



## Exploring stigma of “extreme” weight gain: The terror of fat possible selves in women's responses to hypothetically gaining one hundred pounds☆

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### ABSTRACT

As insidious fat-phobia, fat talk, and fat-negative attitudes and behaviors permeate women's narratives about their bodies, fear of fatness and disdain for fat bodies has become a normative part of women's lives. That said, little is known about how women imagine their future selves and future weight gain, or how they would react to hypothetically imagining major weight gain despite the fact that over a third of American women are labeled as “obese” and many of them have gained at least 100 lb. This study analyzed semi-structured interviews with twenty women from a diverse 2014 community sample (mean age: 35.35, SD: 12.01) collected in a large South-western U.S. city in order to examine U.S. women's subjective feelings about hypothetically gaining significant weight. Results, centered on five themes, connected hypothetical weight gain to severe fat negativity: 1) Weight blame: Anger and disgust directed toward self; 2) Familiarity of gaining weight; 3) Fear of physical limitations; 4) Loss of “sexiness” and loss of male gaze; and 5) Severely distressed feeling that life is over. Tensions about the meaning of fatness and its physical and emotional implications for women were explored, alongside an analysis of how the hypothetically fat body produced visceral reactions, concerns about health, beliefs that attractiveness and eroticism were in danger, and, for some women, severely phobic reactions about fat bodies. Tensions between weight gain that are seen as “extreme” and mundane are also discussed. Methodological implications for how hypothetical questions can elicit strong emotional content are also discussed.

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Fear of fatness and disdain toward fat bodies pervades attitudes about bodies and body size despite the fact that the U.S. has disproportionately more fat people than many other Western countries throughout the world (Janssen et al., 2005). The “war on obesity” and its rhetoric have been deployed to injure, insult, and degrade fat people, especially women (Herndon, 2005; Throsby, 2009), and continues to treat fat bodies as “the enemy,” with a host of public health campaigns and reforms targeting food and drink consumption and eating practices (Lin, Smith, Lee, & Hall, 2011; Sturm, Powell, Chriqui, & Chaloupka, 2010). In response to this “war,” fat studies has emerged as a discipline interested in fighting back against negative portrayals of fatness by arguing instead that fatness serves as a critical site for understanding and critically examining the circulation, production, and cultural construction of material bodies (and the inequalities that come with material bodies) (Brazier & LeBesco, 2001; Cooper, 2010; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009). Fat studies has made notable inroads in the study of bodies and body

image, particularly as fat bodies (and fat shaming) become more visible (Britton, Martz, Bazzini, Curtin, & LeaShomb, 2006; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009).

While some studies have addressed women's fear of fatness as it relates to people's negative body image (Katzman & Lee, 1997; Satinsky, Dennis, Reece, Sanders, & Bardzell, 2013; Sykes & McPhail, 2008), few studies have directly interrogated women's feelings about hypothetical weight gain for themselves. Such imagining can productively link fat negativity to the self, as women grapple not with fatness as an abstract concept but with fatness as directly imagined through their bodies. This oversight is notable given that narratives about “possible selves” or perceptions of what one *could* become can provide insights into the idealization or stigmatization of certain body types that should be avoided or desired (Fahs, in press; Dalley, Pollet, & Vidal, 2013; Granberg, 2006; Markus & Nurius, 1986; O'Brien, McElwee, & Dunning, 2005). Moreover, this approach highlights the ways that women imagine a future fat identity (or, more accurately, what they fear becoming).

While possible selves can either be seen as positive or negative futures there is some evidence that the prevalence and meaning of feared possible selves may differ by gender (Anthis, Dunkel, & Anderson, 2004). Feared possible selves seems to resonate more with women than men, and gender differences often appear in the form and

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perceived likelihood of feared selves. For example, mothers of young children express more fears of being an overwhelmed, tired, or single self than do fathers of the same child (Hooker, Fiese, Jenkins, Morfie, & Schwagler, 1996). Moreover, studies on adolescents have found that girls often have greater fears about their appearances than boys as they fixate on the chance of being “ugly” or “too fat” (Knox, Funk, Elliott, & Bush, 2000).

Social norms frame sizeable weight gain as extreme or an aberration, raising questions about how would women respond to imagining such weight gain. Notably, roughly one-quarter of American women of reproductive age will gain a substantial amount of weight (many over 100 lb) their adult lifetimes (Crawford, Jeffery, & French, 2000), as the CDC estimates that over 35% of women have BMIs that place them in the “overweight,” “obese” or “extreme obese” categories with many weighing well over 200 lb (Sharma, 2015); thus, gaining 100 lb is in actuality neither “extreme” or “unlikely” but rather relatively common and mundane. This tension between the imagined extremity and the lived mundaneness of gaining 100 lb is explored in this study.

In an effort to assess women's feelings about *their own* imagined fat bodies, this study examined qualitative narratives from semi-structured interviews with twenty U.S. women with diverse backgrounds (race, age, current relationship status, parental status, class backgrounds, sexual identities, body sizes) in order to examine women's feelings about their own bodies hypothetically gaining 100 lb. These conversations illuminated five themes that appeared in women's responses to hypothetically becoming much fatter, showcasing the powerful complexities of how fatness circulates in the culture at large, how fatness becomes internalized as fat shame for women, and how women develop ideas about their own bodies and the potential “dangers” of weight gain.

## Literature review

### *The fear of fatness*

While fear of fatness has appeared as a *normative* component of women's feelings about their bodies (Bordo, 1997), the extent of this fear is not fully established. A survey of *Enquire* magazine readers in the early 1990s found over *half* of young women would prefer to be run over by a truck than be fat, and two-thirds of these same women would choose stupidity over fatness (Carroll, 1994; Maine, 2000), while 28% of 115 high school health teachers warned that becoming fat is the worst thing that can happen to a person (Puhl & Brownell, 2001). Another study found that male respondents to a personal dating advertisement were four times as likely to respond to an ad for a woman recovering from drug addiction than one who was described as fifty pounds overweight (Sitton & Blanchard, 1995). This hostility toward fat bodies has real consequences for women, as some studies have identified excessive fear of fatness as connected to eating disturbances, negative cognitions about fatness, and women's desire for thinness (Dalley et al., 2013; Levitt, 2004; Woodman & Steer, 2011; Woud, Anschutz, Van Strien, & Becker, 2011). Icelandic college students with more concerns about physical appearance reported more disgust toward fat people and more anti-fat prejudice than those without concerns about physical appearance (O'Brien et al., 2013). That said, the desire for thinness and the fear of fatness may signify two entirely different constructs with different implications for eating and body image (Levitt, 2003). Further, the fear of fatness may connect to other sorts of phobic or disgusted reactions to “Othered” bodies (Fahs, in press; Seidman, 2013; Windram-Geddes, 2013) and has substantial overlaps with symbolic racism (Crandall, 1994).

Eating disordered thinking and behavior related strongly to the fear of fatness and specifically to the fear of gaining weight. One study found a strong overlap between the fear of fatness and eating disordered behavior among young women in a bulimia treatment center (Rushford, 2006). Another study found that underweight college students overestimated their body size, while all other groups underestimated

their body size (Banfield & McCabe, 2002). Both dieters and non-dieters reported strongly negative attitudes about fatness, but dieters had internalized stronger negative feeling about fatness than did non-dieters (Vartanian, Peter Herman, & Polivy, 2005). Those women who looked for external validation of their bodies struggled more with fatness than those who found intrinsic value in their bodies (Satinsky et al., 2013). Attributions for *why* people become fat also impact attitudes about fatness, as most women attribute fatness to individual lack of self-control and restraint (Degher & Hughes, 1999; Silk, Francombe, & Bachelor, 2011).

Notably, both fat studies and public health literatures have largely argued that the lived experiences of fat people can be relatively similar and very different to those of thin people. Body size and gender impact social treatment, particularly romantic and dating contexts. Fifty percent of fat girls in grades 9–12 more often reported having never dated compared to 20% of their thin classmates (Pearce et al., 2002), while no such distinction occurred for boys (Roehling, Roehling, & Pichler, 2007). Further, Conley and Glauber (2007) in a national random sample found that fatness was associated with a 17% reduction in women's wages (with no economic penalty observed for men's weight). Fat women who reported high levels of fat discrimination also reported greater levels of anxiety and clinical depression compared to thin women in a study of 22,000 people (Hatzenbuehler, Keyes, & Hasin, 2009), and during interviews fat women who said they internalized negative appearance comments reported more unwanted sexual activity than fat women who considered fatness a good quality (Satinsky et al., 2013). Self-identified fat women with intense body shame reported unsatisfying sex lives until they embraced fat pride (Gailey, 2012). Finally, fear of possible fat selves often had no relation to eating healthy diets or engaging in cardiovascular exercise among middle-aged health care professionals (Nouredine & Metzger, 2014).

### *“Fat talk” and fat phobia*

Anti-fat attitudes, or “fat phobia,” have also taken center stage in the fat studies literature, as scholars have worked to assess the relationship between stigma and experiences of the fat body (Puhl & Brownell, 2001; Robinson, Bacon, & O'Reilly, 1993). “Fat talk,” or the way that women speak negatively with each other about the size and shape of their bodies (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994), also impacts how women feel about their bodies, as those who overheard fat talk not only engaged in fat talk more themselves but also reported more body shame and dissatisfaction (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2012). Further, thin women of all ages engaged in fat talk (Engeln & Salk, 2014), and, notably, women felt more surprised by others' positive body talk than by negative body talk (“fat talk”) (Barwick, Bazzini, Martz, Rocheleau, & Curtin, 2012). Women with greater body dissatisfaction and internalization of the thin-ideal reported more fat talk than others, though body mass index was not connected to frequency of fat talk (Salk & Engeln-Maddox, 2011).

People from a variety of demographic backgrounds reported harboring fat-negative attitudes and fat phobic attitudes. Those who were of an average weight, women, younger people, and those with more than a high school education reported more fat phobic attitudes compared to their counterparts, though interventions to change fat phobic attitudes were also highly successful in these populations (Robinson et al., 1993). That said, low-educated and low-income African-American women experienced the greatest increase in BMI (Body Mass Index) while high-educated and high-income white men experienced the least BMI growth in recent years (Ailshire & House, 2011), though this did *not* correlate to fat phobic attitudes, as white women had more emotional distress about weight gain than did African-American women (Moore & Williams, 2011). Additionally, women's close friends and acquaintances had a greater impact on their fat phobia than did strangers or distant others who engaged in fat phobic talk (Brewis, Hruschka, & Wutich, 2011).

### Measuring fat attitudes

When researchers address the “fear of fatness,” they often do so in a quantitative fashion (Garner, Olmstead, & Polivy, 1983; Cooper, Taylor, Cooper, & Fairblum, 1987; Packard & Conway, 2006). The most cited quantitative scales use a single item to address anticipated weight gain in women, and most of these items focus on a broad fear of gaining weight without specifying how much weight is gained. The Fear of Gaining Weight Scale has a single item where participants select between “not at all” and “completely” to the question: “How afraid are you of gaining weight?” (Rushford, 2006). Some items also explore a stronger emotional reaction to weight gain. The much utilized Drive for Thinness subscale of the Eating Disorders Inventory has a single item that states: “I am terrified of gaining weight” (Garner et al., 1983). The Body Shape Questionnaire asks women: “Have you been afraid that you might become fat (or fatter)?” in the last four weeks (Cooper et al., 1987). A more comprehensive scales on future weight gain is the Goldfarb Fear of Fat Scale (Goldfarb, Dykens, & Gerrard, 1985), which includes three items on potential weight gain: “My biggest fear is becoming fat”; “I am afraid to gain even a little weight”; and “Becoming fat would be the worst thing that can happen to me.” This scale most closely measures people’s fear of fatness. Lastly, the “Feared Possible Selves Questionnaire” included items about whether people dreaded looking unattractive and fat to others in the future (Cross & Markus, 1991).

Qualitative studies have generally addressed the fear of fatness through broad open-ended questions about women’s body image or their preferred shapes (Devine, Bove, & Olson, 2000; Reel, SooHoo, Franklin Summerhays, & Gill, 2008; Winterich, 2007). With such diffuse and general questions, discussions of fear of fatness only enter women’s narratives when they consider it a topic worthy of conversation. Qualitative researchers have also addressed anticipated weight gain through less direct questions about fearing that they will grow out of clothes (Frith & Gleeson, 2008; Grogan, Gill, Brownbridge, Kilgariff, & Whalley, 2013), and probing questions during interviews with self-identified bulimics (Broussard, 2005; Earle, 2003) or participants in weight loss programs (Granberg, 2006).

### Fat attitudes across the lifespan

Perceptions of fatness seem to vary throughout a person’s lifetime though fat negativity and fat shaming persist across the lifetime in powerful ways. Different developmental stages seem to encourage particular attitudes about fatness and body image, particularly for adolescent girls, college women, and pregnant women. Adolescent girls hold particularly negative attitudes about fatness, often deploying fat-negative terminology behind their friend’s backs at school (Trainer, Brewis, Williams, & Chavez, 2015) while maintaining homogenous peer groups where all girls maintain similar body weights (Halliday & Kwak, 2009). Fat adolescent girls may also struggle with establishing credible feminine or tomboy identities, requiring them to show creativity at self-making and “fitting in” (Rice, 2007). College women also maintained a variety of fat-negative attitudes and fears. Those with more traditional gender roles in their male–female interactions had significantly more dysfunctional beliefs about their personal appearance (Cash, Ancis, & Strachan, 1997). College women who more often viewed fashion magazines also reported more fear of fatness, more desire for thinness, and more frustration about their weight than those who did not view fashion magazines (Turner, Hamilton, Jacobs, Angood, & Dwyer, 1997). Adolescent and college-aged women had changeable and moldable views of their bodies and of how they felt about fatness, suggesting particular vulnerabilities around fat-negative attitudes.

Dread of fatness and fat phobia also targets women whose bodies change temporarily as in the case of pregnancy. A sizeable number of studies have examined women’s feelings about fatness by examining women’s feelings about weight gain during pregnancy, particularly as

pregnancy elicits women’s feelings about *becoming* fatter, at least temporarily (Guelinckx, Devlieger, Beckers, & Vansant, 2008; Mehta, Siega-Riz, & Herring, 2011; Tovar, Chasan-Taber, Bermudez, Hyatt, & Must, 2010; Wang, Arroyo, Druker, Sankey, & Rosal, 2015). Women often had inaccurate information about appropriate weight gain during pregnancy and often described weight gain during pregnancy as disturbing (Groth & Kearney, 2009). That said, African-American women described weight gain during pregnancy as healthy for the baby or in nonchalant terms more often than in distressed terms (Groth, Morrison-Beedy, & Meng, 2012). Pregnancy becomes a space where women grapple with feelings about their bodies changing, getting fatter, and the meanings they attach to fatness, even as they grapple with the tensions between their “normal” body and their “temporarily fat” body.

### Research questions

Given the fact that fat phobia, “fat talk,” and fear of fatness appear so pervasively in women’s relationship to their bodies, and given that no previous interview studies have directly asked women to imagine hypothetical (and severe) weight gain, this study was driven by four research questions: First, what would women say about *their own* bodies hypothetically becoming fatter, and how would this connect to ideas about gender, power, and the “disciplined” body? Second, how might a hypothetical question about gaining 100 lb elicit particular kinds of emotions about fat bodies, and how might it signal feelings about an imagined future or possible self? Finally, how do narratives about hypothetical weight gain highlight (or downplay) the stressors of fearing weight gain rather than “being fat”?

### Method

This study utilized qualitative data from a sample of 20 adult women (mean age = 35.35, SD = 12.01) recruited in 2014 in a large metropolitan Southwestern U.S. city. Participants were recruited through local entertainment and arts listings distributed free to the community as well as the volunteers section of the local online section of Craigslist. The advertisements asked for women ages 18–59 to participate in an interview study about their sexual behaviors, practices, and attitudes. Participants were selected only for their gender, racial/ethnic background, sexual identity, and age; no other pre-screening questions were asked. A purposive sample was selected to provide greater demographic diversity in the sample: sexual minority women and racial/ethnic minority women were intentionally oversampled and a diverse range of ages was represented (35% or 7 ages 18–31; 40% or 8 ages 32–45; and 25% or 5 ages 46–59). The sample included 60% (12) white women and 40% (8) women of color, including two African-American women, four Mexican-American women, and two Asian-American women. For self-reported sexual identity, the sample included 60% (12) heterosexual women, 20% (4) bisexual women, and 20% (4) lesbian women (though sexual behavior did not always overlap with sexual identity). All participants consented to have their interviews audiotaped and fully transcribed and all received USD \$20.00 compensation. Identifying data was removed and each participant received a pseudonym to ensure anonymity. Participants directly reported a range of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds, employment histories, and parental and relationship statuses.

Participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview protocol that lasted for approximately 1.5 to 2 h, where they responded to 32 questions about their sexual histories and practices, and feelings and attitudes about their bodies. Many have argued that semistructured interviews effectively allow for personal narratives about body weight and the meaning of fatness (Packard & Conway, 2006; Rice, 2007; Saguy & Ward, 2011; Saguy, 2012); semistructured interviews also generated a much wider range of possible selves than a close-ended survey (Whitty, 2002). This study and the specific interview protocol were

both approved by the Institutional Review Board. All participants were interviewed by the lead author in a room that ensured privacy and confidentiality of responses; responses were analyzed by both the lead author and the second author. In the whole interview guide, questions included aspects of their menstrual attitudes, feelings about good and bad sex, feelings about their bodies and sexualities, and questions about body image and fatness. For the purposes of this study, women were asked two questions: "How much do you weigh now?" and "What would it be like to gain 100 pounds?" We chose a question about significant weight gain because this would mean that participants had to imagine a body different enough to enter them into the identity category of "fat" rather than merely "fatter." These questions were scripted, but served to open up other conversations and dialogue about the meaning of fatness and an imagined fat social status, as follow-up questions, clarifications, and probes were free-flowing and conversational.

Responses were analyzed qualitatively using a phenomenologically oriented form of thematic analysis that draws from feminist theory and gender theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This type of analysis allowed for groupings of responses based on women's attitudes and feelings (e.g., anger at self, physical limitations) and it allowed us to analyze the fusion between personal and cultural beliefs about fatness. This method of analysis also supported an examination of the sometimes competing or contradictory beliefs women had about hypothetical weight gain, though it did not allow for a full consideration of reading "beneath" the surface or examining silences. To conduct the analysis, we familiarized ourselves with the data by reading all of the transcripts thoroughly, and we then identified patterns for common interpretations posed by participants. In doing so, we reviewed lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the transcripts, looking for patterns in their ways of describing attitudes about hypothetical weight gain (Braun & Clarke, 2006). We selected and generated themes through the process of identifying logical links and overlaps between participants. After creating these themes, we compared them to previous themes expressed by other participants in order to identify similarities, differences, and general patterns. In the course of meeting together, we refined and reworked the themes until we arrived at a mutually agreed upon list of five themes that reflected women's narratives about hypothetical weight gain.

## Results

All participants answered the question about hypothetical weight gain in some way, though how women discussed their feelings about such weight gain differed in notable ways. That said, the fat possible self was universally seen as a condition to avoid. No participants described gaining 100 lb as a positive thing to imagine, and all but two ( $N = 18$ , or 90%) described it as distinctly negative. This study identified five themes associated with women's feelings about hypothetically gaining 100 lb: 1) Weight blame: Anger and disgust directed toward self; 2) Familiarity of gaining weight; 3) Fear of physical limitations; 4) Loss of "sexiness" and loss of male gaze; and 5) Severely distressed feeling that life is over. As evident in the descriptions below, this analysis aimed to be exhaustive in addressing all observable themes but each theme was not mutually exclusive as some participants' responses overlapped between themes in that one participant's responses fit into multiple themes. Themes also at times overlap so these should not be considered wholly distinct and separate. Note that we also included women's self-reported current weight along with their demographic information below as a means to ground the analysis in the lived experiences of the body.

### *Theme 1: Weight blame: Anger and disgust directed toward self*

Five of the twenty women mentioned feeling that hypothetically gaining 100 lb would inspire them to feel incredibly angry at

themselves, assigning feelings of personal failure to themselves. For example, Rachel (39/White/Bisexual/170 lb) talked frankly about the self-hatred she would feel if she gained 100 lb, citing the importance of vanity: "Oh my god! I can't even. I don't even know! I feel like I would hate myself. I would feel so disappointed in myself for allowing myself to forget the healthy part of vanity. Everyone should own a full-length mirror!" Joyce (21/Filipina/Bisexual/130 lb) admitted that she would compare herself negatively to her thinner self and would miss her "better" self: "I feel like I would just think about when I was lighter and younger and having that comparison would get to me. It would be scary! When I would just think, 'How did that happen?' and I would think about what I would consider a 'better me' to look like and I would compare myself." This sense that the "good" self is thin, and the "bad" self is fat appeared as a taken-for-granted shared assumption about fat bodies, as women assumed individuals become fat because of individual choices/deficiencies rather than because of larger social causes.

The connection between anger directed at the self and feelings of disgust also appeared in women's reactions to this question. Four women shrieked in disgust when asked this question, or started laughing uncontrollably, thinking the interviewer (lead author) was joking by even asking the question. Martha (52/White/Heterosexual/130 lb) laid her head down screaming when she was asked her this question, followed by a description of intense anger and disgust she would feel toward her fat self: "I'm sorry. I don't want to imagine that. I'd have to buy a lot of new clothes. I would mind a lot. I would be disgusted with myself, angry with myself. If I had to see myself in the department store mirrors, I would feel disgusted." This sense of outrage directed at the self for becoming fat, combined with women's strong emotional reactions to this question, suggest that fear of fatness has strong emotional ties (and attributions toward the self).

### *Theme 2: Familiarity of gaining weight*

In contrast to the previous theme, three women mentioned that they had gained weight before and had been through fairly sizeable weight gains and losses over the years. In this sense, the hypothetical weight gain felt more based in reality than purely in their imaginations and served to normalize fatness. Emma (42/White/Heterosexual/125 lb) described her previous weight gain during a medical treatment, and her experience with having fat family members, and how these changed her perspective on weight gain: "Well, for one, it would be unheard of, but I also don't think it would mean a whole lot. There was a stretch of time in my lupus treatment when I was on heavy steroids and I gained about 65 pounds (the biggest I've ever been). It didn't bother me. I can accept my body. A lot of my family are overweight. They're bigger and they're beautiful." This sense that weight gain can be managed and coped with contrasted sharply with other women's interpretations of gaining 100 lb.

On the other hand, one woman described feeling "devastated" at the thought of gaining 100 lb based on her familiarity with how it felt to be bigger; in this sense, fatness was seen as a former self that had to be escaped. Kathleen (49/White/Heterosexual/185 lb) described her weight shifts and the severe personal and relational consequences she endured: "I don't like being fat. I know when I feel jiggly and I just feel like I'm kind of slopping along. I hate that feeling. If I gained 100 pounds? Devastating. I've been there. Absolutely devastating. More than anybody can even know. I've done it a couple of times actually. I gained 83 pounds during my first pregnancy when I was seventeen, and it completely changed how I felt about myself. My husband had a lot of affairs on me. I remember vividly one time he said, 'Look at yourself. Just look at yourself in the mirror and you wonder why I screw around.'" Kathleen's fear of returning to her fat body seemed to notably locate these negative consequences in the *physical* rather than in the relational aspects of her life.

### *Theme 3: Fear of physical limitations*

As the most common example of how women reacted to hypothetical weight gain, eight women described their fears of having physical limitations with body movement in response to gaining 100 lb. Sofia (42/Mexican-American/Heterosexual/167 lb) described already feeling fat and worrying that her “symptoms” would get worse: “Oh my gosh, no! It would be really bad. I’m maybe 30 pounds overweight now and I can feel it. It makes me sluggish. I don’t feel good for me. I’m slow, I get tired easily, and I breathe harder, you know? With more weight, all of these would get worse.” Gretchen (52/White/Heterosexual/203 lb) also felt that she would lose her ability to stay active: “I would be so miserable. I couldn’t move. It would be really hard to do things I like to do, like hiking, biking, traveling. It would be very physically difficult to do things, with a lot of stress on joints.” Antonia (25/Mexican-American/Lesbian/150 lb) worried about sexual changes and physical changes: “I don’t think it would be comfortable. It would be more difficult to work out. I feel like I would have a hard time breathing, and then sexually it would change things too.” Iris (22/Mexican-American/Lesbian/133 lb) also feared losing her ability to exercise: “It would probably be kind of difficult. I’m an outdoorsy person. I like to rock climb and if I were to gain 100 pounds, I don’t think I would be able to do that as easily.” This sense that fat bodies are incapacitated by fatness remained a seemingly unchallenged “fact” for these women as they imagined the loss of their mobility and activity if they gained weight.

Women also seemed to only have a reference point for weight gain when they imagined pregnancy and family members’ health problems; no women mentioned healthy versions of fatness. For example, Daphne (33/White/Heterosexual/130 lb) recalled her experiences gaining weight during pregnancy and her fears of physical limitations: “When I was pregnant with my son, I went up to 175, and it was very, very hard on my body. I had a lot of back pains. I had a lot of pain in my feet. It was very hard to be comfortable. I just remember the folds when I would get hot and stuff like that. There’s a lot of discomfort to gaining weight.” Bea (37/Filipina/Heterosexual/176 lb) described her fear of diabetes and cancer, assuming that all fat people would have serious health complications: “I’d worry about my health just because the whole diabetes thing does run in my family. There’s high blood pressure and all that stuff that my family is always worried about me getting. High blood sugar. If I gained 100 pounds I’d be very unhealthy. I’d have full blown diabetes. I don’t want to die of old age. I don’t want to die of cancer, or some complication with my heart.” These two examples showcase the connotations between fatness and “extreme” health issues such as pregnancy symptoms (where weight gain is a temporary burden), diabetes, and cancer, as some women make assumptions that no healthy version of fatness can exist.

### *Theme 4: Loss of sexiness and loss of the male gaze*

Another type of response focused on the social risks of becoming fatter women. Six women described the loss of feeling sexy or, more precisely, the loss of the male gaze as the primary problem of gaining 100 lb. (Notably, women did *not* mention negative responses from mothers, fathers, siblings, children, or others; thus, their partners became the key referent to their weight worries.) For example, Gail (46/White/Bisexual/195 lb) admitted that she would feel less sexy and would enjoy sex less as a result of gaining 100 lb: “It would have an effect. I can’t lie and say it wouldn’t. I would feel less sexy. It would take me probably a lot of time again to make myself more comfortable in my skin again and feel like I could act sexual again. I can’t enjoy myself having sex unless I feel an overall level of goodness toward myself.” Trish (19/White/Lesbian/125 lb) also felt that she would lose her sense of “sexiness” and not feel attractive any more: “I would probably fall into depression. I would probably live off the couch and play video games and just not have any confidence in the bedroom. I gained like twenty or ten pounds once and it was horrifying to me. I’d feel total

self-hatred, disappointment in myself.” Naomi (18/White/Bisexual/260 lb) also described certainty that people would find her unattractive if she gained weight: “That would be ridiculous. I’d be really ugly. I’d feel disgusted with myself, block out thinking about it. I’d be depressed all the time and wouldn’t go out of the house much because I’d be so fat. Hopefully I’d have the motivation then to exercise. It just wouldn’t be fun. I don’t think I’d be attractive.” This sense of losing confidence, feeling completely unattractive, and being “unworthy” of sexual attention permeated women’s narratives about gaining 100 lb.

The loss of the gaze also seemed to inspire some women to imagine the necessity of eating disorders because they would feel so unattractive. Lila (36/White/Heterosexual/145 lb) described feeling certain she would develop an eating disorder due to a combination of self-hatred and the loss of male attention: “I would just hate myself. I would have an eating disorder and starve myself again. I’m sure of it. I would be so unable to be with somebody else because even if they said, ‘Oh you’re so beautiful’ I wouldn’t believe them. I wouldn’t even want to go out of the house. I wouldn’t show myself to anybody. Who would want to be with someone who was that much overweight!” Yvonne (41/Mexican-American/Heterosexual/130 lb) also felt certain that she would develop eating disturbances in response to feeling unattractive: “Something went completely wrong. I let myself go. I would have to work really hard at it, want to exercise more, watch what I eat, diet, stuff like that. It would probably go too far.” This belief that fat bodies are unworthy of (male) sexual attention and that eating disorders are inevitable results of gaining weight reveals the connection some women make between fatness and sexual attractiveness and value as women.

### *Theme 5: Severely distressed feeling that “life is over”*

As a final theme, four women described fearing weight gain so much that they felt that their life would be over, or that they would have to consider extreme options like suicide or leaving town, if they gained 100 lb. Veronica (49/African-American/Heterosexual/260 lb) described that she would contemplate suicide seriously if she gained weight: “I would want to die if I got that fat. I just don’t see a point in still living like that. You would lose everything, your job, your husband, your way of life. It would be over.” Felicity (20/White/Heterosexual/134 lb) described fantasies that she would leave town to get skinny and would not return home ever again: “I wouldn’t let myself do that. I don’t think I could ever let myself do that. I’m way too much of a control freak. I would be really insanely unhappy and I would leave, and then I would get skinny, and then I would come back. I actually wouldn’t come back to wherever it was that I left. I would never get back to that weight again.” These examples show the visceral, desperate, intense emotional reactions some women had to thinking about severe weight gain.

Two women also said that they would choose death over gaining 100 lb. Zari (43/African-American/Heterosexual/120 lb) described wanting to kill herself if she gained 100 lb: “Devastating. I would have a heart attack. I would be anorexic. I would be killing myself, starving myself.” When I clarified that she would kill herself, Zari responded, “Hell yeah. I would go crazy. I couldn’t do that one. It would drive me nuts. Oh hell no, I couldn’t do it. I’d rather die.” Corinne (21/White/Bisexual/170 lb) said that she would feel suicidal if she gained that much weight: “I would shoot myself in the head. I couldn’t do it. I just couldn’t. I’ve watched people struggle with it all my life. My mom was really heavy and my brother is heavy and my grandmother is heavy and my father was skinny but both grandfathers were heavy. My uncles are heavy. I’m the smallest person in my family. I’ve just watched them beat down on themselves and be emotional, not eat until they’re full, and eat a couple things just to eat and still be hungry. I wouldn’t wanna look like that. I couldn’t do it, personally.” The choice of death over gaining weight reveals the seriousness and intensity of the fat phobia some women internalize about their own, and others’, bodies.

## Discussion

This study examined women's narratives about hypothetically gaining weight, fusing together the notion of the imagined (dreaded) "Other" (a feared possible self) and their own body. Rather than asking women to discuss their feelings about other fat bodies or other fat women, they were instead asked to imagine their own future weight gain (and possible fat future selves) and to describe their reactions to that new body. This imagining of dramatic weight gain is unique to the literature because quantitative studies generally address the broader issue of fearing weight gain (Packard & Conway, 2006) while qualitative studies generally lack direct questions about women's fear of weight gain. This study also implicitly looked at the ways that fat negativity permeates imagined selves rather than actual selves.

Similar to earlier studies on adolescent girls (Knox et al., 2000), pervasive fat shame was quite strong and extensive in the adult women in this study. This unconditional acceptance and mimicking of mainstream fat shaming messages offer no oppositional codes that contest or challenge dominant scripts about fatness. This is all the more alarming given that positive fat acceptance frameworks do exist and certain members of most oppressed groups find hidden and overt ways to challenge their subjugation (Hall & Jefferson, 1993; Scott, 1990). The results of this study are not only disturbing, but also showed a wide range of reactions that connect fatness to dread, disgust, terror, fear, abjection, and disability. That women's notions about fat bodies are largely alarmist, hyperbolic, and unrealistic—for example, fat women do not routinely and frequently lose their full mobility, die of heart attacks, hide themselves in their houses, stop having sex, avoid marriage or partnerships, and feel constant anger with themselves—reveals another disconnect between the realities of living in fat bodies and the *imagined* sense of living in fat bodies. We argue that women are projecting through this strong affect the sense that they *do not want to take on the stigma of fatness* as imagined through the terrible things that will/could happen if they became fat; such imagined occurrences obscure the reality of living as fat and may blind women to their (politicized) desire to conform their bodies to gendered expectations of thinness in order to avoid negative judgment. Tensions between personal narratives and cultural narratives of fatness appear vividly in women's fear narratives. The fear of fatness is *far* more extreme, exaggerated, and terrible than the lived realities of living in a fat body. Coupled with the reality that this sort of weight gain is actually relatively mundane and commonplace among large subsections of U.S. women, the importance of understanding women's affect about fatness—particularly teasing apart fear and disgust as key frameworks that women imagine their bodies within—is critically important to understanding contemporary fat negativity in U.S. culture.

Notably, no women mentioned positive outcomes to gaining weight, and no women imagined any advantages from gaining weight. Fatness was instead framed for women in this study as purely and solely negative. At best, a few women described it as familiar, but even those narratives painted weight gain as familiar and sort of bad. More notably, imagined weight gain elicited strong and intense emotions from women, revealing the ways that body image and emotions are deeply interwoven and interconnected. The fear of fatness operates as an emotional response—one that drives women to feel anger and disappointment at themselves, dread and terror at the thought of having a fat body, and sadness and loss about imagining that their lives would end (metaphorically or literally). The emotions were visceral and intense in the room as well; women laughed, shrieked, dropped their heads to the table, covered their mouths, giggled, gasped, and nervously darted their eyes. Imagined fatness was very real, very concrete, very present for women in this study.

Most disturbingly, the number of women who said that they would contemplate suicide if they gained 100 lb shows again the severity and intensity of the stressors women attach to weight gain. This also highlights the tension between affect (feelings of disgust, fear, loathing,

dread) and materiality of the body (the conditions of being fat or embodying fatness). These women's narratives frankly show that some women imagine they would not consider life worth living if they had to live in a fat body; this is significant for fat studies scholars to measure, study, understand, and face, both at the level of affect *and* as a material consequence of "becoming fat." Fat embodiment, in short, is scary to most women (Hunger, Major, Blodorn, & Miller, 2015). The fat body is not only a target of intense emotions, but of absolute, life-threatening dread and fear. The sense that women have a right to occupy whatever body they have, and that they can (and will) have full and rich lives regardless of thinness or fatness is absolutely *not* something that appeared in women's ideas about fatness. Women did not frame fatness in defiant terms as a symbolic way to challenge our culture's pursuit of unattainable bodies and incessant thinness; rather, similar to the earlier studies of women choosing stupidity or death (Carroll, 1994; Maine, 2000) instead of fatness, they would do almost anything to avoid living in a fat body. More work on other social identity categories that would and could elicit this kind of response is needed. Would women say this about living in a body of a different race? A disabled body? A hairy body? A man's body?

Notably, women in this study gave these vivid, emotional, fat negative responses while being interviewed by a fat woman. Listening to the interviews left the first author not with feelings of personal injury (though a few comments made her internally wince) but with a sense that women in this study felt far more strong emotions about fat stigma than she expected. That women were so open about their fat negative attitudes with her raised questions about what sort of fat negativity would have emerged if women had spoken to a thin interviewer. Research shows that, for example, self-censorship is often present in mixed race dynamics given that social desirability makes students not want to appear racist to their classmates (Hyde & Ruth, 2002), which leaves us to wonder (chillingly): Are women's responses in our study the *censored* version of women's responses to hypothetical weight gain?

We found it notable that *no women* in this study mentioned *any* positive aspects of fatness, and no women identified fatness as politically or personally important (even hypothetically). "Coming out" as fat and willingly labeling as fat has important anti-assimilationist identity implications (Saguy & Ward, 2011), just as labeling fat as a feminist issue (Chrisler, 2012; Saguy & Ward, 2011) can link fatness to its larger socio-political context, though such narratives were clearly not available to women in this study. That women did not identify the liberatory, political, or social implications of fatness seemed to reveal much about the contemporary framing of fatness as purely negative and solely based in stigma. The objectification and constant surveillance of women, the gendering of health behaviors, and the importance of self-control for the performance of femininity (Chrisler, 2012) all related to women's way of discussing hypothetical weight gain, while fat acceptance seemed completely erased from their narratives (Afful & Ricciardelli, 2015). Perhaps the liberatory potential of fatness—how women could see their feelings about body image as connected to bigger stories about power, bodies, and agency—is obscured beneath the intersecting dynamics of self-control (one should restrict eating) and self-blame (anger when one does not restrict eating), again suggesting that women locate the "problem" of fatness within themselves rather than the culture at large. If, for example, women could connect their feelings of self-blame, fear, and disgust to broader themes of women's oppression, they could perhaps move this fat negativity away from themselves and instead see it as connected to patriarchy, sexism, and the oppression of women.

This paper also makes a methodological contribution to the existing literatures by tapping into the importance of asking women hypothetical questions about their own future selves. The assessment of possible selves is an excellent way to locate intimate accounts of prejudices and biases because they offer personalized, detailed, and enduring reactions of what one is striving to become or hoping to avoid (Markus & Nurius, 1986; O'Brien et al., 2005). To date, most of the studies on gender, body,

and future selves have been done in quantitative surveys (Anthis et al., 2004; Garner et al., 1983; Rushford, 2006). Qualitative studies have occasionally interviewed women about thinner future selves (Granberg, 2006), but analysis of how women talk about an imagined fat self have not yet appeared in the academic literature.

Interview questions about possible selves and weight matters offer great insights into the way women experience beauty ideals and weight anxieties. Conversations about possible selves allows women to describe the world in their own terms and may avoid problems of social desirability as women had to respond about their own body rather than others' bodies (and thus could not mask their fat phobia quite as well as they could when speaking about another person). Researchers can ask: 'What if you became \_\_\_?' 'What would it be like to \_\_\_ in the future?' These kinds of questions force participants to consider not just "other" people and "other" lives, but to imagine themselves entering a new framework or consciousness or understanding of themselves (Dalley et al., 2013). It also shows the value of asking questions that elicit strong emotions, as women seem to lose their filter to present themselves as careful, calculated, and in control (similar to O'Brien et al., 2005). The imagined future self could be a powerful addition to existing research protocols, especially when studying bodies and social identities.

#### Limitations and future directions

Certain research decisions may have affected this study's results, as the choice for wording the interview questions may have captured only some, but certainly not all, of the facets of women's ideas about imagined weight gain. For example, asking women to imagine a more moderate amount of weight gain (20 lb, 50 lb) may have elicited different kinds of emotional responses and different feelings about their imagined bodies. We also did not ask if women currently *felt* fat, which could have been interesting in terms of self-identifying as fat or thin now. Further, the qualities of the interviewer and interviewees may have deeply impacted the content of what women said in response to gaining 100 lb, as reciprocity, projection, and rapport all impact questions of fatness when asked by researchers with different body weights (Lloyd & Hopkins, 2015); future research could purposefully target more fat women for this question (who already have some familiarity living in fat bodies), or a thin researcher could ask the question (which may actually elicit *more* fat phobic reactions and comments than with a fat researcher). A study on sexuality and the body that asks for volunteers may also attract a more narrow number (and type) of women willing to participate in the study.

Future studies could also examine men's attitudes about imagined weight gain, more direct questions about the interface between weight gain and feelings about sexuality, and feelings about imagined weight gain and family relationships or body image stories. Future research could also look more closely at differences between sexual minority women and heterosexual women to see if the possible loss of the (male, heterosexual) gaze applied similarly to lesbian and bisexual women. Finally, while this study drew upon a sample far too small to draw any conclusions along race, class, and sexual identity lines, future research could examine patterns about imagined weight gain using quantitative measures and could use a much larger sample size to assess such patterns.

Ultimately, this study adds to the existing fat studies literature by tapping into the intense emotions (particularly fear and disgust) women have about imagining weight gain; this moves beyond a mere "fear of fatness" and into territory where women explore vividly the imagined consequences of gaining 100 lb. The disconnect between their responses and actual fat women's lives seems especially notable, as thin women imagining fatness mostly see it in highly unrealistic (and intensely dreadful) terms rather than in more moderated, realistic terms. If fat women in particular are to have dignity, respect, and pride about their bodies, a more realistic understanding of weight gain is

crucial to that goal; further, interventions that seek to lessen or buffer the intensity of women's fear of weight gain could impact not only fat women's lives, but all women's lives, particularly as weight gain/loss is a relatively mundane and commonplace occurrence for many women. Given that the body is a flexible entity, constantly in flux and continuously gaining and losing weight, changing in shape and size, aging, and moving through the world differently, scholars of fatness and the body are uniquely poised to help people cope with the changes they will inevitably face and the possibilities for social justice work therein.

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