

Is this culture making me look fat?

Review of Tischner, I. (2013). *Fat Lives*. A feminist psychological exploration. New York: Routledge.

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Tischner's theoretically nuanced and well-argued book examines the embodied experience of large women. She uses feminist and poststructuralist theories to explore the discourses available to fat women in our society and the resulting power relations. Illustrating some of the book's important insights, the informant Scrumptz relates how she was stuck in a turnstile at a football game and how this humiliating event made it into the national press. Contrary to prevalent reductionistic approaches, this anecdote depicts that fatness is not an individual attribute, but constructed in relation to a social and material context. Large bodies are not problems in themselves. They only become problems in relation to a particular kind of environment with turnstiles, airplane seats, and fashion clothing that are too small for some bodies. The anecdote also illustrates how fat people become visible and hence disempowered. Like the inmates in Bentham's Panopticon, they are subjected to the evaluative gaze of a disciplining guard who cannot be seen—a metaphor for social judgment that is diffuse and therefore difficult to spot and address.

Social judgment moves even further out of awareness as women internalize it, regulating themselves in relation to social standards, even when no one is watching or judging, constraining their freedom. For example, Tischner's informants say they are chronically self-conscious about eating in public because they have experienced judgment in the past. They publicly eat according to imagined social standards and, feeling deprived, continue to eat what they really want at home. These women thus do not regulate eating based on physiological cues, such as satiety, or personal choice, but in relation to a social struggle; they eat out of rebellion first. However, because they do so secretly, they inadvertently achieve the opposite, namely reinforcing the infantilization implied in social prescriptions of what and how much people should eat. More general, the book vividly illustrates how weight issues occupy a significant portion of a fat woman's conscious awareness, directing behavior and constraining life chances, such as when small-sized job uniforms detract self-conscious large women from applying for a position.

To what extent does "Fat Lives" help us understand fat lives? Lives and the phenomena that Tischner seeks to understand are embodied, culturally embedded, and dynamic. Yet her methodological choices focus more narrowly on decontextualized individuals, offering us static snapshots of their intellectualized experiences, and thereby conceal important cultural, embodied, and developmental dynamics. For example, Tischner does not tell us who her informants are, besides that they are fat, and what they do. Decontextualizing the women from their particular cultures makes it harder to appreciate Tischner's important point that fatness is a cultural construction. To tease out the co-construction of culture and fatness, what needs to be studied is not fat women, but some kind of composite unit of analysis, such as fatness-within-a-particular-culture-in-relation-to-other-cultures. For example, last Thanksgiving, a New York Times art critic criticized a ballerina, who played the Sugar Plum Fairy in *The Nutcracker*, for having "eaten one sugarplum too many" and a male dancer for "sampling half the Sweet realm." The critic responded to a deluge of reader outrage by pointing to ballet's body size standards,

which differ from those of society. The example of the fat ballet dancers challenges Tischner's choice to sample "large" women in the abstract. There are no fat women outside of a particular culture. Fatness does not reside in a particular body size, but in relation to specified cultural standards. To serve the emancipatory aims that Tischner pursues, it would be informative to compare the affordances of one cultural discourse to those of other socially available discourses, as opposed to judging a discourse by abstractly conceived standards of social fairness, which is how Tischner concludes the book.

Cultural comparisons, however, do not only serve the analyst, but also the cultural participant. For instance, introducing a different ballet performance at Lincoln Center, which coincided with fashion week in the same location, a male dancer joked with his audience about how disorienting the beautiful, thin models were for the dancers, who usually take it for granted that they are the thinnest and most beautiful people around. Because Tischner does not position her women in a particular culture, it is difficult to see those aspects of identity construction that take place at the interstices of various cultures and to track their dynamic interplay. Embodied identity is not only the private agentic act of deploying cultural resources, which is what Tischner focuses on, but a public and evolving conversation among diverse stakeholders located in different cultures, which here include public intellectuals, the larger national culture, the ballet culture, and related professional cultures focused on aesthetic refinement. Because the male dancer was located at the intersection of different cultures, he could marshal them in relation to each other through irony, increasing his self-constructive freedom. Freedom thus comes not only from reforming a particular culture through activism with specific agenda items, which is the path that Tischner advocates. It may also emerge from the conversation of one culture with a contrasting one, as was the case for the fat dancer, and can be suppressed when conversing cultures all point in the same direction, as might have been the case for Tischner's fat informants. The culture-relational approach therefore opens up a different role for the activist, which involves facilitating culture-evolutionary processes, versus advocating planned political agendas.

In her comprehensive and insightful theoretical discussion, Tischner points to the shortcomings of Cartesian perspectives, such as traditional cognitive psychology, which splits the mind from the body and prioritizes the mind, as well as semiotic approaches, which treat the body as a socially inscribed text. She favors a phenomenological approach that unites mind, body, and world at a pre-reflective level of lived, sensuous experience. Tischner data, however, primarily tells us how the fat women think about their bodies. But to what extent and how do the women relate to their bodies in sensuous and felt ways? And how does this relation evolve? Perhaps more importantly, do the missing narratives of embodied feeling represent a methodological oversight? Or do they suggest a deeper insight about the women's culturally generated suppression of such feeling?

For example, in my research with investment bankers (Michel, 2011), I found that the industry's hard-charging work ethic caused bankers to identify with their minds and suppress feeling their bodies because heeding body cues would have prevented them from working punishing hours. After a few years of ignoring body cues, bankers experienced physical breakdowns, which forced the body into awareness, changing its status from a passive object to a malicious antagonist that thwarted cherished goals. As bankers fought their bodies, breakdowns exacerbated and forced some bankers to engage their bodies differently, namely as a knowing

subject that showed them better ways of working. This example illustrates that while a Cartesian dualism, in which the mind treats the body as a passive and suppressed object, may be theoretically limiting when held synthetically *a priori*, it accurately describes how people can experience their bodies under specific cultural conditions. Perhaps the fat women's self-conscious regulation toward social standards generated a similar suppression of body cues, which could explain why the felt body is absent from Tischner's data. Exploring this absence thus might have unveiled an important aspect of the fat experience.

The bankers' example also illustrates the importance of developmental analysis for understanding fat lives. Perhaps, similar to the bankers' experience, the more intense the women's suppression of their bodies, the more unsustainable the women's situation becomes and the greater the potential to reconnect with their bodies. Tischner's informants understand the importance of development, for example, when they explain how present behaviors developed from prior experiences, such as the evolution of secret eating from public shaming experiences. Similar to how constraint worked on the bankers, the women recall the shame and despair in which the eating pattern traps them, a constraint that—paradoxically—may also generate awareness and freedom in the longer term. Strong emotions forcefully compel the women to inquire into what influences their eating, how they feel about their eating, and what they can do about undesired aspects, which, in turn, makes visible cultural constraints that trap all of us, but remain hidden unless we experience them in extreme ways. Because Tischner does not pursue these leads, she fails to potentially reveal other paths to emancipation, besides activism. Sociocultural researchers recognize that a developmental approach is not a specialized methodological concern, but that one only truly understands a phenomenon when one tracks it over time (e.g., Wertsch, 1991). A developmental approach also empowers emancipatory agendas. It can help us understand the unsustainability of extreme constraint can endogenously liberate persons.

References

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