

OVERVIEW BY FACULTY CURATOR ABIGAIL C. SAGUY

Obesity Body Size

Faculty Curator Series for Winter 2010 will feature talks by Paul Campos, Katherine Flegal and Marilyn Wann

THE PAST DECADE has seen increasingly intense concern that the United States is eating itself to death. News reports typically evoke an impending disaster, such as a news title that blasts, “Bigger Waistlines, Shorter Lifespans: Obesity a ‘Threatening Storm’” (Semuels 2005). Shortly after the terrorist attacks in 2001, then-Surgeon General Richard Carmona went as far as to call obesity the “terror within” and predicted that that “unless we do something about it, the magnitude of the dilemma will dwarf 9-11 or any other terrorist attempt” (Associated Press 2006). As medical researchers and social scientists investigate the possible causes and potential solutions for the so-called obesity epidemic, politicians have been proposing a range of legislation, from “BMI report cards” and “fat taxes” on high-fat and high sugar foods (Chute 2006; Kantor 2007). Meanwhile, several very fat children have been removed

from their homes by child services on the grounds that their girth is evidence of neglect or abuse (Belkin 2001; Eaton 2007).

In many ways, the public health crusade against cigarette smoking has provided a model for addressing the country's suspected weight problem. Yet, unlike smoking, which has been glamorized by Hollywood, in the contemporary United States fatness is extremely stigmatized. For example, children aged ten and eleven who were shown drawings of other same-sex children and asked to rank whom they liked the most, consistently ranked drawings of fat children the lowest, preferring a child with missing limbs or in a wheel-chair (Latner and Stunkard 2003). Girls are even more likely to express negative sentiments towards fat girls than boys are towards fat boys (Latner and Stunkard 2003). Among adults, women are also more likely than men to be penalized, both in employment and in marriage prospects, for being heavy (Puhl, Andreyeva, and Brownell 2008). Given this, it is not surprising that women were more likely than men to have taken the weight-loss cocktail fen-phen that resulted in heart-valve problems, are more

For example, children aged ten and eleven who were shown drawings of other same-sex children and asked to rank whom they liked the most, consistently ranked drawings of fat children the lowest, preferring a child with missing limbs or in a wheel-chair.

GENDER and BODY SIZE: WINTER 2010

WEDNESDAY
Jan 20

Royce 314
5 to 7 pm

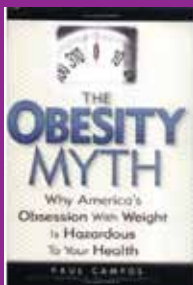
Fat and Identity Politics



Paul Campos

PROFESSOR OF LAW,
UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO

In his talk, Paul Campos, author of *The Obesity Myth: Why America's Obsession with Weight is Hazardous to Your Health* (Gotham, 2004) will address how the medical establishment continues to support efforts to make fat people thin, through weight-loss diets, drugs, and surgery. This talk will examine the extent to which attempts to cure or eliminate obesity are akin to conversion therapy and if they are equally harmful.



WEDNESDAY
Feb 10

Royce 314
4 to 6 pm

Weight & Mortality

THE POPULATION PERSPECTIVE



Katherine Flegal, Ph.D.

SENIOR RESEARCH SCIENTIST / DISTINGUISHED
CONSULTANT, NATIONAL CENTER FOR HEALTH STATISTICS,
CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL AND PREVENTION

Katherine M. Flegal, Senior Research Scientist Distinguished Consultant, National Center for Health Statistics, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, will discuss her research related to obesity and mortality. Estimates using nationally representative data will be presented, along with discussion of some of the criticisms that have been raised regarding this research. Flegal is the co-author of "The Burden of Obesity: Estimating Deaths Attributable to Obesity in the United States," *American Journal of Public Health* 94:9 (September 2004): 1486-1489 and "Excess Deaths Associated With Underweight, Overweight, and Obesity," *JAMA* 293 (2005):1861-1867.

MONDAY
Mar 1

Royce 314
4 to 6 pm

The Real F-Word

FIGHTING FAT FEAR
DURING THE WAR ON "OBESITY"



Marilyn Wann

AUTHOR AND ACTIVIST

Marilyn Wann, activist and the author of *Fat! So?: Because You Don't Have to Apologize for Your Size* (Ten Speed Press, 2004), will discuss how weight-related messages permeate so many areas of society, from media and fashion to medicine and legislation, from our inner thoughts to our biggest life decisions. If you've ever spent time or money or effort worrying about what you weigh, her talk offers some liberating options on how to think and act.



likely to diet, and are disproportionately and increasingly likely to have weight-loss surgery (Bish, Blanck, Serdula, Marcus, Kohl, and Khan 2005; Fraser 1998; Santry, Gillen, and Lauderdale 2005). Some public health scholars have argued that much of the negative health effects that are attributed to the physiological effects of “excess adiposity” may in fact be due to *weight-based stigma* (for example, Muennig 2008).

In my own research, I have been examining debates over body size as a medical, public health, and/or civil rights issue. I initially assumed that there were clear health risks associated with being even slightly heavier than current guidelines. Surely, I assumed, being “overweight” must mean more health problems and earlier mortality. As I dug deeper into the research, however, I found that there was considerable debate over these questions (Saguy and Riley 2005). Moreover, I discovered a fascinating social movement called the “fat acceptance” or “fat liberation” movement. Building on the success of new social movements of the 1960s and 1970s, including civil rights, black power, women’s movement, and queer politics, the fat acceptance movement has reclaimed the stigmatized term “fat” as a neutral or positive descriptor and a basis

Some public health scholars have argued that much of the negative health effects that are attributed to the physiological effects of “excess adiposity” may in fact be due to weight-based stigma.

for collective identity. They reject the terms “overweight” and “obesity” as pathologizing and medicalizing what they consider to be normal and often healthy physical variation.

Perhaps because being heavier has more and immediate negative social implications for women, women have dominated the fat acceptance movement. While not all fat acceptance activists or organizations are feminist, important subgroups have developed feminist analyses of fat oppression (Cooper, 1998; Schoenfielder and Wieser, 1983; Wann, 1999; see also Millman, 1980). Whereas many feminist critiques of narrowly defined and unrealistic body standards focus on the plight of women who *mistakenly* believe they are fat due to a fashion industry that promotes images of emaciated female bodies (Bordo 1993; Wolf 1991), fat acceptance activists have specifically addressed the experiences of women who are, by any measure, fat.

The Gender and Body Size series will feature a range of academic and activist speakers, each of whom has played leading roles in public debates over body size. Paul Campos, J.D., a Professor of Law at the University of Colorado and author of *The Obesity Myth*, will kick off

the lecture series on January 20 from 5 to 7 PM, with his talk “Fat and Identity Politics.” Katherine Flegal, Ph.D., epidemiologist and senior research scientist at the National Center for Healthy Statistics and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, will present her talk “Weight and Mortality: the Population Perspective” on Wednesday, February 10, from 4 to 6 PM. Finally, fat-liberation activist and author of *FAT! SO?: Because You Don’t Have to Apologize for Your Size*, Marilyn Wann will present her talk “The Real F-Word: Fighting Fat Fear During the War on ‘Obesity’” on Monday, March 1, 4 to 6 PM. All talks will be held in Royce 314 and are free and open to the public.

Abigail C. Saguy is an Associate Professor in the Department of Sociology at UCLA.

Sources Cited

- Associated Press. 2006. “Surgeon general: Obesity epidemic will dwarf terrorism threat.”
- Belkin, Lisa. 2001. “Watching her weight.” in *The New York Times*. New York, NY. <http://www.nytimes.com/2001/07/08/magazine/watching-her-weight.html>
- Bish, Connie L., Heidi Michels Blanck, Mary K. Serdula, Michele Marcus, Harold W. Kohl, and Laura Kettel Khan. 2005. “Diet and physical activity behaviors among Americans trying to lose weight: 2000 behavioral risk factor surveillance system.” *Obesity Research* 13:596-607.

- Bordo, Susan. 1993. *Unbearable weight: feminism, western culture, and the body*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Chute, Eleanor. 2006. “Schools get healthier; Drinks companies agree to remove pop.”
- Eaton, Joe. 2007. “The battle over Heavy T.” in *Washington City Paper*.
- Fraser, Laura. 1998. *Losing it: False hopes and fat profits in the diet industry*. New York: Penguin Putnam Inc.
- Kantor, Jodi. 2007. “In obesity fight, many fear a note from school.”
- Latner, Janet D. and Albert J. Stunkard. 2003. “Getting worse: The stigmatization of obese children.” *Obesity Research* 11:452-456.
- Muennig, Peter. 2008. “The body politic: the relationship between stigma and obesity-associated disease.” *BMC Public Health* 8.
- Puhl, R. M., T. Andreyeva, and K. D. Brownell. 2008. “Perceptions of weight discrimination: Prevalence and comparison to race and gender discrimination in America.” *International Journal of Obesity* 32:992–1000.
- Saguy, Abigail C. and Kevin W. Riley. 2005. “Weighing both sides: Morality, mortality and framing contests over obesity.” *Journal of Health Politics, Policy, and Law* 30:869–921.
- Santry, Heena P., Daniel L. Gillen, and Diane S. Lauderdale. 2005. “Trends in bariatric surgical procedures.” *JAMA* 294:1909–1917.
- Semuels, Alana. 2005. “Bigger waistlines, shorter lifespans; Obesity a ‘threatening storm.’” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, March 17, A-1.
- Wolf, Naomi. 1991. *The beauty myth: How images of beauty are used against women*. New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc.