The Self-Protective Properties of Stigma within the Fat Admirer Community

By

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Abstract

  Due to their seemingly abnormal sexual preferences, Fat Admirers represent a group of stigmatized individuals who challenge Western ideals of beauty. This research investigates the self-protective strategies of Fat Admirers. I show how the sharing of stigmatizing experiences in a Fat Admirer online community helps structure an individual's understanding of their identity that acts as a fourth self-protective strategy. The Fat Admirer identity consists of a stigmatized self in which individuals implement strategies that buffer against stigma in an online community setting. This research uses Crocker and Major's (1989) conception of self-protective strategies that include 1. Attributing negative feedback to prejudice about their in-group 2. Comparing outcomes with in-group members 3. Devaluing negative attributes of the in-group. I argue that a fourth strategy (dialogic essentialism) is employed in which FAs converse with similar others in attempts to normalize their essentialist beliefs about their sexual preferences that in turn protects against possible stigmatization.

  Instead of interviewing participants to find out what their FA identity entails, this research uses an internet ethnographical approach to study the natural flow of conversation between members, which offers a new perspective into this community-the interaction *among* self-identified Fat Admirers. This research is important as it illustrates how members combat stigma through interactions that delineate acceptable membership practices. These interactions promote increased importance, validation, and protection of a stigmatized identity.

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Introduction

The obese population faces stereotypes that characterize fat bodies as gluttonous, insatiable, lazy, selfish, and immoral (Griffith 2004; Saguy 2013). Scholars conclude that individuals with extra adipose do in fact experience negative social and psychological outcomes as a result of stigmatization, including, but not limited to, attrition of social networks, barriers to upward mobility, barriers to interpersonal relationships, legal, medical, educational, marital, or occupational opportunities (Puhl and Brownell 2001; Carr and Friedman 2005; Puhl and Brownell 2006; Farrell 2011; Saguy 2013).

Members of the Fat Admirer community challenge these assumptions, and instead partake in fat admiration as opposed to fat admonition. The Fat Admirer community originated from the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA) founded in 1969. Fat Admirers are individuals with sexual preferences for fat bodies, ranging in size, shape, and gender identity. The complexity and range of individuals with a Fat Admirer identity have been well established as Swami and Tovée (2009: 89) explain:

> The preferences of fat admirers (FAs) themselves can be wide ranging, and the targets of those preferences can range from being slightly overweight to morbidly obese. Even so, a consistent thread among FAs appears to be their rejection of the thin ideal as an unnecessarily prescriptive societal construct.

The quote above describes the heterogeneity within the FA community. Fat Admirers have sexual desires for fat bodies that exist on a continuum, with no requirement for where this spectrum ends. FAs admire a wide range of bodies, anywhere from overweight to morbidly

obese.[1] What is clear from Swami and Tovée's (2009) description is that Fat Admirers share an identity based on their preference for fat bodies over thin or traditionally attractive bodies. As a result of their rejection of the "thin is in" mentality, Fat Admirers represent a marginalized community.

Due to this marginalized status, members of the FA community communicate on an online forum where maintenance of in-group versus out-group divisions - or the categorization of "normal" or "appropriate" behaviors within the community - are detailed throughout their interactions. In-group membership consists of individuals with similar interests and meanings of their social world. Intergroup relations (in-group versus out-group distinctions) refer to "the formation of functioning within a group of shared perspectives upon certain aspects of social reality" (Tafjel 1981: 3). On *Dimensions,* a website for individuals who admire fat bodies, the in-group includes men and women who have adopted a Fat Admirer identity in which they acknowledge their nontraditional sexual preferences. Members of the out-group are individuals who see the in-group as threatening to social mores and disruptive to conventional practices. For example, individuals with "normal" sexual preferences, or preferences that align with Western ideals of beauty, are members of the out-group. In some instances, the out-group of Fat Admirers can even be the objects of FA desire: fat individuals. Fat individuals in the out-group hold disbelief, incredulity, or hatefulness towards FAs, which contributes to further marginalization of the in-group.

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[1] Overweight and obesity refer to body measurements based off of a Body Mass Index. BMI categorizes an individual's weight and height based on the following equation: (kg) / [height $(m)^2$

In-group versus out-group divisions become crucial in a discussion of stigma and fat admiration. With an understanding that fat people are stigmatized and that people see obesity discrimination as the last acceptable form of discrimination, research on individuals that challenge these perceptions concretize, normalize, and desensitize the stigma associated with the in-group. Previous scholars discussing preferences of Fat Admirers (Swami and Furnham. 2009; Swami and Tovée 2009) understand the spectrum of desire existing within this community, but do little to analyze the structure of how FAs form their identity. Previous scholarship provides little insight as to what holding a stigmatized identity means to Fat Admirers *and* Female Fat Admirers. The interaction among Fat Admirers and the ways in which they create, maintain, and protect their identities is useful in understanding the role of stigma in social identity research.

This research answers the questions: how do FAs use self-protective strategies against stigma and how does having a FA identity influence interactions about stigma? All three protective strategies proposed by Crocker and Major (1989) - discussed in the next section - are implemented by Fat Admirers. Using Bakhtin's (1981) understanding of a "dialogic," or the constant interaction of meanings through dialogue, I argue that an individual who holds essentialist beliefs about their discredited attribute in conjunction with having a strong group saliency where dialogue takes place acts as a fourth self-protection against stigma. Forum participation and interaction among members censures problematic behaviors while simultaneously providing a platform in which to discuss and concretize a marginalized identity. Members of the in-group disseminate information about acceptable behaviors in a manner that allows individuals to enact self-protective buffers. These strategies help to prevent rejection from the in-group (similar others) and boosts members' self-perception and self-esteem.

Stigma and Social Identity Formation

A discussion of the theoretical framing of stigma is critical for understanding social identity formation as well as the reasons for protection against stigmatization. Key research identifies what the concept of stigma is, how individuals experience stigma in their everyday lives, and the important role stigma plays in creating one's social identity. The following review will discuss how people perceive and acknowledge their stigmatized identities at the individual level, then in the broader scope of their group membership. How an individual perceives their stigma influences one's choice in group membership, which leads to the employment of social boundaries and defensive measures against stigma.

Goffman (1963) defines the concept of stigma as the social process in which an individual with a discrediting attribute (a physical or latent trait that challenges societal norms) is ostracized or condemned for their abnormality. Stigmatized groups consist of the physically handicapped, mentally ill, the obese, or "other" groups defined by race and religion. Goffman (1959) also created the concept of impression management, or the attempt an individual makes to influence the perception of themselves on another. Impression management takes place throughout everyday interactions with wide ranging objectives (to insult, to mislead, or even to gain favor of another). Stigma and impression management work together in structuring the experiences of individuals as well as their self-perceptions. Self-perception is an important aspect in stigma research as it establishes how marginalized individuals create a social identity. Through self-perceptions, the evaluation of an "other," or discriminatory group depends on cultural, affective, and spatial contexts that influence the severity and power of a stigmatized identity that forms over the life course (Link and Phelan 2001; Carr and Friedman 2006).

Goffman's (1963) idea of "courtesy stigma," suggests that stigma is experienced not only by the individual with a discrediting attribute, but to the people in close proximity of the stigmatized person. For example, an individual with an overweight or obese partner receives stares of indignation in a restaurant. In this scenario, courtesy stigma of the individual is not based on his or her attributes, but the proximity between them and their partner. Hebl and Mannix (2003) illustrate that courtesy stigma is attributed to individuals in mere proximity of an obese person, whether or not an actual relationship between the two exist. People perceive the target of courtesy stigma as maintaining a relationship (familial, professional, intimate, or otherwise) with a stigmatized person, and, therefore, as having similar, if not the same characteristics. Goffman (1963: 30) includes other examples of individuals who receive courtesy stigma as "the loyal spouse of the mental patient, the daughter of the ex-con, the parent of the cripple, the friend of the blind, the family of the hangman…" In all of these instances, it is the individual within close proximity to a stigmatized person who receives stigmatization in waves of varying intensity.

What's more, the feeling and intensity of stigmatization can vary across different situations. Crocker (1999) defines this concept as "situational stigma," or the unstable distortions of personal characteristics that differ in each immediate social context. Crocker (1999) explains that individuals engender collective representations of the world, or their own views and shared meanings. The experience of stigma occurs in a dissimilar manner in multiple contexts because self-worth and self-esteem manifest differently across unique situations. Birenbaum (1970) adds that the appraisal of situational stigma indicates that individuals must recognize stigma, which in turn prompts individuals to emulate normal or conventional group behavior to lessen opportunities of further stigma or the propagation of negative self-perceptions. Members learn

the normal conduct through associations with prototypical members of the group – or those individuals who possess extreme rigidity to norms, behaviors, and appropriate conduct of the group (Hogg et al. 2004). Social comparisons are made with respect to in-group and out-group differences that establish an "other" group that does not hold the same values and is therefore inherently dissimilar. These comparisons aim to increase in-group cohesion of members through dictation of group expectations, norms, and values.

Learning typical group etiquette must therefore mean that an individual identifies with a well-defined group, or a community of individuals with shared similar moral values. Social identity theory, proposed by Turner et al. (1979) is an approach to understanding how an individual evaluates their sense of self based on their status as a member of a group. Social identity is defined as "that part of the individuals' self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance of that membership" (Tajfel 1981: 2). This definition limits the scope of an individual's identity to the aspects that impact self-concept and are relevant to certain social behaviors, hence this specificity to a *social* or group identity, not a personal identity. Tajfel (1982: 2) explains three aspects of group identification as follows: "The two necessary components are: a cognitive one, in the sense of awareness of membership and an evaluative one, in the sense that this awareness is related to some value connotations. The third component consists of an emotional investment in the awareness and evaluations." This third component is an explanation of salience or conviction to being a part of this specific group. Fully integrating ones' self as part of an in-group involves awareness, similar values, and emotional significance towards the group itself.

Salience to one's group for stigmatized populations refers to individuals who share similar moral values *and* shared discrediting traits. Yang et al. (2007: 1524) discuss the morally important aspects of stigmatized individuals, or "what is most at stake for actors in a local social world." The sufferer (one who experiences stigma) is exposed to stigma over time, and those who experience similar stigma help to uphold and perpetuate marginalization within their community in order to prevent diminution of their membership values. Conviction to their group identity and the morally important aspects of everyday life for the individual make salient in-group versus out-group experiences, but ultimately "shape the lived experience of stigma for both sufferers and responders or observers," (Yang et al. 2007: 1530). For example, Yang et al. describe the social process of stigma within a cosmology of everyday experiences with the implication that researchers must take into account salient motivations for group members, those stigmatized (traditional forms of stigma) and those in close proximity to these stigmatized individuals (courtesy stigma).

The above theories of stigma, impression management, and group membership demonstrate the multiple factors that influence an individual's life experiences, self-perception, and social identity formation. Logic assumes that stigma and negative perceptions from others will lower self-esteem, however researchers find that not all stigmatized group members experience a devaluation in their self-conceptions.

Stigmatized individuals can experience negative life outcomes and still maintain high levels of self-esteem. Crocker and Major (1989) propose a theoretical perspective in which self-protective strategies buffer against the negative consequences of social stigma. These strategies explain the stable or relatively high self-esteem for certain stigmatized groups (racial minorities, women, the mentally impaired, etc.). Crocker and Major (1989) maintain that the integrity of the

self, or self-esteem, as an active construction of social identity, is an important aspect to consider in stigma research. Individuals challenge stigma at the interpersonal and group levels using three protective guards/strategies. The three strategies are 1. attributing negative feedback to one's group membership (blaming outside factors or outside others as the cause for stigmatization), 2. self-protective properties of in-group comparisons (making comparisons of the self with members of the in-group instead of out-group members). 3. selectivity of values as self-protection for the stigmatized (the protection of self-esteem based from selectively devaluing attributes or dimensions of their group compared to others). Individuals can implement multiple strategies at any given time. The centrality of the stigma, the concealability of the stigma, the amount of time the individual has experienced the stigma, the responsibility of having the stigma, and the acceptance of negative attitudes towards the stigma all influence how an individual views their identity as stigmatizing.

Crandall et. al (2000: 357) discuss that the use of these self-protective strategies occurs "only when individuals have meaningful, group based stigmas [only then] is there a relationship between self-esteem and the use of self-protective cognitions." Use of these strategies is contingent upon the saliency of group membership. This condition assumes that the individual must have some stake or knowledge of their in-group, as well as their out-group. Frable, Platt, and Hoey (1998) show that individuals who are aware of similar stigmatized others (individuals with concealable stigmas) have higher positive affect and higher self-esteem than stigmatized others unaware of similar others. In this regard, knowledge of community acceptance is a self-protective strategy against the predominant cultural views attributed to the individual's stigmatized self.

McKenna and Bargh's (1998) research on Internet "newsgroups" explains that online groups act as virtual communities that impact the identity of members with concealable stigmas. The researchers' concept of "identity demarginalization" emphasizes that higher participation in groups with similar others can lead to active identity change, greater self-acceptance, and increase in identity importance. With Crandall et al.'s (2000) findings that group saliency is important in the employment of self-protective strategies, I argue that there is a fourth self-protective strategy; dialogic essentialism, or the strategy members employ when they hold essentialist beliefs about their preferences that become normalized through critical dialogue with similar others. This fourth strategy is contingent upon in-group saliency. Acknowledging that a discrediting attribute is an immutable characteristic, members buffer themselves against criticism only when similar others reject culpability of this shared stigmatizing feature as well. In-group members gain an understanding that their social identity is not deviant or abnormal, thus protecting them against outside others who hold these negative views.

The identity of a Fat Admirer is a concealable identity, which means the stigmatizing or discrediting attribute is hidden from view and the individual is said to "pass" as normal (Goffman 1963: 75). Fat Admirers experience both traditional stigma and courtesy stigma from being associated with fat people. Stigma about admitting their identity as well as direct discrimination, devaluation of their identity, and the moral judgements made about their lives creates their need for self-protective measures against stigmatization.

Previous scholars have alluded to FAs' experience of stigma; however, an empirical study is needed. Using Goffman's (1963) conception of stigma and Crocker and Major's (1989) schematics of stigma, I ask, how do Fat Admirers (both men and women) use self-protective strategies against stigmatization? How does having a FA identity influence interactions among

groups members? And, lastly, what are some additions to Crocker and Major's (1989) theory that can be used in future implications for stigmatized groups?

STRATEGY	EXAMPLE
1. Attributing Negative Feedback to Prejudice Against One's Group	A student is insulted because of their race, religion, or nationality. They have a higher self-esteem because they believe the stigma is based on prejudice against them.
2. Comparing Outcomes with those of the In-group and not the Out-group	A black student's self-esteem is higher in a segregated school than in an integrated school because they compare their academic success with similar others.
3. Selectively Devaluing the Dimensions in which the In-Group Fairs Poorly	A woman values her jobs as interesting or having comfortable working conditions compared to a man with higher wage status and more promotional opportunities.
4. Dialogic Essentialism	A man engages in conversation on a public forum stating that he cannot control his sexual preferences because he was "born this way."

Stigma and Fat Admirers

Fat bodies are marginalized in Western society, however there exists communities of individuals who accept and admire fatness. Political organizations such as NAAFA and The Fat Underground provide examples of male and female collaborations that challenge the standard beauty norms. Stereotypes against fatness, however, still persist within these settings. As

Millman (1980) explains in her interviews with females in NAAFA, the stereotypes of fat bodies

in the broader society are very much apparent in the rhetoric of NAAFA members. For example,

respondents explain that fat women are seen as sexually desperate, have oral fixations, and are

grateful for any male attention (Millman 1980: 20). Gimlin, (2001: 113) who also conducted

interviews at NAAFA meetings, argues that

> NAAFA's attempts to renegotiate meaning of the fat body rarely convert either outsiders
> or NAAFA members themselves…[members are] bombarded with and influenced by broader
> cultural understandings of the body, and they construct identities that are shaped by those
> understandings.

For fat individuals, understanding social norms and the stigmatized status they hold

makes them also aware of the stigma against Fat Admirers. For Fat Admirers, one of Millman's

(1980: 17) respondents claims, "in my opinion, fat admirers have a lot more problems than fat

women." Another respondent explains further, "it's hard for them [FA's], too. They get asked,

"How could you go out with her? She's so fat." Or, "Couldn't you get better than that?" They

know what they like, but there's also what society dictates," (Millman 1980: 20).

These examples indicate the stigma experienced by individuals who love fat bodies, or

those whose preferences dispute thin ideals of beauty. Scholars have discussed fat admiration in

both gay and straight communities, the categorization and preferences of men's practices within

fat acceptance organizations, the male gaze, and male FAs as sexual predators (Blank 2000;

Gimlin 2001; Swami and Furnham 2009; Swami and Tovée 2009; Monaghan 2005; Moskowitz

et al 2013; Quidley-Rodriguez and De Santis 2017). However, previous researchers have yet to

explore the communication *among* Fat Admirers or their experiences concerning stigma as a

result of their sexual preferences. Some scholars briefly mention how Fat Admirers' attraction to

fat bodies is a stigmatizing, albeit concealable, trait. Millman (1980: 4) expresses that the

NAAFA organization "stresses how fat people *and* fat admirers are victims of prejudice, stigma, and consequent self-hatred," (emphasis added). Goode and Preissler (1983: 200) state, "for the FA, the stigma of obesity represents 'guilt by association' – or, to be more specific, guilt by preference." Keeping in mind Goffman's (1963) definition of courtesy stigma, outside others view FAs (both males and females) with the same negative attributes as their love interests.

Some scholars argue that FAs fear being "outed," which can be damaging to their social status because it is seen as an abnormal sexual preference (Goode and Preissler 1983). Fat Admirers ultimately challenge prevailing beliefs about fat women, such as their sexual desperation, their inability to be viewed as sexually desirable, or how society "views fat women much as children are treated by the law-as a protected category incapable of granting sexual consent" (Goode 2002: 531). Other scholars, such as Saguy (2002), believe that in NAAFA settings, women's sexual partner selection is limited, the competition for affection that results places emphasis on women's looks, yet also bolsters the perception of fat women's inability to find mates outside the organization. Saguy labels these circumstances as "fat heterosexuality," where the sexual partnership resembles thin heterosexual couples with similar gender inequalities and emphasis on the male gaze is present in partner selection. However, with fat heterosexuality, females are more often placed in harmful situations due to their size.

Organizations such as NAAFA work to fight against fat discrimination and stigmatization, however the stigmatization of FAs persists. Colls (2012: 32) observes "fat admiration is complicit in exacerbating the coding of fat sexuality as underground or perverse which in turn reproduces an objectification of 'fat' on women rather than the desire of fat women themselves." The male gaze is harmful to thin and fat females, but in the FA community, these

harmful stereotypes of men as deviant sexual predators establishes an understanding of the stigmatization and otherness male FAs experience in their everyday lives.

The *Dimensions* forum thus provides an example of a virtual space in which both men and women who have sexual preferences for fat bodies are emboldened to share their stories. Members of this forum explore a multitude of topics ranging from the aesthetic appeal of fatness, the comprehension of stereotypes/negative beliefs about their in-group, and salient concerns that link to their experiences of stigma. The deployment of Crocker and Major's (1989) self-protective strategies explain how FAs who feel stigmatized will discredit other deviant groups, employ impression management skills that ingratiate them from the "bad eggs," and defend their sexual practices as normal in order to validate their identity and normalize their experiences. Because members are offered a platform to express their frustrations, those who do so in inappropriate ways are ostracized from the group, thus, individuals who see the FA community as a safe haven will adhere to group membership values and attempt to meet prototypical group standards.

Methods: Internet Ethnographical Research

According to Hine (2013), the goal of an internet ethnography is to understand the meaning-making of participants in a setting where community members' engagement with their computer-mediated communication can be studied. The field site in this research is the online Fat Admirer forum, *Dimensions*. This collective location is artfully and dialectically created with a shared understanding of the taken-for-granted everyday experiences of Fat Admirers. In "normal" or "regular" ethnographic settings, the researcher is unable to be omniscient, yet with the Internet at our fingertips, it is much easier to establish an understanding of the real-time

responses of a large expanse of internet-mediated communication. Hine (2015) and Sade-Beck (2004) argue that using a thick description for online analyses is essential to understanding the use and importance of evolving Internet communication. No internet ethnography on fat admiration exists, although there are examples of content analysis that use print and online newspapers (Saguy and Almeling 2008; Heuer, McClure, and Puhl 2011), fat activist blogs (Afful and Ricciardelli 2015), and photographic research (Cooper 2007; Woolley 2017).

Mkono and Markwell (2014) discussed the internet ethnography approach, or "netnography," using a meta-analysis of articles using internet ethnographies. The authors found that most researchers used a "lurker" approach, in which the researchers remained unknown to participants in order to capture the experiences and meanings of individuals posting to tourism websites. Using TripAdvisor.com, Vo Thanh and Kirova (2018) researched consumers' reviews in order to understand wine tourists' experiences. Their analysis included 825 reviews that were categorized using NVivo software into a 4-category coding system: entertainment, educational, esthetic, and escapist reasons. Using fragments of posts from the site, Vo Thanh and Kirova found that most experiences in Cognac were coupled with educational and entertainment reasons for their wine excursions. Keim-Maplass et al. (2014) studied online illness blogs using the internet ethnography approach. The authors used Twitter data and podcast information to find 12 blogs that had been maintained for over 2 years and belonged to young cancer patients. Keim-Maplass et al. (2014) discussed the limitations and strengths of their internet ethnography in-depth, using a table to ascertain the lived experiences of people suffering from illness and found that patients continued to update their blogs, even days before their passing.

The above examples use internet ethnography where information is readily available and full of rich details about social phenomena that quantitative analysis fails to capture. Analysis of

a forum was chosen because the data provided represents real conversations between Fat Admirers that takes place over time. Analyzing the posts in succession, it is clear that community members enact self-protective strategies against stigma with respect to out-group and in-group members.

Internet ethnography is a fairly recent methodology that provides flexibility in inductive research and allows for diverse forms of analysis in regard to participants' posts and experiences. Internet ethnography is a form of content analysis, meaning that the data is collected from a secondary source, usually photos, forums, websites, newspapers, historical documents, etc. Analysis is then systematic, using a standardized technique. An internet ethnography, however, uses similar principles of ethnographic field research, including field notes and thick descriptions of respondent experiences. As Hine (2011: 574) explains, an internet ethnography is used to analyze "how practices are made meaningful, without assuming in advance what the appropriate structures of meaning-making might be."

Content analysis involves a randomized or systematic data collection, which disturbs the rhythm of posts, makes unclear the previous conversations, and only allows for a partial view of discussion amongst community members. Specifically with forums, the conversations held by community members intertwine with previous statements and allusions to outside resources that make it virtually impossible to only select certain posts/uploads. Reading posts in a story-like manner enables the researcher to develop thick descriptions of the text and to find meaning in the entirety of selected conversations as opposed to disjointed text. Due to the conversational nature of the *Dimensions* forum, a systematic content analysis can not be usefully deployed. Internet ethnography, then, is the superior methodology for this research.

This internet ethnography began in March 2018 with a simple Google search for "fat admiration forum." *Dimensions* was the most specific website for this query and has been discussed in previous literature on fat admiration (Farrell 2011). *Dimensions* originally started as a magazine for male Fat Admirers. After 1994, the magazine became an online forum, and ended as an in-print magazine in 2004. *Dimensions* now includes female members, has over 2 million posts, and over 83,000 members. The website provides a set of conduct rules, prohibiting users under the age of eighteen years old and forbidding the encouragement of weight-loss. This research was conducted using the "lurker" or passive approach in which the researcher did not create an online account or have direct involvement with community members as the information is available to the public and is unobtrusive to respondents. The researcher did, however, become immersed in the forum site with preliminary findings of stigma as a constant theme for both FAs and the fat individuals they admire. This immersion took place in February 2018 and data collection began in March 2018.

Using the *Dimensions* online forum, data were collected and analyzed from March-October 2018 from four different threads. Three threads were located on the FA/FFA forum and one on the BHM/FFA forum (elaboration on abbreviations is found in Appendix I). This selection deliberately used posts from male FA forums and female FA forums in order to demonstrate conversations among *all* Fat Admirers, not just male FAs as has been done in previous studies. Each chosen thread contains at least fifty responses and over five-thousand views to ensure relatively frequent participation. Threads were chosen by title and by the response/view requirements that emphasized issues within the FA community. No time limits were set for analyzing posts as discussions were led for years with active participation throughout.

The selected threads were printed in chronological order and analyzed line-by-line. Links to other sites or pictures are NOT included in analysis, as they were seen to stray from the thread topic itself. Seven hundred and seventy-seven posts from four different threads were analyzed.

Field notes were analytic coding of posts with a three to ten-word summary written by the researcher. For example, a summary might read "LGBTQ and men's experiences," or "not alone, preference known." Other field notes included entry dates and entry times of posts. One member (Kiki) posted on November 11th, 2008 that she was unimpressed and disappointed with the forum. On October 11th, 2010 in the same thread, she expressed a fondness towards the site and fellow members. Kiki conversed with other members until October 19th, 2010 when her posting stopped. Other field notes depicted instances where two members had a lengthy exchange that took place over the course of days. One example is the conversation between John and Brad that John started at 7:08PM on February 22nd, 2016. Brad responded on March 2nd, 2016 at 3:43PM, John commented on the same day at 4:02PM. Brad replied at 7:05PM, John responded exactly 10 minutes later. There were five interactions between the two members until Brad stopped posting on February 3rd, 2016 at 12:49PM. John continued posting in this specific thread until September 11th, 2017 at 3:48PM.

Field notes highlighted posts that were eloquent descriptions or summaries of the thread itself, conversations that included argumentative language, and arrows to indicate the flow of conversation between members. After highlighting posts from all four threads, the researcher created a summary page of each thread with the main theme and the role of stigma. Field notes were reviewed multiple times over the course of analysis and final analysis focused on identifying which of the three self-protective strategies the emergent themes and their cultural meanings were part of.

Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was granted such that the researcher had low participant burden, the information was publicly available, and anonymity of participants would be upheld through the exclusion of online usernames. Pseudonyms were used for reporting the names of respondents. This method of addressing individuals by use of pseudonyms diminishes the possibility of recognizing the site user, protecting the member from identification and possible further stigmatization.

Guideline of Analysis

The following sections discuss the respondents' posts as they relate to the three strategies against stigma (chart below). First, evidence of the initial self-protective strategy, attributing one's stigma to group membership, is discussed. Secondly, the comparison of FA community members outcomes is presented. After, examples of how members deemphasize negative dimensions of the group by promoting positive aspects are shown. Then, a fourth self-protective strategy is proposed. Finally, the conclusion addresses further areas of inquiry to include the fourth self-protective strategy with respect to other stigmatized groups.

1. Attributing Negative Feedback to Prejudice Against One's Group
2. Comparing Outcomes with those of the In-group and not the Out-group
3. Selectively Devaluing the Dimensions in which the In-Group Fairs Poorly

Attributing Negative Feedback to Prejudice Against One's Group Membership

The stigma that Fat Admirers experience is due to lack of understanding or explicit contempt of their sexual preferences from outsider others. Forum members explain these prejudiced attitudes of individuals in an "out-group" as the reason for why stigma exists for this community.

Glen summarizes the prejudice against FAs: "The main problem in society's view of fat people, and the mainstream's contempt for FAs is just collateral damage. If you believe that fat people are inherently unhealthy and unattractive (i.e., if you're a bigot), then you pretty much have to believe there's something wrong with anyone who is attracted to them. It would be just about impossible for someone who has no respect for fat people to be okay with FAs." In this post, Glen reveals the out-group perspective that legitimates the stigmatization against FAs while simultaneously making an attack on people who believe that fat individuals are undesirable. Cameron comments, "don't discount that all the prejudices against fat people also relate to the FA. It is much more than just the resistance to our views/feelings on esthetic aspect of our attraction. Remember we constantly get thrown at us 'how can you in good conscious be attracted to someone in an inherently unhealthy state.'" In this statement, an echo of Millman's (1980) earlier findings of incredulity by non-FAs, outsiders question the sanity of Fat Admirers in that a thin heterosexual man should stick to the masculine script of finding a suitable, *thin* partner. Further, the concept of Goffman's courtesy stigma also resonates with Cameron's post in that stereotypes of fat bodies are often transferred onto the FA who is desiring their fat physicality. Cameron also brings up the fact that the fat acceptance movement is not synonymous with a FA acceptance movement; meaning that people accept fat bodies but not necessarily those who desire fat bodies. Although accepting fat bodies as natural and

undeserving of derision is a facet of FA identity, the out-group of non-Fat Admirers is condemning the FA community all the same.

Fat Admirers are aware of the negative association their identity elicits, as Roy explains, "Why would I 'choose' an orientation that throws me outside the mainstream…A lot of frustration and isolation accompanied this 'preference.'" As Roy conveys, the stigma with his identity stems from the perceived isolation from the outside or "normal" community. Similarly, Charles states that stigma about his preferences, or fetishes, stems from how his partner will react. Fetishes within the FA community can be far-ranging, but Charles describes his fetish as "feederism," or the sexual gratification from watching a romantic partner gorge on food. He explains the difficulty with admitting his feeder fetish "without weirding them out to the point of alienation." Detachment and segregation from outsiders is a real, perceived threat for FAs, because they fear the out-group will react negatively towards their sexual preference. Tommy recalls a stigmatizing event by his father when he drew sexually explicit pictures of larger women. When at first his father found the pictures, he "was made to feel ashamed but when my drawings of large breasted women were found my Dad was happy, but I still wanted to look at any ssbbw porn I could find I just had to make sure I wasn't caught." For Tommy, this example had a dichotomous effect; it showed him how to conceal his FA identity so that he would no longer be stigmatized, and also what is perceived as standard or normal for boys to find appealing through an out-group perspective.

For Fat Admirers, the "Us" versus "Them" approach has thus far been discussed from the perspective of an out-group, or othering entity. Explaining stigma as something that is happening *to* them by people who *are not* them offers protection against possible alienation from loved ones and protection against subscribing to the belief that FAs are, in fact, deviant. Holding steadfast to

the idea of community as a source of commonality, Fat Admirers dissociate with those who think FAs are predators or abnormal. By placing blame on others for the prejudice held against them, these FAs protect their self-perceptions; as a community, they help to perceive each other as normal where any belief that strays from this idealization is a source of contention among members.

Fat females, who are also part of the *Dimensions* community, take part in stigmatizing FAs. Women on the forum who are not FFAs constitute the plethora of fat bodies who partake in conversations with Fat Admirers. Consistent with earlier representations of prejudice against male FAs, fat female members of the forum debate the perceived deviant conduct of FAs.

In one argumentative conversation, Stan felt attacked, having an admittedly angry response "Disclaimer: you'll find some anger in my response here." Previous comments suggested that Stan was shallow; he was not a real FA because he broke up with a woman who lost an extreme amount of weight to look more desirable in mainstream society. Stan uses the metaphor of someone's boyfriend cutting off their perfectly good legs if amputation was deemed mainstream. He explains that if the partner did not feel attracted to their boyfriend anymore, would it be shallow for them to end the relationship? Meredith told Stan "you should be ashamed for the complete lack of empathy you've just displayed for the women you claim to admire," after she explains that fat as a health issue is a reality for many, and to compare weight loss to cosmetic amputation, which is elective and altogether hypothetical, is "repulsive." With that, Stan explains that in his situation, his girlfriend did not lose weight for her health, she actually harmed her body from the drastic weight loss. He continues "And…no-one has a go at women for being sinister and shallow for loving men." Stan emphasizes the sexual division of preference here, stating that women believe men to be shallow, whether they date a thin or fat woman, yet

women are not subject to the same scrutiny. This conversation shows the division between men and women on *Dimensions*; females claim that men are shallow if they want a woman only for her looks, whereas men argue that having a preference does not make someone shallow. FAs argue that male or female, FA or non-FA, people still find partners based on sexual attraction that includes, but is not limited to their appearance. Roy states, "I don't like being called a 'fat fetishist.' First, it makes it sound like I want to get it on with a big lump of fat rather than a fat woman. Second, it seems to imply some deviant obsessiveness, when in fact I'm no different from a guy who lusts after thin women." Fat Admirers reject the notion that they are fetishists due to the stigmatizing insinuation that they are deviant or repulsive. They protect themselves through disassociation with the fetishist stereotype claiming a normal instead of deviant sexual preference. FAs attribute negative feedback from those who view them as fetishists as derogatory and thus separate from their own identities.

Male FAs argue that categorization as lustful predators or fetishists limits their ability to be seen as anything else, namely, legitimate lovers of fat bodies. Max exclaims "…it makes me want to go around punching walls when I see someone online, saying that there aren't enough guys around who love fat girls." In response, Cameron states, "FAs have always had a hard time being accepted by the fat people themselves and it has undermined our ability to join forces to uplift our collective selves." Max agrees, "there just is no good reason for trying to de-legitimize FAs as a whole." Questioning their status as illegitimate admirers, FAs buffer themselves against delegitimation that threatens their FA identity. Lack of trust and disbelief in a person interested in a fat sexual partner is a stereotype given by the out-group. Outside others have the power to antagonize FA legitimacy, but interrogating these stereotypes allows FAs to deflect attention away from their deviancy onto the divisive out-group that misunderstands their preferences.

Kate is a fat woman with dual membership in the in-group and the out-group. Kate

explains, "I'm both a BBW and an FA. There is prejudice against FAs for a number of reasons,

but that doesn't even come close to matching the constant, never ending pressure and hatred…as

a fat person. FAs have one issue where that prejudice affects them – relationships – whereas fat

people have to deal with the same problem in every aspect of their lives." In this sense, fat

people are exposed to a different form of stigma than FAs, however Kate makes the connection

that, yes, FAs do in fact experience prejudice and discrimination. Her perspective develops two

separate marginalized identities, as a fat woman and as a Fat Admirer.

Attributing negative feedback to an out-group refers to FAs condemning labels given by

the out-group such as "fetishists," "predators," or "deviants." Others within the in-group have the

ability to perpetuate certain assumptions, but an individual's self-protection strategy would be to

censure that negative portrayal of their identity through dissociation and explicit rejections of

fetishist and predatory actions.

Using a sarcastic tone, Amanda states,

If the moral of this thread is that I (and all those nasty, awful FAs who like fat women)
have to admit to being shallow…then I guess that's how it is. Clearly, because of that,
I'm incapable of loving someone deeply, being committed, and being in a sustained,
meaningful, supportive, long-term relationship. At least now I have a reason.

Amanda mocks the idea that a FA who is shallow is unable to have a fulfilling, successful

relationship. Despite the sarcasm, the idea of just *giving in* to the label of fetishist is not a sign of

indifference, but of tolerance. Ben explains to John "In the eyes of many people outside of the

BBW/FA community you would indeed be considered a fetishist (as would I)...whenever guys

articulate their carnal thoughts they are at risk of being labeled a fetishist or objectifier of

women. Best to keep your mouth shut an[d] enjoy your partners abundance in silence." The

advice here is to ignore the prejudicial labels assigned by the out-group. In general, the meaning

of fetishist is altogether negative within this community and to subscribe to a different ideology protects FAs from feeling stigmatized.

Others on the forum analyze the term fetish to suggest that fetish can have different meanings to different people, yet ultimately, the out-group will reserve negative connotations for the term. Brad argues "having a fetish doesn't automatically mean you're a creep or that you use people." He later defines creep as one who "refuses to be seen in public with their lover, someone who overlooks a person's humanity for their fat, and someone who uses another person just for sex." John replies "I've said those things MAY be indicators one is a fetishist rather than an actual FA." In this debate, the idea about what it actually means to be an FA is overshadowed by the concept of fat fetishization. Brad asserts that making statements about what a FA may or may not be is further stigmatizing FAs. He responds to John: "you're pushing your misunderstanding out into this community. Your misconceptions could very well serve to further marginalize people who may already feel marginalized."

Brad's comment exemplifies Goffman's claim that individuals who feel stigmatized become censorious when they feel threatened. The stigmatized individual is stimulated "into becoming a critic of the social scene, an observer of human relations," (Goffman, 1963: 111). A hyper-critical view is acquired by the stigmatized individual within these social settings, an awareness that stems from socialization of what it means to be normal, and why, in turn, a stigmatized individual is deemed abnormal. Stories posted on *Dimensions* about stigma correlate to a Fat Admirer's understanding of their atypical preferences and also enables members to identify threats from others. In this way, the stigmatized individual can "examine the others' [the wise's] actions and words until some fugitive sign is obtained that their show of accepting him is only a show," (Goffman 1963: 114). Therefore, the idea of acceptance by the out-group can be

stigmatizing for FAs. An act of admission can prove to be damaging to an individual's self-perception and social status, which is why communication and strong attachment to an in-group is necessary for FAs to obtain the out-group perspective, where prejudice against FAs originates. Contact with outside others also helps to instruct the FA on preventable measures to reduce the risk of experiencing a stigmatizing event.

The stereotype of FAs being "fetishists" is one example in which an out-group can stigmatize FAs. Roy states, "the term [sexual fetish] does some of the work that "pervert" did in a less polite era…The word "fetish" seems, in part, to be a way of denoting desires that are considered deviant or outside the norm." Rejection of the label fetishist or predator in turn allows FAs to reject the label of abnormal. Mocking the idea that fetishist is an end-all-be-all distinction demystifies the grey areas of the possible positive aspects to the term that are unseen by the out-group using the term in a negative light. John summarizes "If you are attracted to fat, then I guess you are a fetishist. I am attracted to a PERSON who happens to be fat. There is a difference. At no point have I made the claim that one is better than the other; I've simply made a distinction." As the out-group, or those with "normal" sexual preferences, fails to make a distinction, the in-group does. Fetishist in the broadest sense is a contemptible slur. Protecting themselves from this label prevents further stigmatization for FAs and attributes negative feedback from the out-group as ill-defined and indistinct from other, more repugnant groups.

Self-Protective Properties of In-group Comparisons: Comparing Outcomes with those of In-group Rather than the Advantaged Outgroup

Members on *Dimensions* acknowledge that their size or their sexual preferences are not widely accepted in the broader society. Knowledge of stigmatization from the "real world" allows members to create divisions within the forum, a form of impression management that occurs through member-to-member comparisons. This is shown by Joseph explaining that "there is nothing wrong with having a predilection for dating whomever you want as long as it's not a kid." In this post, Joseph is protecting his self-image, stating his opinion that being a FA is indeed not shallow, and that anybody who dates a person that fits within their preference parameters should not be stigmatized, that is, unless they are a pedophile. Greg replies "or your own family member." In shifting negative attention from the identity of a FA to something seemingly worse, these men use negative stereotypes of pedophilia and incest to affirm their identities as less harmful than other deviant groups.

By condemning a separate group, the in-group stays protected against stigmatization by outside others. Managing the impression of in-group qualifications is a key strategy against stigmatization because FAs are not as unwelcome in larger society compared to people who break the law or violate fundamental social taboos. Avoiding a negative outcome for the group relies on the perception of others, meaning that the allocation of negative stipulations for abnormal sexual preferences onto different practices protects FAs from being associated with a deviant identity.

Members dictate appropriate and inappropriate behavior on the site through challenging or condemning inappropriate behavior. Examples are men in chat rooms being vulgar to women. Joseph explains "If I had a penny for every time I heard or read a woman's horror story about being asked her weight or other measurements at the beginning of a conversation, I would be a very rich man." Men on *Dimensions* in chatrooms are able to contact women and ask how much

they weigh and if they would be willing to gain weight for a man's sexual pleasure (this is also known as "gaining"). Monique gives examples she has seen in these chats due to her status as "a chat veteran. '…you a gainer?'…'how much do you weigh…wanna get bigger?'…'you look small in your picture…you here to look into gaining?'…'lookin for a girl who wants to gain.' In response to why such forward questioning is rude, Robert shares his conversation with a

> chatter [that] has been around for only a couple of weeks and has made mention to me that she is considering never coming back since this has been a consistent and constant thing without anyone treating her as anything more than a piece of meat that just isn't good enough as she is. Beautiful yes, but never good enough, never big enough.

Women on the forum agree that these messages are rude and hurtful, specifically because men wish for women to change in order to fit their FA fantasies. Walt states "I will tell a girl that I think she'd look better with more weight, if that's what I think. But I'm not going to be the one to make the first move there." Similarly, Joseph says, "I have no interest in trying to pressure someone to gain weight so I can get off…I suspect that there are other guys on here who feel the same way I do." These statements illustrate that both FAs and women on the forum believe chatroom behavior discussing weight and gaining is unacceptable in the online community.

Poor behavior is diverse and subjective, but members delineate what constitutes inappropriateness and ways to navigate these situations. FAs will partake in impression management strategies, such as Walt and Joseph, who show how their behavior diverges from other men who make hurtful comments. In this light, these members agree that chatrooms promote negative outcomes for women, however, these members display prototypical behavior of the group, or the standard ideal for group membership. By acknowledging women's experiences, these men dissociate themselves with the negative outcomes perpetrated by uncouth FAs. Discussing how their roles are positive in the community furthers the perception that these

particular FAs are aware, knowledgeable, and condemnatory of the deviant/poor behavior of their peers.

In Crocker and Major's (1989) explanation of the comparison of outcomes, the discussion among in-group members fails to incorporate the experiences of out-group members who may be more advantaged. In other words, the comparison among in-group members' outcomes protects them from feeling threatened by the out-group advantage, however knowing this out-group advantage is essential to managing in-group behavior. Goffman (1963) explains that these comparisons are common among stigmatized groups: "the phrase 'concern with in-group purification' is used to described the efforts of stigmatized persons not only to 'normify' their own conduct but also to clean up the conduct of others in the group," (Goffman, 1963: 108). For example, Christian expresses, "Would you please stop lumping FAs in with this lot of douchebags. I hate being thrown in with the rotten apples." Stan says, "Mid-sized BBWs are not marginalized by *this* FA, for one." Ethan posts, "It grinds my gears to hear about guys being jackasses though. I guess there's no real escaping it. I just try to do my best not be like that." Explaining how their own conduct is dissimilar from the problematic members on *Dimensions*, Christian, Stan, and Ethan feel the need to state their position as separate from others who are deviant, thus delineating the acceptable practices of the in-group. Hogg et al. (2004: 249) explain this distinction as typical; "people construct norms from appropriate in-group members and in-group behaviors and internalize and enact these norms as part of their social identity." Normification entails knowledge about the group itself, but also how public perception and possible stigmatization against the group require boundaries for acceptable behavior.

In another exchange of posts, the perceived predatory nature of FA identity is also challenged by members of the in-group. Ben states "fat fetishists are just FAs who haven't learn

[sic] to filter their communications." By arguing that men with fetishes are lesser than, or less agreeable to outsiders, Ben is verbally separating his self from other FAs who are seen as predatory or sexually exploitative. Dan reiterates this point in another thread, "…when paired with ignorance about the prevalence of weight gain comments, could significantly increase the likelihood of a newbie making these kinds of remarks. Perhaps not so much for an older, wiser FA." Dan's insinuation that he is the older, wiser Fat Admirer protects his identity as one who does not deviate from the respected normalcies. In these posts, Ben and Dan are establishing their prototypical behavior, or the polarized, idealistic stereotype of group membership. The closest an individual behaves to the prototype, their "self-categorization also produces, within a group, conformity and patterns of in-group liking, trust, and solidarity," (Hogg et. al 2004: 254). Comparison of outcomes, or situations in which a FA identity is challenged, establishes a connection between members of the in-group in that the expected and appropriate behavior becomes extremely salient to individuals who fear stigmatization. By voicing their experiences, these members question how the out-group perceives them, and thus helps to tailor/manage their behavior in a way that protects the FA community from negative perceptions from the out-group.

The above discussions reiterate how the members of the FA community, including FAs and those they admire, are subject to stigmatization and how posting these experiences help to demonstrate the need for a social contract amongst themselves. Comparing outcomes with other FAs establishes a rapport with other community members who have also experienced such negative events. Lola states "I am not making a blanket statement about ALL FA's or putting words into the mouths of other ladies." This member explains her own experiences, reassuring the FAs and other women on the site that she herself does not wish to categorize or stereotype men in the same manner as the out-group. Other members commenting on the ways in which fat

women are approached online negotiate the difference between all men and some men in attempts to address their negative outcomes or issues without subjecting all FAs to further stigma. Nelson says "some men, when dealing with women, lack any kind of social tact." Patrick states, "Unfortunately, dumbasses tend to make up in volume for what they lack in numbers, so I understand the initial reaction of feeling hurt…Most of us welcome you with open arms." Both men and women are guilty of making others feel unwanted or devalued in this discussion, however, members of the in-group state that although these negative interactions occur, the community itself does not accept this behavior.

Elaborating on their own experiences, other members contribute and describe the possible positive outcomes of belonging to the in-group. In an act of impression management, members such as Joseph and Patrick offer encouragement through insisting that the FA community should not be portrayed in a negative light. In fact, Cameron states, "what is a shame is that Dimensions needs to stick together because most of the Fat Acceptance thinks that what goes on here is all crap anyway." Individuals may compare their own negative outcomes, however in his plea for community, Cameron explains the need for legitimacy for fat admiration as a whole, despite the negatives. Coby argues, "By having many members that belong in many different categories, I think we tend to split and exclude rather than gather. But given enough people, similarities within subgroups can inspire realization of the similarities within subgroups." Calling for the power to overcome the negative outcomes of such a diverse group of individuals, members secure the belief that *Dimensions* is in fact a welcoming environment.

Creating boundaries for unacceptable behaviors can be through small-scale impression management or through condemnation of activities in a larger group dialogue. Discussion of positive and negative outcomes helps form prototypical assimilation techniques that define the

codes for membership within the FA community. Adherence to these established standards ensures acceptance among members and may be useful for in-group cohesion strategies.

Selectivity of Values as Self-Protection for the Stigmatized: Devaluing Negative Dimensions of In-group and Valuing Positive Dimensions of In-group

The devaluation of negative aspects within the FA community are seen in multiple threads. Devaluation in this sense does not mean the complete rejection of the negative dimensions of the community. In fact, members often refer to negative aspects of the FA community, however they feel as if they belong to the community nonetheless. Meredith is a female member on *Dimensions* who openly criticizes fat admiration:

> I think there's a huge problem with men in society who ridicule any woman who doesn't fall into their standard and treat women they aren't attracted to as not being worth their time. I see it here with FAs and I see it elsewhere. The only difference is here I feel that men think they can get away with it because they're attracted to something different. As if we're supposed to applaud someone when he describes a thinner woman as being unattractive.

Meredith is explaining here the widespread issue of the male gaze on female bodies. The situation she describes is one in which a FA is no different than a non-FA male who consumes female bodies. Here she states that FAs are still focusing on appearances, whether or not it is the typical or normal attractive standards. Phoebe argues:

> regarding FAs socially, there is very little that encourages him to notice more in women than what their bodies look like…everything is sexualized to a larger degree. So it's very easy for an FA to overlook or ignore other things that BBWs might have to offer in a social environment that focuses mainly on a fat person's physical appearance…instead of totally blaming FAs alone…we need to examine what fat society can do to help him be less so.

Offering this perspective, Phoebe shows the ways in which negative aspects of the community are minimalized or defended. Phoebe at no point suggests that FAs do not perpetuate the sexual commodification of female bodies. She does argue that accusing FAs of being shallow understates the importance of socialization. On a forum designed to admire fatness, FAs tend to focus on what attracts them, which is to a large extent physical characteristics. Phoebe draws attention to the eroticization of fatness, but in a manner that encourages teaching, not criticism. Phoebe suggests that instead of stigmatizing FAs, understanding preferences can transform the discussion into helpful and positive instruction for how women wish to be treated. After a long conversation about fetishistic tendencies, John responds to Brad: "I hope you'll at least engage even if ultimately we don't agree. We will at least be better for having the discussion." This interaction illustrates the potential for resolving an ongoing conflict. Brad admits "it isn't so much that I disagree with you that these behaviors exist or that it's a problem. I'm disagreeing with your terminology." This post is the last Brad uploads to the thread. After this resolution, other members begin to discuss issues for fat bodies and their admirers.

Debates such as the ones above illustrate topics of importance for community members. Crocker and Major (1989: 616) explain, "the impact of performance or outcome feedback on self-esteem is mediated by the psychological centrality, or importance, of the dimension to the self-concept." Yang et al. (2007) use the term "moral experience" to describe individual attitudes that effect their identity, whereas Crocker and Major use this concept as the basis for why individuals devalue aspects that disturb or corrupt their self-esteem. Members of the forum report that discussing their preferences with like-minded others is a large part of why they joined *Dimensions* to begin with. Acceptance, then, is central in their identity as a FA. Max begins,

"I'm not here because I'm hoping to get a date…I'm here because I need some way to express what goes on in my heart, and darn it, I'm just not getting those opportunities in my life…" Glen replies, "I totally agree. I just started posting here this month, for the same reasons." An open community allows for expression of a FA identity, or as Samuel explains, can be "a place where I can express myself around folks who are like me and I don't feel so self-conscious."

Dimensions also acts as a connection for individuals who did not believe in fat admiration, or had doubts of the legitimacy of a FA identity. Henry comments, "…part of me thought anybody that liked how I look was weird and I wasn't sure how I'd react to something so new. I think I came in with the intention of just speaking to people who knew what I was going through but it's become so much more." Leo states, "…spending the last week on these boards have taught me that there is such a thing as an FFA, which is a mind-blowing idea to me." Fred**,** a member on the site for over a decade, explains, "when I stumbled across Dims and saw it [being a FA] wasn't just a "fetish" but it was a legitimate preference." Kayla states, "…I know that I'm not alone, and that I am understood. That I am not a freak or a horrible person…when I need to reconnect with my FFA desires and to affirm their validity, I come back here, and am once again treated like family." In the above examples, the validation and legitimacy of a FA identity as well as the space in which members can meet others who admire their bodies represent the inclusion and positivity that results from membership to the in-group.

One member, Kiki, explains that she found the FFA forum on *Dimensions* disappointing, commenting that "I feel marginalized because I'm a BBW that is attracted to BHM and it never feels like that's a cool flavor **anywhere on this site, even here.** I was really hoping that it would be at least in this area of the board, but it's not and it never has been." Two years later, the same user commented "I was just thinking how amazing our little corner of this site is." These posts

illustrate the strength with which acceptance of identity and community over time can offer a different perspective for a member. Strength in this sense means a stronger attitude towards the FA community and a more salient centrality of membership.

Although there is evident discord, looking deeper than a preliminary analysis of the forum offers insight into the dynamic relations/interactions of community members. There are serious discussions, as well as disputes that result from differing opinions. Haley says, "Dims is an awesome place although it can be a hot mess sometimes…I may argue with someone, but it's usually not a personal issue." By acknowledging, but also diminishing the presence of arguments on the forum, Haley explains that an argument is not an attack on any specific individual or their identity. Alex shares a similar opinion, "I hope I haven't pissed off too much of the community here. I just find people who force their opinions onto others…to be extremely irritating." These two members are noting their own negative presence; however, the evaluations of their online activity hint towards acknowledgment but altogether condemnation of activities by other members deemed inappropriate (engaging in personal attacks or forcing their own viewpoints onto others). Devaluing these negative characteristics of the community means members acknowledge problematic behaviors, but chose to evaluate the positive aspects as more important or meaningful to their membership.

Although *Dimensions* offers access to like-minded individuals, the diversity of membership and the presence of subgroup or minority perspectives is perceived as an altogether positive characteristic. Upon recognition of problems among members, an intolerance of negative behaviors and internal criticism allows for the strengthening of positive experiences. One common theme among members is the fact that this community has offered an online space in which people and their preferences are not alone. As researched by Frable, Platt, and Hoey

(1998), finding group membership with a concealed stigmatized identity has been shown to increase self-esteem, or again, protect individuals against stigmatizing events. Sharing a sense of community as well as the dissemination of information is a valuable aspect of *Dimensions*. Justine states, "if I want a nice romantic story about [a BHM]" she "can find it here." Not that other locations would not have comics or stories, "but the boys look all wrong in mainstream media." These stories are in the "library" section of *Dimensions,* but members refer to specific stories in the forums.

The option to lurk is relevant and important to some members. The ability to read posts and not feel pressured to share allows for invisible participation, but admiration nonetheless. Members are also able to have heated discussions, yet no voices are blocked from participation and there are no limits to the amount of permissible posts, meaning that long debates or conversations can continue even as verbal attacks occur. These attacks may appear to be personal assaults; however, discussions are not centered on a right or wrong continuum. Nobody is told they are unwelcome, and in some situations, support is offered "I am so sorry that this has been your experience!" (Jordan) or "it sounds like you've had some bad romantic experiences, and I'm sorry for that," (Dennis).

The benefits of the *Dimensions* website include access to resources, such as informative articles, art work, chat rooms, and stories. Knowing that others appreciate their fat bodies also helps members in gaining confidence not just online but offline as well. In other words, *Dimensions* offers a space in which FAs and FFAs can express salient experiences and feel accepted by similar individuals. A shared understanding of life as a member of a stigmatized group shapes positive outcomes with respect to devaluing or diminishing the influence of negative aspects of *Dimensions.*

Dialogic Essentialism: A Fourth Form of Self-Protection

Fat admiration is deemed a sexually deviant phenomenon. Sexual expression, or sexuality, is a complex system of what and who sexually attracts an individual. Sexual desire is multi-faceted, incorporating multiple physical and bodily reactions to certain preferences, for example, hair color, gender identity, eye color, race/ethnicity, height, or weight. Given these preferences, individuals select their sexual partners. Compared to an individual who *can* or *will* date a fat person, the Fat Admirer *wants* and *prefers* to date them.

Having sex with a fat individual is not the same as claiming the identity of a Fat Admirer. Some people may have relationships with fat individuals without being sexually attracted to them and some could have attraction to a fat individual without being an FA. Evidence from the forum suggests that Fat Admirers share an opposite perspective to the latter, viewing their preference as a love of fat individuals, not a love of an individual who happens to be fat. One example, as Bobby explains, is: "a guy who is with a fat girl who simply tolerates her body instead of loving it." The difference, or in Bobby's case, is that he is "wired to liking fat girls and it'll never go away." This "wiring" is echoed in Molly's post where she states, "everyone is hard-wired to be attracted to something." Being wired, or programmed to a specific preference denotes a commonality among in-group members. It also presumes that members have no choice in admiring fat bodies. Mirroring claims from essentialist theories that regard sexual orientation as "natural," and biological determinants of sexuality, (Grzanka, Zeiders, and Miles 2016), FAs describe their sexual preference as opposite of constructionist or constructivist claims of choice or ability to change.

Essentialist perspectives are used in multiple contexts, such as sexual minorities and the BDSM community. Yost and Hunter (2012) propose a concept of "socialized essentialism" in the BDSM community. Socialized essentialism refers to external influences that led participants to the BDSM community, however, over time, these members find that BDSM experiences became an essential part of their sexual identities. This finding relates to McKenna and Bargh's (1998) study that group membership can lead to changes in identity and stronger self-acceptance with greater time spent in the community.

The fourth proposed self-protective strategy, dialogic essentialism, draws from Bakhtin's (1981) literary theory of the novel as a new genre that is transformed through limitless interactions with other genres. Bakhtin explains the dialogic as an epistemological technique that helps to interpret heteroglossia - or the condition of language that ensures the meanings of words alter as the historical period changes. The dialogic counters the monologue or the belief that only one language exists through showcasing a multiplicity of speakers and perspectives.

Although Bakhtin's (1981) work is central to the relative novelty of novels, the dialogic can also be used to discuss the written realities of *Dimensions* forum participants. Through dialogue and conversations with others, Fat Admirers negotiate, affirm, and normalize fat admiration within their socio-historical contexts. Despite the monologic posts, members on the forum create conversations with one or more partners, dialogizing language used to discuss fat admiration.

Thus, dialogue on the forum shapes members' recognition of a pattern towards an innate, unalterable characteristic that similar others define as the meaning of FA identity. Lisa states "I've known I love fat guys my entire life, since I was probably about 3 years old." Alice states that she "always KNEW [she] dug fat guys," but she was "so fearful of sharing it with anyone."

Gabby reiterates, "I personally do not see my fat admiration as a choice. As a preteen and teen, I wanted so badly to be attracted to thin girls. To fit in. I thought something was seriously wrong with me." These examples illustrate that individuals with a FA identity have knowledge of their sexual preferences and grow to understand their identities as seemingly abnormal, different, and deviant. FAs believe that awareness of their preference at a young age insinuates an ever-present, unchanging trait, that can not change by choice. This echoes back to the "wired" rhetoric of fellow in-group members in which FAs understand their preferences as seemingly aberrant, but ultimately, communication with other FAs ascribe the foundation of their stigma as externally based and therefore no fault of their own.

This externality of stigma buffers FAs against criticism from people who do not understand the powerlessness they feel towards their preference. Eric asks, "how is digging fat exclusively different from digging any other type exclusively? People can't control who they fall in love with, much less what their privates react to." In another thread, when questioned if Fat Admirers are shallow, Harvey states "you can't fight nature. Nature has proven time and time again to me that Big Girls is where its at for me." Attributing his discrediting attribute to something beyond his control, such as nature, Harvey rejects the possibility that his love of fat women deserves admonition and thereby diminishes his feelings of deviance. Both Eric and Harvey deny responsibility of their preference not only by using essentialist arguments, but also through interactions with others who believe/experience their identity. Stating that being a Fat Admirer is not a choice and they have no control over their sexual desires, FAs protect themselves against feelings of shame or stigma in a setting where they can support one another.

Roy posts, "I've been attracted to larger men since I was in middle school. I finally accepted that it was apart [sic] of who I was just recently…I am so thankful to find a place where

I can talk to people who are going through what I'm going through." Natasha posts, "When I first stumbled on Dimensions it meant I wasn't alone. It meant there wasn't something wrong with me when I got butterflies in my stomach everytime a handsome 400 lb guy crossed my path." Dialogic essentialism requires that members accept their preference as a natural, inherent part of their social identity. Ophelia knew she "was always an FFA at heart, but it took me a long time (too long) to fully understand that and to learn what it meant and even that I had a 'label.'" These members' posts demonstrate strong group saliency that enables members to realize that denigration of the status of Fat Admirer comes from the out-group, not from those who share similar moral values. The strengthening of "us" versus "them" emphasizes the sense of community and recognition of an in-group that is credible, accepting, and normalizing.

Dialogic essentialism is thus contingent upon salient in-group membership and denial of responsibility for one's stigmatizing trait. Morandini et al. (2017: 560) conducted a study using essentialist arguments for groups of lesbian and bisexual women. The researchers conclude that "naturalness beliefs were associated with lower internalized-stigma, whereas discreteness beliefs were associated with greater internalized stigma." Both naturalness and discreteness refer to essentialist arguments; naturalness beliefs explain sexuality as biologically determined whereas discreteness is a fluid, continual understanding of an individual's sexuality in binary, or discrete categories. The authors argue that higher-internalized stigma for discreteness insinuates that respondents have greater perceptions of marginalization than do respondents who hold naturalness beliefs. These respondents were not discussed as part of a well-defined in-group. This is important because a naturalness understanding for lesbians and bisexuals may lower internalized stigma, but the key to a *buffer* against stigma – what will prevent this internalization – is the socialization with similar others. In dialogic essentialism, conversing with others who

legitimate a positive instead of deviant social identity protects members against stigma and dissuades internalizing beliefs of abnormality.

Despite the fact that Fat Admirers (FFAs) encounter "the usual 20 minutes of explanation and mis [dis] belief" over the fact that they admire fat men, dialogic essentialism provides a different perspective with respect to how FAs invalidate aberrant stereotypes. Ophelia expresses that being on the forum, her fellow FAs and FFAs help make her "see that no matter what society would have me believe, loving, caring thoughtful people often prefer partners of a larger size." Members who disengage with negative sentiments (whether it be from specific outside others or society as a whole) learn to navigate experiences with others who question, condemn, and stigmatize their in-group. In response to negative stereotypes, reliance on in-group members assuage feelings of guilt or deviancy in a setting where "there's no need to explain or defend yourself…or the feelings that you have," (Arthur). This explanation illustrates that members of the out-group who do not understand or may even condemn fat admiration are the individuals that require legitimation. Members of the in-group, however, do not hold these beliefs as Gabby explains, he likes "the idea [that] we are showing that there are real people who are attracted to BBWs." In this quote, Gabby refers to convincing members of the out-group about the legitimacy of fat admiration because members of the in-group already know that true FAs exist.

Even new members to the in-group are apt to understand the authentic identity of a Fat Admirer. Derrick expresses "spending the last week in these boards have taught me there is such a thing as an FFA, which is a mind-blowing idea to me." Members who are unsure about an authentic FA asks, "Is there really men out there that are honestly attracted to big girls. Or is it just men looking for easy sex? Or is it they are ashamed of what they like so they want to keep it

hidden" (Stacy). Janine responds, "There are plenty of examples on the forums of men who are with SSBBW's for the long haul and they are true fa's." Janine provides legitimate appraisal of genuine fat admiration, a facet of the in-group that is an uncommon outlook for outside others.

These examples describe in-group acceptance – or the process through which members on *Dimensions* recognize that their sexual preference is only discreditable to incredulous onlookers. FAs themselves deny responsibility for their preference through essentialist beliefs, or knowledge of their immutable characteristics that link them to fellow community members. Dialogic essentialism incorporates both denial of deviancy and strong in-group saliency. Without a robust connection with like-minded others, many members would continue to feel abnormal due to their fat admiration. Dialogic essentialism buffers members against stigmatizing misconceptions or stereotypes but only through essentialist attitudes and group participation.

CONCLUSION

Being a victim of stigma, as Farrell (2011) points out, can either inhibit fat individuals' response and in turn enable them to hide from the world and avoid social interaction - or have the opposite effect. Crocker and Major (1989) note that this opposite effect is a self-protective strategy against stigmatization, employed in three parts.

Critics stereotype FAs as fetishists or deviants, which increases public misunderstanding of the in-group and subsequent stigma. FAs attribute negative feedback such as these stereotypes to misunderstanding and judgement given by the out-group. Discussing experiences, positive or negative leads to in-group purification through impression management skills. Members compare their outcomes, specifically with respect to crude group chats, which provides a framework for prototypical membership behavior. By adhering to acceptable membership

practices, members of the in-group protect themselves from stigma and negative perceptions from the out-group. Discord among members is evident, however these individuals value the opportunity for community. The meaning of group membership is more salient to members than the negative characteristics of certain in-group members' actions. For example, FAs deemphasize the argumentative nature of the forum and instead, members promote positive aspects of the group such as access to knowledge, community, and legitimation of one's sexual preference.

Dimensions members understand the complex nature of fat admiration, but ultimately find solace in an environment that protects them from negative reactions in the real world, helps to forge relationships (intimate or platonic) with individuals who share similar experiences, introduce members to activist and fat acceptance thinking that challenges beauty ideals within the broader society, and recognize salient social identity experiences. Members discuss issues within the online FA community in a manner that establishes in-group boundaries as well as shared meanings of legitimate roles for members. Meanings, standards, and values created by the in-group signify the important prototypical behaviors members should assume. Engaging in dialogic essentialism, members disassociate from stereotypes of deviancy, abnormality, and predatory actions, thus protecting members against stigma.

Moral experience and social identity theories help to explain formation and centrality of group membership, but the employment of self-protective strategies raises questions concerning how members of an in-group maintain positive self-conceptions even in the face of stigma. The fourth self-protective strategy, dialogic essentialism, is contingent on the belief that an individual's preference is an immutable characteristic shared with other members of the stigmatized in-group. If a member believes that they are not responsible for their stigmatizing

attribute, their self-esteem will be less negatively affected. This self-protective strategy is enacted only when a salient membership identity is maintained. Belonging to a group with other stigmatized individuals creates a barrier against stigma such that members of the in-group reject the notion that they or other community members should be stigmatized due to their preferences or other discrediting attributes that are out of their control.

Although the Fat Admirer community is relatively small in size, the structure, roles, categories, and subcategories are similar in other groups. As Hogg et al. (2004: 260) state, "the extent to which members are committed to the group and the group is committed to its members," represents the universality of group loyalty and can thus be attributed to groups other than Fat Admirers. Preventative strategies are used across different marginalized groups and should thus be considered in future studies of group stigma.

A key distinction that should be examined in future sociological research remains the use of the proposed fourth self-protective strategy, that is, studying another group that frames an individual as free of fault or culpability for their stigmatization. For example, fat individuals, some of whom believe they have control over their weight and others who believe that genetic or socio-psychological factors are to blame for their weight, might be interesting to further operationalize dialogic essentialism. I suggest that these individuals should have some stake in group membership, possibly a fat acceptance organization such as NAAFA, to ensure that fat individuals consider themselves as part of an in-group. This reasoning parallels back to Crandall et al.'s (2000) study which notes that group saliency greatly impacts individual enactment of self-protection behaviors.

Holding essentialist beliefs about a stigmatized identity guards against criticism from the out-group. Conviction to a FA identity protects members who believe they are wired or born

with their sexual preference. FAs refute the idea that fat admiration calls for a negative

perception from outside others and thus undermines negative claims held against them. Hence,

dialogic essentialism can be researched with respect to other marginalized groups that are

blamed for, but do not accept responsibility for their stigmatization.

Terms and definitions present within the Fat Admirer community:

FA: Fat Admirer
FFA: Female Fat Admirer
BBW: Big Beautiful Woman
Mid-Size BBW: Medium-sized Big Beautiful Woman, usually with a weight range of 200-300 pounds, although this depends on weight distribution.
SSBW: Super-Size Big Beautiful Woman, usually with a weight range of 300+ pounds, although this depends on weight distribution.
BHM: Big Handsome Man
BDSM: A sexual practice that includes bondage, discipline, sadism, and masochism.

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