

REFLECTIONS ON THIN PRIVILEGE AND RESPONSIBILITY

The word “privilege” is used to describe receiving unjust advantages at the expense of others. These advantages are often largely invisible—especially to those who enjoy them. For instance, I have what is called “thin privilege,” a consequence of weight discrimination.

Because I’m relatively thin, it’s been easier for me to meet and get approval from other people. This has helped me make friends, find a life partner, develop professional contacts, and secure jobs. It also means I am treated with greater respect when I shop or eat in a restaurant. It means I have a larger choice of fashions at less expensive prices and never have to pay for more than one airline seat, making travel and its accompanying opportunities more accessible. I could go on for days listing the ways in which I have benefited from others’ perception of my weight, but I believe these simple examples make the point. I can think of very little in my life that is untainted by “thin privilege.”

Thin privilege is as strong as it is because weight bias is so pervasive. Research documents that fatter people face discrimination in employment (including lower wages), barriers in education, biased attitudes and lower quality of care from health professionals, stereotypes in the media, stigma in interpersonal relationships, and, overall, are judged negatively and treated with less respect. Weight discrimination has reached such great proportions that it now equals or exceeds discrimination based on race and gender.

In addition to the advantages thinner people receive from thin privilege, however, there are also costs. For instance, since I know that fat people are expected to meet greater demands for achievement, I can’t have a full sense of legitimacy in *my* achievements. I know that I landed my nutrition professorship in part because many

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potential competitors were eliminated before they even reached the rigors of academia while other were weeded out along the way due to others' biased assumptions about their nutritional habits. We do not live in a meritocracy.

Another cost we pay is not being able to feel truly valued for who we are. This is commonly noticed by people who lose weight and suddenly get more attention. They also feel enormous pressure, worried that if they regain the weight they will lose their new-found admirers. This wreaks havoc with their self-esteem.

All of us regularly judge and react to others. Sadly, we have all perpetuated weight bias ourselves. When we are subjected repeatedly to images of fat people as lazy gluttons, to images of thin people as attractive, desirable, and healthy, to notions that weight is completely controllable by diet and exercise or that fat causes people to get sick and die early, it should come as no surprise that these ideas have become ingrained in our psyches. Yet these “beliefs” are nothing more than cultural constructs of dubious scientific and social merit.¹

Weight bias harms everyone across the size spectrum. To understand how it might harm thinner people, consider these examples:

- As long as it is more difficult to live in a fat body, everyone fears becoming fat. The internalization of the belief that thinner is better drives the body anxiety that most people—fat or thin—experience. It fuels our preoccupation with obtaining or maintaining that “ideal” weight and conjures up the feelings of shame if we don't. It also supports the development of eating disorders.

¹ This is a short essay on thin privilege and it's beyond space constraints to bust those myths here. For easy reading on those topics, download the “Health at Every Size (HAES) Manifesto” at www.HAESbook.com, or, for more detail, check out my book, *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight*.

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- An enormous amount of time, money, and energy is wasted trying to maintain or achieve a thinner body. Many of us put many aspects of our lives on hold until we achieve those elusive results. We avoid certain clothes, skip out on parties or other social ventures, postpone job searches, or hide in the background, not wanting to draw attention to ourselves until we lose the weight and feel more presentable.
- The oppressive values we absorb limit our world. When prejudice rears its ugly head, we become blinded by our preconceptions, unable to see people for who they really are. We are cheated out of seeing people in all their wonderful uniqueness because we've formed ideas about who they are long before we can really know someone. How many friendships and networking opportunities do we miss out on due to this prejudice?

Until our society fundamentally changes, we can't completely escape or renounce the various privileges we have, whether it's based on our size, skin color, socioeconomic status, education, or other attributes. We're taught to recognize oppression as individual acts of meanness, not as a system (often invisible) conferring advantages. It may be painful to own our role as unfairly advantaged individuals, reaping benefits that at the same time limit and hurt others and ourselves. But whether or not you have actively chosen your privilege, if you are committed to fairness and social justice, I challenge you to be accountable for it; unearned privilege comes with responsibility.

Tips on Living Responsibly with Thin Privilege

Reflect on your privilege. How would your life be different if you were heavier? Think about your daily activities, whether it's meeting a new person, buying a candy bar, ordering fried chicken, shopping for clothes, or speaking out on weight bias. Would others view or

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treat you differently? Would *you* feel more or less self-conscious about others' judgments? More or less entitled in whatever you're doing?

If you think weight bias doesn't affect you, if you're not outraged by what you learn from this exercise, keep repeating it until you understand. It may be hard to see yourself as a person of privilege; after all, you probably sincerely want to do the right thing and be a good person. Give yourself a break. You can accept your privilege without blaming yourself. No one expects you to carry the weight of our culture's sins on your shoulders alone. You can use your privilege to make this a fairer, more compassionate world.

Challenge your assumptions about weight. No doubt you have absorbed some of the assumptions of our culture without critical thought. It's not too late to do that critical thinking. Listen to what fat people say about their own lives and read the exposés that have been written about weight. Commit to fighting oppression. Explore the movements for Health at Every Size and Fat Acceptance.

**Use your privilege responsibly.
What are you going to do to lessen or end it?**

This is an abridged version of a longer article that can be accessed through the Resources link at www.LindaBacon.org.

More information can be found in *Health at Every Size: The Surprising Truth About Your Weight* (www.HAESbook.com).

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