat people are widely endorsed (Brochu & Esses, 2011), and fat people routinely experience weight stigma across a range of everyday settings (Puhl et al., 2021). Importantly, social identity theory articulates different strategies people may utilize in seeking positive social identification (Ellemers & Haslam, 2012). The perceived utility of these strategies is influenced by key characteristics of the social structure, including permeability of group boundaries (subjective belief whether able to attain social status that reflects individual merit regardless of group membership), stability of group status (subjective belief whether group differences are enduring and difficult to change), and legitimacy of current status relations (subjective belief whether social hierarchy is just, fair, and deserved).

In her seminal chapter contributing to the conceptualization of social identification, Deaux (1996) describes social identification as the process by which individuals come to define themselves in terms of the social categories they share with others. Deaux (1996, 2001) discussed three dimensions of the social identification process. The cognitive dimension involves the initial self-categorization as a member of a social group as well as the subsequent cognitive consequences of applying this category label to the self (e.g., self-

stereotyping; Tajfel, 1979; Turner et al., 1987). Many higher body-weight people self-categorize as heavier and these individuals are more likely to endorse weight-based stereotypes about the self (Pearl & Puhl, 2014). The affective dimension pertains to the emotional significance conveyed by a particular social identity. Although social identities are often considered an important source of self-esteem and pride (Tajfel, 1979), not all social identities are viewed positively. For example, many gay and lesbian people have negative affective responses to their sexual identity, particularly early in identity development (Green & Britton, 2012). Likewise, many fat individuals see their weight as a source of guilt and shame (Conradt et al., 2007a, 2007b). Finally, social identification can have behavioral consequences for interpersonal and intergroup interactions (e.g., collective action; Deaux, 2001). Among higher body-weight people, stronger fat identification is associated with greater support for fat rights groups and pro-fat activism (Lindly et al., 2014).

Although there are myriad ways to leverage a social identity approach when studying weight, most existing work has been conducted in the context of conceptualizing weight as a stigmatized social identity. Because fatness is stigmatized at the societal level, it is often assumed that fat people view themselves negatively because of their weight and view other fat people negatively because of their weight. Crandall (1994) found no evidence for ingroup bias among fat people; that is, fat people expressed anti-fat attitudes to the same extent as non-fat people. Similarly, Grover et al. (2003) found that negative implicit and explicit weight attitudes were ubiquitously held across participant weight categories in a community sample. However, extended to weight identity, higher-weight women were more likely to implicitly identify as heavy than higher-weight men, whereas lower-weight women were more likely to explicitly identify as heavy than lower-weight men. Grover et al. interpreted this finding to indicate that women's identification with their weight places them at greater risk for the development of eating disorders. Carels et al. (2011a, 2011b) also found that higher-weight people participating in a weight-loss intervention evidenced high levels of explicit, implicit, and internalized anti-fat bias. Despite this, however, participants generally had positive implicit self-identity, suggesting a disavowal of group membership as fat in order to protect a positive view of self through the pursuit of weight loss.

Other research has shown that people are more likely to perceive themselves as "overweight" the more they report experiencing weight discrimination (even after controlling for weight status; Schafer & Ferraro, 2011). However, having a fat identity is thought to offer little consolation as a protective buffer because fatness is viewed so negatively societally, with few people embracing a fat identity. Some work also articulates a function of weight stigma in protecting and boosting self-esteem for people who are non-fat. For example, Klaczynski et al. (2004) argued that weight bias serves to increase perceived status of people with low self-esteem by affiliating with higher-status, non-fat, ingroups. This process boosts self-esteem via internal attributions regarding weight that protect a positive sense of self and value. Thus, historically, fat identity has been viewed as harmful and unlikely given the pervasiveness of weight stigma (Sobal & Maurer, 1999). Instead, fat identity has primarily been conceptualized as a negative identity that lowers self-esteem and motivates people to escape the group (e.g., lose weight). However, an understanding of social identity processes, particularly in how people come to identify positively with stigmatized groups, highlights the possibility of positive fat identification particularly when fatness is viewed as uncontrollable and weight stigma is viewed as unjust. This is particularly important as some research shows that fat people exhibit less weight bias than non-fat people (e.g., Brochu et al., 2020a, 2020b; Degner & Wentura, 2009).

Experimental work in this domain frequently adopts a weight-based stereotype and social identity threat perspective (Hunger et al., 2015). Seacat and Mickelson (2009) randomly assigned higher body-weight women to experience weight-based stereotype threat or not, finding that threat exposure led to lower exercise intentions and self-efficacy. Similarly, Brochu and Dovidio (2014) found that exposure to weight-based stereotype threat led heavier participants to select a higher calorie meal in a mock food ordering task. Subsequent related work found that reading an article about weight-based discrimination in the workplace (vs. a control article) led participants to order more calories on the food selection task, but only among participants who experienced higher levels of weight stigma (Araiza & Wellman, 2017). These latter two studies highlight how exposure to weight-based social identity threat may result in dysregulated eating behaviors; Major et al. (2020) provide additional experimental evidence for this notion. Across two experiments, participants exposed to a weight-stigmatizing message reported greater anticipated weight stigma compared to individuals exposed to a control message. Anticipated stigma, in turn, was associated with more motivation to avoid stigma by losing weight as well as the willingness to engage in unhealthy weight control behaviors (e.g., fasting, purging, exercising beyond exhaustion). Likewise, interacting with an ostensibly anti-fat peer heightens anticipated stigma, which is associated with poorer appearance-based self-esteem (Hunger et al., 2018).

Although existing social psychological models of identity may indeed apply to weight, and some work has adopted a social identity (threat) lens to understand the consequences of weight stigma, we need to more earnestly and comprehensively advance the understanding of weight as a social identity. Advancing research and theorizing in this domain is necessary to push our social psychological understanding of weight beyond an identity that many scholars and lay individuals alike consider primarily negative to an identity that can foster well-being, stigma resistance, and collective action, topics many of the articles in this special issue tackle directly. There is a rich literature from the "social cure" tradition that shows the health benefits of social identification (Jetten et al., 2017), which argues in part that social identity is the foundation for group-based social connection. Indeed, a meta-analysis of social identification-building interventions suggests that developing a positive fat identity may be one way to foster health and well-being among higher body-weight individuals (Steffens et al., 2021). A positive in-group identity can also drive stigmatized individuals to resist their mistreatment and advocate for social change (van Zomeren, 2013), a critical feature in a world in which weight discrimination is widespread and, in most places, legal. The goal of this special issue is to catalyze research on weight through the lens of social identity. To this end, we have brought together a diverse group of scholars who approach identity from unique disciplinary, theoretical, and methodological lenses. Following an overview of their contributions, we close with suggestions for future research and a path forward that fully realizes the importance of weight as a social identity.

2. Articles in the special issue

2.1. Descriptive and methodological innovations

Two articles in the special issue offer descriptive and measurement advances, respectively, to the area of weight as a social identity. As noted by Scheel et al. (2020), although descriptive research is often erroneously perceived as less valuable, it forms the foundation for truly informative hypothesis testing needed to advance the field. Campbell et al. (2022) leveraged data from over 180,000 higher-weight Project Implicit participants to examine how dimensions of

weight-related identity – namely self-stereotyping, identity centrality, and fat positivity – differ across gender and racial/ethnic groups. They also examined differences in beliefs about group permeability (i.e., the controllability of weight) and perceptions of societal preference for thinness, akin to a sense of public collective self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992). Women tended to report higher levels across these dimensions compared to men, though the effect sizes were modest. Likewise, when differences emerged between racial/ethnic groups they were small. Interestingly, self-stereotyping was positively correlated with fat positivity, whereas the reverse was true for identity centrality. As addressed further in the discussion section, research is warranted to unpack what “centrality” looks like with respect to weight, including when it is (or is not) a positively valenced dimension.

Reliable and valid measurement is also essential for robust and replicable research, a topic of discussion that has a rich history in the social sciences (e.g., Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Scheel et al., 2020), even if improvements in measurement have lagged in disciplines like psychology (Flake et al., 2017). Decker et al. (2022) describe the development and preliminary validation of a scale rooted in work on stereotype threat susceptibility (Picho & Brown, 2011) that is designed to capture vulnerability to weight-based social identity threat. The Social Identities and Attitudes Scale-Weight and Body Shape (SIAS-WBS) assesses weight/shape-related identity, stigma consciousness (i.e., the extent to which one expects to be stigmatized), and investment in – and negative affect related to – stigmatized domains like physical activity. Decker and colleagues show that the SIAS-WBS has strong internal consistency, convergent validity, and test-retest reliability. Additionally, the structure holds in confirmatory factor analyses and the measure exhibited strong factorial invariance across gender, race/ethnicity, and weight-related groups. Although additional validation is warranted, the SIAS-WBS is an exciting new tool for examining individual differences in risk and resilience to the negative effects of weight-based social identity threat.

2.2. Challenging existing identity models

Next, two articles in the special issue also challenge what we know about weight-related perceptions and the applicability of dominant identity models to weight. Although rarely discussed through the lens of social identity, there is a large literature that examines the impact of “weight perceptions,” or how individuals self-classify their weight status. This literature finds that perceiving oneself as higher weight is often associated with poorer mental and physical health outcomes (Robinson et al., 2020), likely in part due to this resulting in susceptibility to weight-based social identity threat (Hunger et al., 2015). At the same time, research has found that among higher-BMI individuals in particular, *not* perceiving oneself as “overweight” is linked to better outcomes, such as engaging in less disordered weight control behaviors (Haslam et al. (2018); Hazzard et al., 2017). These findings raise an important question: are individuals simply “unaware” of their weight status as some have suggested (e.g., Robinson, 2017), or might weight perceptions reflect a different underlying psychology? Richmond et al. (2022) help us to begin clarifying this thorny issue in a diverse sample of university students. They examined multiple factors including awareness and cultural body ideals, with only body satisfaction emerging as a significant predictor of weight perceptions.

Wellman and colleagues (2022) tested the applicability of the rejection–identification model (RIM; Branscombe et al., 1999) in the context of identifying as fat. Although as noted above there may be risks associated with perceiving oneself as fat in our current anti-fat social milieu, it may also offer the potential for in-group identification and group-based resources that help individuals to cope with weight-based mistreatment. Consistent with predictions from the RIM, perceiving group-based discrimination was associated with a stronger fat identity; however, stronger identification was not

associated with greater wellbeing, as tends to be seen with other stigmatized groups such as racial minorities (Branscombe et al., 1999). Although preliminary, these results suggest that the RIM may not adequately capture the dynamics of group-based mistreatment and social identification for fat individuals. Interestingly, Wellman and colleagues found that body affirmation did mediate the link between group-based mistreatment and positive wellbeing outcomes, suggesting this as a potential protective factor that warrants future research. Wellman and colleagues also found that stronger fat identity was associated with support for social change (e.g., anti-size discrimination policies), which itself can foster wellbeing, a topic that is addressed later in this special issue.

2.3. Stigma resistance

The following three articles highlight the role of fat identity in stigma resistance, defined as the capacity to challenge or deflect experiences of stigma or otherwise remain unaffected by it (Firmin et al., 2016). Generally, stigma resistance is beneficial for people with mental illness, as it is associated with better psychosocial and psychiatric outcomes. Meadows and Higgs (2022) sought to examine what distinguishes fat people who resist weight stigma from fat people who internalize weight stigma. They proposed that perceived legitimacy of weight discrimination would mark this distinction, such that those who perceive weight discrimination as illegitimate would be more likely to resist stigma whereas those who perceive weight discrimination as legitimate would be more likely to internalize stigma. Using sophisticated decision tree analyses, Meadows and Higgs found that half of participants resisted weight stigma and that one-third internalized it (the remaining were categorized as indifferent). These findings are contrary to the widely-held notion in the literature that fat people predominantly internalize weight stigma. Identifying as fat and perceiving weight discrimination as illegitimate were the two primary predictors of stigma resistance; notably, a subgroup of resisters perceived weight discrimination as illegitimate even though they did not endorse fat identity.

Sturgess and Stinson (2022) described the transformation of a negative fat identity into a positive identity through the process of fat embodiment, which involves resisting stigma and healing from the trauma of weight stigma and discrimination. They argue that in cultures that are decidedly anti-fat, fat people are stigmatized and develop a self-concept that includes the stigmatized identity through a process of weight stigma internalization. The experience and internalization of weight stigma can lead to disembodiment, or disengagement from the body, through repeated experiences of trauma. As such, methods of fat embodiment, which allow fat people to reconnect with, listen to, and appreciate their bodily sensations and needs, are important to the development of positive fat identity. Sturgess and Stinson articulate embracing fat positive identity, including bodily needs and fat positive perspectives, and fat positive community, including the online fatosphere and desire and sensual pleasure, as embodied approaches to resistance and healing from the trauma of weight stigma and discrimination.

Harrop and Kattari (2022) applied autoethnographic methodologies to enhance understanding of the process of “coming out” as fat. In this demonstration of stigma resistance, Harrop and Kattari identified growing critical consciousness, reclamation of positive social identity, and community belonging as positive outcomes of coming out as fat. Their identity-centered stories, reflections on self, and artifact analyses are provided from a critical queer intersectional approach that details parallel processes of coming out as fat and coming out as other stigmatized identities, all situated within relative positions of privilege and oppression. Integrating their analysis into the weight-based social identity threat model proposed by Hunger et al. (2015), Harrop and Kattari argue that the positive outcomes of coming out as fat may buffer the psychological stress and negative health outcomes

associated with stigmatized identity. As they point out, their exploration has several implications, including the importance of critical consciousness raising in health promotion programs and the utility of group-based interventions that emphasize community cultivation to combat shame and promote positive fat identity. All three of these articles identify stigma resistance as integral to the development of positive fat identity, including increased awareness of weight stigma and its harm and illegitimacy, as well as desire for connection to the fat positive community.

2.4. Activism and collective action

In the final section of the special issue, two articles examine the role of fat identity in activism and collective action, defined as actions undertaken by people to improve their group's conditions (van Zomeren, 2013). Fat activism fights against anti-fat bias and works to change societal attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors toward fatness and fat people (Cooper, 2016; LeBesco, 2004). Research indicates that involvement in activism can promote well-being (Foster, 2019; Vestergren et al., 2017). Acar and Uluğ (2022) examined the multi-level outcomes of fat activism and how they are associated with sustained involvement in collective action. In Study 1, they interviewed fat activists, finding that activists reported gaining a sense of self and community, feeling healthier and empowered, being grateful, and increased body acceptance at the individual level; greater sense of community and increased clothing options at the group level; and greater body liberation and changing diet culture and beauty ideals at the societal level. In Study 2, with a community sample of fat participants, they found that greater participation in fat activism in the past predicted greater willingness to engage in fat activism in the future to the extent that individual and societal gains were perceived. Furthermore, identification as a fat activist predicted willingness to engage in collective action for fat justice whereas identification as fat did not. Acar and Uluğ argue that the motivation to participate in collective action is often associated with the perceived outcomes of previous participation and highlighted the role of identity in this process.

Rathbone et al. (2022) examined the roles of perceived legitimacy of weight-based discrimination, group boundary permeability, and weight identification on intentions to engage in collective action, body satisfaction, and self-esteem among a sample of fat North Americans. Results revealed that participants who were randomly presented with information that weight discrimination was perceived as legitimate by ingroup members reported reduced weight identification, but only among those who perceived group boundaries as permeable. This reduced weight identification predicted weaker intentions to engage in collective action and lower body satisfaction and self-esteem. Rathbone et al. argue that legitimizing weight discrimination has damaging effects for group-based weight identification and downstream consequences that lower fat activism engagement and overall well-being. Both of these articles identify the role of fat identity in fat activism, highlighting the importance of perceived individual-, group-, and societal-level gains from previous participation, as well as perceived legitimacy of weight discrimination and group boundary permeability, on willingness to engage in fat activism.

3. Conclusion

Together, these articles offer insights that we hope will spur further theoretical and empirical work regarding the structure, content, and consequences of fat identity. Each article highlights the unique future directions their respective authors envision, but a few broad areas of critically needed research warrant addressing here. Given minimal differences in weight-based identity between groups, future research may benefit from understanding factors that contribute to differences within groups. This area of work would benefit from adopting an intersectional lens (e.g., Friedman et al., 2019), acknowledging that fat identity is likely

colored by related systems of oppression such as racism and sexism. Moreover, the applicability of existing social identity models to weight demands future empirical attention. How well do the theoretical factor structures of leading social identity models (e.g., Cameron, 2004; Leach et al., 2008) hold when studied in the context of fat identity? Do common measures of social identification capture dimensions of identity (e.g., centrality) in fat individuals comparably to other social groups (e.g., racial minorities; Leach et al., 2008)? These and related questions also highlight the need for continued psychometric work developing, refining, and validating measures of fat identity. Finally, it seems that a stigma resistance framework may be harnessed to foster a positive fat identity, spur collective action, and promote wellbeing. Although theoretical and methodological progress is vital, it is also imperative that we do not lose sight of application and intervention. As scholars we can use our position, power, and privilege to engage in research and action that directly challenges social and structural anti-fatness and supports the development of a positive fat identity.

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