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Becoming “the fat girl”: Acquisition of an unfit identity

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Synopsis

This article offers a feminist post-structuralist theory of fat based on body narratives of diverse women who recount becoming the “fat girl” within a Canadian context. Through examining cultural messages concerning fatness and fitness conveyed to contributors in childhood, it analyzes intersections of personal body histories with broader social histories. The article documents how devaluing perceptions of fat frame participants as “unfit” and how disparaging attributions of size interwoven with other differences disqualify their gender. Size stereotypes surface throughout accounts as a key contributor to women's eating and exercise practices that crystallize in their greater susceptibility to engage in problem eating and avoid activity. A difficult double bind also is created through persistent negative perceptions that obstruct participants' efforts at establishing credible feminine or tomboy identities. While anti-fat messages compromise their physical abilities and identity choices, women show creativity at self-making, mediating differences with improvisational identities as a constant and dynamic process.

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