

Assessing Fatphobia in Public Library Programming: Is Wellness Size-Inclusive?

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ABSTRACT

This content analysis of wellness-related library programs and programming materials seeks to discover the perception of larger bodies within library health programming. Fatphobia or sizeism is prevalent in the wellness industry and within healthcare. Libraries are trusted resources for health information. Informed by the fields of fat studies, we approached health programming in libraries by asking if larger people would feel welcome and able to attend. We examined twenty libraries' programs over the past year as well as library conference programs and programming materials from several websites. There was little evidence of explicit sizeism, but some resources reproduced sizeist stereotypes and language. This presentation takes a fat pedagogy approach to focus on methods for ensuring access to all and expanding current definitions of inclusivity so that people with larger bodies recognize that libraries are welcoming spaces.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Public Libraries; Social Justice; Community Engagement; Specific Populations; Critical Librarianship.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Fatphobia; Sizeism; Public Health; Library Programming

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INTRODUCTION

Contributing to community health has become essential for public libraries, and public health advocates increasingly see libraries as a resource that contributes to population wellness. According to Philbin et al. (2019), “unlike other service-providing institutions libraries are widely trusted by the public... [making] them an opportune space for the coordination and delivery of health-promoting services” (p. 192). To build this trust, librarians have created and refined guidelines that reflect and honor the variety of human experiences and needs (see, e.g., ALA, n.d.; CFLA/FCAB, 2018; ALA, 2021; ALA, 2024). Meanwhile, fat advocates point out that larger bodies are often rejected or excluded from community spaces, including those associated with health (e.g., doctor’s offices, health clubs) and education (e.g., classrooms, auditoriums). Unfortunately, these concerns are often met with medicalization and stereotypes.

Informed by the field of fat studies and inclusive of fat voices, this project seeks to explore whether sizeism associated with health and wellness culture is present in library health programming. This project uses a “fat pedagogy” (Cameron & Russell, 2016) frame to offer recommendations to address sizeism and support library workers’ and graduate library and information science (LIS) programs’ existing commitments to respect and inclusivity. Libraries, as trusted institutions and health partners, can take a significant step in expanding what it means to be inclusive and accessible for all.

LITERATURE REVIEW

To contextualize our project, we provide a brief introduction to the field of fat studies. We then discuss weight-related prejudice and discrimination (sizeism) in various societal contexts, including in libraries. Finally, we discuss health programs in North American public libraries.

Defining Fat Studies

Emerging in the mid-2000s, fat studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarly inquiry that works to expose and critique societal narratives that devalue people due to their weight (Wann, 2009; Rothblum, 2012). Fat studies is similar to other fields of critical scholarship (e.g., critical race studies, feminist studies, queer studies). Fat studies scholars oppose the medicalization of body weight diversity (Wann, 2009), which treats fat people as diseased, dangerous, and problematic (Brown, 2016) and enables “health”-based prejudice.

As a result, many fat scholars oppose the use of the medical terms “overweight” and “obese” and instead prefer to reclaim the word “fat” as a neutral adjective to describe larger bodies. They also critique “anti-obesity” public health campaigns and dominant societal narratives that equate lower weights with health (see, e.g., Lyons, 2009; Mackert & Shorb, 2022) while highlighting the limitations of statistical studies correlating higher weights and health issues (Burgard, 2009). In contrast, the Health and Every Size (HAES) movement has been viewed by fat studies scholars and activists as a productive path toward non-stigmatizing health promotion (Lyons, 2009; Burgard, 2009).

Sizeism

Sizeism, fatphobia, and weight stigma are terms linked to prejudice or discrimination based on weight. Sizeism negatively impacts the physical and mental health, employment, personal relationships, and education of fat people. Puhl and Heuer (2010) found that weight stigma does not motivate affected individuals to lose weight. Instead, it causes stress and under-utilization of health care, leading to misdiagnoses and/or inappropriate treatments, increased stress, and mistrust of health providers among fat people (Chrisler & Barney, 2017). Christian et al. (2023) found that weight stigma was associated with eating disorders, depression, and anxiety.

Sizeism also has adverse effects at work, including in hiring, promotions, wages, and terminations (Puhl and Brownell, 2001; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Hunt & Rhodes, 2018). In addition, sizeism affects personal relationships. Puhl and Heuer (2009) report that fat people often face “obesity” stigma from friends and family members, and Puhl and Brownell (2001) report children are less likely to want a fat child as a friend. In education, fat children lack support from school personnel (Cruz da Silva Souza & Peres Gonçalves, 2022) and are perceived negatively by teachers (Langford et al., 2022). Teachers may give lower grades or expect lower performance from fat students (Finn et al., 2019; Kenney et al., 2015). Learning may be impacted due to pain and discomfort caused by spaces and furniture designed for small bodies (Hetrick & Attig, 2009; Stewart et al., 2023).

Sizeism in Libraries

Research on sizeism in libraries is limited. Angell and Price (2012) found that fat studies books were miscategorized as medical materials. Versluis et al. (2020) examined the intersectional impact of being fat and female in library work, finding fat people are often considered lazy, self-serving, out of control, stupid, and/or immoral, which affects both their work with the public and with colleagues. Chabot (2021) found that weight capacity information was often absent from library furniture catalogs and the availability of wider chairs was limited, magnifying fatphobic messages about who belongs in the physical space of libraries. Cheveney (2022) argued for including fat liberation in critical librarianship and fat pedagogy approaches in information literacy instruction. Chabot and Hill (2023) issued a call to combat fatphobia in library work through familiarization with fat studies, listening to fat perspectives, and building related scholarship. Galasso (2023) also emphasized listening to fat perspectives and discussed the need to include fatness in library diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and accessibility work. Similarly, Rutledge et al. (2024) provided recommendations for including fatness in DEI efforts in libraries.

Health Programming in Libraries

Public health and community well-being are among the most pressing needs for libraries to address (Rich, 2024). Luo (2018) reports that up to 60% of reference questions are about health. Both public and academic libraries offer health-related programs, including those related

to physical health (e.g., healthy cooking and gentle exercise) (Elia, 2019) and mental health (Carlisle, 2018). In some libraries, social work trainees provide support for vulnerable people and train librarians in mental health or trauma-informed principles (Johnson et al., 2023). Libraries host health clinics and partner with health care providers for programming (Morgan et al., 2018), rather than replacing “highly skilled health or social service professionals” (Morgan et al., 2016, p. 2034). Programming partners perceive public libraries to be “trusted connectors, community experts, and organizations that share goals with health promotion organizations” (Lenstra & McGehee, 2022, p. 66). Libraries become health hubs through “cross-sectoral collaborations” (Morgan et al., 2016, p. 2034).

While it is clear that libraries promote health, there is little research on how libraries address weight. Whitt (2020) found that few libraries had the capacity to provide “obesity prevention” services but did like the idea; Flaherty & Miller (2016) reported on a health assessment and pedometer lending program in rural North Carolina to prevent health problems, including “obesity.”

Research Questions

Over the last two decades, fat studies as a research field and sizeism as a research topic have demonstrated the diverse negative impacts of prejudice against fat people. Health is often used as a justification for this prejudice. Examining health programs in North American libraries serves as a logical entry point to locate and eliminate sizeism in libraries. More specifically, this project asks, *how does library health and wellness programming contribute to or challenge the dominant societal narrative of anti-fatness?*

METHOD

To investigate these questions, we examined library programming in the United States and Canada. Data included library conference materials, public library program descriptions, and resources used by library workers to develop health-related programs and resources to provide a broad picture of the narrative around health and weight in libraries. Library programming information was gathered from websites of twenty urban library systems across Canada and the U.S. The membership lists of the Urban Libraries Council (ULC) and the Canadian Urban Libraries Council (CULC) were used to create the sample of library websites. Ten libraries were randomly chosen from each list using a pattern of every tenth listing for the ULC and every fifth for the CULC (see Appendix A). Library conference materials included online proceedings from the Ontario Library Association conference, the largest conference for Canadian library workers. Other resources included the websites of Network of the National Library of Medicine (U.S.), Web Junction, and the American Library Association-sponsored site, The Programming Librarian (see Appendix B).

Data collection progressed similarly across sites, using a combination of browsing and targeted search. Sites were searched using the terms “health” and “wellness” to gather relevant information. Additionally, sites were browsed for relevant programming not captured in targeted searches. Data was collected in February and March 2024 and examined via open coding for

explicit and implicit discussions of bodies, weight, eating, and health. The group met to compare approaches and results.

RESULTS

United States

All U.S. public libraries examined offered some type of health-related programming. Mental health/wellness, healthy eating/nutrition, and fitness/exercise were most common. There was a diverse selection of offerings and also recurring programs (e.g., yoga; lactation/postpartum support; fall prevention). Many programs indicated that they were run by an outside partner, such as a hospital or health agency/nonprofit. We found no health-related program title or descriptions that focused on weight loss though one mentioned burning calories, but visual promotional materials rarely included people of diverse weight or size.

Canada

All Canadian public libraries offered some type of health-related programming, but the quality and availability of programming was not consistent across Canada. Libraries often partnered with local health authorities to offer programs, inviting a medicalized approach to health rather than a holistic one. Programs for seniors often described physical activities and requirements for the event, but not for other age groups. Only one event mentioned weight loss directly, but some programs linked lifestyle to heart problems and diabetes.

Network of the National Library of Medicine (NNLM)

NNLM (2021) provides a variety of online health information resources used by health professionals, librarians, and others within and outside of the United States. Searching for weight yielded references to weight loss, healthy weight, and weight management or control. We focused on NNLM's Reading Club, which suggests books and online materials about food and nutrition. There were few overtly sizeist recommendations, though one resource encourages readers to calculate their Body Mass Index and links to governmental sources that explicitly connect weight and health. It also warns about deceptive weight loss products.

American Library Association (ALA) Programming Librarian

The ALA Programming Librarian website offers a searchable database of replicable programs on many topics, including health and wellness. Many program ideas involve physical activity or nutrition. Some programs promote weight loss and use language that could feel unwelcoming for fat patrons. For example, there were implied connections between fat people and "gluttonous" holidays or "sedentary" lifestyles. Some fitness programs discussed physical accommodations for senior patrons but not fat patrons.

Ontario Library Association (OLA) Conference Programs

OLA presentations rarely focused on health or wellness. Relevant presentations took a broad approach, discussing concepts such as movement, cooking, connection, food, consumer health, and partnerships with health agencies. No programs explicitly discussed fatness or weight

loss. Instead, language focused on the concept of “literacy” in relation to health and wellness. Terms included “health literacy,” “food literacy,” “food illiteracy”, and “wellness and digital literacy.”

LIMITATIONS

The researchers recognize methodological limitations. First, online library calendars varied in their filtering and sorting capabilities. Second, observations were limited to online descriptions and promotional materials; programs were not attended in person. Finally, the review was limited to urban libraries, with rural libraries not reflected in the sample.

DISCUSSION

The findings indicate that North American public libraries regularly offered health and wellness programming and were supported in these endeavors by health agencies and professional development opportunities. Programs often included nutrition and fitness but rarely addressed weight or weight bias specifically. Evidence of explicit sizeism was limited, but concerns of implicit bias remained. Some ALA and NNLM resources reproduced sizeist stereotypes and language. In addition, OLA use of the word “literacy” in the singular suggested only one appropriate understanding, rather than the more nuanced approach of plural “literacies.”

Recent library programming generally did not promote problematic narratives of anti-fatness. However, programming also did not challenge the dominant societal narrative of anti-fatness. Explicit welcoming or consideration of larger bodies was rare, and few visual materials depicted diverse body sizes. While some programs were described as accessible in relation to movement or ability to participate from a sitting position, this was not the norm.

These omissions can create an atmosphere of uncertainty for fat people. Consumer culture is inundated with sizeist messages permeating all areas of life, including physical and mental health, employment, personal relationships, and education (Puhl and Heuer, 2010; Chrisler & Barney, 2017; Christian et al. 2023). For fat people, it can be a risk to come to an event on health or wellness, as they may be unsure how they will be treated or welcomed in a given space. Thus, it is important to be explicit when describing library programs and framing community initiatives and inclusivity in graduate LIS programs.

Based on this analysis, we view an opportunity for libraries and LIS programs to incorporate “fat pedagogy” into their understanding of library programming, particularly in the realm of health and wellness. Fat pedagogy seeks to “disrupt the reproduction, legitimization, and promotion of dominant ‘obesity’ discourses, while offering alternative approaches that promote body acceptance and health for people of all shapes and sizes” (Cameron & Watkins, 2018, p. 1). Public library programming is a site of public teaching and learning. Therefore, without a deliberately inclusive pedagogical approach, libraries are potentially a “political site of privilege and oppression” (Cameron & Russell, 2016, p. 2).

RECOMMENDATIONS

These recommendations represent fat pedagogy in action. They apply to graduate programs in LIS and could be helpful in a variety of courses on information sources and services, public and academic libraries, and accessibility, as well as courses focused on health information. Our recommendations to public libraries include both staff and program promotion and implementation.

For LIS programs, consider:

- including body size as part of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) education, in alignment with ALA Standards for Accreditation (2023)
- challenging sizeist comments and model inclusion in the classroom. Cameron and Russell's *The Fat Pedagogy Reader* (2016) may be a helpful starting place for educators looking to incorporate these issues in the classroom

For staff, consider:

- including sizeism along with other types of bias during staff training
- focusing on sizeist discrimination against library users and staff in onboarding materials (Rutledge et al., 2024)
- including anti-discrimination wording, including sizeism, in space use and partnership materials for outside organizations

For library programming, consider:

- assessing current programs and spaces for size inclusiveness, including chairs for diverse body sizes (Chabot, 2021)
- selecting routes for movement-based outdoor programs that are accessible to wheelchair users and people with limited mobility
- including people of diverse sizes on library communications and program advertisements
- explicitly welcoming diverse bodies in program promotional materials

CONCLUSION

Published materials are only one outward representation of what happens in libraries and may not reflect the lived reality of all fat library users. However, published materials can serve as evidence of good-faith efforts toward inclusivity. The provided recommendations aim to facilitate a deeper level of accessibility and connection for library users of all sizes.

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APPENDIX A

Library Websites Reviewed

<u>Escondido Public Library</u>	California
<u>Sacramento Public Library</u>	California
<u>Sonoma County Library</u>	California
<u>DC Public Library</u>	Washington, DC
<u>Clayton County Library System</u>	Georgia
<u>Carmel Clay Public Library</u>	Indiana
<u>Iowa City Public Library</u>	Iowa
<u>Shreve Memorial Library</u>	Louisiana
<u>Springfield City Library</u>	Massachusetts
<u>St. Charles City-County Library</u>	Missouri
<u>Brampton Public Library</u>	Ontario
<u>Calgary Public Library</u>	Alberta
<u>Fraser Valley Regional Library</u>	British Columbia
<u>Halifax Public Libraries</u>	Nova Scotia
<u>Kitchener Public Library</u>	Ontario
<u>London Public Library</u>	Ontario
<u>Mississauga Public Library</u>	Ontario
<u>Okanagan Regional Library</u>	British Columbia
<u>Red Deer Public Library</u>	Alberta
<u>Saskatoon Public Library</u>	Saskatchewan

APPENDIX B

Library Professional Resources Used for Analysis

- Ontario Public Library Association (Canada) conference programs, 2016-2024
- Network of the National Library of Medicine (US)
- Web Junction
- The Programming Librarian
- Let's Move in Libraries - Healthy Eating and Living in the Library
- American Library Association - health programming ideas