



## What's Wrong with Fat?

*Abigail C. Saguy*

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The United States, we are told, is facing an obesity epidemic-a "battle of the bulge" of not just national, but global proportions-that requires drastic and immediate action. Experts in the media, medical science, and government alike are scrambling to find answers. What or who is responsible for this fat crisis, and what can we do to stop it?

Abigail Saguy argues that these fraught and frantic debates obscure a more important question: How has fatness come to be understood as a public health crisis at all? Why, she asks, has the view of "fat" as a problem-a symptom of immorality, a medical pathology, a public health epidemic-come to dominate more positive framings of weight-as consistent with health, beauty, or a legitimate rights claim-in public discourse? Why are heavy individuals singled out for blame? And what are the consequences of understanding weight in these ways?

*What's Wrong with Fat?* presents each of the various ways in which fat is understood in America today, examining the implications of understanding fatness as a health risk, disease, and epidemic, and revealing why we've come to understand the issue in these terms, despite considerable scientific uncertainty and debate. Saguy shows how debates over the relationship between body size and health risk take place within a larger, though often invisible, contest over whether we should understand fatness as obesity at all. Moreover, she reveals that public discussions of the "obesity crisis" do more harm than good, leading to bullying, weight-based discrimination, and misdiagnoses.

Showing that the medical framing of fat is literally making us sick, *What's Wrong with Fat?* provides a crucial corrective to our society's misplaced obsession with weight.

## What's Wrong with Fat? Details

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## From Reader Review What's Wrong with Fat? for online ebook

### Marcia says

Un libro revelador.

Utiliza todas las herramientas de los Estudios Filosóficos y Sociales sobre Ciencia y Tecnología (EFSCT) para analizar uno de los temas de vanguardia con mayor presencia pública: la obesidad.

Una "verdad incuestionable" que se cuestiona desde muchas aristas diferentes.

Una apología al refrán mexicano que dice "salió peor el remedio que la enfermedad".

Un libro para todo público... para que todo público se cuestione sobre sus ideas acerca de la gordura y la salud... y para que, de paso, se cuestione acerca de sus ideas de cualquier índole.

100% recomendable.

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### Faith says

I've read books about fat acceptance/fat rights in the past. When I saw this book in the library and read the blurb on the inside cover, I thought I would read something in a similar vein. While this book refutes the idea that being overweight or obese is automatically unhealthy and challenges the concept of the "obesity epidemic", it's more academic and less polemical in nature than other books I have read on this issue. The title of the book is a hint of what Saguy aims to do in this book. She wants readers to challenge the whole concept of obesity. By the time you finish reading the book, she literally wants you to ask the same question she asked: what wrong with fat? Saguy is a sociologist at UCLA and discusses a lot of sociological theory throughout the book. In particular, she relies heavily on frame analysis to discuss how fatness is portrayed in American society. Saguy argues that fat is often discussed within the medical (obesity [fatness] is a medical problem needing medical treatment), public health crisis (obesity is a public health problem warranting a collective solution), and personal responsibility (the obese need to take personal responsibility for their weight) frames. All these frames posit fat as a problem that needs to be solved. Saguy argues that these frames are often taken for granted but should be questioned. Additionally, she discusses how other frames (fat is beautiful, health at every size and fat rights frames) that see fat in a neutral or positive light receive little attention and have much less influence than other frames that portray fat as being pathological. The best parts of What's Wrong with Fat? are where Saguy connects fat prejudice to other prejudices such as racial and class prejudice. In fact, Saguy makes a convincing case that our current framing of fat as a pathology is more socially acceptable way to condemn the poor and minorities.

The book is short but can be a bit dry at times. However, the topic itself is fascinating (to me at least!) and helps to keep the reader interested. I definitely recommend it.

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### Lisa Lilly says

I read this book for a class, and it was a fascinating read. I would have finished it regardless of the course requirements. The author did a good job of explaining in clear language any academic terms she used. That made it easy to read even for someone with a background in sociology.

The author disputes the cultural assumptions about the negative effects of being overweight and the idea of an obesity epidemic. While doing so, she draws attention to the way findings from specific studies can be

extrapolated without basis and can be sensationalized in the media. I found this particular point a good reminder these days when it seems every news organization is fighting to create the most alarmist headlines.

On a personal level, I found the book valuable in bringing out how often weight is used as a proxy for health (or for ill health) and how damaging that can be.

For writers, this book is a good example of how to convey information in a way that's accessible to readers without watering down the content or message.

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## Korri says

If I were the type of reader to highlight whole paragraphs, this would be the book in which I'd do so.

One of the most important & revelatory things I learned while studying history in college is that it doesn't matter if something is true or not—what matters is if people think it's true and what they do about it. Abigail Saguy follows a similar line of thought in *What's Wrong with Fat?*. She doesn't test the veracity of claims that 'obesity' is a public health crisis—instead she explains how and why the claims that there is an obesity epidemic have been accepted as true and examines the social implications of framing fatness as a disease or health risk. The book studies the production, content, and reception of how the news media frames fat and looks into the cultural construction and contestation of social meaning attached to fat (p. 18).

Not all meanings have the same cultural, symbolic, social and cultural capital. Wealthy pharmaceutical companies who have considerable lobbying power with legislators fund scientific studies on the 'obesity epidemic' whereas fat people working on fat acceptance are seen as merely defensive, biased, and just trying to justify their bodies and 'unhealthy' lifestyles. This condemnation is made possible by framing fat as an individual personal responsibility, a matter of will power and self-control. If you're fat, you're just not trying hard enough. Maybe some shame and stigma will help get fat folks on the right path!

It turns out that 'while done in the name of health, the medical framing of fat is literally making us sick' (p. 162). Based on experiments she devised and conducted, Saguy observes that news reports blaming lack of personal responsibility for the 'obesity epidemic' serve to heighten anti-fat stigma and prejudice. Stress of discrimination leads people to avoid doctor's visits, thereby missing opportunities to catch issues early on (that is, if weight isn't blamed for a patient's concerns). Behaviors that would be considered disordered eating in 'normal' weight people are celebrated when 'obese' individuals engage in them. Framing fat as a health risk and issue of personal responsibility gives pharmaceutical companies an argument to speed FDA approval of their products and makes it seem justifiable to charge 'obese' people more for health insurance and other services. Focusing on obesity occludes other disparate issues bound up with the health frame: 'nutrition, physical activity, stress, food production and distribution, and social inequality' (p. 171).

Saguy covers many issues in this text—calling BMI the bullshit it is; discussing how news media sensationalizes scientific studies about fat and obesity, which often feature associational not causal data, while casting doubts about reports that don't confirm preconceptions; articulating how condemnation of fat can stand in as a socially acceptable way to express racism and classism; and more. Highly recommended.

A favorite quote:

'Mentioning television watching as an example of sedentary activity simplifies the narrative of sedentary lifestyle as immoral, which may explain why television is the example of choice when it comes to discussing inactivity. I have yet to read an article about children becoming obese because they are spending too much time reading, doing puzzles, or playing board games.' (pp. 83-84)

## **Kjerstin Gruys says**

Sharp writing and a must-read for anyone interested in the politics of body size. Saguy makes a compelling argument that our culture's growing anti-fat stigma is more harmful to both individuals and society than fatness itself, or the so-called "obesity epidemic."

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## **Sharon Haywood says**

An excellent analysis of the ways in which fat is framed in the US, challenging the reader to consider how mainstream society's framing of fat and the "obesity crisis" actually increases the stigma against people of size, which runs completely contrary to promoting the mental and physical health of individuals and society. Written in accessible language and extremely well-documented, Saguy's book is a must for anyone even remotely interested in issues of social justice.

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## **K says**

Reveals how exactly, by whom, for whose gain, and whose harm, the "obesity epidemic" was constructed.

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## **Jonna Higgins-Freese says**

I think there are at least two kinds of truly fabulous books: those that articulate something you've thought or felt, but never seen anyone say before (or say so well), and those that overturn the way you think and create new categories and ways of seeing. This book was fabulous, for me, in the second way.

I stayed up late reading. The author is smart, and the writing is clear and nuanced. She does a good job of explaining technical terms in academic sociology, and of explaining the notion of "frames" - the meta-ways we set up the context or overarching framework of an issue in a way that allows for certain understandings and solutions and excludes others.

She talks about problem frames for weight (immorality, medical, public health crisis, health at every size, fat as beauty, and fat rights), as well as frames for blame (personal responsibility, sociocultural, biological), and the ways these can be mixed and matched, as well as the ways multiple problem and blame frames are often mingled together in a single argument. For example, "a health at every size frame challenges the notion that fat people are inevitably unhealthy but reinforces the notion of health a central cultural value. A beauty frame expands what counts as beautiful to include fat women, rather than proposing a more radical critique of how people (and especially women) are judged on the basis of beauty" (66).

She presents fascinating sociological information, for example, that "The U.S. news media . . . is more likely to treat fatness, than "thinness-oriented" eating disorders, as an issue of personal responsibility and moral failing" (71).

I was very interested to learn that we really aren't sure what factors impact weight -- some believe that diet

and exercise can have an influence, but other studies do not seem to bear this out. I hadn't heard of the argument that certain environmental toxins may be a factor, and that "the human organism may produce additional body fat as a way to store industrial toxins away from vital organs" (76). Apparently there can also be long -- even intergenerational -- lag times between environmental exposures or "risk" factors and weight impacts in offspring (76).

There was even some humor, as in her analysis of a 2003 Boston Globe article "'The two prime culprits for this expanding obesity are inactivity and overeating, and TV watching is linked to both of them . . . spending lazy hours in front of the TV . . . ' Mentioning television watching as an example of sedentary activity simplifies the narrative of sedentary lifestyle as immoral, which may explain why television is the example of choice when it comes to discussing inactivity. I have yet to read an article about children becoming obese because they are spending too much time reading, doing puzzles, or playing board games." (84)

One of the most compelling parts of the book was a summary of a scientific/political/media controversy about several studies related to weight, what she calls the Eating-to-Death study and the Fat OK study. Related to how the results were reported, she writes, "Note how the CDC fails to mention that this same study had found the overweight category to be associated with fewer deaths and even states that 'being overweight carries health risks'<sup>66</sup>. In contrast, when overweight had been thought to be associated with increased mortality, the CDC cited the number of excess deaths associated with overweight and obesity combined. In other words, it included the mortality statistics for overweight when these produced a higher estimate and ignored them when they lowered the estimate." (121)

She points out that the weight of scientific evidence shows little association between overweight and mortality. For example, in one study, "the relative risk of all-cause mortality for people in the overweight category [BMI 26-29.9] was not significantly different than those in the 'normal weight' category' (BMI 18.6-24.9). However, neither the abstract nor press releases, on which journalists heavily rely, mention this information." (125) This allows the results to seem surprising, when in fact, the bulk of scientific evidence shows no association between overweight and mortality.

In terms of the impacts of various frames, the author discovered that the Health at Every Size frame does not shift viewers attitudes as much as a fat rights frame. After being exposed to a fat rights frame, respondents were more likely to indicate that people in images with larger BMI's could be "healthy at that size." (135)

She also notes that telling people that heavier weights lead to poor health outcomes may in fact raise their stress level and predispose them to those outcomes (141).

She also provides a number of examples of how our frames and assumptions that fat is bad and weight loss is good mask truly unhealthy/life-threatening behaviors. A woman who had been anorexic was asked to describe, by a medical professional, everything she had eaten [over a period of time], but "was never asked whether she had purged any of this food, or if she had taken laxatives or diuretics . . . 'through these questions (and non-questions), some of the most dangerous health behaviors -- such as crash-dieting, purging, laxative abuse, and extreme food restriction -- are made invisible" (144).

I found this particularly interesting: "blame for obesity is typically framed as a question of personal responsibility. This frame foregrounds cases in which people are fat because of unhealthy lifestyles, while obscuring cases in which people are fat despite healthy lifestyles or those in which people are thin despite being sedentary and subsisting on "junk food" and cigarettes" (146). I certainly resonated with this -- a decade ago when I did *Weight Watchers*, I found ways to game the system, and often traded fruits for similar-point-value cookies. My weight stayed down, but I'm not sure that was the best for my health. Similarly, I can certainly think of thin chain smokers and heavier athletes who eat well, yet on first glance, we know which our society would consider healthier.

She points out that higher income white people are more likely than lower-income people and people of color to be thin, for reasons that are unknown, but she argues that it "elevate[s] the cultural preferences and practices of elite groups as healthy and thus virtuous. Geographer Julie Guthman has critiqued the alternative food movement for exactly this reason, arguing that it 'gives rise to a missionary impulse, so those who are attracted to this food and movement want to spread the gospel.' She explicitly compares this movement to early colonial encounters, in which Europeans tried to convert others to their religion, government, art, and manners. 69 (149)

In analyzing the impacts of the various frames, she points out that "if being fat is a disease, fat people are considered to have a moral obligation to seek medical treatment, even if such treatment is risky or has a low probability of success. This is what sociologist Talcott Parsons referred to as the 'sick role'" (152).

She writes of the personal power of a fat acceptance model, "As I took part in a synchronized swim class with other NAAFA members, I couldn't take my eyes off of two young women sitting near the pool in bikinis. they were both in their early twenties, at most, and were strikingly beautiful. They were also extremely fat, considerably fatter than the average NAAFA member. They were sitting on the laps of two conventionally handsome and muscularly toned men, who were, I realized, fat admirers. Two other handsome men sat nearby, vying for their attention. These women were hot stuff, and they knew it." (153).

She describes how fat rights activists have successfully challenged anti-obesity campaigns and turned them into nutrition and activity task forces. She quotes fat rights activist Ragen Chastain, "While I do sometimes suffer because I'm obese, I've never suffered from obesity. [What I suffer from] is living in a society where I'm shamed, stigmatized and humiliated because of the way I look . . . [I'm oppressed by] people who choose to believe that I could be thin if I tried (even though there's no evidence for that)" and by social pressures to conform to a standard of slenderness" (160).

She describes a counselor working with an overweight patient who was able to shift the conversation from the patient's weight per se to the trauma the patient had suffered because of her weight -- why hadn't the adults in her life protected her from bullying? She quotes a clinical psychologist who asks audiences to think about what would happen if we heard not about a war on obesity, but a war on weight prejudice.

Adults can make an effort to eat more nutritious foods or be more active for those intrinsic benefits, rather than due to their impacts on weight.

She ends with a story about her tween daughter, who complained one morning that her butt looked big. "Yes!" the author said. "Big butts do run in our family," and proceeded to dance around singing "Baby Got Back." Her daughter seemed affirmed and happy afterwards.

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## Veta says

[4.5]

This was incredibly good. Also the first academic book on this topic I've read. I really appreciated the style and the methodological approach to assessing and analysing the lenses used to understand fat/fatness/obesity. It was incredibly well researched and completely impartial. I definitely recommend this book to anyone wishing to learn more about how our society's understands fat and how different frames shape the discourse on obesity. I also think this book is essential for any budding body positivity scholar or fat rights activist. I do not think that the academic approach of this book is too alienating. It is well written and quite easy to read.

## Gayle Noble says

Interesting book that takes a look behind the "Obesity Epidemic" headlines. The author explains how some work has been based on extrapolated and estimated figures but are being reported as gospel by the media. She also looks at possible motivations for the way obesity is 'framed' in today's society (as health crisis, as economic problem, etc). Should we be concentrating on fitness rather than body size? After all, being thin does not necessarily mean you are healthy. The author warns that we should ensure that a war on fat does not tip further into a war on fat people. Rating: 4 stars.

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## Taracuda says

A thorough look at how the frames we use impact our understanding of fatness. I was familiar with frames and Healthy at Any Size concepts when I started, but there were still some absolutely new insights that I took away.

A good and thought-provoking read that doesn't pretend to have all of the answers.

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## Jean says

Dense and scholarly, but worth the effort. Thought-provoking study of how and possibly why (\*cough\* drug funding \*cough\*) "obesity" has come to be seen as a moral/medical/public health crisis in our society. A good account of some of the less-ballyhooed studies that indicate there are some health \_benefits\_ to being heavier as well. Not pro-fat nor pro-thin, but an interesting look at society and media and the role they play in such matters. Marred by a couple of unfortunate typos/editing issues, but well worth the read.

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## Peter Mcloughlin says

Here in New England Puritans settled here a long time ago and we have been a nation of morals scolds since the that time. We moralize sex, drugs and rock and roll we crusade against alcohol in the 1920s by introducing prohibition. We want to reform people and wag the finger at people we believe do not show personal responsibility. Thin bodies are not only a symbol of health and beauty but have been moralized into a moral virtue and fat bodies a moral vice. Many assume overweight people have no sense of control, are on the dimmer side of the IQ scale and lay around on the couch all day in front of the TV. The thin body especially for aspiring middle class white women is a sign of worthiness. Eating disorders are a staple of the media. Anorexia Nervosa is get much attention from the media and much sympathetic coverage for its unfortunate victim. So one at the opposite extreme who engages in binge eating is a fat slob who is morally flawed.

I used to be fat I have lost over 100 pounds over the last 2 years and before I did that I felt the pressure from my peers that fat people don't measure up. Seeing as most people who diet gain the weight back in a year (95%) telling people to buck up and lose weight may simply be making unrealistic demands on people who probably have bodies that in this food abundant environment have a set point to corpulence. This book is a breath of fresh air to a scolding culture.

### **Austin Larson says**

I've been looking for a book on this topic for a while since I went to a lecture last fall on "the obesity paradox". The paradox is that obese people are more likely to be diagnosed with a wide variety of conditions but once they are diagnosed, they are likely to have a better outcome than a normal weight person with the same condition. There are an increasing number of papers about situations in which higher body weight is protective.

The author is a sociologist and does not try to address the physiology of overweight. She advances the theory that doctors have driven the narrative of the health crisis of obesity because it is in our financial self interest and because it is the only remaining acceptable form of class discrimination. She paints an interesting picture of the nascent civil rights movement for fat acceptance. She contrasts the portrayal of anorexia and obesity in the media and in the medical literature. One as an organic psychiatric disease and the other as a failure of self-control.

This book gave me a lot to think about and I think that it will have an effect on my practice.

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### **Tara Brabazon says**

A fascinating book that explores 'the frames' around 'fat' bodies. The attention to race and class is excellent, alongside a recognition of the pressure placed on children to conform to an undefined 'norm.'

The 'health at every size' movement is well revealed in this book and builds on the diverse 'frames' configuring the 'normal body' in both science and the media.

Strongly recommended. It is beautifully written, evocative and convincing.

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