

Book Review: Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement by Charlotte Cooper

Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement, by Charlotte Cooper, not only offers a thorough history of the fat acceptance movement, which seeks to change societal attitudes towards fat people, but also provides insight into activist practices more broadly. Dimitrinka Atanasova praises this accessible book as an important read for those working in the field of critical weight studies and fat studies and for showing how academic research can be mobilised to reach audiences beyond the academy.

***Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*. Charlotte Cooper. Hammer/On Press. 2016.**

When I reached for *Fat Activism: A Radical Social Movement*, I expected to read a historical account of what is often seen as a controversial social movement. If weight or fat is linked to obesity, variously defined as [a contributor to chronic diseases](#) or [a chronic disease in its own right](#), how can we accept it? The book, however, surprised me. While it does offer a thorough and timely history of the fat acceptance movement – broadly described as a social movement seeking to change societal attitudes towards fat people – it does more than that. Charlotte Cooper has an important message to researchers who have analysed [the framing of obesity](#). The book also gives a rare glimpse into the actual doing of (fat) activism, while at the same time offering a critical account of the fat acceptance movement. Finally, being the product of Cooper's own doctoral research, this book is a prime example of where aspirations to make our original contributions to knowledge more accessible may take us.

An especially important aspect of Cooper's book is her message to scholars who have used [the theoretical framework of framing](#) to study how obesity and weight issues are socially constructed. This [large and growing body of work](#) has demonstrated that weight can be understood in different ways by different groups in society. Here, one frame would be the fat activist frame and another the medicalised frame, according to which fat and weight are problematic and in need of treatment due to their impact on physical health. As Cooper rightly observes, most framing studies present such frames as equal. But the proponents of these different frames may have unequal resources at their disposal. Thinking of, for example, weight-loss organisations and fat activist organisations and the frames that they 'sponsor', it is immediately obvious that they have a very different command of resources, which has possible implications for the success of their messages.

What additionally makes Cooper's book invaluable, and not only to the more obvious group of researchers interested in obesity, fat studies and critical weight studies, is that it offers a rare view into the actual doing of (fat) activism. The details and examples of doing (fat) activism found in the book are of relevance to activists as well as to social movement researchers who define and document what constitutes activism. Doing (fat) activism, as we learn, can encompass a broad spectrum of activities. These span from political process activism (such as campaigning for, and putting in place, legislation prohibiting weight-based discrimination in the workplace) to creative and cultural expressions (such as creating art).

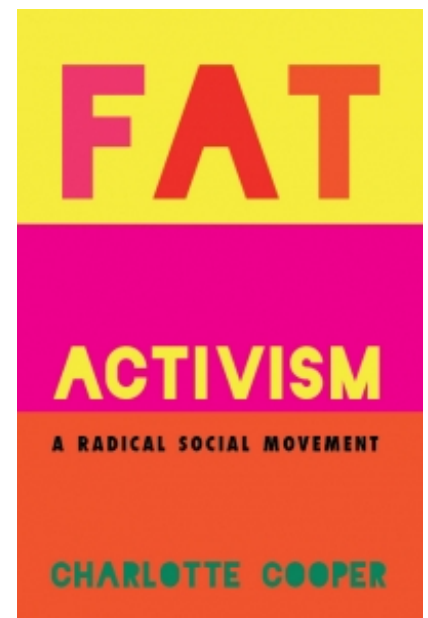




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Cooper's book is also intriguing because it is not a self-congratulatory praise of fat activism, and it is often thanks to this type of constructive criticism that ideas and projects advance. Playing on the meaning of the word 'movement' as in 'social movement', but also 'movement from one place to another and from one point in time to another', Cooper shows that fat activism has travelled a long way since [The Fat Liberation Manifesto of 1973](#), but has now reached a point of stagnation. This stagnation, according to Cooper, has something to do with certain types of fat activism becoming more acceptable as well as a tendency to use proxies for fat activism.

With respect to the former, Cooper is critical of how certain types of fat activism have become more acceptable and more visible in the public eye. This is, for example, the case with 'healthist fat activism' mostly associated with the [Health At Every Size movement](#), which is a branch of the fat acceptance movement where activists have tried to prove that one can be fat and healthy at the same time. Cooper argues that as a direct response to claims that fat and weight are bad because they are connected to ill health, this may be a good tactic, but it also divides fat people into healthy and unhealthy: in other words, into 'good' and 'bad'. Overall, the key message here is that there should not be just one 'right' way of doing fat activism.

With respect to proxies for fat activism, Cooper draws our attention to how fat activism is often equated with, or reduced to, for example, the [National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance \(NAAFA\)](#). While NAAFA may have been important for the fat acceptance movement, it is not all that there is to it. Cooper shows how fat activism is more multifaceted and uses the term 'proxies for fat activism' to refer to practices of equating it to single aspects. In fact, as an organisation founded and run by male 'fat admirers', Cooper argues that NAAFA is at odds with the radical feminist origins of the fat acceptance movement and has perhaps, on the downside, contributed to the movement's current staleness and loss of touch with its foundational radical energy.

Finally, the book can serve as an example of how doctoral research can be 'translated' for a wider audience. Cooper refers to academic concepts and theories, but explains them in plain and accessible language. This can be evidenced through her definitions of, for example, 'neoliberalism' as 'the emphasis on individualism over collectivism', and of 'healthism' as the idea that 'health is a moral project that is the responsibility of individuals'.

In sum, the book will be a useful read for academics who approach fat/weight and obesity from different perspectives including, but not limited to, framing, fat studies and critical weight studies. It will also be of interest to

social movement researchers in giving practical ideas to activists and doctoral students looking to make their research available to a wider readership. The book may additionally catch the attention of researchers interested in language use and its implications, particularly at the point when Cooper mentions how 'fat' is more emotionally charged than 'weight', and therefore talking of 'fat bias' instead of 'weight bias' is potentially significant.

Dr Dimitrinka Atanasova examined the framing of obesity in online newspapers in her doctoral research. She is interested in health and science communication and is currently a Research Assistant working on a study that explores the role of participation in creative arts for mental health and well-being. Find her on Twitter as [@dbatanasova](#). [Read more reviews by Dimitrinka Atanasova](#).

Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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