

Book Review: Fat Lives: A Feminist Psychological Exploration

by blog admin

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Within the context of the current 'obesity debate', this book investigates the embodied experience of 'being large' from a critical psychological perspective. Using poststructuralist and feminist theories, the author explores the discourses available to and used by self-designated 'fat' individuals, as well as the societal power relationships that are produced by these. Megan O'Branski finds this book is a concise, readable exploration of the intersections of multiple embodied subjectivities competing for the construction of the "ideal" feminine.



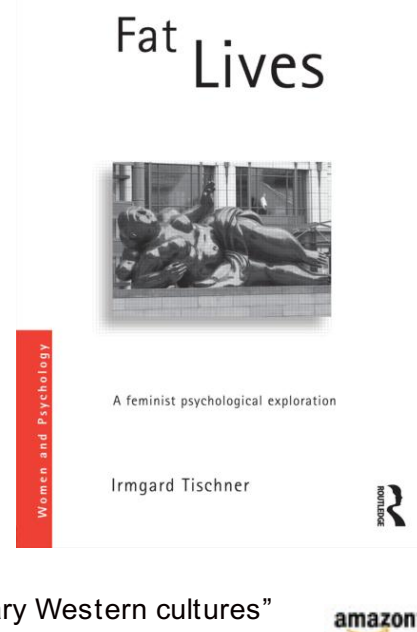
Fat Lives: A Feminist Psychological Exploration. Irmgard Tischner. Routledge. October 2012.

Find this book

Today it seems quite impossible to escape hearing some thing about the so-called obesity epidemic threatening the West. The conversation about weight and obesity teems with frightening (statistical) figures paired with headless images of the overweight. These are not presented as individuals, but are rendered faceless and sexless, juxtaposed against the slim, fit ideal. With *Fat Lives*, Dr. [Irmgard Tischner](#) joins the debate over obesity by examining the relationship between weight and gender and the mounting pressure that individuals, and in particular females, face to achieve and maintain a certain body type through a critical psychological lens.

Tischner's aim in this book is "to extend the critical literature on fat and gender further" by "exploring...the gendered constructions of embodied fat, health, and well-being, and the power relations and conditions of possibilities produced in discourses of body size and gender in contemporary Western cultures" (8). *Fat Lives* is divided into seven chapters, with the first two situating the research within existing literature on obesity, and positioning it theoretically within a Foucauldian/feminist framework. The following three chapters focus on the data collected for the project that follow five themes of "the invisibility of fat women, issues of clothing choice and availability, the constructions of health, responsibility...and the responsible neoliberal citizen, and, finally, gender and fat" (9). Tischner devotes the last empirical chapter entirely to the discussion of gender and fat, because of "[t]he general lack of mention of 'gender' in the women's interviews and the noted difference in engagement with this topic" (9). For this review, I will focus on Tischner's discussion of her theory and methodology, and her final substantive chapter, entitled "Gendering Fat".

"Exploring Fat Lives", the second substantive chapter, establishes the theoretical framework and methodology of *Fat Lives*. Tischner examines the relationship between fat and gender discursively, specifically through Foucauldian discourse analysis. There are, of course, tensions between Foucauldian power analyses and feminism; however the use of Foucault's disciplinary power thesis has proven beneficial to some feminists examining the role of power, particularly patriarchal power, in regulating (and by extension normalising) the bodies of women. Tischner leaves most of the review of her theoretical literature to an appendix, which may present a challenge for readers not familiar with post-structuralism generally. She argues that Foucauldian analysis reveals the impact of power on the production and reproduction of subjectivity – in this case, the production of the "feminine" body. Her use of discursive analysis is a clear and almost intuitive choice for readers familiar with post-structuralism more broadly.



The most interesting parts of “Exploring Fat Lives” were those Tischner dedicated to discussing her methodology, and the inherent complexity in asking interview subjects to discuss their experiences without unintentionally priming certain responses. One of the concerns Tischner identifies is with her recruitment material, in which she requested people with “large” bodies “instead of ‘fat’, ‘overweight’, ‘obese’, or any other descriptive term” (38). She acknowledges that this choice alone could have considerable implications for her results, as her use of the descriptor “large” would attract a specific identity-group while rejecting others. Readers who have engaged with this type of analysis in their own work will immediately relate, and those less familiar will gain a good sense of the problems with post-structuralist methodologies.

The final substantive chapter, “Gendering Fat”, is the real core of the book. In her introduction, Tischner recognizes the “curious” (9) nature of having a chapter devoted to discussing gender and fat when the previous chapters take fat to be a gendered issue. Her rationale is that given the lack of direct engagement with the gendered politics of fat on the part of her female subjects, which was in direct contrast with the responses of her male subjects, it was worthwhile grant this discussion its own chapter (9). Indeed, “Gendering Fat” is a compelling addition to the relationship between the obesity debate and embodied gender. Tischner argues that “[w]omen’s and men’s (fat) bodies, femininity and masculinity are construed in qualitatively different ways and inscribed with different meanings” (94). She concludes that while men certainly face pressure to maintain a lean physique, a man’s fatness does not exclude him from masculinity – in contrast, a woman’s fatness may obscure her femininity by failing to conform to the ideal “small” feminine figure. The slightness of a woman’s figure is important as it positions her as physically inferior to men, and therefore passive, implying that regulatory discourses perpetuating the desirability of the slight woman are directly connected to the disciplinary power of patriarchy. Fat women stand outside this normalisation by rejecting the inherent passivity of a lack of mass, and are inherently problematic.

Presentation is a relatively consistent issue in this book. Tischner makes frequent use of excerpts from interviews and focus groups she conducted in researching this project, and these selections are presented completely verbatim. While this undoubtedly preserved the speakers’ words without too much interference from the author, an important consideration when operating within theoretical frameworks so focused upon discursive practices, Tischner’s choice to include not only her subjects’ stammers but her own nonverbal murmurs in the text was confusing, and its purpose not clearly relevant for the reader’s understanding. The result was quite the opposite of what Tischner presumably intended, for her interjections into her speakers’ narratives so muddled the text that it was quite difficult to read, and therefore the speakers’ words were largely lost. Occasionally this feeling of disconnection extended to other parts of the book – Tischner clearly links concepts from one chapter back to previous discussions, but it leaves the reader wondering if the same linkages could have been established through a different organization of her themes.

Fat Lives is a concise, readable exploration of the intersections of multiple embodied subjectivities competing for the construction of the “ideal” feminine. This book would be a good choice for anyone interested in examining the effects of regulatory discourse on the embodied experiences of individuals, and the ways in which individuals may resist or subvert those discourses, although Tischner’s positioning her review of the theoretical literature, it would perhaps be better suited to those already familiar with the critical theories utilised in the work.

Megan O’Branski is a third year PhD candidate in the School of Geography, Politics, and Sociology at Newcastle University. She received her BA in Political Science from the University of Connecticut in 2009. Her research focuses on the intersection of performativity, gender, and the weaponization and brutalization of the body in ethnic violence. Further research interests include sexuality, security studies, and zombies. [Read more reviews by Megan.](#)