I, Sarah Rompola, hereby submit this original work as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Sociology.

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Can Fat Only Be Funny? A Content Analysis of Fat Stigmatization in Mike & Molly

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Can Fat Only Be Funny? A Content Analysis of Fat Stigmatization in *Mike & Molly*

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ABSTRACT

There is clear evidence from the social science literature that fat stigmatization exists in all realms of life. The purpose of this study is to examine the portrayals of fatness in entertainment media, specifically the first two seasons of the popular television sitcom *Mike & Molly*. This show was chosen due to its popularity and more importantly because it features two fat protagonists. Through a qualitative content analysis of 24 episodes comprised of 267 scenes, it was evident that the fat male body and fat female body are portrayed differently. Mike’s body was labeled as fat more frequently as fat than Molly’s body. Mike was more frequently compared to massive objects (i.e. mountains) and was also the subject of more fat jokes when compared to Molly. Labeling the fat body in negative ways and fat jokes that disparage the fat body perpetuate fat stigmatization. In contrast to previous research that found fat characters are rarely portrayed in romantic situations, *Mike & Molly* does portray a positive romantic relationship between the two lead characters. These findings suggest that portraying fat characters on television is complicated, especially in a fat-phobic society. This study also shows stigmatization is not solely a women’s issue. Fat male bodies are increasingly scrutinized and judged for breaking the thin ideal.
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INTRODUCTION

“So, anyway, yes, I think I’d be grossed out if I had to watch two characters with rolls and rolls of fat kissing each other…because I’d be grossed out if I had to watch them doing anything.” This quote is one of many that express Maura Kelly’s, a blogger for Marie Claire, disdain for seeing fatness portrayed as normal on the popular CBS sitcom Mike & Molly. Kelly (2010) critiqued the sitcom in a piece entitled, “Should “Fatties” Get a Room? (Even on TV?)”

Mike & Molly is a comedy about a working class Chicago couple that met at an Overeaters Anonymous meeting and subsequently began dating. Mike is a good natured Chicago police officer and Molly is a friendly fourth grade teacher. Given the likeability of both of these characters, what is it about fatness that could have a blogger so enraged? Why are fat bodies, and fatness in general, so divisive?

In her book entitled Fat Shame, Amy Erdman Farrell (2011:5) contends that fat is “neither neutral nor insignificant, but [is] a central protagonist in the cultural development of what constitute[s] a proper American body.” Beyond helping define what constitutes a proper American body, fat is understood in a multitude of ways including: a public health crisis, an epidemic and a sign of moral deficiency. Kelly (2010) expresses these common sentiments about fat in her blog post. She writes, “No one who is as fat as Mike and Molly can be healthy. And obesity is costing our country far more in terms of all the related health problems we are paying for, by way of our insurance, than any other health problem, even cancer” (Kelly 2010).

Fatness as a source of stigma for Americans has recently garnered more attention within academia. In regards to the media, most research focuses on news media presentations of fatness as an epidemic. Past research has paid less attention to entertainment media and issues of fatness. Most studies of entertainment media’s presentation are quantitative in nature. To address this
lack of qualitative study of entertainment media, the purpose of this research study is to examine the ways fatness is portrayed in the sitcom Mike & Molly. Through a qualitative content analysis I examine whether or not Mike & Molly perpetuates fat stigmatization or shaming. I call on Goffman’s (1963) stigma theory and Saguy’s (2013) extension of framing analysis for theoretical standing. Additionally, I use Shilling’s (2003) and Bordo’s (1993) contributions to bodies literature to enlighten my notions of fat bodies. I will begin this paper with a discussion of the main discourses surrounding fatness.

CONTEMPORARY DISCOURSES OF FATNESS

Currently two major schools of thought dominate the conversation surrounding fatness in the United States: the medical discourse and the fat studies discourse. The medical discourse permeates all aspects of life and has more power and notoriety as compared to the fat studies field. The medical discourse focuses on classifications, causes and measures of fatness (e.g. the body mass index (BMI) and waist circumferences) as well as diseases related to and health risks associated with fatness. This expert discourse is widely known and typically considered the most reliable. News media, health industries and even government policies rely heavily on the medical framing of fat. The medical discourse assumes fat is detrimental to human health and needs to be cured. The construction of fat as a disease is unlike many other diseases, because it is thought to be under an individual’s control. As a disease, it is commonly thought that fat can and should be treated through medical intervention (Boero 2007).

The field of fat studies stands in direct contrast to the medical discourse. Fat studies, a burgeoning area of study in academia, has had its roots in feminist activism since the 1960s. In The Fat Studies Reader, fat studies is defined as “an interdisciplinary field of scholarship, marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes,
and stigma placed on fat and the fat body” (Rothblum and Solovay 2009:2). Fat studies “has an extensive history and interdisciplinary literature which questions and problematizes traditional understandings of obesity and draws upon the language, culture and theory of civil rights, social justice and social change” (Cooper 2010:1020). The fat studies discourse focuses on embodiment as a social process and does not assume fat is bad for the individual body or society at large. Fat studies literature is typically in opposition to the dominant obesity frameworks that construct fat through a biomedical lens.

Before I continue I should note that obesity and overweight are both contested terms that have been historically constructed and are innately anti-fat and prejudicial. Some researchers have opted to use scare quotes when using these terms to bring the reader’s attention to this constructed nature. I will not do this, as it can become cumbersome on the reader. Instead, in line with fat studies scholarship, I will use the word fat as often as possible in an attempt to reclaim it as a neutral descriptor like tall or short (Rothblum and Solovay 2009). I also hope to create space between the politically constructed terms of overweight and obesity that, in my opinion, have no firm definitions beyond the BMI, which has shown to be problematic. I ask the reader to keep in mind the controversial nature of both obesity and overweight as terms for fatness. I will discuss the contested nature of said terms later in this review of literature after a review of framing theory, as this theory helps dictate what terms are used to describe fatness.

FRAMING THEORY

In addition to these larger discourses surrounding fatness, it is useful to explore framing theory to understand the impact different constructions of fat have on the ways people understand it, attribute stereotypes to fat people, and even think of ways (if deemed necessary due to the construction) to “cure” fatness. While frame analysis theory was originally created by
Goffman (1974), Saguy’s (2013) book entitled, *What’s Wrong with Fat?*, is an exemplary application of framing theory to the topic of fat in both the United States and Europe. Saguy also provides a nuanced illustration of the potential impact different frames can have. Goffman (1974) theorized about the ways in which people use conceptual frames to organize their experiences and guide their actions. Framing is inevitable in life, as it helps simplify complex situations, making them both more understandable and approachable. Different frames imply different courses of action. In regards to fatness:

The term obesity implies a medical frame…a medical frame implies that fat bodies are pathological. It has become so pervasive and taken-for-granted in the contemporary United States and elsewhere that most people do not even realize that it is a frame and that there are alternative ways of understanding fatness, as for instance, beautiful, sexy, healthy or a positive form of human diversity (Saguy 2013:5).

Fat studies strives to explore these alternative ways to understand fat.

*Problem Frames*

Saguy (2013) discusses problem frames, or the different ways to construct fatness as problematic or not. Problem frames that construct fatness as a problem include: medical frame, immorality frame, and public health crisis frame. The medical frame claims excess weight and fat are medical problems that should be alleviated through medical interventions. When talking about fat, this frame draws analogies to cancer and smoking. The immorality frame makes fat a moral issue and condemns it as evidence of sloth and gluttony. This frame relies on the cultural belief in self-reliance and self-restraint. It suggests people need to exercise greater control over their own bodies. The public health crisis frame constructs fat as a problem that concerns the entirety of society, requires governmental intervention and is a threat to economic stability of the United States.
Frames that contest the hegemonic notion that fat is a problem include: Health At Every Size (HAES) frame, beauty frame and fat rights frame (Saguy 2013). The HAES frame stipulates the intense focus on dieting and weight constitutes a health problem, and people of all sizes have the potential to be healthy by being physically active and eating healthy foods. HAES’s focus is on fat people being healthy as opposed to thin (Campos 2004). The beauty frame suggests thinness is not the only form of beauty, and fat should also be seen as beautiful. The fat rights frame understands discrimination due to body weight as a social justice issue. The fat rights frame calls for an end to weight-based bias, stigma and discrimination. These are frames the field of fat studies would use to construct fatness and challenge the traditional frames that situate fat as problematic. While the space Saguy dedicates to these alternative problem frames in her book may suggest they are equally as popular in the larger conversation on fatness, they are not. As the field of fat studies grows, hopefully these frames will become more popular in both academic discussions and popular media. These alternative frames are important because they present different messages of fatness that would allow both fat and thin people to be more accepting of fat, perhaps reducing the stigma fat people face. Contesting hegemonic ideas of fatness is difficult, though, as the mere suggestion that fat can be healthy and beautiful is a radical notion in society today.

*Blame Frames*

In addition to problem frames, Saguy (2013) also discusses blame frames, or the different ways to assign blame for obesity. Blame frames inherently reinforce the problem frames of fat as a medical and public health concern. The three blame frames Saguy analyzes are: personal responsibility, sociocultural, and biological. Personal responsibility finds fault with individuals’ choices and suggests the “cure” for fatness is people making better personal decisions. The
sociocultural frame recognizes society’s effects, mostly constraining in nature, on people’s choices. This frame blames toxic food, unsafe exercise environments, poverty, and both national and subcultural attitudes and practices surrounding food for obesity. The biological frame blames genetic factors for obesity. This frame argues obesity is highly inheritable, and science should attempt to determine the genetic factors responsible for obesity. These blame frames do not challenge the underlying assumption that fat is a problem.

MEASUREMENTS AND DEFINITIONS OF FATNESS

In the introduction of his book *Fat: a Cultural History of Obesity*, Gilman writes, “Fat is truly in the eye of the beholder. Each age, culture and tradition has defined acceptable weight for itself, and yet all have a point beyond which excess weight is unacceptable, unhealthy, ugly or corrupting” (2008:3). Changing definitions of acceptable weight affect how the physical state of fat is perceived. Fat carries meanings that change through time with changing definitions of what body size is considered fat. Mark Graham (2005) uses the phrases “lipoliteracy” and “lipoliterates” to explain the way people interact with and define fat. He argues that people are “lipoliterates” in that they read fat for what they believe it tells them about a person. The different ways fat has been read will be discussed in detail later through a brief history of fat in the United States. What is important to consider now is that the terminology and semantics used for fat are neither neutral nor benign; they are social constructions that carry both political and practical implications.

The scientific community and news media coverage of obesity have largely relied on the medical and public health crisis problem frames. The medicalized nature of fat has led to a narrow scientific endeavor to classify and measure it. The result of this is the Body Mass Index. The BMI is typically used as the standard to define degrees of fatness. The BMI labels people as
underweight, normal, overweight or obese. Some of the most influential government health agencies like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the National Institutes for Health depend on BMI as the principal indicator of “weight, health and mortality risk in the American population” (Oliver 2006:20). The BMI is a measure of proportional body weight to height (calculated as weight in kilograms divided by height in meters [squared]); it is not a strict measure of body fat mass or percentage as many people assume it to be (Saguy 2013).

The BMI has recently been contested as both a valid measurement of fatness and the standard on which definitions of degrees of fatness are based. The BMI is a poor predictor of mortality, in addition to being a poor predictor of diseases commonly associated with obesity (Oliver 2006; Campos 2004). That is, increased risk levels of certain diseases typically associated with obesity, such as diabetes or heart disease, do not align with the standard cut-offs of underweight, normal, overweight, or obese on the BMI. In addition to these problems, the BMI was rather arbitrarily adjusted in 1998. Based on a 1995 report from the World Health Organization and opinions from some of the leading obesity researchers, the U.S. government issued new guidelines for the clinical definition of obesity and lowered the threshold for the overweight category from a BMI of 27 to 25 (Brewis 2011; Oliver 2006). Overnight 29 million Americans became “overweight,” even though their actual weight did not change. This change highlights the constructed nature of the index, as well as the definitions it implies for terms to describe fatness. Oliver (2006) argues that this change had more to do with political and monetary gain for governmental agencies’ budgets than it did with real evidence suggesting that a lower threshold for overweight better predicts health problems associated with being overweight.
The term overweight suggests the existence of an ideal weight and is inherently an anti-fat judgment (Rothblum and Solovay 2009). A person with a BMI of 25-29.9 is considered overweight and a person with a BMI of 30 or more is considered obese. However, Levi et al. define obesity as “an excessively high amount of body fat or adipose tissue in relation to lean body mass” (2012:15). This is quite vague, as who is to say what constitutes “excessive”? Like most other researchers, Levi et al. (2012) then rely on the BMI to define overweight and obesity. These terms become more complicated as most people in the United States equate a person’s weight with that person’s health. Relying on a rather crude measure, BMI, as a sole determinant of a person’s health is not appropriate. As suggested earlier, diseases associated with obesity are not reliably predicted from a person’s position on the BMI (Oliver 2006; Campos 2004).

The apparent spread of the obesity epidemic also shows the constructed nature of obesity. Deeming obesity as an epidemic now classifies it as a disease. This exemplifies the medical frame as suggested by Saguy (2013). This terminology also suggests that there is a cure for fat people; this again is anti-fat as cures only exist for pathological states. It also assumes that people are naturally thin and should maintain this ‘natural’ state. The characterization of obesity as an epidemic also creates industries that can sell people supposed cures: this has been called the “Diet Industrial Complex” (Farrell 2011), and includes the growing cosmetic surgery industry, stomach stapling, and bariatric weight loss centers. Americans spend an estimated $50 million a year in pursuit of weight loss (Hesse-Biber 2007). Gilman writes, “The anxiety about ‘epidemics’ points out the danger which lies in ‘moral panic’ that defines those ‘diseases’ we openly fear and those ‘infected’ persons we openly disdain” (2008:21). In general, it is difficult to define fatness as most research has not expanded beyond the BMI. It is important to consider
the constructed nature definitions of fatness have and the implications definitions have on both people’s lives and research.

RATES OF OBESITY

Rates of obesity had been on the rise in the last two decades of the 20th century but appear to be steadying. Between 1980 and 2000 rates of obesity doubled for adults (CDC 2007). The number of children and adolescents categorized as overweight tripled in the same twenty-year period (Ogden et al 2006). The latest data shows that roughly 1/3 (35.7%) of adults and 1/5 (16.9%) of children and adolescents in the United States were categorized as obese during 2009-2010 (Ogden et al 2012). In addition to 35.7% Americans categorized as obese, 33.3% were categorized as overweight in 2009-2010 (CDC 2011). Now a majority of Americans, 69%, are categorized as either overweight or obese. While a majority of Americans may be considered fat in real life, fat bodies are rarely present in the media. If fat bodies are represented, it is in predictable ways. Beyond news media coverage of the obesity epidemic, there are only a few well-known contemporary examples of fat people in media, the most popular of which is probably NBC’s reality show The Biggest Loser. In the review of literature that follows, I will begin with a brief history of fat in the U.S.

HISTORY OF FAT IN THE UNITED STATES

Reviewing a history of fat in the U.S. is important because fat has had a varied history and not always been as vilified as it is today. Throughout most of Western history (until the late 19th century), fat was generally understood as a sign of both wealth and health, because only the rich could maintain corpulent bodies in a society in which food was scarce and expensive. Specifically for women, “fatness meant that a woman was well fed, which in turn signaled that she was strong, healthy, from a well-off family, and likely to bear healthy children” (Hartley
In general, fat carried positive connotations of prosperity, distinction, security and high status (Farrell 2011). This of course was true to a certain point. If a person was too fat, he or she was assumed to be greedy and gluttonous; these, however, were still afflictions of the wealthy.

In addition to fat being an indicator of high status, it was used as a spectacle to highlight difference. This could be seen in the outrageously fat bodies on display at fairs, circuses and vaudeville performances (Farrell 2011). As industrialization increased and immigrants poured into the United States, fat became a marker for identifying inferior bodies. Cartoons, postcards and even medical knowledge at the beginning of the 20th century used fat to mark immigrant bodies. In early 20th century cartoons, “thin signifies the upstanding citizen, fat the cheating, stupid and coarse immigrant” (Farrell 2011:77). Immigrants and lower class people were thought to be naturally prone to fatness due to their inferiority and lack of civilization. The story of fat in America’s past is not as hegemonic as it is today; fat had the space to mean different things.

Fat has been constructed differently for men and women. At the turn of the 20th century, the fat male body became the antithesis of what it meant to be a man. Industrialization and inventions created creature comforts that were unknown to the vast majority of the population. The fat male body began to be read as a sign that the man frequently indulged in civilized life and could not control his appetites. It was a sign of physical weakness and lack of willpower (Farrell 2011). During the early 20th century, diet advice started appearing in popular women’s magazines (Boero 2012), a forum that would not be seen by men. As women gained social freedoms in the early 1900’s their bodies were becoming increasingly monitored and encouraged to take up less physical space (Farrell 2011). Ironically, while fat on men’s bodies put their masculinity at risk, beginning in the 20th century, fat on women became a sign they were
partaking in activities typically reserved for men. Fat became a signifier for gender boundaries. It was not until after World War II that fat became increasingly medicalized (Boero 2012). Since then, the mainstream story about fat has been a simple one, as Klein and Shiffman (2005) summarize in the title of their article, “Thin is In and Stout is Out.”

SOCIOLOGY AND BODIES

Since fat bodies are the focus of this research study it is necessary to briefly review the pertinent aspects of sociology’s understanding of bodies. Only recently has the body become an academic area of study in the social sciences. Bodies have traditionally been understood as pre-social, that is, natural entities that did not meaningfully influence or interact with society or constitute a valuable area of study (Shilling 2003). Feminist theory has helped elucidate many of sociology’s theories of bodies (Bordo 1993). The relationship between the body and culture is summarized thus:

The body—what we eat, how we dress, the daily rituals through which we attend to the body—is a medium of culture. The body…is a powerful symbolic form, a surface on which the central roles, hierarchies and even metaphysical commitments of a culture are inscribed and thus reinforced through the concrete language of a body (Bordo 1993:165).

I would argue the fat body is an especially apt example of the body being a medium of culture. Our culture is obsessed with thinness and constructs fatness as the antithesis of health and vitality. Fat bodies become the site at which this is played out. Fat bodies also highlight the challenging experiences of embodiment in a world built for thin bodies.

Gendered Bodies

One cannot talk about bodies and not acknowledge their gendered nature, especially because female bodies have historically been oppressed, constrained and scrutinized to a much greater extent than male bodies. Immense pressure has been placed on women to conform to
body expectations that are strictly defined and unrealistic, even sometimes dangerously so (Bordo 1993). Recently, society has also begun to place pressure on men to conform to body ideals, but to a lesser extent than women (Bordo 1999). Huff notes that Foucault traces the emergence of body norms to the turn of the 19th century, when “the body became subjected to a normalizing judgment that both homogenizes individuals, by proclaiming a universally applicable standard, and differentiates them, by ranking them according to their difference from an unattainable ideal” (2001:45). Today, for the female body this ideal is such that women rarely feel as if they could ever be too thin (Hesse-Biber 2007).

The concept, hegemonic masculinity also helps inform gendered bodies. Connell and Messerschmidt argue, “hegemonic masculinity was understood as the pattern of practice (i.e., things done, not just a set of role expectations or an identity) that allowed men’s dominance over women to continue” (2005:832). Like unattainable body ideals, hegemonic masculinity is difficult to embody. Even though majority of men are not example of hegemonic masculinity, Connell and Messerschmidt argue hegemonic masculinity is, “…certainly normative. It embodie(s) the currently most honored way of being a man, it require(s) all other men to position themselves in relation to it, (2005:832). Today, hegemonic masculinity is embodied by thinness and whiteness.

Body Projects

Shilling’s (2003) concept of body projects is useful in considering the fat body and ways in which people approach fat bodies. Shilling writes, “In the affluent West, there is a tendency for the body to be seen as an entity which is in the process of becoming; a project which should be worked at and accomplished as part of an individual’s self-identity,” (2003:4). Acknowledging the body as a project implies accepting that “its appearance, size, shape and even
its contents are potentially open to reconstruction in line with the designs of its owner” (Shilling 2003:4). Body projects require people to be “conscious of and actively concerned about the management, maintenance and appearance of their bodies” (Shilling 2003:4). Bodies become both personal resources and social signifiers of a person’s identity.

Shilling (2003) argues the most common example of body-as-project is the construction of healthy bodies. The quest for constructing a healthy body, and perhaps more importantly, the appearance of a healthy body is increasingly understood to be linked to a person’s identity and worth. Fat on a body surpasses a physical state and is assumed to say something about the moral state of the body (i.e. lazy or out of control). Shilling also points out that the body limits body projects. Bodies are not as conforming to people’s intentions as some would like to believe. Dieting is a good example of this. Shilling notes “over 95% of all weight taken off during diets is put back on again, while the body can react to dieting by reducing the rate at which calories are consumed and by storing greater amounts of fat as a safeguard against future periods of ‘starvation’” (2003:189). Body projects are especially applicable to studying fatness as the personal responsibility blame frame defines fat as a problem individuals can control. In a fat-phobic society, the attempt to construct healthy bodies means eliminating fat from a person’s body.

STIGMA THEORY

Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma is applicable to fat in today’s society. Stigma is defined as:

An attribute that is deeply discrediting, but it should be seen that a language of relationships, not attributes, is really needed. An attribute that stigmatizes one type of possessor can confirm the usualness of another, and therefore is neither creditable nor discreditable as a thing in itself (Goffman 1963:3).
In today’s society, fat is deeply discrediting. A “language of relationships” exists that denounces fat and fat people on various levels from health to moral standing. Fat also serves to “confirm the usualness of another” in that it is quite easy to see the difference between fat and thin people.

Huff reaffirms Goffman’s notion: “This stigmatization process serves to secure boundaries of the normal; that is, the spectacle of the fat body confirms and consolidates the identity of the normal body” (2001:52).

Goffman (1963) differentiates between “discredited” and “discreditable” stigmas. “Discredited” stigmas are those that are obvious or conspicuous to another person, and fat proves to be this kind of stigma. “Discreditable” stigmas are those that can be made hidden and have the potential to be a source of negative judgment on the person but not necessarily so. Goffman contends that people tend to believe a person with a stigma is not quite human, which leads people to discriminate against that person, albeit sometimes unknowingly, in effect reducing the life chances of the stigmatized person.

Goffman (1963) also claims that people construct stigma theories or ideologies to explain the inferior nature of the stigmatized person and account for the danger the stigmatized person represents. This can include rationalizing animosity based on other perceived or known differences of the stigmatized person, such as social class. People also tend to assume a wide range of deficiencies on the basis of the original stigma; for example, if a person is fat, they are also lazy or messy. Goffman (1963) notes people with “discredited” stigmas may be uneasy and anxious in social situations with “normals.” Goffman suggests this may result in the “discredited” person “defensively cowering” in certain situations. I would argue that in some situations humor is used by both the “discredited” person, in this case the fat person, and the “normal” person, in this case the thin person, to diffuse anxiety or awkwardness.
BIAS, STIGMA AND DISCRIMINATION

Puhl and Brownell (2001) contend that bias, stigma and discrimination based on a person’s body weight is the last acceptable form of discrimination. Hartley calls it “fat phobia” and writes it “is one of the few acceptable forms of prejudice left in a society that at times goes to extremes to prove itself politically correct” (2001:65). Some people argue that these negative attitudes and actions towards fat people are “for their own good,” (Brownell 2005:5) or “a helpful and healthful prejudice for society to have,” (Saguy 2013:146) in that they help motivate fat people to lose weight and serve as an incentive for thin people to avoid gaining weight. Studies have shown that the prevalence of weight discrimination is similar to reported rates of race and age discrimination in America (Puhl, Andreyeva and Brownell 2008a; Andreyeva, Puhl and Brownell 2008b). Stigma and discrimination have negative consequences on all aspects of a person’s life, both practically and emotionally, through increased levels of stress. Goffman’s (1963) stigma theory suggests that this bias, stigma and discrimination would diminish the life chances of fat people. Studies show that weight bias exists in all realms of life and it would appear that Goffman is correct: fat people’s life chances are not equal to those of their thin counterparts.

Employment

In regards to employment, fat people face many biases and discrimination. Fat people are less likely to be hired for jobs (Puhl and Brownell 2001). One study showed 16% of employers would not hire fat women and 44% of employers would use a woman’s fatness as a medical condition to pass on an applicant (Kristen 2002). Fat employees are often perceived to have undesirable traits related to job performance. In another study, participants viewed fat candidates as “less competent, less productive, not industrious, disorganized, indecisive, inactive and less
successful,” (Kristen 2002:63). Fat employees are frequently disciplined more harshly than their thin counterparts and are assigned less challenging or unfavorable projects and positions (Fikkan and Rothblum 2005). Puhl and Brownell (2001) argue that employers perceive fat persons as unfit in public sales positions, and more appropriate for telephone sales. Kristen (2002) terms these “noncontact positions.” Fat employees also face wage penalties that manifest in several ways. Fewer fat people are hired to high level positions, fat people often receive lower wages than thin counterparts, and fat employees are more often denied promotions than thin peers (Puhl and Brownell 2001). Puhl and Heuer estimate the wage penalty for fat men is 0.7% to 3.4% and 2.3%-6.1% for fat women (2009:942).

**Healthcare**

In addition to employment, weight bias exists in healthcare. Studies have shown medical professionals hold negative attitudes towards fat patients (Puhl and Brownell 2001; Puhl and Heuer 2009). Medical professionals also typically spend less time with fat patients (Puhl and Heuer 2009). In an online survey of 111 women and 111 men, Puhl and Brownell (2006) found women in their sample reported the most frequent source of stigma based on weight was from doctors, and men reported it as second most frequent source. The attitudes of doctors, nurses and other health professionals do not go unnoticed by patients. Fat patients are less likely to seek out health care due to past negative experiences (Puhl and Heuer 2009). Carr and Friedman (2005) contend only the heaviest patients reported health care discrimination in their study. Regardless, it is clear fat people face stigma in the health care arena.

**Education**

Fat people also experience weight bias related to education. Peer rejection can surface early in a fat child’s educational experience, as studies have shown anti-fat attitudes appear as
early as three years old (Puhl and Brownell 2001). This can lead to bullying and taunting.

Weight bias in education may increase and become more overt in higher levels of education. Fat students are less likely to be accepted into college and students have even been dismissed from college due to their weight (Puhl and Brownell 2001). In *The Fat Studies Reader*, Hetrick and Attig (2009) present a description of the constraining and shaming nature of school desks for fat students. Hetrick and Attig show how for fat students to sit in the desks, “our hips and stomachs must be pushed, shoved, and squeezed into unforgiving metal, wood, and plastic” (2009:197).

Crandall (1991) found that fat college students received less financial aid from their parents to pay for college. Crandall (1995) repeated this study and found that parents were more discriminatory against their fat daughters when offering financial aid for college.

*Interpersonal Experiences and Relationships*

Weight bias also exists in interpersonal experiences and relationships. Puhl and Heuer (2009) suggest fatness negatively affects dating relationships of women. Puhl and Brownell (2006) found both men and women report various sources of stigma: family, friends, coworkers and classmates. Carr and Friedman (2005) found that consequences of weight bias are most acute for those with high socioeconomic status. I would argue that weight bias and discrimination faced in other aspects of life previously mentioned (employment, health care, and education) would also affect a person’s interpersonal experiences and relationships.

**MEDIA & SOCIETY**

Weight bias permeates all types of media. First I will briefly discuss pertinent theories on media’s effect on society. One theory is socialization, in other words, that mass media teach and reinforce societal values (Perse 2001). Social learning theory would stipulate that people copy behaviors they see in media (Perse 2001). The media presents a range of images and materials
that present different ways of behaving or being in society. When this range of images and materials is limiting, viewers may forget that other options of behaviors, images and materials exist in the real world. To this end, Perse says, “Television programs rely on stereotypes because, as a business, they need to attract a large audience, so they must present content that is easily understood by a wide range of people, young and old, educated and uneducated” (2001:65). Enteman (2011) contends these stereotypes are limiting, objectifying, and depersonalize and deny individuality. Mainstream media can be reductionist in its presentation of diverse people and body types. In regards to fatness, the messages in mainstream media are rather streamlined; fat is bad, thin is good. The treatment of fatness in the media is important because the content communicates social norms and models behaviors to audiences (Greenberg et al 2003).

**News Media and Fatness**

News media has constructed fat in a very specific way in the creation of the obesity epidemic. News media increasingly presents stories and images of the obesity epidemic, in effect creating a moral panic surrounding fatness. Boero (2007), in an extensive review of print news articles, suggests that one of the main messages is that fat bodies are out of control and threatening. In addition to this, as in other epidemics, everyone is “at risk” for becoming obese. Boero stated, “Obesity is often represented as a contagious disease that can strike suddenly and unexpectedly, threatening the physical and fiscal health of an entire nation,” (2007:46). News media also places emphasis on personal responsibility by blaming individuals and suggesting the solution to the epidemic is within individuals’ control through dieting, exercise, and medical intervention (Boero 2007; Kim and Willis 2007). Saguy and Gruys (2010) argue the news media draws upon and reproduces negative stereotypes of fat people. McClure, Puhl and Heuer (2011)
found that when news stories about obesity are accompanied with a stereotypical negative image of a fat person, participants expressed more negative attitudes towards fat people regardless of whether the story was positive, negative or neutral towards fat people.

**Entertainment Media and Fatness**

Entertainment media handles fatness and fat people differently than news media. Unlike the news media, which is filled with stories about the obesity epidemic and images of fat people with blurred faces, fat people and issues surrounding fatness are generally absent from entertainment media. In a quantitative content analysis of the top-rated primetime fictional programs during 1999-2000, Greenberg et al (2003) found that of 1018 characters, only 14% of female and 24% of male characters were overweight or obese.¹ These percentages are much lower than the actual percentage of people in these categories in the U.S. population. The exception to this general lack of fat actors and characters can be found in reality television shows like NBC’s *The Biggest Loser*. *The Biggest Loser* is a reality television show in which fat contestants train vigorously for weeks with famous trainers and face weekly weigh-ins in hopes of being the contestant who loses the most weight by the end of the show.

In fictional entertainment media, fat characters are rarely portrayed in romantic relationships (Greenberg et al 2003; White, Brown and Ginsburg 1999). Heavier male characters tend to have fewer interactions with friends (Greenberg et al 2003). Fat characters are more likely to be the objects of ridicule and humor than their thin counterparts and are frequently shown engaging in stereotypical eating behaviors (Greenberg et al 2003). In a content analysis of

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¹ Greenberg et al (2003) identified the most popular (based on Nielsen ratings) 10 fictional series on the six major TV networks (ABC, CBS, Fox, NBC, UPN and WB) and aimed to record 5 episodes of each series. The final sample was composed of 275 episodes from 56 series and provided 210 hours of recordings. They did not include series featuring nonhuman characters and cancelled series. Content analysis was used to determine body type based on the Body Image Assessment Scale and then quantify how often characters with various body types appeared in the sample.
18 prime-time situation comedies, Fouts and Burggraf (2000) found that the fatter a female character was, the more she received negative comments from male characters, and that these negative comments were often reinforced with audience laughter. The fatter a male character, the more negative comments he made about his own weight; these comments were also often followed by audience laughter (Fouts and Vaughn 2002). This is different from the female characters in Fouts and Vaughn’s (2000) study, as no one is chastising the male character; it is not criticism from another character, but rather self-deprecating talk. In a content analysis of 135 fat stigmatization vignettes from various movies and television shows, Himes and Thompson (2007) found that male characters were three times more likely to engage in fat stigmatization and humor directed toward others when compared to female characters.

Entertainment media directed at children portrays fatness in similar ways. In cartoons, overweight characters are far more likely to be depicted as unattractive, unintelligent and unhappy (Klein and Shiffman 2005). In a content analysis of children’s videos and books, Herbozo et al (2004) found that obesity was associated with negative traits in 64% of the children’s videos and 20% of children’s books examined. Herbozo et al (2004) found obese characters were commonly depicted as “evil, unattractive, unfriendly and cruel.” With that said, Robinson, Callister and Jankowski (2008) found that children’s sitcoms and cartoons contain body diversity that more closely aligns with the real world than shows for adults.

Thin and extremely thin characters are the norm in entertainment media. It does not take much weight for actors to appear fat next to the ultrathin norm presented on most television shows. Very thin characters are overrepresented in television programs (Greenburg et al 2003; Fouts and Burggraf 2000; White et al 1999). Thin characters are given more desirable attributes and major roles (Puhl and Heuer 2009). Very thin female characters receive significantly more
positive verbal comments regarding their bodies than fat characters (Fouts and Burggraf 1999). So while entertainment media does not address the obesity epidemic in the same way as news media, it ultimately sends the message that fat is bad and thin is good.

Pearl, Puhl and Brownell (2012) show that media has the potential to alleviate weight stigma. In an experimental setting, Pearl et al (2012) found that when participants viewed positive images of fat persons they were less likely to endorse negative stereotypes of fat people, less likely to request social distance from a fat person, and showed more interest in positive representations than stereotypical ones. In another attempt to show the media’s ability to present fat-affirming messages, Ganz (2012) examined the success of the television show Weeds in its attempt to create a fat-positive character. Ganz (2012) determined portraying a fat-positive character was very difficult, and the tension between fat stigmatization and acts of resistance and body acceptance are a balancing act for the fat character. I think Ganz summarizes the unique relationship between media and society well:

As acknowledged, there are problematic aspects to the representations of fat stereotypes, but there are also direct challenges to some of those troubling depictions [in the show]. There are significant difficulties in creating a fat-positive atmosphere in a culture so utterly saturated with fat phobia (2012:218).

While the media does have the potential to reduce fat stigmatization, entertainment media overwhelming presents negative portrayals of fatness, if fatness is shown at all.

ROLE OF HUMOR IN MEDIA

Comedy and humor play a large role in entertainment media’s portrayal of fat characters. Humor has the potential to “both build social cohesion by narratively establishing group norms and maintain social control through ridicule to enforce norms and punish deviance” (Fine 1983). Humor can also be subversive and contrary to social norms by providing “an antidote to blind allegiance or orthodoxy” (Smith 1993). In entertainment media, humor tends to construct the fat
character as other, strengthening anti-fat messages and social norms through ridicule. Mosher claims, “Fat men usually appear in the situation comedy, which provides the narrative space for plenty of fat jokes but also positions the home as a refuge from an increasingly fragmented culture, flattening social contradictions into everyday personal experience” (2001:168). This flattening of social contradictions into the realm of personal experience prevents sitcoms from having to address larger social inequalities. Humor is thus frequently used to maintain the status quo and not challenge existing social norms in regards to fatness.

Theories and Functions of Humor

A brief review of the main theories and functions of humor will help inform the analysis of CBS’s primetime show Mike & Molly, given humor’s role in scripted sitcoms. Three theories of humor in communication research are: relief theory, incongruity theory and superiority theory. Relief theory would contend humor is used to reduce tension or stress (Lynch 2002). Meyer claims that in relief theory, “people experience humor and laugh because they sense stress has been reduced in a certain way...humor then results from a release of nervous energy” (2000:312). Incongruity theory argues, “people laugh at what surprises them, is unexpected, or is off in a nonthreatening way” (Meyer 2000:313). Incongruity humor is a way to interpret ambiguity. The third theory, superiority theory, contends people laugh either out loud or silently at other people’s inadequacies or due to a feeling of triumph over the person (Lynch 2002; Meyer 2000). Humor as an assertion of superiority can be used as a mechanism of control, and Lynch (2002) would say resistance as well. Superiority humor has been termed “disciplining by laughter” (Meyer 2000). Meyer argues superiority humor maintains order as those who disobey norms are “censured by laughter” and enhances group solidarity by laughing at “ridiculed others” (2000:315).
Within these theories, humor has four basic rhetorical functions in communication: identification, clarification, enforcement and differentiation (Meyer 2000). When humor functions to build support between speaker and audience, enhance speaker credibility and increase group cohesiveness, it fulfills the identification function (Meyer 2000). Humor functions to clarify when speakers reduce their views or messages into memorable phrases, anecdotes or play on words in hopes of simplifying a complicated or broader message (Meyer 2000). Clarification humor can also teach or elucidate social norms or proper behavior in situations without seeming too damning or judgmental. These two functions of humor have a tendency to unite speakers and the audience.

Unlike the previous functions that typically unite communicators, the last two functions of humor are divisive. The third function, enforcement, goes beyond clarifying social norms and allows the speaker to implement norms by leveling criticism onto a person or subject while maintaining some degree of identification with an audience (Meyer 2000). It is a humorous way to correct behavior or pronounce a violation of norms. This function of humor involves laughing at a person, signifying there is need for improvement. The last function of humor allows speakers to differentiate themselves from other opinions, people, and/or groups, often using harsh divisive language (Meyer 2000). Differentiation is similar to identification, but differs in that identification serves to bring speaker and audience together as they laugh together at some relief of tension, and differentiation serves to make clear divisions and mark boundaries between groups, people and opinions.

Humor often relies on stereotypes. Fouts and Burggraf (2000) argue that laughter reinforces the stereotypes the speaker uses to make a joke. Stukator notes, “Comedy is progressive, for it has the capacity to demystify the world, to expose oppressive hierarchies, and
to express utopian desires. Yet comedy is also inherently conservative, for it involves the use of cultural stereotypes and archetypes” (2001:199). For any of the functions of humor to work, there must be a common knowledge shared between speaker and listener. In entertainment media this common knowledge frequently finds its foundations in cultural norms and stereotypes. This can be harmful when the pervasive stereotypes of a group of people, like fat people, are overwhelmingly negative.

The aim of this study is to qualitatively examine the portrayals of fatness in the sitcom *Mike & Molly* to determine whether or not a show that features two fat main characters presents fatness in a less stereotypical, anti-fat way than mainstream entertainment media. I addressed this inquiry using content analysis. Given the overwhelming evidence that anti-fat biases are rampant throughout society, being ambivalent to fat, as in the case of the fat character on *Weeds*, is a breakthrough. However, I anticipate *Mike & Molly* to present ideas of fatness that align with popular discourse surrounding fatness given the format and construction of the show. *Weeds* is on a cable network and untraditional in its story lines. I expect the need for *Mike & Molly*, as a major-network sitcom, to appeal to a wide audience helps shape its messages about fatness towards the traditional fat is bad, thin is good ideology. One might think the show is progressive in the choice to cast two fat main characters, but depending on the presentations of these fat bodies and the discourse surrounding them, as Mosher points out, “getting significant screen time does not always guarantee the fat character an empowered position of enunciation” (2001:171). I also anticipate Molly’s fatness being portrayed differently and judged more harshly than Mike’s.
METHOD

This study used qualitative content analysis to examine how fatness is portrayed in entertainment media, specifically in the half-hour sitcom *Mike & Molly*. As Pehlke et al. (2009) suggest, use of qualitative content analysis is appropriate for studies involving sitcoms, because dialogue and actions of characters are difficult to quantify for analysis. I chose *Mike & Molly* for several reasons. *Mike & Molly* is currently in its third season on CBS. The show’s first season premiered September 2010 and then ran for 24 episodes ending in May 2011. The second season began September 2011 and ran for 23 episodes ending in May 2012. *Mike & Molly* averaged 11.14 and 11.51 million viewers in its first two seasons respectively (Gorman 2011; Gorman 2012). In addition to the show’s popularity, Melissa McCarthy won the Primetime Emmy Award for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Comedy Series in 2011 for her role as Molly Flynn. The last and most important reason for choosing to examine *Mike & Molly* is that the two main characters are fat, and not just in comparison to the extremely thin norm in entertainment media. This show is unlike many others in that the fat characters are dynamic, engaged and vital to both the plot and success of the show.

According to Elo and Kyngäs (2007), the interpretative process of analyzing texts involves three phases: preparing, organizing and reporting. After selecting a text, the preparation phase begins with selecting the sample and unit of analysis. In the interest of parsimony, I decided to begin my analysis with the show’s pilot and then watch every other episode through the second season finale. I acquired copies of the episodes on DVD from the local library. In total, I watched 12 episodes each from the first and second season, for a total sample of 24 episodes out of a possible 47. I decided to watch every other episode because it would allow for me to focus on a manageable sample while not losing the continuity of the show. Using the
structure of the sitcom, a scene was the most logical unit of analysis, to ensure interactions are kept whole and meaningful to avoid fragmentation (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). Fragmentation occurs when the unit of analysis is too narrow and results in meaning being fractured or lost (Graneheim and Lundman 2004). I employed Kunkel et al.’s definition of a scene to inform my methodology: “a sequence in which the place and time generally hold constant… scenes can be thought of in the same sense as a passage in a story; a scene ends when the primary setting shifts in time, place, or characters in a way that extensively interrupts the flow of related action,” (2003:7). I previewed episodes to ensure this unit of analysis was appropriate.

The next phase of content analysis, according to Elo and Kyngäs (2007), is the organizational phase. In this phase, I watched additional episodes to fully immerse myself in the text. In order to conduct the content analysis, a comprehensive coding tool was developed. Basic information from each episode, including season number, episode number and episode title, was documented. In addition, a description of the scene, including characters present, location (e.g. school, living room, kitchen), time frame in episode, and a brief summary, were also documented. I relied on previous literature about representations of fat characters in media to inform the following coding categories: stigma (Link and Phelan 2001); body project (Shilling 2009); romantic encounter and thin ideal (Greenberg et al 2003). For example, previous research has shown that fat characters on television are rarely shown in romantic situations (Greenberg et al 2003). Given that Mike & Molly is centered on the fat characters’ relationship with each other, it was important to code for romantic situations to see if past literature held true for this show. I also employed open coding (Berg 1989) after I was familiar with the text to help construct
additional categories (such as fat jokes and body anxiety) to be used for coding throughout this analysis.

The content categories that guided the analysis were: stigma, control/discipline, thin ideal, body anxiety, body project, romantic encounter, and fat jokes. Each scene was coded for the presence of the above categories, and then a qualitative description was recorded if necessary. I relied on Link and Phelan’s (2001) extension of Goffman’s theory of stigma to operationalize the concept into five components that could be observed through the characters’ interactions and/or dialogue. Those components include: 1. discerning and labeling difference (e.g. fatness), 2. labeled difference linked to a stereotype (e.g. laziness), 3. creating “us” versus “them” categories (e.g. thin vs. fat characters), 4. status loss exemplified or discrimination shown, and lastly, 5. power differences or inequality present. The category control/discipline included codes for self-control/discipline or control/discipline imposed by another character and whether or not the control/discipline was achieved through diet, exercise or another form. Thin ideal was coded for whether or not it was supported, challenged, or not addressed within the scene. The final four categories (body anxiety, body project, romantic encounter and fat jokes) were coded for whether or not they were present in the scene; if present, details were recorded of the interaction and/or dialogue was transcribed. An example of the coding sheet used can be found in the appendix.

After coding was completed, I began to analyze the data. I color-coded each category with a highlighter on the hard copies of the coding sheets. This made it easier to see within a specific scene, what codes appeared. For example, within the category fat jokes, the first code within the stigma category, discern and label difference, frequently appeared. I then marked each coding sheet with corresponding color tabs so it would be easier to analyze the scenes when
compared to each other. Then I took each category and wrote down the descriptions or transcriptions where applicable on note cards in order to organize the findings and create basic descriptive statistics. For example, I wrote each fat joke on its own note card, so I was able to organize the jokes into groups. This allowed me the flexibility to discover which groupings made the most sense, and helped illuminate patterns within the data. The table below summarizes some descriptive statistics.

Table 1. Prevalence and Percentages of Codes in Scenes (n=267).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Count of Scenes with Code</th>
<th>Percentage of Scenes with Code</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Stigma</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Discern/label difference</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>10.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difference linked to stereotype</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Control/Discipline</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>9.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Enforced</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diet</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>10.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Thin Ideal</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenged</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body Anxiety</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Body Project</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>13.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Romantic Encounter</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>11.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Fat Joke</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supported</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>20.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This finding section focuses on the 126 scenes that had one or more of my analytic codes present. When referencing specific episodes I will denote the season and then episode number separated by a colon, for example the pilot episode would be denoted as 1:1; meaning season 1, episode 1.
**Romantic Encounters**

The first finding that emerged from my content analysis of *Mike & Molly* contradicted previous literature (Greenburg et al 2003) regarding portrayals of fat characters in romantic situations in sitcoms. Unlike most previous portrayals of fat characters on television, Mike and Molly are repeatedly shown in romantic situations, as their relationship is the crux of the show. In the first episode, Mike asks Molly out on a date and says he’s “smitten” with her; Molly gladly accepts his offer (1:1). Mike takes Molly on a date to a local bowling alley, where Mike kisses Molly in the bowling lane and someone shouts out, “That-a-boy Mike” (1:3). This confirmation of the kiss tells the audience it is good, not a grotesque abnormal kiss between “two fatties,” as one blogger referred to it (Kelly 2011). Mike and Molly are often shown kissing, and sexual innuendos are frequent as well. In a later episode, Mike drops Molly off at her house and then has to take his best friend and partner on the police force, Carl, home (1:5). He walks Molly to her front door where Molly kisses him on the cheek and then tells him to come back if he wants to get lucky. Molly, referring to sex, exclaims to Mike, “One more time then you are driving me home!” (1:7). The show continues the innuendos with Mike and Molly in bed together on a number of occasions. Mike and Molly also say, “I love you” on several different occasions. In 2:5, Mike tells Molly, “You’re so darn sexy.”

Mike and Molly’s romantic and physical relationship contradicts previous findings. Their relationship is dynamic. They have disagreements and argue, interact with each other’s families, and eventually Mike moves into Molly’s home, which she shares with her mom and sister. Mike and Molly are very affectionate towards one another, as they are shown hugging and kissing regularly. In this regard, *Mike & Molly* offers a more normalized, positive message regarding love and relationships between two fat people. At a very basic level, showing fat
characters in a romantic relationship is a milestone given the almost complete absence of both fat characters and fat characters in dynamic, real life-like relationships in scripted television.

**Body as Project**

A second finding that emerged was the emphasis on body projects. Body projects are activities that continually enhance a person’s body and in turn reveal something about that individual’s identity (Shilling 2003). The body project prevalent in *Mike & Molly* is losing weight, tightening their bodies to better fit societal norms of thinness. For Mike and Molly, this is achieved through Overeaters Anonymous (OA) meetings, diet, and rarely, exercise. In this sense, the show perpetuates the myth that fat is always bad and needs to be erased from the body. The underlying idea is that the body is controllable and can be changed as long as a person has enough will power, an essential component for body projects.

For example, Mike and Molly meet at an OA meeting in the pilot episode and attend meetings periodically throughout the first two seasons. OA is structured in the same way as Alcoholics Anonymous. It contains a heavy spiritual component and describes compulsive overeating as an emotional, physical and spiritual illness that the sufferer has no control over (Boero 2012). This sense of having no control over one’s eating seemingly contradicts the notion that the body is controllable and a willing person can lose weight if that is his or her goal. But, in fact, this situates OA as the ultimate body project; the eternal quest and struggle to control one’s overeating and thus align the body with societal norms of thinness.

In the OA meetings, Mike and Molly are shown sharing, which always began with either; “Hi my name is Mike and I’m an overeater,” or “Hi my name is Molly and I’m an overeater.” A “share” in OA is when a person volunteers to speak before the group and comment on a struggle or victory they have had in their journey to control their eating. Depending on the meeting
format one person may share for the majority of a meeting or there will be open shares, in which several people will stand and address the meeting (Boero 2012). Beginning the shares with the phrase “I’m an overeater” suggests the reason for fatness is excessive eating. Ganz (2013) terms this the fat-as-glutton myth, which calls on the immorality frame to problematize fat (Saguy 2013). Fat-as-glutton framing makes fat a moral issue and can result in questioning the moral standards of fat persons. Framing fat as a problem in this way makes it possible to question a fat person’s character and draw conclusions that a fat person must be lazy, have a poor work ethic, be sloppy, etc. In addition to overlooking other explanations of fatness, this myth completely rules out the position that fat can be good and positive.

Both Mike and Molly perpetuate this myth with their shares. Mike often uses self-deprecating humor. At the first OA meeting he says, “I lost three pounds then I took off my shirt and found it right here [points to under his upper arm],” (1:1). This statement indicates that he did not actually shed three pounds from his body, he lost it on his body because it is so large. Then he shares a time when he was in the grocery store and bought fun-sized candies, and by the time he got to the checkout lane he had jammed 19 into his mouth. Mike’s use of humor suggests he is trying to align the audience with his endeavor to lose weight, an example of the identification function of humor (Meyer 2002). He wants the audience to understand him and his flaw of overeating and thus the fatness he is trying to overcome.

At the same OA meeting, Molly shares, “I know I’m never going to be a size 2 and that’s fine because I happen to like who I am, just want to learn to control my eating” (1:1). This statement is telling because it shows that fat women cannot be pleased with their bodies in a fat-hating, fat-shaming society. The space does not yet exist for women to love their bodies, especially fat bodies, in mainstream media. It also highlights the unattainable nature of the ideal
body for most women and the struggle in continually attempting to get ever closer to the ideal. In a later episode featuring an OA meeting Molly says, “I had a pretty good week. I actually lost three pounds” (1:7). In a separate episode, she says something similar, “Not one, not two, but three pounds” (2:9). At another meeting Mike shares, “Losing weight without even thinking about it. Win the battle here [points to head], win the battle here [points to stomach]” (1:9). This share reinforces a traditional notion in western philosophy that the mind is separate from and can thus control the body. This is why body projects are thought to be an expression of self; the mind is expressed through its control over the body. Graham (2005) notion of “lipoliteracy” calls on this ancient idea. As “lipoliterates” we read people’s bodies for insight into their minds, personalities, and natures. For Mike and Molly, OA is a body project that will help them shrink their bodies, reinforcing the idea that bodies are controllable and fat bodies are bad.

So how do Mike and Molly set about changing their bodies? The pilot opens with Mike and his partner Carl in a diner. Mike is telling Carl that he is on a new diet from Modern Bride because he’s “trying to drop a couple of pounds,” that he’s exercising at a gym three times a week and riding a stationary bike every morning (1:1). As mentioned in the literature review, in the past fat has feminized men’s bodies making others question their masculinity (Farrell 2011). Mike referencing a diet that he found in Modern Bride, a publication undoubtedly meant for women, seems to support this feminization of fat men’s bodies. In the next scene Molly is shown exercising on an elliptical in her living room as her thin mom and sister walk in, sit on the couch, and eat a piece of chocolate cake. Molly exclaims, “I’m trying to watch my diet! I’m trying to exercise!” It is noteworthy that the first time the audience meets Mike and Molly, both are lamenting about diet and exercise. Mike and Molly explicitly address their big bodies and a desire to change them, reinforcing social norms of thin bodies being desired and dieting as a
matter of personal control, a tenet of the personal responsibility frame that problematizes fatness (Saguy 2013).

In addition to their own efforts, Mike and Molly’s friends often help them stay on track by enforcing their diets, providing control when Mike or Molly struggle. In the pilot, Carl prevents Mike from eating a large meal as he says, “This is suicide by meatball bullets. I’m not going to let you ruin your diet. You’ve lost 3.5 pounds,” and then orders Mike a chicken breast on wheat toast (1:1). In another exchange the control exerted by others is more obvious. Mike and Carl are at the diner and Mike mentions that he loves pea soup. Carl responds with, “Uh-uh-uh you know that’s loaded with salt and fat.” Mike pleads, “C’mon, I’ve been doing really good,” to which Carl says, “Because I’m the one that’s been standing guard over your pie hole.” Mike responds, “I just wanted one bowl.” Carl is quick to point out, “You’ve never had one bowl of anything in your life” (2:5).

Molly has similar experiences. In the beginning of Season 2, Molly is in the kitchen eating breakfast with her mom and sister and complaining about Mike. Molly’s mom says, “Sweetie, I don’t think those pancakes are part of your diet.” Molly snaps back, “Do you want to reach over and take them away from me?” Her mom takes control and says, “No hot dogs and no pancakes, you are not eating this stress away” (2:1). These exchanges are significant because they continue the fat-as-glutton myth and the stereotype that fat people are out of control. It seems to serve as reassurance for the audience. If the viewer is able to make smart food choices and maintain control he or she will not succumb to the “disease” of being fat. When Mike does show self-restraint, Carl shows his approval of the ‘good’ behavior. At the diner again, Mike orders tuna for lunch and Carl says, “You know I’m proud of you, you’ve been showing a lot of self control lately,” (1:23).
In addition to help from others, Mike and Molly restrict their eating, choose healthier food options and skip meals. In fact, Mike and Molly were rarely shown actually eating in the episodes I analyzed, even though food was in front of them. Examples of Mike and Molly’s dieting behavior include scenes in which: Molly makes mashed cauliflower instead of mashed potatoes (2:9); Mike orders egg whites at the diner while Carl orders big elaborate breakfasts (2:15); Mike seriously cuts down on his portions in one episode, ordering only 12 French fries at the diner (1:3); Mike turns down pie (1:7); Molly turns down breakfast (1:7); and together they are shown eating egg whites while fantasizing about donuts (1:23). Mike also confirms dieting as a positive when he says, “I feel great and have more energy” (1:3). While dieting is prevalent in the show, exercising is not. After the pilot, where Molly is shown briefly on an elliptical machine, she attends a yoga class with her mom and sister and that is the extent of her exercising on the show. Mike is never shown exercising in the episodes I analyzed.

**Gender Differences in Labeling Bodies**

Another finding that emerged was the gender difference in labeling the fat body. Mike’s body was labeled 27 different times, while Molly’s body was only labeled 5 times. Parentheses indicate number of times each label was used. Mike either called himself, or was called: “large man” (2), “man of tremendous girth,” “overeater” (2), “fat” (4), “big man” (3), “mountain” (2), “freaking Himalayas,” “big and bountiful,” “tons of fun,” “300 pounds” (2), “big boy” (2), “overweight,” “fat guy” (2), “fat cop,” “refrigerator,” “milk truck,” and “fat Casper.” Molly either called herself, or was called: “big boned,” “beefy gal,” “overeater” (2) and “Rubenesque.” The difference in quantity alone is striking. Mike’s fat body being labeled more frequently than Molly’s body is contradictory to what one might expect given the focus on thin female bodies as the desired norm in both media and society. Mike is also more explicitly noted as fat and
compared to other large objects: refrigerator, milk truck and mountains (more specifically the Himalayas). These are quite extreme and become comical in the absurd nature of such hyperboles as “tons of fun” and comparing a human body to a mountain range. Typically it is women’s bodies that are labeled and judged this extensively. This aspect of the show also presents a different message about bodies, albeit not a progressive one: men’s bodies are now also under siege for not adhering to thin norms and are explicitly labeled as such.

This evidence suggests that men’s fat bodies and embodiment need to be examined to a greater degree. Bordo (1999) presents one of the few examinations of male bodies, but the only references to fat in this work are about men’s opinions of fat on women’s bodies. It does not seem right to situate fat as solely a woman’s issue especially given the grave consequences it can have on a person’s life in a fat-loathing world. I agree with those who argue fat should be a feminist issue (Chrisler 2012; Fikkan and Rothblum 2012) but that does not necessarily mean studying men and fatness is not a worthy endeavor. It may be that fat affects men and women differently, but there is not enough data on fat men, their bodies and sense of embodiment to compare to the vast literature on women’s bodies. Clearly, Mike’s body being labeled three times more than Molly’s would suggest fat is also a man’s issue, as Gilman claims in his book *Fat Boys: Slim Book* (2004).

*Role of Humor*

Along with the labels and euphemisms for fat bodies, humor is used to address Mike and Molly’s fatness. Physical humor and fat jokes abound in this sitcom, and often the joke teller is a thin character. The two major categories of fat jokes, jokes about body size and out of control eating, perpetuate Ganz’s (2003) fat-as-glutton myth. All but four of the fat jokes in the episodes I analyzed fell into these two categories.
In reference to out of control eating, Mike or Molly made eight jokes while other, thinner characters (including Mike’s best friend Carl, Mike’s mom, and Molly’s mom) made 13 jokes about out of control eating. A sampling of these jokes follows. In reference to Carl and Mike’s anniversary of becoming partners on the police force Molly says, “That’s longer than any relationship I’ve ever had, except maybe [with] Colonel Sanders” (1:5). Carl says, “Look at him; you don’t think he’s closed a few all-you-can-eat places in his day?” (1:19). In another episode (1:21), frustrated with Mike, Molly says, “If I really wanted to trap you I’d dig a really big hole in the backyard and cover it with Moon Pies.” At a Christmas party where Mike is volunteering as Santa Claus he tells a young kid, “Ya know how I got this fat? Eating all the naughty kids. So butter up and I’ll see you Christmas morning” (2:11). Molly’s mom, Joyce, laments about Mike, “Look at him, can’t get rid of a couple of parking tickets but sure can make a loaf of bread disappear” (2:13). Lastly, at the diner Mike and Carl frequent, the waiter, Samuel, tells Mike, “FYI the walk-in freezer has a padlock and a security camera. Don’t embarrass yourself” (2:19).

The basis of all of these jokes is taking the notion of out of control eating to the absurd (i.e. getting fat eating all of the naughty kids), and without this exaggeration, the jokes would not make sense or be funny. The jokes above seem to fall within the superiority theory of humor. As mentioned in the review of literature, superiority theory asserts that people laugh at other people’s inadequacies or due to a feeling of being better than the other person (Lynch 2002; Meyer 2000). These jokes sustain the stereotype that fat people must not be able to control themselves around food and that is why they are fat. The audience can laugh at these ‘flaws’ within the characters because fat is bad. If fat did not carry such negative connotations the jokes would not be funny. These jokes also function as enforcement humor. The jokes enforce social norms and proper behavior without seeming too damning or judgmental (Meyer 2002). These
jokes obviously condemn out of control eating but manage a rather light-hearted tone due to their absurdity.

The second emphasis of the fat jokes is the size of Mike and Molly’s bodies. Mike or Molly makes nine of these jokes, while other characters make a total of 20 jokes about Mike and/or Molly’s body size. A sampling of these jokes follows. Carl makes several jokes about Mike’s body including: “Maybe you could move to Japan. Big man is a god over there. Seriously, yank your underwear up into your crack and get yourself sumo groupies” (1:1); “I would shoot you right now but I don’t have enough chalk to outline your body” (1:1); and, “Sweet Jesus, it’s like hugging a futon” (1:2). An exchange between Mike and Molly after Mike’s stomach grumbles begins with Mike saying, “Sorry just two corn dogs fighting for kennel space” (1:13). Molly looks at Mike and exclaims, “Oh my god! You’re drenched in sweat.” Mike replies, “What’d you expect? I’m a fat guy in a wool suit,” (1:13) and “You’re sweating like a hooker in church: a fully hydrated, 300 pound hooker,” (1:13). Vince, Molly’s mom’s boyfriend, describes Mike sleeping on the couch saying, “Looks like one of those giant manatees sunning itself on a big rock” (1:21). Referring to his clothes, Mike says, “Two more pockets and I’m a pool table” (2:3). Molly’s mom tells Mike, “Seeing you up there [on the roof], blocking the sun, reminds me of when my husband was alive” (2:3). After Mike moves in to Molly’s house, Molly’s mom says, “So the only thing we get from having you in the house is an empty refrigerator and a three foot butt divot in the couch” (2:13).

Jokes about Mike’s body are far more frequent than jokes about Molly’s body, similar to the discrepancy in their bodies being labeled as fat or a euphemism for fat. In fact, there are only two jokes about Molly’s body, while there are 27 jokes about Mike’s body. Molly makes both of the jokes about her own body. She tells her mom “Bones don’t jiggle” (1:1) and during a share at
an OA meeting she says, “Oh and I would like to walk into a night club and not have every queen jump on me like I’m a gay pride float,” (1:1). The jokes about Mike’s body are extreme; sumo wrestlers are iconic for their large bodies, it would take a massive object to block the sun, and manatees are also known as cows of the sea. Through the outlandish nature of these jokes, it becomes explicit that Mike’s body is large and norm-breaking in its size. These jokes also seem to support the superiority theory of humor and enforcement function, as the jokes discipline through laughter in attempt to maintain order and reinforce norms (Meyer 2002); in this case anti-fat and pro-thin body norms. It is interesting that almost all of the jokes meant to enforce social norms about bodies and chastise the norm-breaking body are about Mike’s fat male body. The fact that Mike’s body is the site of such ridicule once again sends a direct message about men’s bodies. No longer should men be thought exempt from the fat stigmatization that permeates media and society.

CONCLUSION

There are several possible explanations for the patterns I found in Mike & Molly. In regards to the gender discrepancies in both labeling fat bodies and fat jokes, I would argue this shows men’s bodies are increasingly judged and critiqued. One example in popular culture is the increase of male spokespersons for Weight Watchers like former basketball player Charles Barkley and comedian Jason Alexander. The weight loss industry has found a new market: men. Men wanting to shrink their bodies through diet rest on the foundation that they are not slim enough. The message is clear in Mike & Molly that Mike’s body is not thin enough. The fact Mike’s fat body is laughed at and labeled, highlights his body’s physical deviance from hegemonic notions of masculinity by reinforcing normative ideas of masculine male bodies.
Mike’s body being much larger than Molly’s body could also play a part in the gendered nature of labeling the fat body and discrepancy in fat jokes. Molly is also an endearing, immensely likable character and the viewer may find it harsh if she was criticized or made fun of as much as Mike. Most people would find it uncouth to comment on a women’s body size. On a more macro scale, the fact that fat jokes were the most prevalent analytic code shows that humor is used to promote fat stigmatization and that fat jokes are not seen as offensive by the viewing public. Through fat jokes the viewer is exposed to the idea that being fat is unacceptable, laughable and often the fault of the fat person. In this way the fat jokes function to enforce societal norms of thinness and self-restraint.

This study contributes to existing literature in three ways. Firstly, it provides a more in-depth qualitative look at specific fat characters currently on television. This is rare in current literature. One aspect of this is moving beyond a count of how many fat characters are in romantic relationships or engaged in other activities compared to thin characters (as in Greenberg et al [2003]) and examining the fat characters’ actions and ways fat bodies are discussed and talked about in media. This study provides qualitative examples instead of broad statistics about fat characters and bodies. Secondly, this study places fat bodies and fat characters at the center of the analysis as opposed to the periphery or as a comparison group to thin characters. Thirdly, it uses frame analysis to explore the ways fatness is approached, talked about and understood. I think this helps to deconstruct the hegemonic notions of fatness and bring awareness to other ways of understanding fat that can lead to acceptance as opposed to stigmatization. Recalling Graham’s (2005) notion of “lipoliterates,” I think it is useful to consider the different ways media could frame fatness in order to influence the way audiences read fat.
Future research should expand on this examination of one show’s fat characters and consider how fat bodies are portrayed in all forms of media. Expanding on this study and using a research team would allow for an entire series to be analyzed and provide the opportunity for coding reliability across members of a study team. In addition, future research could reveal more about the ways the audience understands and reacts to fat characters on television. The media’s impact on audiences is frequently debated, but with a divisive issue like fatness, audiences responding positively to positive portrayals of fatness could lead to a lessening of fat stigmatization. In addition to fat as the focus of future research, men’s bodies in general should be examined more frequently. Gender and body issues are so often considered a woman’s issue that men are frequently overlooked. Given the serious consequences of fat bias and discrimination discussed earlier, fat stigmatization is a serious issue that affects millions of Americans. While *Mike & Molly* does present some positive images of fatness, it still relies heavily on stereotypes and negative portrayals of fatness for laughs perpetuating anti-fat ideas.


Boero, Natalie. 2007. “All the News that’s Fat to Print: The American “Obesity Epidemic” and the Media.” *Qualitative Sociology* 30:41-60.


Chrisler, Joan C. 2012. “‘Why Can’t You Control Yourself?’ Fat Should Be a Feminist Issue.” *Sex Roles* 66:608-616.


## APPENDIX

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### Description of Scene

- **Who (characters present):**
- **What (brief summary):**
- **Where (location):**
- **When (time in episode):**

### Stigma

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