

Analyzing Fatness and Identity through Queer Theory

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Introduction

Fat professionals often navigate discrimination in student affairs, yet they contribute valuable skills and expertise to enhance the overall effectiveness of the field. The very concept of “fitting in” is one that is not reserved only for fat student affairs professionals, but many professionals that hold historically excluded identities. In Silvis & Santos (2018), fat student affairs professionals highlight the various challenges they face in higher education. Their narratives depict how their bodies are policed and encouraged to “fit” within a certain type of “normal” body. The article specifically focuses on the hiring practices within higher education and how it can be oppressive and discriminatory towards fat practitioners, and especially for fat Queer and Trans People of Color (QTPOC) professionals (Silvis & Santos, 2018). The narratives in the article explain how it is impossible to separate fatness and race, fatness and gender, fatness and sexuality, etc., even though it is often asked of individuals within higher education. The article touches on concepts of Muñoz’ disidentification, encouraging readers to consider the connection between identity, power, and resistance in higher education. The article explains that fat practitioners must navigate institutional norms, oppressive practices, and identify resistance frameworks within higher education. By utilizing guiding principles of queer theory, scholars can challenge normative constructs that are barriers to fat liberation within higher education. This analysis encourages a more inclusive examination of the nuanced narratives surrounding body size & institutional harm within the context of higher education and fat liberation.

Critical Analysis

Fat professionals face discrimination across various professions, and higher education is no different in this regard. Whether that be through the hiring process, the onboarding to the institution, or the institutional norms themselves, higher education operates under anti-fat bias, constantly. This anti-fat bias takes many forms, including traditional student desks where the

desk and chair are attached, not carrying larger sizes in university bookstores, and conversations surrounding what is and what isn't considered "professional", to name a few.

Queer theory invites scholars to lead with curiosity and to dismantle pre-existing harmful societal norms. Intentionally employing the term "fat" serves as a conscious choice. By embracing a word historically used to marginalize larger bodies, fat people cultivate a powerful act of resistance. This action is an example of deliberately reclaiming words that have historically made society uncomfortable with the exact thing that causes them discomfort. Being able to identify fat-friendly spaces that honor one's body is absolutely paramount. Silvis & Santos (2018) emphasizes the importance of an awareness of the fat experience within higher education. While awareness is crucial, the next step involves considering what happens once everyone is aware of the discrimination that fat professionals face within higher education. This is one of the limitations of using queer theory as a critical lens with this article. Meaning, that by using queer theory, we are left with more questions than answers. This can make it extremely difficult to lead through action.

Queer theory can be a productive lens to use when talking about fat liberation within higher education. However, using the lens of queer theory comes with an array of limitations. As is true with most affinity groups, there are varied perspectives within fat liberation on what it is and what it isn't. The terminology and language used in queer theory does not always align with the constant discourse surrounding body size and fat liberation. Folks have a multitude of different histories and experiences that all influence the historical and social context of the fat liberation movement – thereby considering any concept of "normalcy" to be offensive to begin with. Further, queer theory's emphasis on deconstructing normative structures might not be the most effective approach for addressing issues related to body size within higher ed.

Synthesis

Fat practitioners demonstrating authenticity on their campus could manifest in a variety of ways, as facing institutional support from non-fat allies can help fat practitioners in their fight

for basic human rights and human decency within student affairs. Queer theory suggests that in order to engage in fat liberation productively, interest convergence might be the best option. Instead of non-fat allies asking “how can I help *them*”?, changing the question to be “how can I help *us*”?, further re-iterating that the discrimination fat practitioners face is a collective issue. By engaging in this critical dialogue, a community of care is created. The goal is not comprehension, but rather, compassion – it’s about humanity and humility.

Queer theory encourages the use of question asking to challenge normative expectations in higher education, focusing on identity and norms, power dynamics, institutional practices, language, resistance, and advocacy. By using queer theory as a lens to engage in fat liberation, the concept of what an inclusive community could look like is heavily influenced by our perceptions of productivity. By using queer theory to analyze the experiences of professionals within higher education who identify as fat, it offers a framework to challenge institutional and societal norms and queers the conversation. Through this approach, scholars are required to dismantle any notion of “normalcy”, something that queer theory and fat liberation consistently aim to do – specifically surrounding professionalism within higher education.

The utilization of queer theory in analyzing and critiquing the experiences of fat practitioners within higher education allows for the identification of the ways in which institutions create norms that impact individuals of varying body sizes. How do we determine which bodies are “normal”? How do we decide which bodies are “the most productive”? The fostering of a community that is both accepting and supportive is of the utmost importance to practitioners that have been historically excluded and marginalized. Employing queer theory as a critical lens to fat liberation enables the deconstruction of pre-existing, harmful narratives, paving the way for a more comprehensive narrative that centralizes the principles of fat liberation within institutional contexts.

References

Silvis, J. A., & Santos, A. J. (2018). Get Out of That Chair: How Fat Professionals Fit in Student Affairs. *The Vermont Connection*, 39(1). <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol39/iss1/14/>