Fat on Campus:

Students’ Experiences of Sizist Discrimination on College Campus

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This thesis titled

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ABSTRACT

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Fat on Campus: Students’ Experiences of Sizist Discrimination on College Campus

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I examine how sizism is experienced by college students. I explore the spaces and contexts in which students experience this form of discrimination, the gendered differences in how men and women experience this form of discrimination, as well as how students of both genders cope with and resist sizism. Fourteen university students or recent graduates who identified as fat, overweight, or obese during their college career participated in qualitative interviews about their experiences of weight discrimination during their college careers. All participants attended one of two state universities in Ohio. This data indicates that fat college students experience discrimination both interpersonally and at the structural level through the way physical space is organized and institutional discrimination. Additionally, the data indicates that women experience sizist discrimination more frequently and intensely due to their position at the intersection of sizism and sexism. However, men experience sizism too and are more likely to be policed on their masculinity if they are fat. Finally, I found that participants used a number of coping and resistance strategies to deal with sizist discrimination.

Approved:______________________________________________________________

Christine L. Mattley

Associate Professor of Sociology and Anthropology
To all the students who shared their stories,

may you find the love, acceptance, and respect you deserve.
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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Like most fat\(^1\) people, I have experienced sizism throughout my life. This experience was particularly salient during my undergraduate college career. In high school I had lost a great deal of weight through dieting and exercising. However, like most dieters and many college students, I gained all the weight back and then some in college. I was never comfortable in college spaces with all the cramped bathroom stalls, unyielding lecture hall desks, and chairs that refused to accommodate my large hips. On top of the issues of space, there were the taunts fired at me out of car windows and from fraternity house porches; not to mention the comments and weight loss suggestions of well meaning friends and family. All of these incidents expressed that my body and by extension myself were unhealthy, unattractive, and generally inferior to the “normal,” thin bodies of many of my peers.

As I continued my education I learned more about feminist studies, size acceptance movements, and the burgeoning literature around fat studies and sociology of the body. Through this literature I learned that what I was experiencing was sizism, a form of discrimination against fat people. More importantly, I came to realize was that this discrimination was not acceptable and that I was not alone. My study aims to expand scholarly literature on how sizism operates, especially within the context of the college campus.

In order to further explore sizism in the college context, I pose three questions. First, how do fat college students experience discrimination? Second, do men and women

\(^{1}\) I have chosen to use the word fat because of the fat acceptance movement’s work to reclaim the word fat as a descriptive rather than a pejorative. I also use the term person of size interchangeably.
experience discrimination differently depending on their gender? Third, what strategies do fat students use to cope with and resist this discrimination? In order to answer this question I conducted qualitative interviews with fifteen current undergraduate students, graduate students, and recent graduates who self-identified as fat, overweight, or obese.

What I found was that fat students experience sizist discrimination both at the interpersonal level and the structural level. Forms of interpersonal discrimination included: harassment, teasing, unsolicited weight loss advice, and staring or looks of disgust or pity. At the structural level through the way space was organized and shaped as well as through institutional biases against fat people. While both men and women experience sizist discrimination, I found that this type of discrimination was gendered with women experiencing discrimination more frequently and intensely due to existing at the intersection of sizism and sexism. However, men of size experienced feminization and increased masculinity policing. Both men and women enacted a number of strategies to deal with sizist discrimination. Some of these strategies were not political and could be characterized as coping strategies. However, other strategies were more political and actively resisted sizist discrimination.

In chapter two I discuss the relevant literature. In this chapter I summarize the way in which fat has been constructed as a social problem particularly in the Western world. Then I proceed to the previous literature and research findings regarding fat bodies and discrimination, gender, and resistance. This chapter concludes with a discussion of why the university makes for an interesting site to investigate sizist discrimination.
In the third chapter I discuss the methods used to collect and analyze this data. This study utilized data collected through qualitative interviews with fat students and recent graduates. Participants were recruited through a combination of random sampling by hanging up flyers and sending out mass emails as well as snowball sampling. Throughout the interview process I utilized my own status and experiences as a person of size to gain rapport with participants. Once the data was collected and transcribed it was coded for the three themes discussed: discrimination, gender, and resistance.

The fourth chapter highlights my findings on discrimination. In this chapter, I discuss how discrimination occurs both interpersonally and structurally. The first section I address interpersonal discrimination. The interpersonal can range from something as blatant as harassment and teasing to more subtle forms such as receiving looks or stares. This discrimination can come from a number of sources including strangers, peers, family members, and friends. The next two sections deal with various forms of structural sizism. Structurally, discrimination occurs in two ways: in the way space is physically organized and institutional sizism. In the section labeled “physical space,” I discuss how the ways in which physical space is organized and shaped has a discriminatory effect on people of size. In the final section I discuss how certain places have adopted sizism institutionally and as a result are uncomfortable or unsafe spaces for fat people.

Gender is addressed in the fifth chapter. First, I discuss the ways in which the fat feminine body exists at the intersection of sexism and sizism. Women face greater sizist discrimination because all women are supposed to be public sex objects and therefore fat women are subject to greater externalized and internalized sizist oppression. Men
however do face sizist discrimination in a gendered way. Specifically fat men who lack masculine cultural capital are feminized and subject to greater gender policing.

The sixth chapter discusses my findings concerning coping and resistance. First, I discuss strategies for dealing with sizist discrimination. Some were not political and in many cases represented a great deal of internalization of sizist discrimination. These strategies included dieting and ignoring or avoiding discrimination. Second, I describe more political strategies of resistance utilized by participants including, but not limited to: arguing back, resisting stereotypes, surrounding themselves with non-sizist people, and calling for activism.

Finally, in chapter seven I conclude with a summary of all the findings. In this section, I discuss policy implications for colleges and universities that will help to alleviate discrimination toward students of size. Additionally, I discuss future directions for sociological studies of the fat body.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

In the burgeoning fields of fat studies and sociology of the body there is a great deal of research on sizist discrimination. In this chapter, I summarize some of the important literature on this subject. First, I discuss how the fat body is constructed as a social problem in the United States. Next, I highlight the literature on sizist discrimination, the ways in which this discrimination is gendered, and the ways that fat people have resisted this discrimination. Finally, I look at previous literature on sizism on college campuses and discuss why colleges and universities provide an interesting context in which to study sizist discrimination.

Fat as a Social Problem

Most American’s are aware of the dominant discourse regarding fat. We are told by everyone from our doctors to media talking heads that America is in the grips of an obesity epidemic. According to this conventional wisdom, American’s are getting fatter at an alarming rate. In addition, fat is viewed as unhealthy and attributing to a number of other illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes. This obesity epidemic is believed to be costing our health care system millions of dollars (Saguy and Riley 2005; Campos et al. 2006; Ortyl 2010).

There are two theoretical perspectives that are commonly used to understand the crisis presented by the obesity epidemic: objectivist and constructionist. Most of the research on fat, particularly anti-obesity research, operates under the objectivist perspective. Objectivists believe that fat self evidently becomes a social problem when a large number of individuals’ weights exceed medically prescribed limits (Sobal and
Maurer 1999). Most fat studies and sociology of the body scholars however utilize a
social constructionist perspective. According to the social constructionist perspective,
social problems are not based on “objective reality” but rather the products of collective
definitions. That is to say that social problems have their basis in public opinion and
their perceived severity or prevalence may or may not correspond with any sort of
objective reality (Sobal and Maurer 1999). In the case of the fat body, the social
constructionist view is useful in looking at the social climate and structures that
contribute to the fat body being constructed as a social problem.

Despite the overwhelming dominance of the obesity epidemic rhetoric, there have
been challenges to its claims from researchers and activists alike. In particular, the fat
acceptance movement works to counter the claims of the anti-obesity epidemic and fight
sizist discrimination. While there are many organizations within this movement, the
largest and most well known is the National Association for the Advancement of Fat
Acceptance (NAAFA). This organization was founded in 1969 and seeks to gain respect
and tolerance for fat people. Towards this aim, NAAFA argues that the fat body is not a
diseased body, but rather a normal form of body diversity (Saguy 2005).

Fat acceptance researchers and activists contradict many anti-obesity claims
including: the notion that being obese increases mortality, body fat causes many diseases
associated with it such as heart disease and diabetes, and significant long term weight
loss is a practical goal (Campos et al. 2006). Additionally fat acceptance activists and
researchers claim that the diet industry itself is responsible for much of the ill health
suffered by people of size (Saguy 2005). Furthermore, fat acceptance activist argue for a
Health at Every Size (HAES) paradigm that acknowledges that a person can be both fat and fit (Saguy 2005; Campos et al. 2006).

However, in terms of mainstream perceptions of the fat body, the obesity epidemic still reigns supreme. There are two major reasons why this is the case. First, the obesity epidemic is profitable. There is a multibillion dollar industry in the United States centered on weight loss (Cooper 1998; Campos et al 2006; Fraiser 2009; Burgard et al 2009). Much of the anti-obesity research is funded by grants from the weight loss industry and often anti-obesity researchers sit on the boards of these corporations (Saguy 2005; Campos et al. 2006). This means that the diet industry, one of the major stakeholders in the debate about fat and health, has a great deal of financial as well as medical and scientific capital to promote its claims. In fact, these medical arguments are very effective in stymieing fat acceptance claims regarding the fat body (Saguy 2005).

In addition to being beneficial to the weight loss industry, the obesity epidemic perseveres mainly because it relies on preexisting beliefs about the fat body in Western culture. In the Western world there was a time when being fat was considered a sign of success and prosperity. However this began to change around the beginning of the 1900’s. Currently the fat body is not only viewed as ugly, but fat people are also viewed as moral failures. Historian Peter Sterns (1997) argues that modern day sizism has its roots in the protestant abhorrence for appetite. Excessive appetite was viewed as sinful and refraining from eating for long periods of time was considered holy. However, prior to the 1900’s excessive appetite itself was the target of revulsion and not attached to any particular bodily form.
According to Sterns, the reasons that public attitudes toward the fat body began to shift are multifaceted. Fashion began to shift toward preferring the slender body through the move away from the corset for women and the advent of ready to wear clothing for both genders. During this time the medical profession started to shift away from viewing fat as a sign of health. This change was due in part to the fact that sanitation and immunization caused communicable diseases to be of less concern and increasing concern over disease caused by sedentary life styles. These trends were quickly adopted by self interested parties that began to sell various weight loss products. Likewise, the fashion industry, medical professionals, and commercial exploiters could all reference each others calms, lending credibility to the anti-fat movement.

While these factors were important in shaping and motivating the campaign against fat, Sterns argues the underlying reason the anti-fat trend begin at the turn of the 20th century is because of increased concerns about growing consumerism. Worry about overconsumption triggered an increase in religious sternness toward appetite. Fat people were seen as violating the protestant ethics of hard work and self discipline. The fat body was not simply unfashionable, but a sign of moral failing. This view of fat people as moral failures persists to this day.

Given the history of sizism, it is not surprising that moral outrage against the fat body has increased in recent decades. Sociologist Abigail Saguy notes, “In our society, being heavy has become more of a stigma lately because we’re struggling with other issues of consumption (2010).” With all the recent concerns about cooperate greed and overconsumption of resources fat people are increasingly viewed as embodying
overconsumption and restraint (Ortyl 2010). These cultural and economic factors have put the perceived moral failings of fat people in the consciousness of the American public. These preexisting cultural beliefs combined with the pervasiveness of the rhetoric of the obesity epidemic serve to create a social climate that promotes sizism and discrimination against people of size.

Fat and Discrimination

Most people are aware that fat is associated with stigma and, as the multibillion dollar industry of diet and weight loss products indicates, many fear becoming fat themselves (Cooper 1998; Campos et al 2006; Fraiser 2009; Burgard et al. 2009). For people of size, stigma is a very real part of their daily lives. Fat people are viewed as “unlikable, lazy, sexless, ugly, self-indulgent, and sloppy” (Cordell and Ronai 1999, 29). They are considered “less competent, less friendly, less popular, less likeable, less happy, less self-confident, less feminine, less active, weaker, dirtier,” and less self-disciplined when compared to people who are considered thin or normal. In terms of health, fat people are considered not only physically, but also emotionally unhealthy (Cordell and Ronai 1999).

The idea that being fat is a moral failing underlies these stereotypes and is a major source of discrimination. Fat people are considered fair game to ridicule because their fat is considered their own fault (Weinstock and Krehbiel 2009). Recent reports of Obesity Epidemic have brought cultural fat phobia to the forefront, thus perpetuating an environment that is already hostile toward the fat body (Campos et al 2006; Burgard et al. 2009). In fact, according to Rebecca Puhl, a researcher at Yale University’s Rudd Center
for Food Policy and Obesity, discrimination against people of size has increased 66 percent in the last decade (Ortyl 2010).

As a result, fat people face discrimination in many settings. For instance, the medical field is notoriously sizist (Joanisse and Synnott 1999; Royce 2009). Many physicians and other medical staff accept the dominate images of fat people, particularly with regard to physical and emotional health. As a result, many fat people report being treated rudely or berated by physicians. Perhaps most disturbingly, many fat patients’ concerns are dismissed as being the result of their weight and no other potential causes are investigated (Joanisse and Synnott 1999).

Employment discrimination is also commonly experienced by people of size. According to fat activist Charlotte Cooper (1998), fat applicants are often turned down for jobs because they are perceived to be lazy and lacking in ambition or their perceived unhealthiness leads employers to believe they will frequently be absent due to medical issues. Additionally, many companies will not hire fat people because they do not fit the cooperate image (Cooper 1998). Even when fat people get the job, they often face disdain or rude comments from bosses and coworkers who are intolerant of fat people (Joanisse and Synnott 1999).

In addition to discrimination from strangers and acquaintances, fat people face sizism from people they know and love. Many fat people experience hurtful comments and suggestions from well-meaning or concerned friends and family. Sometimes this takes the form of teasing or weight loss suggestions and coaxing. Despite the good intentions of these comments, they often are quite hurtful and serve to reinforce the
stigma and low self-esteem associated with being fat (Cooper 1998; Joanisse and Synnott 1999; Weinstock and Krehbiel 2009).

Sizism does not just come from other people. Discrimination against fat people can manifest in the very way that space is organized. Many people of size face access issues throughout their daily lives. Cooper (1998) describes the physical barriers people of size face:

For thinner people the knowledge that one physically ‘fits in’ is usually taken for granted… Fat people of all sizes do not automatically assume that we will fit in… Alongside transport, chairs that are too narrow and insubstantial, or seating that is immovable, seatbelts which do not stretch far enough, shops or pubs where the fixtures and tables are cramped together, toilette cubicles, doorways, turnstiles, rides at the funfair, aisles, theaters, cinemas, and restaurants are just a few of the places where we cannot guarantee that our bodies will be accommodated (1998: 18-19).

Cooper also discusses the difficulty people of size have in finding clothing that fits their bodies. Many people of size must shop at specialty stores. For people of size who are required to follow a dress code, finding work uniforms is very often a challenge.

The incidents described above may look as though they are trivial or just random acts of rudeness. However, examination of these incidences as part of a larger pattern of discrimination helps to identify how sizism operates in society. When one looks at these experiences collectively, it becomes clear that sizist discrimination is not just a few isolated incidents or one or two mean spirited people, but a pattern of social exclusion and discrimination against people of size.

Fat and Gender

In western society, bodies are deeply gendered and fat bodies are no exception. Therefore, it follows that the way fat bodies are constructed is also gendered. Most of the
previous work on fat and gender has focused on women and femininity. However, there
has been an increase in studies looking at masculinity and fat bodies. My research looks
at both fat men and fat women’s experiences in college to explore the ways in which
femininity and masculinity affect how student’s of size experience sizist discrimination.

Feminists have been writing about the tyranny of slenderness for decades. The
issue of women’s struggles with weight and body image has become even more pressing
in recent years because the image of the ideal woman has become increasingly thin.
These airbrushed and photo shopped images are literally impossible to achieve and yet so
inundate our culture that it is nearly impossible for women to resist them (Bordo 1993).
Of course, it is not simply the media that perpetuates these images, but also the beauty
ideals of our culture as whole. Women are particularly vulnerable to the tyranny of
beauty standards because women’s esteem in society is inseparable from their bodies
(Bordo 1993; Cooper 1998; McKinley 1999; Cordell and Ronai 1999; Hartley 2001; Rice
2007). According to feminist theorist Susan Bordo (1993), in Western culture the body
and the mind are seen as separate entities. This mind/body dichotomy is gendered, where
men are cast in the role of the mind and women are cast in the body. We can see this in
how women are socialized from a young age to base a great deal of the self-esteem on
their physical attractiveness (McKinnley 1999). In addition, women are expected to be
public sex objects, available to be consumed by the male gaze. Therefore women who
fail to meet the standards of beauty expected by western culture are subject to public
scrutiny (Hartley 2001; Harding 2008).
While both women and men are subject to protestant ethics that condemn excessive appetite (Sterns 1997), women are particularly vulnerable to restriction on consumption. Women are expected to be nurturing toward others but self-nurture is considered taboo, especially with regard to food. Therefore, the fat female body is considered to be in violation of this basic tenant of femininity (Bordo 1993; Hartley 2001). Many women deeply internalize this tenant against self-nurturing and appetite and can develop disordered eating behaviors as a result (Bordo 1993).

Due to the sizism within our society, many fat girls are prevented from developing a gendered identity. A study of Canadian youths by Carla Rice (2007) illustrates this point. The girls in Rice’s study were not considered adequately feminine because of their fat bodies. Additionally, many girls were not able to take on a “tom boy” identity because they were perceived as not fit enough to participate in physical activities associated with this identity. Many fat women continue to struggle with fitting into our gendered society because they have been socialized from a young age to perceive themselves as not fitting into any prescribed gender identity.

S. Bear Bergman provides an interesting case study in gender and fat stigma in hir essay, “Part Time Fatso” (2009). As a self identified butch, Bergman cans pass as either a man or a woman. In hir narrative, ze asserts that when ze is viewed as a woman, ze is considered to be a fat woman. Ze must shop in “plus sized” stores and finds it nearly impossible to order a regular Coca-Cola without being served a Diet Coke. However, if ze makes any effort to pass as a man, for instance by binding hir breasts, ze

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2 I use the gender neutral pronouns hir and ze since Bergman considers hirself to be a third gender.
is not seen as fat. Ze is able to shop in any man’s store and has no trouble ordering a regular Coca-Cola. Because of hir experiences, Bergman asserts that women’s bodies are subject to more stigma for being fat than are men’s bodies. Research by Yale University’s Rudd Center for Food Policy and Obesity supports this assertion. According to a national study of weight/height discrimination women with a BMI of 30 – 35 were three times more likely to report being discriminated because of their size compared to men with the same BMI (Phul, Andreyeva, and Brownell 2008).

However, feminist scholars who focus on fat women’s oppression are not without their critics. Kristen Bell and Darlene McNaughton (2007), argue that feminist scholars have made sizism into a women’s issue, which marginalizes fat men in the literature. While many feminist scholars acknowledge that men suffer as the result of our sizist culture, few believe that their oppression is equal and many claim that it is a recent phenomenon (Bordo 1993; Sterns 1997; Bell and McNauthton 2007). Bell and McNaughton challenge the claims. They assert that men’s body issues center on the pressure to be big, strong, and hard – that is without flabbiness or softness that is associated with fat. Under this ideal, men who are fat are often characterized as inadequately masculine and feminized. One example of this feminization of the fat male body is the term “man boobs,” a reference to accumulation of fat around the pectoral muscles. Of course, Bell and McNaughton emphasize that this relationship is quite complicated. They point out that there are examples of fat men who are characterized as masculine, including the late hip-hop artist, Biggie Smalls. This and other masculine fat
men indicate the importance of acknowledging that the relationship between gender and
fat is furthered complicated by issues of race, ethnicity, class, and sexuality.

Whatever their gender, sizist discrimination clearly takes a toll on fat people.
More often than not, the message that fat is a moral failure and makes them unfeminine
or inadequately masculine is internalized. However, people of size do not simply
passively accept sizist discrimination. In fact, there are many ways in which people of
size resist this discrimination.

Fat and Resistance

Many fat people do not just sit idly by while experiencing discrimination and
harassment. Studies have found that people commonly develop strategies to cope with
and resist discrimination (Cooper 1998; Cordell and Ronai 1999; Joanisse and Synnott
1999; Rice 2007; Hetrick and Attig 2009). Strategies found in previous studies include,
but are not limited to, constructing their fat as not being their fault (Cordell and Ronai
1999), witty rejoinders and other verbal responses to discrimination (Joanisse and
Synnott 1999), participating in activism within the fat acceptance movement (Cooper
1998; Joanisse and Synnott 1999), or refusing to be forced into spaces, such as desks, that
are not accommodating to their size (Hetrick and Attig 2009).

Feminist theorist, Celia Hartley (2001), argues that the fat women’s bodies are in
themselves a form of resistance to women’s oppression:

We now recognize that the idealized female body has been culturally
encoded to mark a woman as physically passive, taking up little space, and
non-self-nurturing. To the extent that the fat body has been vilified as
marking a woman who refuses to accept that prescribed construction, a
place must be made in feminist scholarship for theorizing the fat body in
ways that acknowledge the power of her refusal (2001: 71).
Nita Mary McKinley (1999) agrees that the fat woman has the potential to resist constructions of femininity.

When a fat woman refuses to watch her body and refuses to apologize for her nonconformity to the ideal weight, she challenges constructions of the ideal woman as bodies, as contains, and as subject to male approval. She also resists labeling herself and other women as deviant (1999: 111).

However, McKinley is cautious of uncritically celebrating the fat female body as a site of resistance. She points out that this alternative discourse is not equal in power and influence to the dominant discourse and does not prevent fat women from experiencing sizism. She adds that, “Effectively changing women’s ‘discontent’ with their weight will require a challenge to current cultural power structures” (1999: 111).

College campuses are notorious for being spaces where challenges can be made to dominant cultural power structures. Universities are a space where ideas that challenge the dominant discourse can be discussed. In fact, universities are known for being hot beds of political resistance. It is for this and many other reasons that universities make for an interesting site to examine sizist discrimination.

Why College?

Like most institutions, colleges and universities are not immune to sizism. College is certainly not the first or only place where students experience weight based discrimination. However, it makes for an interesting site to study sizism. While, there are a number of fat college students who have been fat most of their lives, college is a time when many people’s weight changes. We have all heard of the dreaded freshman fifteen and how many students may gain weight during the course of their college careers. Other students may lose weight during college. Despite the variety of shapes
and sizes of people on college campuses, most campuses tend to be perceived to have a disproportionate number of people whose bodies more closely fit the cultural ideals of young, white, and thin.

Additionally, college campuses can be a site of discrimination for fat students at the institutional level. Most colleges enact health initiatives and many times these policies may inadvertently or even blatantly discriminate against fat students. One example of such a policy comes from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania. This university attempted to enact a policy which forced incoming students with a BMI within the levels considered medically obese to take a fitness class or lose weight before graduating (Ortly 2010). In addition to policy, cultural attitudes about the fat body may block fat people from accessing certain institutions and programs in higher education. For instance, the people who make admissions decisions may have sizist attitudes that cause them to exclude students of size (Cooper 1998).

Messages about the fat body are often written in the college curriculum. Susan Koppelman (2009) explored how fat people were discussed in the curriculum by looking at syllabi for classes that included the short story, “The Fat Girl,” by Andre Dubus. The course syllabi Kopplemen studied came from classes in many disciplines ranging from medical school to English literature. All of the syllabi she studied framed the story in terms of disorders, pathology, and disability. While many of the courses clearly tried to be sensitive to issues faced by people of size, it was clear that these classes were not taught from a fat acceptance perspective and did not view the fat body as a normal human variation.
As was discussed previously, fat people often face issues of access because of their size. Likewise, fat college students can be discriminated against by the physical structures of the classroom. The typical college classroom desk is made out of hard plastic, metal, and wood that is shaped in a way that is not accommodating to fat bodies. These desks can be uncomfortable and even physically painful for fat students. The experience of barely fitting into classroom desks and having to squirm around to get comfortable can be humiliating for fat college students. Ashley Hetrick and Derek Attig (2009) argue that the shape and size of classroom desks represent a “hidden curriculum” about the shape and size that a student’s body should take. Hetrick and Attig call for schools to be more accommodating to fat students rather than allowing fat students to feel marginalized and stigmatized by the physical space of the classroom.

Many times the discrimination against people of size on college campuses is not quite so subtle. Sizist harassment and abuse are serious issues that most fat people face. There are numerous accounts of people of size facing harassment by strangers because of their weight. In fact, people often lose their inhibitions toward being rude to strangers when it comes to fat people and openly criticize and harass fat strangers (Joanisse and Synnott 1999; Royce 2009). The drinking culture around college campuses may exacerbate this problem, since alcohol consumption further erodes these inhibitions.

In addition to street harassment and rude comments, fat people face the threat of physical and sexual abuse. Many studies have shown that fat youths are far more likely to experience bullying than their thinner counterparts (Weinstock and Krehbiel 2009). This increased vulnerability to bullying continues into college, where there are
institutions such as fraternities and team sports that are notorious for abusing women, other men, and each other as part of hazing and other rituals. Fat people are at increased risk for abuse in these and other institutions where bullying and hazing are still prevalent because of the pervasiveness of sizism in these institutions.

Unfortunately, sexual violence is a common occurrence on college campuses. According to a report by the United States Justice Department during their time in a higher education institution, one-quarter to one-fifth of all women experience rape or attempted rape (Fisher, Cullen, and Turner 2000). Because of the pervasiveness of sizism in our culture, sexual violence affects people of size in specific ways and fat people may be specifically targeted for violence because of their size. For instance, abusers may use the perceived unattractiveness of fat women as a means of control. Abusers may tell their partners that they are worthless or that nobody else would want them because of their size (Royce 2009).

Another example that comes out of the drinking and hookup culture around college campuses is the practice of “hogging.” According to Ariane Prohaska and Jeannine Gailey, (2009):

“Hogging” is a practice in which men prey on women they deem fat or unattractive to satisfy sexual desires or compete with their peers. Hoggers, a self-imposed label, are groups of men who hang out at bars or parties and try to pick up fat women for sex or make bets with their friends about who can pick up the fattest or most unattractive woman (158).

Hogging practices often include non-consensual practices such as video recording without the woman’s knowledge or even gang rape.
Fat survivors of sexual violence who seek help from the medical and mental health profession, or criminal justice system may be revictimized because of their weight. Previous dealings with sizist doctors or counselors may make fat women less likely to seek help from medical providers in cases of physical, mental, or sexual abuse. Even if they do come to care providers or other people for help, they may face sizist discrimination (Royce 2009). Unfortunately, fat women’s claims of being sexually assaulted are often discredited because of their perceived unattractiveness. For instance, there have been numerous reports of police officers refusing to take reports of sexual assault from fat women and even ridiculing them for being unattractive (Royce 2009). Therefore, fat women are not only at increased risk of being victims of sexual violence, but also of revictimization by peers and services designed to help survivors.

In addition to college campuses being a site for sizism at the interpersonal and institution level it also has the potential to be a site of resistance. Hetrick and Attig (2009) describe an incident where a fat woman refused to sit in ill-fitting desks, choosing instead to sit on the floor. Not only did she refuse to force her body into a desk that did not fit, through her action she unapologetically brought attention to the fact that the desks were too small. Colleges and universities are known for being hotbeds for social movements. While there are no official fat liberation/acceptance groups on the college campuses in my research, the empowerment and consciousness that comes from participating in other movements (particularly college feminist movements) create environments and opportunities for resistance.
This study will help to further shed light on sizism in the context of the university through investigating the following questions: First, how do fat college students experience sizist discrimination? What forms does this discrimination take? Secondly, is this discrimination gendered? Do men and women both experience discrimination? Third, what strategies do students of size use to cope with and resist the sizist discrimination they face?
CHAPTER 3: METHODS

In order to answer these questions I set out to conduct in-depth interviews with students at two large Midwestern state universities. After obtaining approval for my research from the Institutional Review Board, I recruited through flyers, snowball sampling, and mass emails. The flyer contained ambiguous language, asking participants “to take part in a study looking at weight discrimination and sizism on college campuses.” As a result, a number of people who contacted me were not fat, but rather considered themselves to be excessively thin or “fit.” I politely declined to interview them, acknowledging that while their claims of discrimination were probably legitimate; they did not fit the parameters of this particular study.

In addition to being misinterpreted, my flyers were also openly ridiculed. A few weeks after posting them I discovered one of my flyers with sizist graffiti (figure A). This demonstrates how deeply ingrained sizism is where even proposed research on fat studies is subject to sizism.

I also used my contacts at these universities to recruit through snowball sampling, asking almost everyone I knew if they knew someone who might be willing to participate. At one of the universities, this was the only way in which I was able to recruit, since I was not currently affiliated with that university. For that institution, I stayed with a friend for a weekend and used my informal network of people in the area to recruit participants.
After this trip, I sought approval from the institution where I hung flyers to recruit from their student body via mass email. After obtaining their permission and a list of all the email addresses for all the students at that institution, I began going through the list and picking a random sample of 400 names. The list was alphabetized, so I choose a letter and emailed 400 students whose email address started with that letter. I repeated this process emailing a different group of 400 students every day for several weeks, picking a different letter of the alphabet each day. The response rate was very low
mostly due to the fact that I was contacting a wider population (students at that
University) in the hopes of recruiting from a smaller population (college students of size).

I collected interviews with fifteen students and recent graduates. While I sought
to recruit an equal number of men and women, the overwhelming majority of participants
were women. Most of the participants were currently enrolled in a university as
undergraduate students (n = 10) with a few recent graduates\(^3\) (n = 3) and graduate
students (n = 2). Much like populations of students at universities themselves, the
majority of participants were white (n = 13) with only two students of color.

Table 1: Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Student Status</th>
<th>Race/Ethnicity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ana</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chase</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daisy</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Easter</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Recent Graduate</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>South Asian</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackie</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lizzy</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Recent Graduate</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marge</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Graduate Student</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mia</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rusty</td>
<td>Man</td>
<td>Recent Graduate</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sophie</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamara</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>White</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tyra</td>
<td>Woman</td>
<td>Undergraduate</td>
<td>African American</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

\(^3\) Recent graduates have graduated from college within the last year.
\(^4\) Names have been changed to protect the identity of participants.
Because of the fact that recruitment was through self selection, there was a range of actual body sizes of participants. While most of them would be considered clinically obese or overweight, two participants had recently lost a large amount of weight. One participant was a thin woman who seemed to be suffering from severe body dimorphic disorder and anorexia.5

Most of the interviews were conducted in a room set aside for research in the basement of one of the university buildings. Some of the interviews were conducted at various other places including a McDonald’s, in a bar, and in a room in my friend’s apartment. The length of the interviews ranged between ten and forty minutes, with the average length being about twenty-five minutes.

For these interviews I constructed an interview guide that contained questions asking participants to talk about their experiences of discrimination (See Appendix A). Questions on the interview guide were constructed to get participants not only to talk about their college experience in general, but to encourage them to provide anecdotes about particular instances of discrimination. I asked participants how their gender affected their experiences and if they believed their experiences would be different if they were not a man or a woman, to describe how they responded to certain types and instances of sizist discrimination that they recounted to me, what advice they would give other people experiencing this type of discrimination, as well as what they would tell people who discriminate against people of size and the college administration. All of this

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5 Because recruitment for my study based the definition of “fat” on self identification, I elected to use the data from Ana’s interview, despite the fact that she would not be considered overweight or fat to most people.
was aimed at uncovering how they experienced sizist discrimination, how this
discrimination was gendered, and how participants coped with and resisted this
discrimination. While, I asked most participants all of the questions on the guide, I kept
the interviews largely open and conversational, allowing me to ask follow up questions
and probe participants’ responses and stories for more information. The list of questions
I made continued to change as the process went on, adding new questions based on
common experiences and themes that emerged throughout the interviews.

During the interview process, I found that my own status as a person of size was
helpful in gaining report with interviewees. Many interviewees, particularly women,
rightly identified that their experiences were probably very similar to my own as a person
of size on college campus. During many of these interviews I was able to nod my head
knowingly or laugh along with participants. This insider status allowed me a great deal
of report with participants and very likely made participants more comfortable sharing
their stories with me.

After collecting the fifteen interviews, I set about transcribing and coding the
data; keeping in mind that this study was designed to answer the questions: In what
context does sizism occur in and around the college campus? In what ways do men and
women experience weight discrimination differently? Finally, what ways do people of
size react to or resist this discrimination? I kept notes on how I saw these themes
emerging throughout the interview and transcription process in a form of open coding.
Subsequently I used the subcategories that emerged during those processes for axial
coding the data by going line by line through the transcriptions, looking for specific
forms of discrimination, instances where gender came into play, and strategies of coping and resistance.

I found that fat college students’ experiences of discrimination could be subdivided into three forms, interpersonal, physical, and place/space. That is discrimination occurred between individuals and groups of individuals as well as structurally creating access issues and places where fat students did not feel safe or comfortable. Additionally, I found that both men and women experience discrimination. However, there were ways in which men and women’s experiences were gendered. In addition, I found that participants responded to this discrimination using many strategies to cope with and resist this discrimination.
CHAPTER 4: DISCRIMINATION

My data yielded many insights into the ways in which sizist discrimination operates on and around the college campus. Often discrimination on campus can be overt. Fat students are sometimes harassed on the streets or in the bars or berated by their friends and family. However, many participants noted that sizist discrimination often operates in a way that is far more subtle.

Daisy: I think it's more of the-the more subtle things that start to bother me. More so than um - direct discrimination. I feel like direct name calling or anything like that is what you think of as discrimination.

Esther: Um I don't think that there was ever any pressure for people to be thinner overtly. Um I never felt targeted for it. But it was always sort of the way that things were expressed culturally. Um and the way people would you know dress and act on campus. It was always very much the idea that you know thinner is better.

John: And I don’t know. It’s like I said, it’s kinda hard to pin down. But there is definitely a vibe that you - that I always got from people… There is definitely one or two times a week that I felt bad about it. Like, I just felt like. I don’t know. I was somehow worse than other people I knew.

Tamara: A lot of things uh I guess that have affected me most were never um directly something someone said or something someone did or anything. Like it was - it was more uh the way I felt about a certain thing.

Many of the participants do describe having felt bullied or discriminated against during high school or as children. Participants were mixed in terms of whether they felt that this discrimination was greater or less now that they were in college. However, many remarked that they faced less overt hostility and bullying in college. Many speculated this was due to the fact that people in college were older and supposed to be more mature.

Marge: I think to that it's more subtle. Like unless somebody drives by you and yells, "Hey! Fat chick" … You know. Um. But now, people are grownups so they’re a little bit - they're more subtle. … Even if the grad
students are thinking it, they're not gonna to say it because they're grown ups and they're polite.

Mia: Unlike in high school, I think in college people learn to be more discrete.

Even so, sizist discrimination was clearly still as issue for participants, even if it tended to manifest itself more frequently in subtle forms. This discrimination existed at both the interpersonal level as well as the structural level with both levels reinforcing and blurring into each other. In order to evaluate this discrimination, I have broken the experiences described by my participants down into three categories: Interpersonal, Physical, and Space. First, “Interpersonal” describes the ways in which interactions with friends, roommates, classmates, family, and other people can result in or perpetuate sizist discrimination. Second, “Physical Space” describes the ways in which the size and shape of the physical structures in and around college campuses can be a form of discrimination against people of size. Finally, “Place” describes how certain spaces and places in and around college campuses can be spaces that are not safe for fat bodies.

Interpersonal

Essentially, interpersonal discrimination is one person or a few people acting in a sizist way toward another individual. This form of discrimination can be overt, as in the case of someone yelling slurs out a car window or more subtle, for example, a look of disgust directed at a fat person who is eating. Most of the time these interactions fall in between the subtle and the overt. In this section we will look at the forms of interpersonal discrimination experienced by participants in this study starting with the most overt forms and ending with the most subtle.
While I was careful to direct my line of questioning toward participants’ experiences in college, more than half of the participants in this sample (n = 9) indicated that they had experienced bullying and harassment as a child or during high school. Many participants who had experienced this early bulling still carried some anxiety and internalized sizism as a result of this bullying. John indicated that even though he had lost a great deal of weight and was no longer viewed as a person of size that he still experienced a fear of being discriminated against.

John: And even, even now I still feel that way a lot of the time. Um, which I mean I can rationally say, cause I lost like 85 pounds in the last year. Um, well I’m not overweight anymore, I’m down to 169. I was 255 at the start of the last fall quarter. And I can still like thing. Well, I’m not - I’m not fat anymore. But I still, but I’m still prepared for that kind of thinking. And it’s still hard for me to go out and do things. I’m still kind of paranoid about it.

Tyra describes how she believes her lack of self confidence stems from being bullied as a girl.

Tyra: Personally, I took it horribly and it's - it caused a lot of - I believe psychological - being teased since I was very young about lots of things, but like size was the number one thing I think. So I think it's definitely a psychological thing. Once you are teased to a certain point. It makes you like feel like shit for a very long time so.

Tyra’s assertion that bullying and harassment during her youth has lasting psychological results is supported by the literature on youth bullying (Weinstock and Krehbiel 2009).

Of course, for many participants bullying, harassment, and rude comments were not a thing of the past. Five participants indicated that they had been harassed for their size by complete strangers. Four participants indicated that they had experienced street harassment, usually in the form of a young man yelling obscenities from a passing car. Two participants indicated that they had been the subject of rude comments made by
male perpetrators in a bar. While none of these participants indicated that this was a regular occurrence, Tamara notes that “when it happens it's something that sticks with you for a long time.” Even though it is not a daily or even weekly occurrence, it is still something that leaves a lasting impression.

Five participants also indicated that they or someone else that had known had experienced sizist comments being made against them during arguments that were not directly related to their size.

Tamara: I know girls that like if they are at a bar and there's like some drunk guy or something and they start yelling with them - like it might not begin with like something to do with weight but like eventually they're going to get called a fat whore or fat bitch or something like that. Like it almost always comes out later.

Tyra: um yeah like a lot of friends of mine, they would just be teased if they were like defending themselves. They would - you know - say “Oh! You're fat! So it doesn't matter what you're saying because you're fat and ugly.”

Two of the participants worked in resident housing in positions of authority and often faced sizist comments from uncooperative residents.

Lizzy: Especially in situations where maybe I was writing someone up you know, and, or confronting someone in a residence hall that I’d be walking away and I knew, I knew what they were saying about me. You know? And that, usually something like “fat ass,” you know, because well they were mad at me because I was writing them up. That was always the word. You know, the first thing they went to, to try and offend me.

Rusty had similar experiences during his time as a resident assistant.

Rusty: I remember even one time when I was walking down the hallway. I like didn't have my shirt on or something and everybody's like "That's disgusting! We don't wanna see that!" and like trying or basically telling me that because I was overweight I didn't have the right to not wear a shirt. And I pretty much told um too damn bad. I'm not - I don't care.
(laughs) Like cause it was the middle of the night and they woke me up at 3 am. So they just had to deal with it.

Corey: Right. Do you think you faced a lot of discrimination in your - as your experience as an RA?

Rusty: Umm yeah uh I don't know what all that was. That was a lot of stuff. Me being the person who was enforcing rules I think is what really - they were looking for anything to try and get at me.

In all of these instances, the people participants were in conflict with likely used sizist name calling because fat is one of the worst things that someone can call another person.

Tyra noted this in her description of her friends using sizist comments against other people, but not identifying Tyra herself as fat.

Tyra: and people would ask me what's wrong and stuff and I would tell them, I really hate my size I keep trying but I'm too fat and this and that and they'll be like, "Oh you're not fat." and this and that. But then some - you know someone who um is clearly smaller than me and then like they don't like them so they'll call them fat and it's like well basically you're calling me fat because I'm clearly bigger than that person. “Well no you're not fat.” So it's like that kind of gets really confusing. Like will - do - if you view fat like you-your trying to let that person down because you don't like them, but yet I'm like bigger than them, but you're not calling me fat. Like if fat actually mean something displeasant rather than actual size? Like it's like really confusing. So I don't know if they - if those people like view fat as you happen to be bigger and I hate you or you know - you're bigger but I like you therefore you're not fat.

Because being fat is one of the worst things that one can accuse another person of being, Tyra’s friends freely utilized sizist insults against other people, but would not direct this insult at Tyra, even though Tyra felt that she was clearly just as fat if not fatter than the people her friends were calling fat.

Of course it’s not just people who fat students are in conflict with that make sizist comments towards fat students. Three participants reported experiencing teasing about
their weight from their friends. John discussed a number of instances where people made jokes about him engaging in physical activity or eating.

John: Yeah, I would definitely say it would be mostly the-rude comments. I mean anything from like, uh, you know I’d tell somebody, “I’m gonna run down to the library” and they’d be like (mockingly) “You’re gonna run.” Like, come on! I can still run! I’m not in a fuckn’ wheel chair! I can pick one leg up and put it in front of the other. It’s not impossible. I don’t care how big somebody is if they can walk, they can run. But, uh. Just a lot of jokes like that um - that I got kind of sick of.

Rusty describes being teased about being lazy by his friends at a party.

Rusty: Even last night like I didn't really want to um - I was really tired because like it was my first day off in 19 days and I didn't really wanna get up to get a shot and everyone was like, "you're so lazy! blah, blah, blah, blah" going on and on about how lazy they thought I was but, um

Corey: Do you think that's because you're an overweight person?

Rusty: I think so. Yeah. I mean I think that was really what it was all about.

Sophie had one friend in particular who consistently made fun of her for her weight.

Sophie: Um I think my friends kind of say it like jokingly and like when they drink it comes out more. And I-I just kind of go along with it because I don't know. I have a good sense of humor so I don't really. It doesn't bother me but I think deep down it kind of does bother me (laugh)

Corey: Yeah (both laugh) How often would you say this happens?

Sophie: I don't know. Like every weekend.

Corey: Like every weekend?

Sophie: Yeah there's one friend that really just - he likes to pick at me. But he picks at everyone. So it's not just me but. That's the issue that he picks at

Corey: Is your-your weight?

Sophie: Yeah
Being made fun of by friends put participants in a difficult position, because many of them found the teasing hurtful or frustrating at times. However, because the teasing was coming from friends they felt that they needed to show that they were good sports about it and not fight back.

In addition to being teased by members of their peer group, students of size also face pressure from their family regarding their weight. Four participants indicated that they felt pressured by members of their family to lose weight. Jackie was lucky enough to have support from her mother and her brothers. However she did experience pressure to lose weight from her father’s side of the family; “I think my dad and my dad's mom, they're a little bit more pickier they're like ‘You gotta lose the weight! You've gotta lose the weight!’”

Esther described experiencing pressure from her mother. Esther believes that her mother was always primarily concerned with Esther’s health. However, in one instance, Esther was telling her mother about a man she had met online and was preparing to meet in person. “My mom said "Well does he know that you - you know." and sort of gestured to the fact that I was heavy and that was - sort of stung.” It’s clear that comments like that do not represent a concern for her daughter’s health, and more from a cultural understanding that being fat is not considered attractive.

Sophie was pressured to begin losing weight because her parents informed her that she could not travel abroad unless she did so. This resulted in a very painful emotional exchange with her mother.

Sophie: Um so freshman year my parents told me I couldn't go to Germany unless I lost 40 pounds. So I was trying to like go to Ping and
lose weight and do all of this stuff and ended up losing 30 pounds which was like really good for me but there was like this one moment where I just kind of broke down to my mom and I told her I was like I feel ugly and fat and she was like you're not ugly. But like she just didn't say like you're not fat either. She just kind of left it. She's like you're not ugly and I was like ok. And so like that didn't make me feel good.

Even this terribly painful experience was not off limits to Sophie’s unfunny friend.

Sophie: that one friend that I was talking about just like he always uses that against me now. And like we were at this party this one time and he just like kinda kept saying like - throwing it at me like "You're not ugly. You're not ugly." and like just kinda throwing it in my face and like it really hurt my feelings cause like I don't wanna like hear that I'm not ugly. I wanna hear like - I don't know - that I'm like not fat too. I don't know, but I don't know that really bothered me that one night.

For many of the people of size the friends and family pressuring and picking on them may have nothing but the best intentions. They may believe that they are helping their friends or family member out by encouraging them to lose weight. However, these interviews indicated that this teasing and pressure serves to reinforce much of the internalized fat hatred and low self image that many people of size harbor.

It is not just friends and family who put pressure on fat students to lose weight. Unsolicited weight loss advice is a common form of sizist discrimination that people of size face in and around college campuses. Five participants described experiencing unsolicited weight loss advice from coworkers and colleagues, bosses, roommates, health care professionals and other acquaintances. Rusty described being regularly criticized for using elevators as opposed to taking the stairs.

Rusty: Just like people always suggesting things like "Oh you should take the stairs" or like you should go and do like you know physically laborious things. You know at any given time of the day. Like people would or greatly contended or tend to greatly encourage that. You know. As opposed to like - when I was thinner people wouldn't - didn't really care if
I took the elevator. They'd be like Yeah! You can take the elevator, so what. You know. Didn't matter and now they're like, "Well we need to be healthy and we need to take the stairs.

Marge also described being told repeatedly that she should diet and exercise, especially from her fellow grad students. While Marge was careful to indicate that her friends were generally pretty supportive of her and contentious about making sure she didn’t feel bad about her body, Marge admitted that, “Although, I did feel bad when my (sigh) my friends kept talking about how - let's go to the gym! Let's go to the gym! It was like, enough!”

While Rusty and Marge felt that the people nagging them to lose weight really did not do so in an attempt to demean them, other participants indicated experiences of unsolicited weight loss advice that felt more like bullying and harassment. Esther described her boss at an on campus organization constantly making comments and suggesting ways that she could lose weight.

Esther: I think the only outstanding time that I can think of I ever felt sort of discriminated or bullied for is I had a boss on campus when I worked for the institute for cultural studies that would make comments from time to time. Um because she herself had at one point been heavy. So she was sort of pressing you know making - she would sometimes make comments and she was judgmental all around regardless. I mean not just about size but a lot of other stuff. But it was kind of frustrating because it wasn't. I never really felt it was in her grounds to do so.

Jackie described living with two roommates who constantly tried to bully her into losing weight.

Jackie: So like the very first week it was constantly "You should go exercise." You should do this. You should do that to lose the weight… You know what I mean? So, when they start telling me this it gets me down more because it's like they can't accept me for who I am.
Jackie goes on to describe how her roommates were always commenting on what she was eating, talking amongst each other about how she ate and her body as if she was not in the room, and picking up the containers and commenting on the fat content of her food. It even got to the point where her roommates took over the kitchen and would not allow her to keep her food there.

Jackie: Now this quarter actually, we all had a cabinet in our apartment where we put our food… So, I'm gone for the whole intersession break. When I came back they had put all their food in my cabinet. I only had like - I mean - I had like tea bags and you know stuff to make tea and three cans of like spaghetti o's or something like that. And so, I was just like, ok so now there is not even any room for my food. So, actually I keep my food in my room this quarter now.

This is a clear instance of sizist bullying. Jackie’s roommates demonstrate a clear disregard for Jackie’s feelings and her own right to decide what sort of food to put in her own body.

An issue that many participants (n = 7) brought up was the issue of dating. These participants found it very difficult to find people who were interested in dating them.

John: Like even my, my female friends there was always like, “Oh sure. John, I’m sure there, there are women out there who would like you.” And I’m like, “Well then introduce me to one.” (laughs) And, and it was hard to get a date, cause there was always, and there are big people who have girlfriends. I’m not going to even pretend for a second that that’s impossible. But it is harder. Um. Cause you can’t, you can’t, I can’t anyway. I mean, you probably don’t even try. I ca-can’t win a girl over with just personality as easily if I’m a big guy because there’s very obviously in my experience, a-a correlation between weight and attractiveness.

Emily: an attention of a guy mostly too that’s a big thing. Like, if some girl is skinnier – you know – she gets more attention from guys, while a girl like my size doesn’t get attention… if I know a guy for a awhile and he’s nice to me in class as a person and then if there’s a social setting or something he’ll hang out – like if there’s two girls or me and he knows
more than one or if we’re like together. He’ll pretend to like one and go out with that girl instead

Marge even found the whole experience so frustrating that she gave up on dating entirely.

Marge: I already gave up trying to date men, because I can't compete with the size four, twenty-two year old. I mean and you'd even think that as a grad student it wouldn't matter that I was competing with those women, but I'll tell you right now. If those guys don't come in here with a girlfriend it doesn't matter. They're going for those girls. Or they're going for my colleagues who look like - you know - 22 year olds so. (sigh) I already gave up dating.

Beyond dating, many participants found that people were less friendly toward fat people in general. John noted, “Like if I was with one of my - one of my thinner friends and we meet somebody new. They would always be a lot friendlier to my friend than they would to me.” Rusty who gained quite a bit of weight over the course of his college career noticed a change in how friendly people were toward him: “Yeah. People were a lot more friendly when I was - first got to college. When I was really, really attractive and really thin and then as time went on as I got bigger they were less friendly.” Jackie, a bubbly, energetic, and extraverted person, found this lack of friendliness very frustrating: “I-I mean I consider myself a pretty nice person but, no one else would know that because it's like they build this wall like Ah! Like they're wearing a sign ‘You don't talk to fat people.’ Whatever.”

Another more subtle form of discrimination is communicated not through words but through the looks that people give fat students. Mia described the looks that she received from her classmates when she came into the room looking sweaty and red faced from climbing the stairs to get to class.
Mia: Um so anytime I would run up the stairs I would literally run up the stairs and then immediately go to the bathroom so I could calm myself down and no one would see me breathing hard or the sweaty face or whatever cause I know if someone did see that it'd-it'd - they'd either show pity or they just kind of you know - hahaha look at the fat girl type deal… like when you run up the stairs and you'd be late for class and then you go in and you're like (imitates heavy gasping breathing) Oh man that was a lot of stairs! Breathing heavy. They'd be like, “Oh. You know. Poor girl can't even run up a flight of stairs without having issues.” I mean - it went from looks of pity, looks of disgust, looks of hahaha look at the fat girl.

As a graduate student, Marge teaches some of the women’s studies classes at her institution. She described an incident where a student reacted to a naked image of Beth Ditto (a fat feminist musician) with a look of disgust.

Marge: And it - it was this weird moment where one of my students was incredibly repulsed by the picture. And it was this weird moment for me as an instructor. I mean it wasn't like a clear instance of discrimination or harassment, but it was weird for me to be this fat woman up there at the front of the classroom with all this authority and to have this student like she was clearly - like I mean her - she had this embodied - you know - reaction to it. Not embodied, but a visceral reaction. And it was weird for me that - I don't know - it was like - like she wasn't in the least bit sensitive to the fact that that's what my body looks like naked. And so, I mean, that was a weird moment for me. I was kind of like - you know - would you. I don't know. Like, would she have responded that way if like - I don't - I don't know. It was just it was weird for me to see her react in that way and to not care at all about how I might feel about her - you know - puking in her mouth at the image of a fat naked woman. You know. I mean she didn't necessarily puke in her mouth but she had that look on her face. It was pretty - pretty disturbing. (emphasis added by me)

Even though this student was not directing this look at Marge, she still noted that this women’s reaction to the fat body presented to her reflected on her view of fat bodies including Marge’s own body.

Many participants reported that people stared at them or feared that people were staring at them, especially in certain contexts such as dining halls and the student
recreation center. Lizzy provided some insight into why fat students might feel like someone is staring.

*Corey:* Why do you think people feel like everyone is looking at them if they’re a person of size?

*Lizzy:* I don’t know. I guess probably because we’re sort of made to think that way. I think that you – as a person of size I just - you’re automatically just by being reared in America you learn that you’re different. Even though, actually, you’re probably the majority. We’re probably the majority at this point. Um, but you’re not acceptable and I think that knowing that you’re a minority, I suppose – you just – I don’t know. You just think you stick out like a sore thumb.

Looks and stares are often such a subtle form of discrimination that many participants second guessed whether or not the interaction had happened at all. However, the number of people who reported having such interactions (n = 8) indicates that there may be more to it than simple paranoia. The fear of being stared at and silently judged often came up when participants talked about being forced into spaces that were too small such as desks and bus seats; which brings us to the next form of discrimination.

**Physical Space**

Hertrick and Attig (2009) argue that the size and shape of college desks represented a “hidden curriculum” about the size and shape of the ideal student body. By creating spaces that fat students cannot comfortably fit into, the school is communicating to students that their bodies must be a certain size in order to be the ideal student. This lesson was certainly not lost on the participants in this study. The majority of interviewees (n = 10) reported finding the desks too small to fit comfortably into. In fact, many participants brought up this issue almost immediately upon starting the interview.
As you can imagine, trying to force your body into a hard metal, wood, and plastic structure that is too small is very physically uncomfortable. Rob even demonstrated the awkward way in which he had to contort his body in order to fit into his desk. However, the discomfort around trying to fit into a desk extended beyond physical discomfort. Many participants reported finding the experience of trying to fit into small desks humiliating.

Tamara: and a lot of their um classrooms are arranged so that they're um - they're filled with those desks where the chair is attached to the desk and so - like there are some - I've had classes where like - my - the entire hour that I would be in there I would just be so self conscious that I was like squeezed in here and could barely move and I felt like really embarrassed and stuff… It does just make me feel really self conscious like about where I'm sitting or who's sitting by me and if they can - and I wonder like ok can they see how uncomfortable I am right now? And I guess it is kind of a learning distraction if you're um not only thinking about how you look, but also feeling like uncomfortable and you can't move comfortably then it sucks

Daisy: I think it's more of a self conscious thing. Like you know there are some classrooms that are whatever, but then there are other classrooms where you have to squeeze into the like the tiny desks. Squeeze past the little isles and I think that's more. It could just be like self confidence or self awareness. Like, I feel like people are looking at me cause I'm like Ah! These desks are not made for bigger girls. They're not!

Chase: because [too small desks] can make things uncomfortable.

Corey: Um, you mean physically uncomfortable or socially uncomfortable or both?

Chase: Definitely both because it-it makes me feel physically uncomfortable because you know obviously there's a desk ramming into my stomach. But it makes me feel socially uncomfortable just because it's like oh god that looks so pathetic. You know. This guy cannot fit into a desk all that well.

Rusty recalled an incident where a man in one of his classes was too big for the desks and a different chair had to be found in order to accommodate him.
Rusty: Now that you mention that, I remembered um my first algebra class I took at [college] uh we had a guy who was very, very obese and people were really rude to him. You know. Just and like I remember he always had a lot of trouble with the chairs and he - they actually had to bring a chair in for him because like they desks that they provided just like weren't you know capable. So he had to sit in the front of the class with this like ridiculous chair so he could actually sit down.

Corey: How do you think he dealt with this discrimination?

Rusty: He didn't really talk to anybody. I mean he seemed like really embarrassed and kind of closed himself off.

Participants reported that the physical as well as emotional and social discomfort of being forced into desks that did not fit had a negative effect on their education. Daisy reported being unable to focus on class.

Daisy: I think it's distracting. You know? You're just very aware like this desk is just uncomfortable for me and I feel like I look like I'm big in it. You know? It really - it just distracts from me paying full attention. ‘Cause if I'm not uncom-if I'm uncomfortable the way I'm feeling right now obviously I'm not going to be like lets learn about physics. You know what I mean? I'm more focused on, oh god this desk is ridding into my stomach.

Lizzy also reported being distracted by her physical and social discomfort

Lizzy: I would say that and then at that point. You know when I really think about it, I have so much anxiety about that. I was thinking about the way people were looking at me and how uncomfortable I was more a lot of the times than I was thinking about the class. That’s really kind of scary when I think about it now… Seriously, if I had more space and I would have felt comfortable in that desk. I don’t know if I would have thought everyone was looking at me! But like you know when you’re sitting in a chair and you think that like – like your but is hanging over the edges and your stomach is like pressed against the desk cause it’s not big enough. How can you not think that people are noticing those things? It’s such a source of anxiety! I would tell the college administration that my GPA would have been so much higher than it was if they had bigger desks!

Both Lizzy and Tamara reported that they were less likely to go to classes in rooms where they knew the desks were uncomfortable.
Tamara: Well, it certainly makes me like more inclined to like not go to class. If um - it's not like I think to myself well, I don't wanna sit there so I'm not going to class, but if I'm already like thinking about like um Oh well, I know we're not going to do anything today. I don't have anything to turn in. Plus I hate sitting in that class. So, I'm not going to go.

Rob discusses how he was unlikely to answer questions in his classes that required him to get out of his chair and write something on the board: “Just kind of lock myself - I'm not gonna like - I don't feel like getting up to go to the chalk board cause I gotta go - it's kinda hard for me to walk through the isle sometimes. So it's kind of like I'm just gonna sit here.”

It is not just the desks themselves that cause problems for fat students, but also the way in which the space of the classroom is organized. Both Rob and Daisy mentioned in above quotes that the isles between desks were also often too narrow. Marge described teaching in a classroom that is structured in a way that does not allow much room for a person of size to maneuver: “Some of the smaller rooms it's uncomfortable to - to navigate that space. Even as an instructor there've been times where I was like, Oh! I guess I'm not gonna try to move around because I can't. ‘Cause my butt doesn't fit through that space.”

All of these cases represent a significant barrier to fat students’ education. The physical discomfort combined with the social anxiety over their peers seeing them squished uncomfortably into the desks is a serious distraction from learning. The data supports Hetrick and Attig’s assertion that the size and shape of desks represents a hidden curriculum, where students are taught the size and shape a students’ body should be and fat students are informed that their bodies do not meet this standard.
Buses are another place where space is structured in a way that enforces this hidden curriculum about students’ bodies. Like airplane seats, bus seats can be quite small in order to accommodate more people. Esther reported, “I rode the bus back and forth so there was always the - you know - Oh God I feel like I'm taking up too much space!” Other students may enforce this feeling of taking up too much space by refusing to sit next to fat people. Jackie reported experiencing this.

Jackie: Like the bus service; no one wants to sit with you. It's a crime to sit with a big person - you know - they like - anybody else…There'll be time on the bus where. You know I always pick up my bag. I don't care who sits with me… If you want to sit with me, sit with me, if not whatever. But, I'll be sitting there and people will just - like the people that are in front of me will have two people in the seat and then they'll be like me and everybody behind me will have two people in a seat. It's like no one wants to sit with me ‘cause of the way I look.

The fact that other students will not sit next to a person of size further reinforces the message that their bodies are not acceptable.

Clothing was another issue that arose in the interviews. At both universities, participants\(^6\) \((n = 6)\) reported having difficulty finding places to purchase clothing that fit them. Daisy complained that none of the boutiques and shops around campus carried clothing for plus sized women.

Daisy: not a single thing in those stores are gonna fit me. They just don’t! I'm not - I'm not a big big girl but I'm definitely plus sized and even then like you'd think there'd be one store that carried something that was cut with a little more room, because it's not like no one on campus is big (laughs)

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\(^6\) This issue was only brought up by women participants. This coincides with Bergman claim that ze had less trouble finding men’s clothing that fit hir than women’s clothing. Of course, I cannot say that men did not have this problem, simply that they did not mention it during the interviews.
This was not only frustrating because it was harder for Daisy to find clothes, but also because it prevented her from enjoying shopping with her friends.

Daisy: So I just. I mean friends will wanna go and I'll just say no. You know, you guys can go without me and make an excuse kinda thing but. Just cause it's not fun when twelve of your friends are trying on cute dresses and you're just like yeah I can look at shoes.

Mia and Esther reported having problems finding clothing that would fit them at the bookstores and clothing shops that carried clothing items with their university’s insignia.

Esther: Um you know I know for instance - you know - if you go to the book store and if you're looking at some of the clothing items there they don't have - unless you don't mind wearing oversized sweat shirts or t-shirts - a lot of the more fitted clothing their not gonna have in - sized for larger people.

Mia: Um (sigh) Not always having sizes. I mean if you go to the book store and try to buy a hoodie. They have one or two one x, two x sizes. The rest are uh mostly smalls.

This is another way in which the hidden curriculum about students bodies is communicated. The bodies of students that do not fit the range of size that is considered normal or ideal cannot even find shirts and sweaters the bear the universities brand.

Like interpersonal discrimination, discrimination that comes from the way things are made and the way space is structured communicates through to students of size that their bodies are outside of what is considered normal or ideal. The pain and humiliation of trying to squeeze into unyielding desks communicates to students that their bodies are the wrong shape for the learning environment. Likewise with the size and shape of bus seats which causes students anxiety over spilling into the seat next to them; a lesson which is further reinforced by other students’ refusal to sit beside them. Then being unable to find clothing at the boutiques, shops, and bookstores still further reinforces the
hidden curriculum about student bodies. The examples of desks, bus seats, and clothing do not comprise an exhaustive list of physical space and access issues that students of size face. Participants also mentioned airplane seats, chairs, bathroom stalls, and other spaces. Whatever the place or space the message remains the same: your body is not normal and does not deserve the same accommodations that thinner bodies enjoy.

Place

Sizist discrimination is an issue for fat people across many places and contexts. However, there are certain places and spaces where people of size feel particularly vulnerable. On the college campus these places include dining halls, spaces where health and fitness are emphasized (i.e. medical facilities and student recreation centers), and certain social settings (i.e. bars, large parties, and social Greek institutions).

When talking to participants about why they feel uncomfortable in or avoid certain places and activities two common reasons came up. First, students of size feared being discriminated against in these spaces. This fear sometimes came from past experiences of discrimination in these spaces although this was not always necessarily the case. Marge describes this feeling in explaining why she does not eat at the dining facility in the student union: “So I guess even, even if I don't necessarily experience harassment or discrimination - I worry about it.” The fear of experiencing discrimination in a certain setting was a powerful deterrent for many participants. Secondly, participants tended to avoid places where they felt like they were the only fat person there. Many participants described this resulting in a feeling that they did not belong. The
combination of fear of discrimination and feeling like the only fat person made certain spaces very uncomfortable for students of size.

Dining halls and cafeterias were spaces where many participants\(^7\) (n = 8) felt unsafe. One of the major concerns was about being looked or judged for what they were eating or the amount of food that they were eating.

Daisy: so whenever I would feel like I would - you know you go to the dining hall - everyone else in the world piles their plate high and even if I didn't I would feel like there's always just that somebody right there at the table next to you that like “God look what that girl’s eating!”

Jackie: Almost everywhere I go I get chicken nuggets and fries. So, you come out with this big plate and everybody just stares at you like “What is she doing! Like, she shouldn't be eating chicken nuggets and fries. She needs to be eatin salads or she needs to be eatin banana!”

Mia: If you're sitting down eating something, no matter what it is you're eating, people will always look at you. If you - especially if you've got a plate in front of you - you just sat down to eat.

Tamara was so concerned about being stared at while she was eating that she went out of her way to avoid being seen by other people at the dining halls.

Tamara: If I wasn't with someone else, then I would try and sit fat away from other people. So I just - like I just don't like people seeing me eat in general, but like in the dining hall you're so squished in with a million other people so. It was like uh kind of especially um anxi- a - it made me anxious is what I am trying to say.

Some participants reported being hyper conscious of what other people were eating, especially people they perceived to be thinner than themselves.

Esther: Um I don't know that anyone ever said anything outright it was just something I was always very aware of when you'd be around these people that would eat you know a salad and maybe a little bit of pasta if

\( ^7 \)While one male participant reported being discriminated against in the dining halls, the majority of participants and the participants that seemed to internalize the fear of dining hall and being judged for eating the most were women. More on this in the next chapter.
that. Or - or we're always you know thin to the point that it's kind of like I don't know that that's actually healthy.

Jackie: But then you go out to sit at the food court and you see like all these skinny girls who are like chomping down on salads like they're rabbits and I don't know about you, (laughs) but salads just do not do it for me.

Tamara: I felt like I was eating more than other people or something? I was really conscious about um different types of people and what they were eating and things like that.

Esther even adjusted how she ate in order to fit in with the other girls she was with and not be ridiculed for eating too much.

Esther: I was always really self conscious about what I ate and I would deliberately eat slower or eat less than I was comfortable eating because of the fact that I was afraid they would judge me for it. And while I think of eating healthy is very important, it was always sort of a struggle because it's frustrating to eat and not feel satisfied and then feel bad - and then feel bad because you have to go get something else later on… I was sort of very aware - it made my much more aware eating and took the pleasure out of it I guess.

Many of the participants avoided the dining halls all together after their first couple of years in school because of these issues.

In addition to dining halls and cafeterias, many fat students felt uncomfortable in institutions that focused on health and fitness; specifically medical establishments such as student health centers and student recreation centers. Both Esther and Tamara reported going to the student health center for issues unrelated to their weight and being pressured into losing weight. Esther reported, “I just remember going - having to go to the student health center and I - for something unrelated and then - you know - I had the physician there talking about ‘oh well you should use the rec center.’” Tamara went see a physician about a cold and the discovered that her blood pressure was very high. She
believes that this high blood pressure had a great deal to do with error because the pressure cuff was too small for her arm.

Tamara: So I have my blood pressure taken and you know - a lot of times when I have my blood pressure taken like they have the - they either have to use the - the bigger band or if they don't use the bigger band then I feel like my arms gonna get cut off. And so that like happened and it like the thing almost came off and it was taking a really long time to register. So I was thinking to myself, well she's definitely going to have to do it again. Like that happens a lot too where I have to have my blood pressure taken multiple times.

Despite the fact that there is no history of high blood pressure in Tamara’s family and Tamara is a very young woman, the possibility that her very elevated blood pressure reading could have been due to measurement error was not explored. Rather, the physician presumed that her high blood pressure reading was accurate because she was fat and proceeded to berate her for her weight.

Tamara: So she just started talking about like um if you keep this - if you're blood pressure stays this high you're on your way to a stroke. Um you're almost abso - Oh! She said, "right now it's not a question of whether you'll have a heart attack it's when you'll have a heart attack. And like you're 22 years old, your blood pressure shouldn't be this high. um this is absolutely connected to weight. You know and she talked about my BMI. She talked about um saying things like how my generation was the first that was going to not outlive their parents and um and things like that and like she just kept - she would like look at me as she was telling me these things and I didn't have a response I just kept nodding. And eventually like I guess that wasn't - she wasn't satisfied that I wasn't completely mortified or something. I don't know what reaction she wanted. So she looked at me and said, "That doesn’t’ bother you at all?"
And I said, "yeah it bothers me, but I came here for a cold."

Not only is it problematic that the doctor and nurse involved in this incident did not check for instrument error, but the doctor’s lecture represents a lack of sensitivity toward fat people. Physicians need to realize that even if they do believe that a patient’s weight is
unhealthy, they are not doing their patients any great favors by lecturing and berating them into dieting. This only adds to the sizist harassment and discrimination that their fat patients face on a daily basis.

Daisy had a similar experience at an off-campus physician’s office when she went in for her yearly physical.

Daisy: and for my insurance every year I have to get a check up of sorts. They check cholesterol, they check sugars, they check blood pressure, they check everything like that and it's just to make sure - just to see how my health is doing in general to stay on the insurance. And my older sister and my younger sister both have to do the same thing. Um. I'm perfectly healthy. Every time I go I have perfect blood sugar, perfect cholesterol, nothing wrong. My only problem is technically I'm obese. I'm like not even - you know? So, even though all of my vitals are perfectly fine. Even though my blood pressure is perfectly fine. I have nothing else wrong with me. Nothing health wise. Other than I weight more than what is acceptable to the doctor. The only thing they focus on is “are you gonna try to lose weight?” “Do you work out?” “Do you do this?” and they've actually like - they report that sort of thing and my older sister who has - she's got high blood pressure and she's got like a bad sugar level. They don't say anything to her. Not a single thing. The doctor’s appointment is just take it and go. You're fine. I get like tormented almost at the doctor’s office. You know? It's not an in and out thing. And I'm the one that has the attention paid to me and I'm the one that has to be fixed because of my weight. Even though everything else is-is fine. You know? and it's ridiculous to me that my older sister who is just - just cause she's in the health weight range she’s fine. Let her go. But I'm the one because I'm technically obese and the stupid BMI chart, which I hate. But, like I'm - I'm the one that's the problem. I'm the health problem. I'm the insurance risk simply because of weight.

These stories represent a fat-is-unhealthy approach to weight rather than a more holistic approach that takes into account more than a person’s BMI. This paradigm not only discriminates against fat people like Daisy, a healthy 23 year old, but also does no great favors to her thinner sister, who is at greater risk for the diseases associated with high blood sugar and blood pressure.
Another health and fitness related college institution where fat students are often hesitant to go is the student recreation center (n = 6). Like the dining halls, fat students often feared being looked upon with judgment in this context. Daisy recalls being discouraged by overhearing other people make comments about other people’s bodies.

Daisy: I went to [the student recreation center]. I went a lot like my freshman/sophomore year and I just gave it up because I would be so. Nothing was directed toward me but I would overhear conversations about other people were like "Why would she be like" - or "What does she think she's doing?" Just talking about people who are either bigger or not in shape.

This further reinforced the idea that people were probably thinking and possibly saying the same things about her. Mia on the other hand, experienced more direct forms of interpersonal discrimination at the student recreation center.

Mia: I never went to the rec center for fear of being laughed at um… they had a rec center in the dorm and uh going down there if there’re skinny minnies in there. I would go get on the bike, get on the treadmill and they would always just kinda - you know - look at each other and look at me and kind of get those smiles or whatever.

Many participants felt out of place in the student recreation center because they perceived all of the other people around them to be much thinner and in better shape.

Jackie: Everybody that comes from Ping is extremely thin. You know. It's - they're like built. They all have like - the men have muscles and everything and it's kind of intimidating. You're walking in - you feel like a blob walking into like the state of perfection. It's like, you just don't want to do it. I don't want - I don't wanna go to Ping (laughs). I don't want to be intimidated. I don't want to be on a bicycle between two skinny white chicks or whatever and then have them be like “What are you doing here? This isn't a place for you.”

Tamara: I went to [recreation center] a few times and um felt like I was the only person of size that used Ping for some reason… like I would want to go to Ping to work out and get exercise to lose weight. I felt like most of the people that were there were - were just really athletic people
who were trying to become more athletic. It didn't - I didn't feel like it was um like oriented towards people who wanted to lose weight or something like that. Like I was um it was just like uh - just really populated by athletic type people as I see you know what that body type means.

Like in the dining halls, people of size are hyper aware of the bodies of the people around them. Being surrounded by bodies that fit the ideal in terms of being thin and “fit” and seeing no fat bodies left participants with a feeling that they did not belong. This feeling combined with the fear of being discriminated against made fat students feel very unsafe in the student recreation center.

The major reason that sizist discrimination feels more salient in the student health center and recreation center is because of the emphasis on health and fitness in these spaces. Despite evidence to the contrary (Campos et al 2006), these institutions tend to function on the premise that fat bodies are inherently unhealthy bodies. Fatness in constructed as an illness, obesity. However, unlike most illnesses, obesity is believed to be the fault of the obese. As a result, health and fitness institutions tend to convey this message that fat is a failing of the individual. This institutional sizism is often played out in interactions between medical professionals and fat students or between fat students and other students at the gym. Ironically, this institutional sizism can prevent people of size from going to see the doctor or going to exercise at the student recreation center, two things that would allow them to be healthier regardless of their size.

Beyond these smaller and more specific intuitions, in recent years many colleges and institutions have adopted the rhetoric of the obesity epidemic and begun to include health and fitness to their own institutional agenda (Ortyl 2010). The two universities
that participants attended were among the schools that adopted health promotion
campaigns that constructed the fat body as an unhealthy body. These campaigns can
have the effect (intended or unintended) to make fat students feel even worse about their
bodies.

Marge: I think that their needs to be less focus on weight loss around
campus… I think that there needs to be less of a focus on this whole fat
equals unhealth (laughs) unhealthy thing. You know what I mean? Like, it's just - it's ridiculous. 'Cause they're all about that! You know. The-the Wellness Connection and the Student Health Center team up to put all
these things around that are like, here's some ways that you can - you know - not get fat. (laughs) and it's like - ah - yeah - it's - it's frustrating and I think that that really damages a lot of young women's self esteem and even mine!

Rusty: Um I would tell the college administration that that's something
they need to be more sensitive about. I mean it's not something that is ever
considered and with all like their stupid wellness initiatives that they are
always talking about like they're really helping to cultivate these things.

As Tamara points out, this concern about gaining weight is reinforced through other
college institutions as well, such as the student paper.

Tamara: Something that bothers me is how every single year there's um a
story in the paper or just people talking about like how to avoid the
freshman 15 and all this stuff and how it's like the most awful thing in the
world.

In addition to health and fitness places, spaces where drinking culture is prevalent
were also places that many fat students felt uncomfortable including bars, parties, and
Greek life. Here the threat of discrimination is much greater because people tend to lose
their inhibitions toward being rude when they have been drinking. Both Marge and
Daisy reported experiencing weight based harassment at bars.

Daisy: there've been times where I'd be like out at the bar and dancing.
You know. With my friends and there'd just be that jerk frat boy that'd just
kind of like "Oh, why's that girl on the table?" or like "Fatty" You know what I mean? "Get off the table." Gotta - not that I was ever on tables but you know - dancing with your friends and it's always like "What is she doing there?" You know. And it's just - it's not - it's not something that happens all the time. But the few times it has is really discouraging… it's just like that ruins the whole night.

Marge reported that the fear of being discriminated against at the bars was enough to prevent her from going to certain bars: “because I know that the type - the people there are the type of people who would - who would discriminate against me or would harass me. You know what I mean? So, I'm more prone to come to places like this\(^8\) where I feel safe - I feel safer.”

While women in general are viewed as sex objects for public consumption, especially young women\(^9\), bars and parties are places where women feel more vulnerable to the male gaze. For women of size this gaze makes them vulnerable to discrimination and harassment based on the size and shape of their bodies. Sophie reported experiencing this gaze when she went to fraternity parties with her friends.

Sophie: I've never really had like a issue with confidence but then coming in as a freshman and seeing like girls going out on the weekends it was hard to like have the confidence to go into frat parties cause like going in as a group they kind of like - I don't know the guys at the door just kind of look at you and that was kind of difficult. I never really wanted to go out on the weekends with my friends just cause I was afraid I was gonna get rejected at the door… for me to try and go to the frat parties and just like the guy standing at the door would be looked at and I-I clearly didn't fit in.

For Tyra, the fear of being viewed as “the fat one” was enough to dissuade her from going to parties at all: “I was invited, ‘hey you should come hang out with us at this party.’ I didn't wanna go because I assumed at the party there would be drinking and people like meeting guys and I didn't want to be the fat one tagging along.” In both

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\(^8\) Referring to the quiet, low key bar where the interview was conducted).
\(^9\) More on this in the next chapter
cases, these women felt like they would not be welcome or “fit in” at these parties because they would not be considered attractive by the men who were present.

At both of the schools that students in this study attending, Greek Life was a major component of the drinking and partying culture. As both Daisy and Sophie eluded to in pervious quotations, men involved in fraternities were perceived to be more likely to discriminate against people of size. Tamara also made this assertion about men and women involved in Greek Life.

Tamara: me personally I wouldn't wanna join a sorority for like a lot of different reasons other than my weight, but that would definitely also be one of those things. It's like even if I didn't mind like the um the weird pledgey stuff they do. Like it was… Like, even if that was just completely ok with me I still think I wouldn't want to try and get involved with that kind of thing and even like um like I'm a journalism major so I try and - and go and I'll write stories so I have to interview people that are parts of different things and so - and sometimes I feel self conscious about my weight and not - either not do it or just be really nervous about having to do it.

Mia did want to pledge a sorority, but found herself dissuaded from even attempting to pledge certain sororities because of their reputation for not accepting fat women.

Mia: Like I remember when I was thinking about rushing - my fiancé was already in a fraternity and he um he told me that certain sororities I may as well not even try because they won't accept me because of the way I look - the way I dress - who I am. He said a couple of the good ones were you know "A O Phi" stuff like that - they accepted - they did have bigger girls but I mean some of the ones like "Kappa Delta" and "D Z" You never saw with - with plus sized girls.

Based on participants’ experiences it is clear that Greek organizations often discriminate against people of size, particularly women of size. This is due in part to the way that fraternities and sororities rely on the male gaze in evaluating party goers and pledges.
Women in this hyper masculine context are often viewed as objects for publically scrutiny.

While both men and women experience interpersonal, physical, and institutional discrimination there are ways in which this discrimination is gendered. In the next chapter, I will discuss some of the gendered elements of sizist discrimination more in depth.
CHAPTER 5: GENDER

For decades, feminists have been exploring the ways in which the body is intimately linked with gender. These pioneering scholars worked to bring attention to the body as a sociological and feminist site of study and laid the groundwork for fat studies. Scholarship about the fat body has largely focused on women and fat bodies with many scholars making the assertion that women are more vulnerable to sizist discrimination and if men do experience sizism, it’s a recent phenomenon. (Bordo 1993; Cooper 1998; McKinley 1999; Cordell and Ronai 1999; Hartley 2001; Rice 2007).

However, this view has come under some criticism; with some scholars asserting that men do experience sizist discrimination and have for just as long as women in Western society (Sterns 1997; Bell and McNaughton 2007).

In this study I sought to explore the ways in which sizist discrimination is gendered. What I found was that both men and women did experience discrimination. In some ways this discrimination was similar, which makes sense given that the recent focus on the obesity epidemic targets both fat men and fat women. However, there were many ways in which this discrimination was gender specific. In many ways, women’s experiences of sizism were more salient, since women are subject to more rigid standards regarding weight and viewed as public sex objects. While half of the men I interviewed indicated that they did not think that sizist discrimination was a big deal on college campuses, male participants did describe instances where they or other men that they knew suffered under this form of discrimination.
Women and Fat

The vast majority of participants (n = 11) believed that women experienced sizism more frequently and intensely than men did. Many women cited the impossible beauty standards that are placed on women, particularly regarding weight.

Esther: Um I-I think so because I do believe very highly that it's not ok to be larger as a woman. That women are supposed to be you know small and pretty and tiny with big breasts even though you can't have a very small body frame and also have big breasts.

Daisy: We're so expected to be tiny. Like we're just women in general - whether it be the media or other college students - are just so expected to be little and I'm sure - I don't think guys are - especially that - there's like uh continue where that's where is excepted to if you're a guy it's much further then it is for girls. Like girls if you're even a little overweight you get that. I mean that's just how girls – “God look at that pouch! She's got a muffin top!” You know? And things like that. To e-even if you're just a little overweight it doesn't matter. It's horrible and wrong and – and “why doesn’t' she take care of herself?”

Mia: Woman are looked on a lot harder because we're supposed to have you know sex appeal. We're supposed to be you know beautiful and you know dress like certain way and wearing makeup a certain way, wearing our hair a certain way. It's the Barbie complex.

Many women (n = 6) attributed this extra pressure to be thin at least in part to the media pushing these images of ideal female beauty.

Ana: Well I mean like, looking at magazines and stuff you see all of these skinny models and everything and I mean since that's really what's idolized now like. I don't know, it makes you feel like really fat like even if like you're not like considered overweight like technically.

Tamara and Jackie believed that this pressure to be thin was especially demanding in a college environment. When talking about the lack of friendliness she experiences on college campuses Jackie discussed her frustration at men’s lack of friendliness towards her because her weight is beyond what is considered sexually appealing.
Jackie: And I think - this is kind of personal but, I think it goes back to the whole like sexual relationship kinda thing. Like, so if a guy really likes you he's gonna be like, I don't want to be with her cause she's big and she's probably not gonna be like - you know - as good in bed or whatever as the skinny girl… I mean, I think a lot of people - I hate to say this because you know but, I feel like a lot of people base almost everything on sex… And they're just like, ah (disgusted) you know - she's not gonna look good with her clothes off… but I kind of get that feeling like ugh (frustrated) what's wrong with just being friends?

Tamara mentioned that she felt the pressure was especially prevalent on college campuses because there were so many people on campus are young.

Tamara: I guess it's just the same kind of stereotypes that they have about overweight people that happen everywhere - especially - I guess among young people. ‘Cause everyone has pressure to look beautiful or something to look like people in the media. Whereas, like - like I know it extends - it - you know - it keeps happening as you get older but like there's definitely more of a pressure on… you're with a bunch of people that are your same age and like that's the age that is glorified in the media as like all these beautiful people are - are young and thin and so if you're already young then now you have pressure to be thin too.

Ultimately, the pressure for women to fit this impossible standard of beauty relates back Western cultures’ expectations that women be public sex objects. Women are expected to make every effort to be pleasing to the (heterosexual) male gaze by deviating from the beauty standard, for instance by being fat, is meet with discrimination.

Lizzy expressed her fear of being subject to the male gaze even in her classes.

Lizzy: I hated those classes; especially the classes that had a lot of men in them. And that was always, I always thought that men were looking at me and thinking about me being, a negative way more than women would look at me…thinking back on the classes that I was in like that like, if I walked into a room, and especially men who were, it’s almost like high school, like the men who were like physically fit, like that you could tell were like fraternity guys or athletes. Like, I always felt that they - I always got uncomfortable around them and nervous, like they were thinking about me and thinking “oh my gosh, she’s so gross.” And I hated that feeling.
In fact, two male participants objectified women in this manner throughout their interviews. John, in particular, referenced women friends who believed they were fat. He did not accept their assertions of being fat based on the fact that he considered them “pretty hot.” However, when this gaze was turned on himself by other people he was quite offended.

John: people who saw me and then noticed I lost weight, it was always the same thing: “Wow you lost a lot of weight. You look really good.” And my first thought was, “how are those two things connected exactly?” I was always like, “ok so what are you saying about how I looked before?”

John felt completely entitled to evaluate the bodies of women to assess whether they were fat or “hot.” However, when people made similar evaluations about his body he was offended.

Tyra asserted that men were more likely to discriminate against her because of her weight.

Trya: I think that a lot of guys automatically assume if a woman is fat all they're doing is eating and you know complaining about their life and not exercising and they must not be athletic just because you know they're bigger and they just like keep leading on all these excuses and reasons and those excuses lead to reasons to make fun of them and they just always expect like woman - cause based on like society and stuff - that they should look a certain way to be attractive.

In Tyra’s experience, men who discriminated against her believed that Tyra’s supposed failure to be thin and therefore pleasing to them sexually was her fault. Therefore, just as they feel entitled to evaluate her body, they believed they were entitled to police her body.

However, men were not the only people who policed fat women’s bodies. As mentioned in the last chapter, sororities commonly have policies (formal or informal) that
exclude fat women. Jackie complained of this policing in terms of how some women
determine with whom to associate.

Jackie: and it's the same way with girls. Like, (sigh) I don't know if you notice but a lot of the girls here are (sigh) they're kinda preppy\textsuperscript{10}. You know like, "Yeah! We got it and you don't. So - you know - don't even talk to us if you don't have it." Pretty much the attitude. And they're all like walkin around in these like short shorts and skin tight shirts and they're just like - you know - we roll with our people. You know like we just wanna be surrounded by skinny, thin people. Skinny, pretty people. We don't want anything to do with you guys. You know what I mean? and I think that's the attitude.

Marge also discussed the ways in which she felt policed by her well meaning female friends and colleagues. She believed that this policing was not something that they would do to a male colleague: “I mean I couldn't imagine any of my female colleges ever suggesting to a fat male college that he go to the gym with them.” However, she felt that this was something that all women do regardless of their size.

Marge: Get a lot of women together and eventually someone wants to talk about diets and so - I mean I see that happen quite a bit and I'm not sure - I feel like that would happen no matter what size the women involved - you know - what size they are… I don't know if it's about me because those women are so invested in there - in their bodies.

Rusty also witnessed this good natured policing behavior among the residents in his hall when he was a resident assistant for the dormitories: “a lot of my female residents kind of policed each other whenever I was an RA and like they were always like, ‘Oh! Let’s go get ice cream. Oh we can't get ice cream because you know we could get fat’ or whatever.” Likewise, Mia recalled hearing people talking about what other people were eating in the dining halls.

\textsuperscript{10} Preppy is a slang terms that is commonly used by high school student to refer to the cheerleaders and athletes that are considered popular. It is also characterized by a superior attitude toward people who do not fit into the standards set by those communities.
Mia: “Oh look at how much she's eating” or-or “wow! Is that all she's eating?” type of deals are “oh look she only got a salad.” You know stuff like that. Stupid little comments… It’s like I said it's - I think anymore with size issues it's not just people looking at plus sized anymore, it's also people looking at people who are starving themselves trying to fit in… So I mean people look at both things like “Oh is that all she's getting to eat? Look at how skinny she is.” or “Oh wow! Look at how much food she got.” You know. “She doesn't need all that.”

In addition to having their appetites policed by other women, all the women in this study that discussed the dining halls or eating indicated that they had deeply internalized the need to restrict what they ate or not be seen eating. This corresponds with Susan Bordo’s (1993) theories regarding women and appetite. According to Bordo, women’s desire to eat is something that is considered shameful. It is something that women should do in private and even so in small quantities. This deep seeded abhorrence for women’s appetites and self nurturing was internalized by the women in my study.

As a result of this demand that women be self disciplined in her eating many women developed eating disorders. Three women in this study reported engaging in disordered eating behaviors, such as binging, purging and starving themselves. Most notably, Ana, a participant who was not even considered overweight by medical standards. Like many other women participants, she indicated that she was hesitant to go to the dining halls: “Um, hesitant to go anywhere with food, because, I don't know like I'm afraid I'm gonna like start eating a lot and I mean, I've had like points in my life were I-I've gained a lot of weight and I've really tried to shy away from those places.”

11 Because recruitment for my study based the definition of “fat” on self report. I elected to use the data from Ana’s interview, despite the fact that she would not be considered overweight or fat to most people.
Women were not the only people in the study that were policed regarding how much they ate. John reported his friends making comments about what he ate.

John: But every time I went, like I’d get as much as I wanted and they’d be like, “What? That’s it?” And I’d be like, “I got as much as you.” And they’re like, “well aren’t you gonna get any more?” I’m like, “why, why would I do that?” There is like this assumption that I must you know, (sarcastic) I must be eating more than them, clearly. And it’s like, it’s like come on guys.

The assumption made about all fat people regardless of their gender is that they cannot or do not control the amount of food that they consume and therefore all fat people receive policing regardless of their gender. However, none of the men in my study reported feeling self conscious about eating. Rusty followed up his comment on his residents denying themselves ice cream with “And I remember just like lovin my ice cream to death.” I meet Chase for his interview in a McDonalds at his suggestion and he ate a meal there during the interview. It seems clear from this that the men in this study did not feel much shame regarding what they ate. This, however, was not the case for any of the women in this study. So, if all fat people receive policing regarding what they eat and all women receive policing regarding what they eat, it seems apparent that fat women receive more policing regarding what they eat because their bodies exist at the intersection between sexism and sizism.

Another area in which women find themselves at the intersection between sizism and sexism is sexual violence. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, four participants indicated that they had experienced harassment. The participants who indicated experiencing street harassment were all women. Previous studies (i.e. Joanisse and Synnott 1999) have demonstrated that men of size also experience street harassment.
However it was interesting that only women reported it in these interviews. It would not surprise me if women of size were more likely to experience this form of harassment, since street harassment is an issue faced by all women, regardless of their size. Therefore, it would follow that fat women were at an increased risk for this form of sizist and sexist discrimination.

While none of the participants reported being targeted for sexual violence other than sexual harassment because of their weight, the threat of being targeted for sexual violence because of her weight was a salient concern for Tamara.

Tamara: I've heard stories about instances of like guys who cruise bars to try and find like the fattest girl that they can and like have sex with her and then make fun of her - you know, afterwards to all their friends and stuff…That's what I heard it was. It was like - you know - they refer to it as.

Corey: hogging?

Tamara: I heard it that, but before - I think that's what they called it in the [local newspaper] - but before that I had heard like another - maybe at other schools or something - like whaling I think also too… So yeah - I mean I don't know person that it's happened to, but I mean it apparently does happen. But, that's because I don't really like go out to bars and do social things like that because of I guess stuff like that. Like I don't wanna have to deal with - you know - um guys hitting on me just to make fun of me.

The threat of sexual violence, especially where drinking is involved, is a problem experienced by all college women (Fisher, Cullen, and Turner 2000). However, there are instances where fat women are specifically targeting for sexual violence and could be at an increased risk (Harding 2008; Prohaska and Gailey 2009; Royce 2009).

While all fat people are subject to sizist discrimination, this data clearly indicates that in many instances the intersections between sizism and sexism make them far more
vulnerable to sizist discrimination. A large part of this is due to the fact that beauty standards regarding weight are much stricter for women than for men and the fact that women are expected to be public sex objects. However, like women, there are ways in which sizism does affect men that are gender specific.

Men and Fat

While my data does support many feminist scholars’ assertions that women do experience sizism more frequently and intensely, there are many ways in which both fat men and women both experience this discrimination. Men in this study did report experiencing and internalizing sizist discrimination. This makes sense considering that the rhetoric surrounding the obesity epidemic does in many instances target both fat men and fat women.

In their critique on the way fat men are marginalized in feminist literature on fat, Bell and McNaughton (2007) discuss how fat men are often feminized because of their size. The ideal masculine body in Western culture is the athletic, hard body. Conversely fat is seen as soft and weak, traits that are associated with the feminine body. In this data, there is some support for Bell and McNaughton’s assertions. Chase, a heterosexual man, described being viewed as feminine and being commonly considered gay by other people. While he did not attribute this to being a fat man, but rather to the fact that he was “clean cut,” he did feminize his own body when describing his difficulty in fitting into some chairs: “I have unnaturally wide hips for a man.” Despite the fact that there is very little that is more natural than where human bodies store fat tissue, having wide hips is considered an aspect of the feminine body and not the masculine body. Therefore,
because his body accumulates fat in an area associated with the feminine body, Chase characterizes his hips as non-normative and therefore “unnatural.”

Interestingly, John, one of the participants who had recently lost weight and was no longer considered fat, described having his masculinity policed more frequently when he was fat. One of the ways that John lost the weight was through regularly attending Pilates classes, an exercise that is often considered very feminine.

John: I kept going because I thought it was pretty useful. I thought it was a nice workout. And I would tell people like, “Sorry, I’m gonna have to go I have Pilates at six.” And they’d be like, “are you serious?” I’m like, “Yeah, I know it has the stereotype of being for chicks but it’s actually pretty awesome.” And um, it was always meet with this kind of incredulous like, “What? Seriously?”

However, after the weight started coming off he was convinced by the Pilates instructor to come to Zumba classes, an exercise that is also considered very feminine.

John: But, she told me she was going to be doing um, fitness this quarter. She wasn’t doing Pilates but she was doing um, like Zumba on Fridays. And, and I told her in an email, “I was comfortable enough in my masculinity to do Pilates, but Zumba is a whole nother ball game.” She’s like, “No, no, no, you should come anyway, you should come anyway!” So, I went anyway and I had a lot of fun and it was just as silly as, as you probably imagine. I was again the only guy there… Like, Zumba is ten times sillier than Pilates. I don’t care what anybody says. Like, you have to swing your hips in a circle and do the shoulder wiggle and it’s ridiculous and it’s very obviously for women.

However, when he informed people that he was participating in these activities as a thinner man, people were less likely to police his masculinity: “But now people are just like, ‘ok, you do Zumba.’ And there’s not even a pause. So it’s just, it’s obvious that now, it’s much more acceptable for me to be doing these things.” John also describes having the length of his hair criticized when he was fat.
John: So, I mean there are definitely differences for me. Um. Shit, even the fact that I, you know, I tie my hair back now. And my hair was getting long before I’d get made fun of for it. Now, it’s just like, Oh he’s another dude with a pony tail, whatever. Um. I mean, it’s not uncommon. The red ponytail is less common but, um, it’s not uncommon at all. So people just don’t care. Like, I got no comments from my friends about the fact that I was tying my hair back.

Corey: So do you think your masculinity comes more into question when you’re an overweight person then?

John: Yeah, I think that’s a good way to put it. Um, Yeah, I just wasn’t taken seriously as a man, really.

Contrary to John’s experience, Rob however did not experience any of this policing. In fact, Rob did not feel that he experienced much discrimination at all. People often did not even think of him as a fat person.

Rob: Like I said I've really never had an issue with people thinking that. Well a lot of times people - I-I identify myself as being someone like overweight, obese and all this stuff because I know what I weigh and all this stuff and I know - I kind of feel like I know where I should be but I'm not, but other people tend to not notice that. Until I kind of point it out and they're like, "oh actually you kinda are."

From the conversation with Rob, it became apparent that the major reason that Rob did not experience discrimination in the same way that many of the other male participants did was because he had more masculine cultural capital. Rob’s friends who referred him to me for this study described him as “more dude-like” than Chase and Rusty. In fact, Rob himself associated his not being characterized as fat to the fact that he is a good athlete.

Rob: Like physically or whatever and so I've always been a strong - stronger person. So that's never really affected me so much. Cause even though I was fat I could - I was still athletic so to speak. So I mean I was - well I can't do it anymore but like - but in high school like I was able to run a mile in six minutes and I was 260 pounds so. It really didn't affect
me in that kinda way… but I also have like the reputation for being like - I don't know - like sports and whatnot.

Rob also participates in other activities that are considered masculine such as break dancing. He describes being quite good at it” “I can like stand on my head. I can do all kinds of stuff that a lot people usually can't do.” Rob’s masculine mannerisms and skill at athletics gave him some masculine cultural capital that protected him from sizism or even being perceived as fat.

In conclusion, not only do men experience sizism, in some circumstances their bodies can be feminized and their masculinity policed. However, men with masculine cultural capital such as athleticism or a more masculine appearance, maybe be protected against sizism. These case studies raise questions regarding how fat and masculinity intersect. As Bell and McNaughton asserted in their critique, there is a lot that can be gained in our understanding of sizism, gender, and the body by exploring this matter further.

No matter what their gender, fat people do not just passively accept sizism. There are many ways that fat people cope with and resist this discrimination. In the next chapter, I will discuss some of the ways in which participants dealt with and fought against the sizist discrimination in their own lives.
CHAPTER 6: RESISTANCE

Fat people do not take discrimination lying down. In fact in recent decades, fat liberation and fat acceptance movements have sprung up around the country to fight against sizist discrimination. However, resistance is not always formalized and fact none of the campuses had fat acceptance groups so not surprisingly none of the participants in this study were involved in the fat acceptance movements. Nonetheless, there are still many ways in which fat students responded to the sizist discrimination they faced in college. Some of these responses can be characterized as resistance, while others were less political and are better characterized as coping strategies. These coping strategies include dieting, laughing off hurtful comments, and ignoring discrimination or avoiding certain situations. Resistance strategies utilized by participants including refusing to be defined by their fat, reclaiming their bodies as their own, resisting stereotypes, arguing or fighting back against discriminators, surrounding themselves with non-sizist people and creating safe space, arguing that fat is a diversity issue, and even calls for activism. In this chapter, I will describe some of the coping and resisting strategies that participants utilized to address sizism.

Coping

All of the participants in this study had to various degrees internalized the sizism that they faced. We live in a sizist society where fat people are considered lazy, sloppy and unattractive. In addition, the rhetoric surrounding the obesity epidemic has further contributed to the construction of fat people as unhealthy, even diseased, and as parasites on the healthcare systems (Campos et al. 2006). Fat people receive these messages their
entire lives and through college have them consistently reinforced through interpersonal and structural discrimination. Therefore, it is hardly shocking that participants would internalize this stigma and that it would affect their ability to resist. As feminist blogger Kate Harding (2008) explained fat people are faced with two choices, either struggle against your body by dieting throughout your life or struggle against a sizist society. Either way, fat people must struggle. Marge lays out the toll this takes on her ability to address the sizism she faces in her day to day life.

Marge: Well, it depends on how I'm feeling. Because there are some days where I don't feel very good about myself and I do kind of feel like - like a slob - like a fat slob. You know. And I hate feeling that way. I mean, not that I hate you know feeling so fat, but I hate feeling bad about being fat… But - but I mean, on those days when I do feel bad about myself because of my weight. I sort of - I-I will play into that stuff. Like maybe I should go to the gym. Maybe - maybe I should try that recipe. Maybe I shouldn't have this second piece of cake. You know. So I - so I will - I will play into it. That's how I ended up gettin roped into going to that gym… But - I mean, but then other times I'll just look at them and I'll be like, “No, I'm kind of happy being fat. I really don't wanna work out.”

In this quote, Marge articulates how difficult it is to struggle with the internalized feelings of sizism that many, if not most fat people harbor, with her political values of resisting sizism.

Not surprisingly, dieting was the most common form of coping discussed by participants. Ten participants reported engaging in dieting, with five of those ten participants indicating that they were dieting at the time of the interview. For many participants, this was a lifelong process. According to Chase, “I've been trying to lose weight for the last - I don't know - 10 years or so.” Chase was only twenty years old at
the time of the interview, which indicates that he began dieting at a very young age and has been struggling with his weight for half of his lifetime.

Four participants even indicated disordered eating behaviors. Both Tyra and Marge reported that she used to engage in binging and purging previous to coming to college.

Tyra: Like there were times in my life where I would like try - like I was basically bulimic for a while. You know - trying to you know lose weight and it's unhealthy.

Marge: Ok. Well, um. I've always been a thicker girl. Like ever since I was a little kid and I was even bulimic when I was about 12, 13.

Ana reported that her fear of becoming fat like her parents had driven her to stop eating for several days at a time: Ana: “So I mean, I went through a lot of times when like I just wouldn't eat for like a good four days at a time cause I was like I'm not gonna be like that and I mean, that's really bad for your health and like those moments still do come up every once in awhile.” Esther described how her stress over not eating in public caused her to engage in private binging behaviors.

Esther: and while I think of eating healthy is very important, it was always sort of a struggle because it's frustrating to eat and not feel satisfied and then feel bad - and then feel bad because you have to go get something else later on to feel full and then it just sort of starts that cycle of you know binging and then feeling bad cause you ate something that wasn't the healthiest or most fulfilling choice. Um and sort of always feeling like I had that hanging over my head. Um you know lead to a lot of probably unhealthy habits.

The internalization of this sizism caused these four women to resort to extremely unhealthy behaviors in order to lose weight and cope with the stress caused by the sizist ideals in western culture.
Three participants reported dealing with hurtful comments and jokes made by friends by simply laughing it off.

Chase: Well, I usually don't take things personally so, I-I usually respond you know maybe just another jokingly insult. I don't think it really affects me too much, but it's uh. I don't know. I don't think it's that big of an issue.

Sophie: and I-I just kind of go along with it because I don't know. I have a good sense of humor so I don't really. It doesn't bother me but I think deep down it kind of does bother me.

Sophie in particular seemed to feel pressured to not fight back against these comments from her peers and demonstrate that she had a good sense of humor, even when they were inappropriate and hurt her feelings. John even went to far as to condone these jokes.

John: I know people who don’t know me very well. um, or who know me a little bit and they’re joking around with me. They’re gonna make a joke. They’re just gonna. And I can deal with it if it’s once or twice… I think a lot of people who were making fun of me for it were not even doing it in a personal way. It wasn’t like, “Oh wow, John, you’re a bad person.” It was just like, there is an easy joke.

This represents John’s own internalized sizism, he condones making fun of fat people including himself because it’s such an obvious and easy joke.

Avoiding and ignoring discrimination was another common way that participants (n = 7) dealt with sizism. When asked how participants respond to sizism many participants indicated that they try to ignore it.

Emily: I just kind of ignored it

Esther: Um maybe. Um I tend to sort of ignore that kind of - not ignore I guess but not be as receptive or aware of it.

Jackie: Um. Really I just try to let it go in one ear and out the other.
Tamara was even more active in ignoring and avoiding discrimination often choosing to walk with her headphones on to avoid hearing any street harassment: “Like I walk um - I usually have my headphones on a lot of the times when I go places and part of that is just because I don't want to hear if people are saying things to me.” However, not all people conceived ignoring or avoiding situations to be a coping strategy, but rather an active form of resistance.

Corey: If you could give people experiencing this type of discrimination any sort of advice what would it be?

Daisy: Ignore it. I know it's hard to and it's not easy to it's just I-I think it's a self worth thing already - I - it's hard for people of size to have confidence already because society as a whole is obsessed with size that I would say don't let what one stupid frat boy says to you matter. You know? I think it would be something that just love yourself the way you are. Just don't - don't let that get to you.

In this case, Daisy frames ignoring sizism as political. To her, ignoring it is about not letting society’s sizist ideas about weight or “one stupid frat boy” cause you to internalize fat hatred.

Resistance

While none of the participants in this study were involved in the fat acceptance movement and very few were even aware that such a movement existed, participants did resist the sizism they encountered. In fact, participants enacted a number of different resistance strategies to prevent internalization and combat sizism.

One of these resistance strategies was not allowing their fat body to define them as a person. Often people are not friendly or unwilling to consider dating a person of
size. In these all too common cases, people only see fat bodies and are unwilling to get to know a fat person. Emily, Jackie, and Tyra criticized this mentality.

Emily: It doesn’t really tell the makeup of the person. They have no idea who the person is. Do you know what I mean? You can’t really judge like a book by its cover. It sounds cliché but that’s kind of what I’m thinking.

Jackie: And it's like, it's no big deal; we're just like everybody else. We just have a few extra pounds on us. Whatever. No one cares how you look. It's not all about looks. It's all about what's inside

Tyra: Maybe they not - not - might not be attracted to bigger people. It's uh - I guess it's ok if you're not someone's type or whatever. But just you know - I think at least you should check on the inside. You know you might like that person for who they are on the inside, which is I think what should matter first of all.

In this way, they are asserting that there is more to them than just fat bodies. Similarly, John and Sophie expressed frustration over the fact that people treated them differently when they were fat. John had this to say about receiving less masculinity policing now that he was thinner.

John: “I understand that these are the rules of the game. That doesn’t mean that I have to like them.” Like, yes, if I want to be taken seriously and I want to do Zumba or Pilates or whatever, if I’m thin, then it’s much more acceptable and people will just accept it. And they’ll be like, Ok that’s great you do Pilates, you do Zumba, you do whatever. But, that doesn’t mean I have to like it. Because, I’m the same guy I was a year ago, I just look differently. I’m in better shape.

Sophie felt similarly about people who were previously very rude to her, but were much friendlier now that she had lost some weight: “I'm the same person I was back then. So, I'm like the only part that's different is that I'm a little bit lighter so.” In both of these cases, John and Sophie are asserting that there is more to them than a fat body.
Another way in which participants \( n = 6 \) resisted sizism was by asserting that their body was their own and that other people did not have the right to judge or comment on it.

Esther: you know if-if it's not hurting you it's really none of your business.

Marge: I guess partly it would be - I would ask them why the hell they care so much about somebody else’s size… You know. It's none of their business. It's my body.

Tyra: It's really none of your business and none of your concern and there really is no reason why it matters… I just want like to know why it matters if someone is bigger and not - besides possible health reasons. Besides if you're not attracted to them. If you're not attracted to them just don't talk to them. Don't have to talk about them. You don't have to call them names, just don’t' talk to them. It's like that simple.

In addition to people having no right to mock or judge another person’s body, participants claimed that discriminators did not have the right to police what other people ate. Mia asserted that the people she overheard making comments about what women were eating in the dining halls did not have the right to make these comments: “The various comments and stuff are made, speculations that they have no right to be making in truth.” Jackie made similar assertions to her roommates who criticized the food she ate: “You don't have to eat it. It shouldn't bother you.” In all of these cases participants reclaimed their autonomy over their bodies and denied people the right to police and judge their body.

There are a number of stereotypes that contribute to discrimination against people of size. One stereotype in particular that underscores sizism is the idea that being fat is the fault of the fat person. This stereotype explicitly implies that fat people are too lazy
and over indulgent to lose the weight and therefore deserving of the discrimination to which they are subjected.

John: I think that people assume that it’s ok because if you’re overweight you must, you must be doing something wrong with your life. You must be lazy. You must lack willpower. You must do this, do that, do whatever. But it’s your fault you’re overweight, so I can make fun of you. And that all that, that really seems to be the case, because it’s one of the few things that people can still freely discriminate against. Like, you can’t still discriminate against short people, because what the hell?! It’s not their fault that they’re short. You can’t discriminate against race; same reason, not their fault. But overweight people, it’s like, well it’s your fault your fat so I can make fun of you and it still sucks to be made fun of for it.

However, six participants contradicted the idea that being fat was the fault of fat people. Marge pointed to a combination of genetic, biological, and life circumstance reasons why she was overweight.

Marge: Nobody's paying me to go to the gym for four hours a day and I don't have a personal nutritionist to freaking cook all my meals for me shit and even then I would still be - like every woman in my family is fat that’s - I have hypothyroidism on top of that - I'm always gonna be this size.

Jackie points out how her asthma caused her to gain weight because it reduced her ability to exercise and the medication caused her to eat more.

Jackie: I have asthma. So - um - it's mostly exercise induced. I can't do a lot of like physical activity without going into these spasms and asthma attacks and everything… Well the way they treat asthma is to put you on steroids. I don't know if you've ever taken steroids, but they make you so hungry. You could eat - like just last quarter I was put back on steroids. I think I took um for a week maybe. You would eat! So, I would eat at like noon this big course meal. Be done with it. 15 minutes later - like at 12:30 - I'm ready to hit the buffet again. Like, I just want more food. So, when you're like - so when I was 11 - like it was between 11 and 13 - right around that area - I was put on steroids for a really long time. I mean they gave me the powder - to break it up into powder and inhale it and everything like that and then my weight - I mean - it just increased. You can't - if you're hungry you're gonna eat (laughs) and when you're on steroids you're always hungry.
Tyra also reported having a medical condition that contributed to her body weight:

“There are - there are reasons why some people are bigger. Not just by stereotypical eating and not exercising and being lazy. Like you know. So person could have a disease. Like I have polycystic ovary disease. It's gonna be - it's really hard for me to lose weight.” Mia and Sophie also pointed out that medical issues can cause people to gain weight.

Mia: a lot of people take a base science course or base anatomy course and learn that some people can't help the size they are. There are you know - there are conditions - medical conditions that cause people to be overweight.

Sophie: Like you can be that size like in a few weeks like - I don't know like I think a lot of skinny people don't realize that you could get like a thyroid problem or like get pregnant or like your metabolism could shut down and like just in a few years you could be overweight and then you don't realize how hard it is to like go back to being that size.

On top of genetic and medical issues, Jackie mentions that she grew up on heavily processed food because her family was large and could not afford the time and money needed to prepare healthier food: “I have four brothers. You know. We don't have time to go out and make all this stuff natural. We're like quick. Just get something for quick… this is the way I grew up. You know. I didn't grow up - like my family’s not rich.”

In addition to genetic, medical, and family issues, being a college student presents its own circumstances that may cause students to gain weight. Jackie and Tamara point out how lack of money and access to healthy, non-processed food can contribute to students gaining weight.

Jackie: We're like all poor college students. I say this to everybody. We're poor. We don't - it's ok if we don't eat the big fancy meals. It's ok if we don't go spend like 15 dollars and a shrimp tray just because we want
shrimp. You know? And so I always buy this processed food. Like, I get bologna, frozen pizza, quick stuff… And it's just like - you know - it's cheap, it's quick, whatever. I'm ok with it.

Tamara: but, like when we - we talk about nutrition among college kids a lot and then they joke about Oh. I don't have any money so I'm eating - I eat ramen every single day and stuff like that and so it's like - there's almost like this disconnect between like we don't have money so we eat like crap so of course it's going to affect the way look and then like but if you let it affect the way you look then there's something wrong with you or something. Like, you weren't trying hard enough to avoid the freshman fifteen or whatever.

Marge adds that time constraints can also make it difficult to put in the time to prepare food: “But then after starting the Ph.D. program - Well, there just isn't a lot of time to cook. There's sort of not - well into exercising on top of that I have a genetic predisposition to being a big girl.”

Beyond the college context, Tamara also points out that there are other issues of class and location that affect people’s ability to access healthy foods.

Tamara: Like um so there's just - there's just so many more factors that I wish people - more people would take into account like um a lot of people who live in - in a poor intercity urban areas like um if they get a bad reputation like grocery stores don't go there and so they don't have anywhere to buy good food within their means and so they like might go to the grocery sto- but they have to go to like a convenience store or gas station or something to buy groceries. Which you know if you go there well you’re gonna come home with like cheetos and-and soda and stuff like that and like there's - you know - unhealthy food is less expensive than healthy food. Like there's so many more things that go into it than just being lazy or not having control of your appetite or something like that.

In all of these instances, participants are aware of some of the other health and societal level circumstances that can cause people to become fat. This contradicts the notion that fat is the fault of the individual fat person. In this way, participants fought
against the construction of fat as a sign of moral failing of laziness and self-indulgence, a
notion that is used to justify discrimination against people of size.

Beyond calling claims that fat is the fault of the individual into question, six
participants called into question the proposed solution to this individualized problem,
weight loss.

Chase: It's cause most people think oh well you can diet and exercise. It's
not as easy as it sounds. but, one thing I'd say - yeah that's pretty much it -
it's not as - it's easier said than done to lose weight.

Sophie: I've been this size my whole life. So like it's not easy to lose
weight. And like it's not easy once you like - it's not like I have like a
strong food addiction but like it's not easy to go to the dining hall and like
eat a grilled chicken breast and a salad with a dressing with no fat and like
pick foods that are healthy and then want to go to Ping four times a week
when you're constantly busy like. It's not easy to lose weight and live that
lifestyle constantly when you see your friends going to McDonalds and
drinking heavily on the weekends and then just be like a size two. Like I
wish they could just realize. Cause I know one of the big comments in
high school was "Can't they just lose some weight? It's not that hard." Like
yeah, it is that hard. Trust me. I tried Jenny Craig, I've tried weight
watchers, I've tried everything so. So it is that hard.

John and Will go on to describe how being busy with other priorities such as school and
work can prevent people from having the time and energy to exercise.

John: I don't make, I never made fun of people who are overweight before
and I'm not going to start now. I'm not going to look at someone who's
overweight and be like, "hey man, I lost the weight. You can too. What the
fuck! You're lazy." I'm not gonna do that. Cause I, cause I know first
hand it isn't easy! I mean, I, I worked my ass off. This was not something
I just decided casually I was gonna do. Um. I had to change a lot of
lifestyle habits. It was hard. And, for most people who are overweight, I
know that it is simply not possible. They don't have the time to go to the
gym. They don't have the time to, to cook right, eat right, whatever. I
mean, there probably, you know, pressed for time and they can't get to the
gym every day. Like, I don't know anybody, I don't even know of
anybody who says to me "Well, I have the time to go to the gym. I just
hate it. I'm lazy." Like I don't know anybody like that!
Rob: I spent like a year, a year and a half just trying to get myself back into shape just to see if I could do it and like I did it and whatnot. Then I went back to school and focused on school like much heavier and whatnot and I gained it all back. So it's not the fact that I'm lazy and whatnot it's just your priorities and what you're doing at the time. Not everyone has the time to be - go out and try to be an athlete… It's like if everyone really could dedicate an hour to two hours a day and exercise. Yeah, it would - the whole country would be thin and it's just not feasible… But the whole association of fat equals lazy, this one to one relationship is just stupid.

Jackie called into question the usefulness of certain dieting motivation techniques such as setting weight loss goals and making new year’s resolutions.

Jackie: If you say - like New Year’s resolutions. If you say, "Oh my goal this year is to lose 20 pounds by June or 40 pounds by December." You're just setting yourself up for - if you're not ready for it you're just setting yourself up for like- to be upset because if you reach June and you didn't lose the 20 pounds you’re ahh! You know? I made this New Year’s resolution and it didn't follow through and so I totally don't even make resolutions anymore.

Additionally, despite the fact that long term weight loss is put forth as the cure for the obesity epidemic, there is very little evidence that it is a practical goal for fat people (Campos et al. 2006). Tyra, pointed out this fact in her interview.

Tyra: It's not gonna stay off forever. You have to keep working at it and it all comes down to if you're comfortable about it. Like if you really want to spend the rest of your life like exercising a ton like every day and eating healthy every day. Not eating any bad foods at all then by all means do so. But, you know. What's the fun in that?

In all of these instances, participants were resisting the idea that fat people are fat because they are lazy or over-indulgent. They point to the biological, genetic, family, and social factors that can contribute to people gaining weight. Additionally, they undermine the idea that getting thin is simply a matter of getting more exercise and eating healthy by discussing the barriers to these weight loss methods and their own struggles to lose weight.
One common justification for sizist discrimination is that it motivates fat people to lose weight. Three participants discussed how wrong this idea was.

John: Being made fun of or discriminated against or whatever, it, it just sucks. And it’s certainly didn’t make me decide that I wanted to lose weight. It just made me sad. I mean, again that is not why I decided to get in better shape. Like (mockingly) If I do this the teasing will stop. I’d better jump on the elliptical. Like that was never the, that was not the point.

Rob and Tamara asserted that sizism can even have a negative effect on a person’s ability to lose weight and their overall health.

Tamara: When really you are just trying to make people understand that like it's - it's a process. So like don't - if someone is overweight, you don't know if they're trying to lose weight or if they're not. So like making them feel bad all the way until they get there isn't going to help.

Rob: So. Because that's kinda - kinda where like - that's kind of like a self fulfilling prophesy if you get yourself all worked up and then you start not going out into the world and whatnot because someone is haggling for your weight. Cause all those people are doing is perpetuate your weight issue even more. Yeah, cause you’re gonna be unnessiarily stressed and you’re metabolically just gonna fall apart and that's true for anyone. I don't care what your weight is.

These assertions contradict the idea that fat shaming and discrimination is meant to help lazy fat people lose weight. Even if the discrimination is coming from a well meaning place, discrimination is just discrimination and in the end it does more harm than good by reinforcing fat students’ internalized fat hatred.

One of the most common stereotypes about fat people is the idea that fat is not healthy. This notion is perpetuated through the many medical and other commercial institutions that promote the rhetoric of the obesity epidemic. This rhetoric continues to dominate discussions of the fat body, despite evidence that contradicts its claims.
(Campos et al. 2006). However, despite the pervasiveness of the stereotype that fat bodies are unhealthy bodies, five participants asserted that fat bodies were not inherently unhealthy bodies. Esther made this claim multiple times: “you know it's more important to be healthy and you don't have to be thin to be healthy.” Rusty talked about a person he worked with in campus health promotions who was a fat fitness instructor.

Rusty: I mean like one of the girls she was a fitness instructor, but she was a-a curvy lady. You know and that was her thing. She was like, “you know what? You don't have to be a size two in order to be a fitness instructor.” So she kind of did that whole like - you know - love your body aerobics thing.

Rob discussed the fact that being a person of size did not mean that he was not fit or a good athlete: “So I'm like 260 pounds, I can do this stuff and so people don't really associate that with - associate that with a lot like an overweight person. ‘Cause people like just assume you can do that. You can't be this overweight, obese person and do this at the same time.”

Along with the idea that fat people are not healthy, comes the stereotype that fat people are unattractive. Three participants made claims contradicting this stereotype in their interviews. Esther and Chase contradicted the stereotype that no one would ever be interested in dating people of size. Esther asserted, “Every body type - you know - is potentially beautiful to someone.” Chase discussed his own desire for fat women and stated that he was not the only man who felt this way: “There's plenty of guys who like - you know - the curvier, bigger women.” Jackie was emphatic in her resistance of this stereotype: “Well, hey, I got news for them: Fat people are pretty too!” She talked about trying to help her mother with her mother’s internalized sizism.
Jackie: I love my mom. If she lost 40 pounds I'm still gonna love her the same way. You know - if she's happy then I'm happy. I think she takes it a little bit more harshly though cause she's not - she's going through like depression and everything. So she's a little bit more - you know - like real like - you know – “I wanna lose the weight” and stuff to be happier. I always tell her “Mom you're pretty the way you are.” (laughs) “I'm gonna love you just as much now as - if you lose 100 pounds I'm gonna love you just as much. I'm not gonna treat you any different. We're still gonna go out to eat together. We're still gonna go shopping together.”

Jackie tried to help her mother by reminding her that she is beautiful and worthy of love just the way she is. This is an important form of resistance for fat women, since women’s self-worth is so wrapped up in their physical appearance. Many fat women feel that they are unattractive and in western society that commonly translates into unworthy of love.

By accepting fat women as beautiful, Jackie not only resists her own discrimination, but also discrimination against her mother and other women.

Two participants resisted the general idea that being fat was a bad thing by talking about some things that are good about being fat. Rob discussed how his size contributes to his being viewed as a strong person: “It was usually kept a positive spin on it cause I've always been kind of like a stronger person and whatnot so. It would always be like don't screw with the fat man or whatever he can lug around a lot of weight.”

Emily had a very interesting spin on being a person of size. She claimed that she felt like she was more visible and people paid attention to her more now that she was fat than when she was thinner and smaller.

Emily: when I was in high school I was really skinny. I was like less than 100 pounds and I always felt very weak and small and not really noticed and as I got older like as I, you know as I got older I got, gained more weight and I got bigger and I kind of got recognized more or if I spoke out my voice kind of mattered. So I never wanted to get too skinny if that makes sense? I just like to, I feel like when people see me. Cause like
when I first started going to school and I hadn’t gone to school for a while and I had a break in between when I did my undergrad and my grad school and when I first started going to OU I did lose some weight and like I walked around and people were like “You’re so skinny. You’re so skinny” and it was a nice compliment I guess because it’s supposed to be a compliment to by skinny. You know? For a woman. But it kind of in the back of my mind I was like I don’t want to get too skinny. Cause I never wanted to get - get to that skinny weight like under 90 or around 100 pounds or whatever. I never want to be perceived as that image personally. So I always try to like, even if I’m like uh you know considered overweight in my height or you know the body mass index, the BMI. I am considered overweight. It doesn’t bother me as it probably would another girl…

Corey: Right. So you feel like you get more power from being a person who’s larger?

Emily: I feel like. Yeah! Because when I was like skinnier and maybe because I was younger too, but when I was skinnier I did not get as much you know power in my voice or if I had something to say but as I get older, I get much more you know attention from it and I think it does have to do with my size!

Emily felt like she was invisible as a little skinny, girl and so she did not want to go back to being thin. Rather, she was happy being fat and feeling seen.

Another way that participants (n = 5) resisted sizist discrimination was to verbally respond to discriminators. John described his reaction to people who consistently made derogatory jokes about his weight: “If it was somebody who d-do, made those jokes a bunch of times I would, I would get kind of annoyed about it. I’d be like ‘seriously, lay the hell off. I get it.’… it’s like find a new joke! Like, I-I haven’t laughed at that once. So, maybe you should you should put that together.” Even after losing weight, John continued to argue with people who made sizist comments to him.

John: Actually, I had one guy make the comment that, in spring, that in a few more months I would be normal. And I was like, “What the hell does that mean, normal? Like, I’m not normal now? I can’t be 220lbs and also
normal?” And he was like, “Oh no! I’m sorry! I didn’t mean it like that!” And I’m like, “But that’s what you said!”

Even though the other man in this instance was trying to give John a compliment, John correctly interpreted the comment as sizist and called the other man out on it. Mia had a similar reaction to friends or acquaintances who made sizist comments to her.

Mia: Well, first of all I just look at them like “did you really just say that to me?” and uh if they didn't excuse themselves or apologize for it I kind of like make a glib comment and just ignore it. Um either something like uh “thanks, I think” and then go on with the conversation or whatever.

Even though Mia does not have the follow through that John does, Mia still calls out the sizist discrimination and lets her discriminators know that what they said was not appropriate. Her best friend in college was another fat student who responded to discrimination with fighting words. Mia describes an incident where she and her friend, who was pregnant at the time, were walking together and a man harassed them in the street: “we were walking up to the dorm and two guys drove by, “lose some weight!” out the window to her and probably me at the same time. And she yelled back, ‘I'm pregnant! Assholes!”’

Rusty and Marge talked about instances where they verbally rejected weight loss advice and suggestions. Rusty describes his response to being told he should take the stairs rather than the elevator: “I'm usually just like, ‘I don't want to’… Like I don't care. Like I'm-I'm not gonna take the stairs today. I don't want to. Like-like, I'm gonna take the elevator. I'll meet you up there.” Marge describes her response to colleagues that suggest she goes to the gym.

Marge: I mean, but then other times I'll just look at them and I'll be like, “No, I'm kind of happy being fat. I really don't wanna work out.” I mean, if I wanted to workout I would, but I don't want to… I don't know, like I guess when I feel like people are sort of giving me directions on like how
to be more healthy, i.e. less fat. and I'm feel like uh - when I'm feeling rowdy, I kind of tell them to fuck off. Not really, but I'm just like, Dude, I'm happy with who I am. Like, I don't - or that's an interesting idea. Why don't you go workout? (laughs) You know like, How's that working out for you? and so - so I guess yeah a lot of times I just turn it back on them. Like, that's awesome for you, but- but yeah - I don't - It depends - it depends on how I feel about myself I think. So - and I'm hoping as I get older that there will be more days where I can be like “Yeah, good for you. Not doin that.”

In all these cases, this form of resistance lets others know that their sizist discrimination is not acceptable and will not be tolerated.

In addition to confronting sizist people, participants (n = 7) created safe spaces for themselves by surrounding themselves with non-sizist people. Sophie talked about how she had more confidence in high school than she did now that she was in college in part because her high school friends were more accepting of her weight and size: “I don't because like my theater friends in high school never cared about what I looked like or what I did. I-I'm like one of the goofiest people you'll ever meet.” Likewise, John talks about how the jokes and teasing he received for being fat were reduced when he had established a good group of friends: “'Cause by the time I had been here for even a year I’d made a pretty solid group of friends who you know, they never gave me a hard time about my weight.” Daisy talked about how having a good group of friends helped her not to internalize a lot of shame about her body.

Daisy: So I think I find myself surrounding myself with people who really don't either don't care or don't - you know - or not that - they either don't care at all. Like don't have an opinion one way or the other or think the way I think that like it doesn't matter what size your is. That - you know – you' re beautiful no matter what and all of that so I think I-I - whether is consciously or sub consciously surround myself with people like that… I think if I was around people that were the ones who were discriminating I feel like I would not - I wouldn't be happy. You know? It's something that
I don't want to obsess about everyday. I don't want to obsess about what my jean size is everyday and if I surrounded myself with people who were so obsessed with that and so discriminatory I would - I would! That's all you would think about and it's not healthy.

Jackie, perhaps one of the most confident and happy participants I interviewed, talked a great deal about the role of having people who accepted her for who she really was despite her size: “My friends accept me for who I am. My family accepts me for who I am. What could a person ask for more really?... You find friends who accept you and the people who accept you are as - really they're worth your time. If they don't accept you then don't take a second look.” Emily espoused a similar philosophy about dating prospects: “if I was ignored because I am not preferred or whatever for that type or some guys going for that type I just kind of like didn’t consider that guy a prospective.” Marge had friends who explicitly worked to prevent her from feeling bad about her body after a difficult aerobics class by reassuring her that her difficulty in keeping up was not because she was fat.

Marge: I did end up trying eventually. Cause I figured eh - you know - it'll be good for me to move - to move around a little bit and I complained once that I was having a hard time keeping up in the class and actually these two women, who were on the slim side, um - well, they're quite slim - they (sigh) they actually worked really hard to reassure me that it had nothing to do with being fat. That it was about just being out of shape.

Beyond protecting fat students from discrimination and helping reduce how much they internalized the sizist discrimination they encountered, surrounding oneself with non-sizist people helped them to begin to more actively resist. In fact, as Marge put it these two functions worked in tandem.

Marge: I think it's important to - to resist discrimination and to not - well I think it's important to surround yourself with people who are accepting
and who are non-judgmental. Because, if you don't have that type of community, I think it's really it's really easy to internalize some of those negative messages... I'd say, “fuck them. Don't listen to them. Get yourself some friends - you know - get involved in a community of people who accept you and who are actively resisting it as well.”

Both Daisy and Lizzy discussed how being involved in communities that resisted sizism was important to them. While there were no fat acceptance groups or spaces on campus, because women’s oppression is so intimately linked with sizism feminist spaces provided that safe space that Daisy and Lizzy needed to resist the sizism they faced.

Corey: How do people you interact with most frequently view people of size? Like your coworkers, your friends, family, roommates?

Daisy: Well, obviously I very lucky with coworkers (laugh) I work at the women's center

Corey: Oh yeah! (Both laugh)

Daisy: I get lucky with that. They're all great.

Daisy’s work with her campus’ Women’s Center even gave her an opportunity to organize the events around Love Your Body Day and participant in activism around issues like sizism and eating disorders. Lizzy talked about how being involved in the Women and Gender Studies program at her school allowed her safe space to resist many issues of oppression that she faced, including sizism.

Lizzy: I mean I think that, actually being in women’s studies probably had a little bit different experience because I was always, I always felt very comfortable in my classes. And I felt like comfortable, who I was… But like walking into one of my women’s studies classes where there was like twelve of us and we all looked different and everybody was ok with everybody I thought it was wonderful. And again, probably got a hundred times more out of that class then the class where I was constantly having anxiety about someone looking at me.
Corey: Do you think being involved in Women and Gender Studies and mostly women’s spaces helped you to cope with some of the issues of being a person of size?

Lizzy: Yes, ‘cause you know, women’s studies is very accepting of everyone. You know, with like intersectionality, I felt like any issues that I had no matter what they were in my life I could be like Oh! This is related to women’s studies because, you know, this is part of women’s studies. (Corey laughing in the background) You know, I’m a person of size and at the time identified completely as a lesbian and that was like, you know, I was like oh cool they’re cool with us. You know? And it made, obviously, those issues, I could tie into women’s studies and it was like, it made it all feel a little bit better for me.

Feminist spaces are important for student of size, particularly women, because it is often the first place where they are told that sizism is not ok. It provides fat students with safe space to engage with their own experiences of sizism and the experiences of others politically and ultimately resist sizist and sexist oppression.

It is in forum and spaces like the classroom and activist programming like that of the Women’s Center where fat students start to see that fat is not the individual moral failing it is constructed to be. Many participants were clearly had at least the beginnings of a political consciousness regarding this issue. Six participants discussed the ways in which fat should be framed as a diversity issue rather than an individual problem or moral failing. As Esther put it, “it’s ok to not be a set body size. Everyone is different.” This notion that the fat body represents a different body type among many rather than a moral failing of the fat individual was echoed by Daisy.

Daisy: Like, no one thinks of fat discrimination it's almost like - everyone knows you get teased for being bigger. Everyone knows that. Everyone knows that - it's almost ingrained that you should be ashamed of your size like and by totally accepting the fact that - you know - we can have tiny desks and embarrass people who have to sit down in them. That's ok. I don't understand why - why nothing’s happened yet. Nothing- no one's
spoken up or said, this is right. You know? and I think that's the most
discouraging thing to me is because really there's nothing wrong. It-it -
people are all different sizes. Why is it ok? We all have different hair
colors! That's not a problem! We're not telling people who have - I don't
know - red hair that there's something wrong with them and they have to
fix that. You know?

Jackie carried this sentiment even further by talking about how fat bodies are not
represented among fashion models: “You know. That person does not represent every
female in the world. (laughs) You know what I mean? There - we're all different people.
We're all different shapes and sizes and you know. We each have our own mark.” Marge
argued that fat studies should be part of the curriculum at universities much like other
issues of diversity such as ability, race, and gender

    Marge: But - so I mean I think that - I would like to see a fatness studies
    program. I mean I would like to see more fat studies scholarship available
    on campus. I didn’t even realize that this thing existed until - until I got
    here and met a few different people. So, when I was an undergrad, none of
    that stuff ever came up… But - I mean - I think that their needs to be more
    education about acceptance of people who are different and re- you know
    size, - you know - ability, race whatever.

    In addition to framing fat bodies as a normal human variation, rather than
diseased and unhealthy, discussing fat as a diversity issue legitimizes calls for greater
accessibility of college spaces for fat bodies. Mia and Tamara made the connection
between the access issues of people with disabilities (a group whose access issues are
considered legitimate by most of mainstream society) and the access issues faced by
people of size.

    Tamara: there are a few things about [this university] in particular that - I
guess they're-they're not really um good for people of size but also it's
kind of a - plus even people with disabilities too.
Mia: Otherwise try to just you know thing about accessibility issues. I mean you deal with the ADA all the time. Why not think about you know the rest of the campus while you're at it.

The size acceptance movement made this connection in addressing the issue of access for years. In this way, fat bodies are framed as deserving of the same accommodations as disabled bodies.

In many of these cases, we can see that the ideas behind fat acceptance and liberation have been discovered by many fat people even if formal activist groups do not yet exist on these campuses. In fact, two participants even espoused calls for activism in their interviews. As some of the above quotes indicated, Marge was adamant that fat studies should be part of the curriculum and that fat students should be forming communities and resisting discrimination. Lizzy also talked about collective action to convince the university to create more accessible classrooms by changing the desks: “I always thought that when I was here. I always thought we should have gotten like a consortium together and been like we want – we demand bigger desks.”

In all of these cases, participants had turned taken their personal experiences of sizism and, instead of fully internalizing it, have created a political understanding of sizism. While much of this constitutes the sort of everyday resistance that oppressed people utilize in order to survive the sizism they face every day, there is ground to hope that these seeds of this resistance could someday soon flourish into collective action.
CHAPTER 7: CONCLUSIONS

To summarize, fat students in this study experienced discrimination at the interpersonal as well as the institutional level. At the interpersonal level, sizist discrimination was perpetrated against them by everyone from strangers to colleagues and even friends and family. This interpersonal discrimination can take many forms, including overt forms of discrimination such as blatant bullying and harassment, to more subtle forms such as looks of mockery or disgust.

In addition to the interpersonal, the physical size and shape of desks, the classroom, bus seats, and the availability of plus sized clothing can create physical access issues for students of size. Additionally, being forced into spaces that do not fit their bodies can cause fat students physical pain and humiliation. These access issues create a hidden curriculum about the ideal student body.

Another way in which institutional sizism can discriminate against fat students is by creating spaces that are uncomfortable and even unsafe for fat bodies. In particular, institutions in and around the university that focus on health and fitness and drinking culture are spaces where people of size do not feel safe. Participants reported that they were hesitant to go to these places or even avoided them altogether for fear of being discriminated against and because the lack of other fat people left them feeling like they did not belong there.

All of these forms of discrimination work together to ensure that students of size internalize the message that their bodies are abnormal, unhealthy, unattractive, and generally unacceptable. This message is so ubiquitous that it is impossible for fat people
not to internalize it at least to a certain extent. Indeed, it is clear from these students' experience of discrimination that fat is considered one of the worst things anyone can embody. This construction takes a terrible toll on fat students’ self confidence, emotional well being, and, ironically, their overall health.

While both men and women reported experiencing discrimination, there were ways in which this discrimination was gendered. Women experienced sizism more frequently and intensely due to the fact that fat women’s bodies exist at the intersection of sizism and sexism. Women are held to impossible beauty standards, especially regarding fat. Additionally, women are seen as public sex objects, which leads women who fail to meet these impossible standards open to increased discrimination. Men of size experienced sizism in gendered ways as well. Male participants in this study experienced being feminized and having their masculinity policed because of their body size. However, having more masculine cultural capital, such as athletic ability, provided fat men with protection from sizism.

Whatever their gender, fat students utilized a number of coping and resistance strategies in response to sizist discrimination. Participants coped by doing things like dieting, laughing off sizist comments and jokes, and ignoring discriminators. Many participants took a more political approach by implementing resistance strategies including but not limited to asserting ownership of their own bodies, resisting sizist stereotypes, surrounding themselves with non-sizist people, and calling for activism. These resistance strategies indicate that fat students do not simply internalize
discrimination but actively resist it. It is this sort of resistance that lays the foundation for collective action against sizist discrimination.

This study contributes to the literature on the burgeoning fields of sociology of the body as well as fat studies. Specifically, this study provides valuable insight into the discrimination against the fat body, how this discrimination is gendered, and how fat people resist this construction. It expands our knowledge about the social construction of the fat body by examining how ideal student bodies are constructed at the university. Furthermore, by investigating the experiences of fat men and fat women, it provides valuable insight into fat masculinity. Finally, this study further demonstrates how fat bodies do not just passively internalize sizism, but rather resist this discrimination even outside of formal fat acceptance communities.

Moreover, it provides a way of investigating how fat bodies are constructed at the university level by tracing the experiences of individual students of size back to the institutional level. In this way, it provides unique insights into the way these structures affect the daily lives of students. This study demonstrates that like society at large, the university contributes to constructing the fat body as abnormal and unhealthy. It does so through an institutional emphasis on health and fitness that constructs the fat body as the opposite of the healthy, fit body. Also, universities create a hidden curriculum by structuring classroom spaces in a way that push a hidden curriculum about the ideal student body. This study demonstrates how these and other institutional constructions of the fat body affect the everyday lives of students of size.
While feminists have been theorizing the fat body for generations, much of their work has focused on how fat women’s bodies are constructed. This study helps to contribute evidence and insights into this traditional vein of feminist scholarship by exploring how this construction occurs in the college environment. However, this emphasis on women’s bodies in feminist scholarship on sizism has come under some criticism (Sterns 1997; Bell and McNaughton 2007). By including men in this study, it has increased the rather small amount of knowledge that we have regarding the ways that sizism affects men and masculinity. This works supports Bell and McNaughton’s claims that sizism has an effect on fat men’s ability to be perceived as masculine. The findings of this study suggest that fat men’s bodies are subject to greater masculinity policing than that of thin men. However, my findings also suggest that there are ways in which having masculine cultural capital can protect men from sizism. All of these insights help to contribute to the burgeoning literature on fat masculinity.

Finally, this study contributes to our knowledge on how fat people resist sizism. In many instances, literature on sizism focuses heavily on the victimization of fat people, without focusing on how fat people have agency and resist this discrimination. In cases where this agency is explored, it is usually within the context of formal fat acceptance or liberation movements and tends to exclude the ways in which fat people outside these movements utilize resistance in their everyday lives. There have been a number of great studies looking at resistance strategies that include everyday resistance strategies (i.e. Cooper 1998; Cordell and Rambo Ronai 1999; McKinley 1999). These studies provide many important insights; however, they are now over a decade old. There is evidence
that fat stigma has been on the increase in recent years due to the increased pervasiveness of the rhetoric of the obesity epidemic (Campos et al. 2006). Now more than ever it is important not only to look at how this increase in stigma affects fat people, but also to remember that fat bodies are not simply passive bodies, internalizing sizism, but have agency and actively resist the embodiment practices of sizism and the obesity epidemic rhetoric.

In addition to contributing to the existing literature on sociology of the body and fat studies, this study has many important policy implications and opens up some new questions for exploration. In the next sections, I will discuss the policy implications for universities and some new directions for scholarship on the fat body and sizism.

Policy Implications

This study has a number of important policy implications for universities. In order for universities to be truly committed to issues of diversity and serving their student body, they need to work to make their campus safe and accommodating to all students, including fat students. To accomplish this goal universities need to address the way physical space is shaped on their campus, the way that health promotions and health education addresses the fat body, and continue to support and expand spaces where students can engage with and collectively resist issues of discrimination.

One of the most important things that colleges and universities can do to assure that fat bodies can feel safe and comfortable in the educational environment is by restructuring the classrooms. The way most desks are shaped simply does not accommodate fat students’ bodies. The physical and social discomfort that this causes
does negatively affect fat students’ ability to learn. Additionally, it helps to reinforce the message that fat students’ bodies are outside of what is considered normal or ideal, which serves to further the internalization of sizism. As many participants suggested, the best way to address this problem is to replace traditional desks with tables and chairs that can be pulled away from the desks. Also, these chairs need to have enough space for a range of sized bodies and not have arm rests that can dig into fat students’ hips and thighs. Besides changing the actual desks, space should be organized so that the space between other desks is adequate for students to move without feeling like they are imposing on other students. This would make classroom spaces more comfortable and navigable for not just fat students, but for all students and enhance the educational experience.

The way that the institution deals promoting health among the student body also needs to be addressed. Like most institutions in the contemporary western world, the majority of universities have adopted the rhetoric of the obesity epidemic. This rhetoric constructs the fat body as unhealthy and places the blame for this supposed epidemic of obesity on individual fat people. This rhetoric contributes greatly to the sizist climate at universities and the internalization of fat hatred. The adoption of this paradigm by universities is not healthy for students. In addition to contributing to the low self esteem and well being of fat students, by focusing on body weight as a negative it contributes to the social climate that contributes to poor body image among all student and promotes disordered eating. It is impossible for health promotions initiatives at universities to promote positive body image while also promoting the idea that the fat body is not acceptable.
Universities need to shift their focus from preventing obesity to a more holistic view of health, such as Health at Every Size (HAES). HAES programs promote healthy eating, exercise, and positive body image, while not constructing certain bodies as inherently unhealthy. Universities can make health and fitness spaces safer for fat students by training health and fitness staff in HAES and providing HAES programming for students in these spaces, such as fat friendly fitness classes.

Additionally, universities need to be critical of how their own practices negatively affect students’ fitness and nutrition. For example, dining halls and cafeterias often have a very limited number of healthy options for students, which also carrying a number of fried and processed options. Even worse, many schools allow fast food franchises into their student unions and dining halls. It is completely unfair and illogical to blame fat students or students in general for not eating healthy, while presenting them with far more unhealthy options than healthy ones.

As universities deal with the financial pinch of the recession and increasing defunding of the higher education system, more and more schools are cutting programs dedicated to social justice. These programs have been shown time and time again to benefit oppressed groups on campuses, including people of size. The spaces created by these programs and in and outside the classroom give students spaces to discuss and engage with their own experiences as well as the experiences of others. These programs provide the safe space that oppressed students, including students of size, need to organize and collectively resist their oppression and the oppression of others. In fact, the fat students in this study who resisted the most were those that were involved in social
justice programming, especially feminist programs. It is important for fat people and all other oppressed groups for these spaces to exist and have the resources they need to create safe space for students to engage with their personal experiences and organize against sizist, sexist, and all other oppressions.

Restructuring classrooms, adopting a HAES paradigm, and providing spaces for education and resistance can all go a long way toward addressing the climate of sizism on college campuses. There needs to be more access to alternative paradigms to the obesity epidemic like HAES and fat studies scholarship on campuses. Being introduced to fat studies and sociology of the body scholarship has created a world of good in my own life and is the reason I have chosen to dedicate my own career to these subjects. This study suggests a number of interesting directions that this scholarship can further explore.

Future Directions

There are a number of exciting avenues for sociology of the body and fat studies. In particular this study suggests a need to further explore the ways in which sizism affects masculinity. Also, the experiences of participants suggested that sexism is not the only form of oppression that intersects with sizism to create new oppressions. It is important for further scholarship on sizism and the fat body to explore and address these intersections.

As this study suggests, fat men experience sizism in some ways that are gendered. The fat male body is often feminized and fat men are subject to increased masculinity policing. However, there are some men who manage to escape being embodied as fat by having masculine cultural capital, such as athletic ability. Unfortunately, there were only
four fat men in this study and therefore it is limited in how much it can really tell us about how fat men experience sizism. The ways in which fat male bodies interact with masculinity and sizism warrants further exploration. It is my belief that scholarship in this area can provide us with some valuable insights into the construction of both the fat body and masculinity.

Like most burgeoning veins of academic scholarship, studies of the fat body tend to privilege the experiences of white, middleclass fat people. Unfortunately, this study is no exception, with the vast majority of this sample being white and privileged in terms of educational access. It seems that this focus on privileged groups is starting to shift in this scholarship; however, there is still a long way to go.

This study sought to explore the intersections of gender and sizism, but participants also suggested that their experiences and the experiences of other fat people were affected by the intersections of other fat and other aspects of their identity. Jackie, Marge, and Tamara both expressed the ways in which class intersects with sizism. Jackie discussed how the class she grew up in may have contributed to her body size because she grew up eating the cheap, processed food that were most accessible to working class families. Tamara talked about how poor people who have less access to healthy food options due to lack of funds and transportation causes weight gain. Marge also talked about how she often was not sure if discrimination directed at her body was due to her gender, class, size, or all three.

The two non-white participants discussed how their race and ethnicity intersected with their size to create discrimination. Emily discussed at great lengths how women
with thin bodies were privileged within her Pakistani-American community, especially in terms of dating. Tyra, an African American student, eluded to the fact that race as well as her body size contributed to her being teased and feeling like an outsider in the college community.

Lizzy, Tamara, and Rusty both suggested ways in which lesbian and gay sexuality intersects with sizism. Lizzy expressed that she felt safer as a person of size at LGBT social events and spaces, this was not a sentiment that Tamara and Rusty shared. Additionally, Lizzy, who had identified as a lesbian since she was a young teenager, was in the process of exploring her own sexuality and dating men. She was concerned that people would see this as being connected with her recent weight loss.

Lizzy: I sort of, so been, over the past 19 months I’ve lost 91 pounds and um went through some really crazy life changes and very, very, very recently, I’ve decided to explore my sexuality a little it and I’m, I think I’m shopping in the man department now. And I have to say that I know that part of it is connected to the fact that I’ve lost weight. It’s terrible! Terrible! ‘Cause, now I’m like, I’m thinner now, maybe I can get a boyfriend. No, that’s not like my thinking. I know people are going to say “well she lost weight, she looks really great, now - now she’s normal, because now she can get a boyfriend.” Like the thought of people saying that about me makes me want to jab my eyes out a little bit.

In addition to intersections between fat and sexuality, Tamara, who described herself as dressing “butchly,” discussed how she was unsure if the sexual harassment she experienced on the streets was due to her size or her gender presentation. All of these experiences suggest a very interesting and complex intersection between homophobia, queer sexuality and identity, and fat that warrants further investigation.

These and intersections with other forms of identity and oppression such as age, place, and disability contribute to the way people experience oppression. It is important
that scholars studying the fat body and sizism acknowledge and interrogate these intersecting oppressions in this scholarship and not further marginalize these oppressed groups in the literature.

In conclusion, this provides some interesting insights into the way sizist discrimination operates, is gendered, and resisted by fat university students. These findings have some important policy implications for the university and suggest some exciting possibilities for fat scholarship that explores the intersections of gender, class, race, sexuality and other identities. It is important that scholars continue to interrogate oppression in all of its forms including sizism. It is only thought promoting acceptance of all bodies regardless of ability, color, size and shape, that any body can be free.
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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

Tell me about your experiences as a person of size on campus.

Have you been discriminated because of your weight? If so how often?

Have you ever faced teasing, harassment, or inappropriate comments because of your weight during college?

What is the most common type of harassment or discrimination that you experience as a person of size?

Tell me about a particular instance where you have felt discriminated against because of your weight? How did you deal with this instance?

Are there instances where you have been uncomfortable in the class room because of your weight? (ask about desks in particular)

Are there certain places you are hesitant to go or activities you are hesitant to participate in because of your size?

What is your impression of the attitude typical college students have toward people of size?

How do the people you interact with most frequently view people of size? (i.e. coworkers, friends, family, roommates, etc.)

Do you think your experiences as a person of size are affected by your gender? Do you feel that your experiences would be different if you were a woman/man?

Do you know of other people how have been discriminated against because of their weight? What happened? How did they deal with this discrimination?

If you could tell people who discriminate against people of size one thing, what would it be?

If you could tell the college administration one thing about fat discrimination what would it be?

If you could give people experiencing this type of discrimination advice what would that be?