

Fat studies conference challenges supersize stereotypes

July 13 2012, by Neil Sands

Cat Pause proudly describes herself as "fat", can live with euphemisms like "curvy", "chunky" or "chubby", but baulks at what she believes are value-laden labels such as "overweight" or "obese".

The US-born academic is a pioneer in the emerging field of [fat](#) studies, organising New Zealand's first conference on the topic at Massey University's Wellington campus on Thursday and Friday.

Fat studies, she explains, is an academic discipline just like history, English or [political science](#), but it examines attitudes towards fat people and challenges the assumption that anyone with a bulging [waistline](#) is unhealthy.

At the conference, scholars from as far afield as the United States and Australia discussed papers such as "Fat hatred and the Left in the time of 'the [obesity epidemic](#)'" and "The role of diagnosis in marginalising corpulence".

"One of the reasons we're so fearful and hateful of fat is that we believe we can read people's bodies," Pause told AFP.

"So when people look at a [fat body](#) like mine, it tells them I'm unhealthy and that this is a diseased body. It tells them I don't ever exercise and eat nothing but junk."

Pause said the reality is that some people are just bigger than others and

fat studies highlighted the need for society to accept the fact, rather than constantly judging fat people and pushing them to lose weight.

One of its first tasks, she said, was to reclaim the word "fat" so it was not used solely as an insult, in much the same way the gay community adopted the term "queer".

People now call themselves fat activists and speak of fat pride, refusing to accept what they say is pressure from the multi-billion weight loss industry to strive for a skinny ideal.

This explains Pause's aversion to "[overweight](#)", which she says implies she is above her perfect weight. She says she has not weighed herself for years and last time she did she tipped the scales at about 130 kilograms (237 pounds).

Similarly, she says "obesity" is a term "used by the medical community to pathologise fat bodies, making it a disease".

-- 'Exploiting insecurities' --

Massey University lecturer Andrew Dickson said the weight-loss industry was built around exploiting the insecurities of fat people.

"We know 95 percent of people who attempt to lose weight will fail to do so, therefore, there is not a weight-loss industry, what they do is sell solutions to weight anxiety," he said.

"We're getting this horrible, obsessive anxiety about weight issues."

Dickson himself said he had never been as stressed as when he reduced his weight from 130 kilograms to 86, obsessively completing endurance runs, dieting constantly and taking prescription medicines to slim down.

Now weighing 100 kilograms, Dickson says he is healthy even though conventional weight charts would classify him as obese, still running about 60 kilometres (37 miles) a week and referring to himself as "the fat athlete".

"I don't do them fast and I'm never going to win... (but) it's not all about looking like Usain Bolt," he said.

Critics say asserting that obesity is not necessarily a major health problem flies in the face of medical evidence about diseases such as diabetes and other issues, a claim disputed by fat activists.

"It's not just how much you weigh for your height, it's where it (fat) is in the liver, pancreas, and places that you can't see," Auckland University of Technology nutritionist Elaine Rush told TVNZ this week.

-- 'Daily' insults --

The fat issues movement, while addressing serious issues, is not without a strain of self-deprecating humour.

Dickson lobbies running clubs to introduce a "Clydesdale class" for hefty athletes, while Pause has a set of bathroom scales from the US where the numbers have been replaced with words like "hot", "perfect" and "sexy".

In the Australian city of Melbourne, a synchronised swimming club for fat women has been set up called Aquaporko.

"If you didn't laugh, you'd cry, we'd all go crazy," said Pause.

Australian activist Kath Read, who blogs as "Fat Heffalump", said many of the jibes directed her way were far from good natured.

"I barely go through a day where I'm not called something nasty on the street by a stranger," she said.

"It's not the kind of people, like teenagers, that you'd expect to be (doing the) abusing. It's by people in business suits, by women my own age -- I'm almost 40 -- by people you'd expect, on the face of it, to be respectable human beings."

Pause said there were laws against racism and sexism but discrimination against fat people was just as commonplace and was not just tolerated but, in a sense promoted, by governments running anti-obesity campaigns.

"It's not illegal to discriminate against someone based on their size, whereas it's illegal in most countries to discriminate based on someone's sex or race, sexual orientation is becoming more protected too," she said.

"I'd like size to become a protected class."

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