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### Losing It: The Construction and Stigmatization of Obesity on Reality Television in the United States

Alisa Roost

*CUNY Hostos Community College*

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## Losing It: The Construction and Stigmatization of Obesity on Reality Television in the U.S.

Alisa Roost

In April 2012, First Lady Michelle Obama appeared on the popular reality television show *The Biggest Loser (TBL)* and praised it for motivating viewers: “I am a big fan of *The Biggest Loser* because the contestants inspire so many of us” (season 13: ep.15). The contestants do indeed inspire many people. The United States, like much of the world, focuses considerable attention on obesity, and there is indeed value to bringing consciousness to healthy choices. However, an extremely destructive perversion of this movement has emerged: a shaming judgment of the overweight or obese as morally inferior that is repeated in countless articles, headlines and stories: as Michael Gard and Jan Wright note, “The ‘obesity epidemic’ as a bad news story is at fever pitch in both scholarly journals and popular reporting” (2). As Katherine Flegal reports, over half the U.S. population is overweight or obese, and many obese people experience microaggressions on a regular basis, as Haley Morris-Cafiero’s work captures. For the most part, they are fleeting moments, hard to categorize and interrogate, but reality programming captures culturally prevalent attitudes. As the US struggles with issues of consumption, access to resources in an increasingly unequal society, and the corporatization of many aspects of life, including our food supply, reality shows are making an increasingly visible impact on the dialogue around weight loss and food. *TBL* is the most prominent, but there are numerous other shows, like *Heavy* and *Extreme Weight Loss (EWL)*. While all three shows mention health concerns and food in passing, the focus is on punishingly strenuous exercise as the means to weight loss and the transformation of appearance as the inevitable outcome of successful changes. Unfortunately, no non-surgical diet is proven to consistently work over the long run; as

Dr. George Bray, founder of the North American Association for the Study of Obesity and a Master of the American Board of Obesity Medicine, the American College of Physicians, and the American College of Endocrinology, summarizes the difficult status quo: “While diet, lifestyle, and exercise are the cornerstones of current approaches to treat obesity, they have been ineffective in stemming the current epidemic” (1853). As Dr. Priya Sumithran, an endocrinologist and research fellow at the University of Melbourne, reported, the majority of people who lose weight (as do many *TBL* contestants), do not keep it off, in part because losing weight creates hormonal changes. Despite this, US reality programming around weight loss focuses on and justifies the societal prejudice against heavier people, while encouraging unhealthy approaches towards dealing with obesity. Taken together, these shows reflect and reinforce a narrative that, for the vast majority, is unattainable and creates a cycle of shame, isolation, and failure.

### Performing Fatness

“Fatness” is a performance that US culture scripts and stigmatizes. Assumptions about fatness vary with culture and society (Coleman). US culture increasingly defines fatness with a shaming dominant narrative that reality weight-loss television both reflects and reinforces: obese people are portrayed as lazy, broken, and out of control, noticed only to be mocked or marked as inhabiting a transitional space. Brenda Weber’s articulation of “Before-Bodies” and “After-Bodies” applies: these shows define obese people only in a transitory state, a “before” in the presumably inevitable before-and-after narrative, thereby justifying the stigmatization as a motivation for a presumably healthy change.

“Obesity” is a broad medical term based only on the “Body Mass Index” (BMI) or the

ratio of weight to height. As a result, it includes all heavier bodies regardless of fitness. In the United States some (but not all) people who are obese or overweight are labelled as “fat.” Arnold Schwarzenegger and 56% of NFL players meet this definition of obese (Harp), but they would not be stigmatized as fat. As Sander Gilman notes, “[Fat's] centrality in the mental universe of any given individual is heavily dependent on the role of anxiety associated with [obesity in a given culture]” (xiii). In problematizing gender, Judith Butler examines how “political forces with strategic interests” shape the idea of “the body” (164). Just as Butler argues that gender is performative, so too, fatness is performed, socially constructed, and culturally defined. Throughout this article I will use “obesity” as a corollary to Butler’s taxonomy of sex, a biological phenomenon (defined below), and I will use “fat” as a corollary to Butler’s classification of gender, a culturally-defined performance.

Without scientific basis, reality weight-loss shows equate fatness with illness and failure as a foundation from which to stigmatize larger bodies. Foucault posits a dialectic between the pre-modern practice of visibly inscribing bodies to publicly mark those who broke societal rules, and the mores in modern societies, which expect citizens to internalize societal strictures making visible marking unnecessary. Foucault’s dialectic develops as a narrative on the fat participants’ bodies, whose initial large size signifies a transgression against norms; the shows highlight large bodies in order to first stigmatize and then transform their bodies, which ultimately reflect acquiescence to dominant values. The participants begin marked as “fat,” but as they appear to have shifted into the standards for “normal,” they lose the deviant label. Thus *TBL* “disciplines the non-compliant ... [and] differentiates between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ citizens” (Silk 370). Susan Bordo argues that obsession with thinness is “one of the most powerful normalizing mechanisms of our century” for it requires “constant watchfulness over appetite and strenuous work ... to

conform to this ideal” (186, 202). Not only does the moral panic about obesity and the weight-centered health paradigm stigmatize fat people (Gilman and LeBesco), but it forces them to constantly and assiduously regulate their behavior to conform.

Moral panic linked to obesity intertwines with issues of consumption, class, and national identity, simultaneously encouraging consumption and self-denial. Crawford argues that U.S. society calls on wealthy consumers to both succumb to desire in a capitalistic frenzy of consumption and simultaneously postpone desires to develop a strong work ethic. As Bordo notes, the body reflects “the difficulty of finding homeostasis between the producer and the consumer sides of the self” (201). Amy Erdman Farrell argues that the narrative of obesity invokes a narrative of downward mobility, while fitness signifies patriotism, control, and morality. Reality TV shows define weight loss as a consumer endeavor, stripping away an allegedly false before-body, revealing an individual’s alleged true self: the after-body. Simplistic health generalizations justify societal prejudice, and portray all heavier people as unhealthy.

These conflicting ideas about consumption and morality reach millions through these shows. Since *TBL* first aired in 2004, it has produced 239 episodes in the US (as of December 2015), spin-offs in thirty-one other countries or regions, and extensive tie-in merchandise. *TBL* is the most popular, but other shows include: ABC’s *Extreme Weight Loss* (originally called *Extreme Makeover: Weight Loss Edition*), VH1’s *Celebrity Fit Club*, MTV’s *I Used to be Fat*, Oxygen’s *Dance Your Ass Off*, the Food Network’s *Weighing In*, Lifetime’s *DietTribe*, A&E’s *Heavy*, TLC’s *One Big Happy Family*, Bravo’s *Thintervention*, the CW Network’s *Shedding it for the Wedding*, NBC’s *Losing it with Jillian*, and ABC’s *Shaq’s Big Challenge*. Additionally, Style network has two shows that chronicle weight-loss experiences, but don’t feature as much producer intervention: *Ruby* follows one woman’s attempts at weight loss, and *Too Fat for 15*

follows obese teenagers at a weight-loss boarding school. While the reality shows vary in details, for the most part they choose participants and edit narratives that reinforce negative assumptions and thus stigmatize a performed version of fatness.

## Obesity and Health

Reality TV's narrative of obesity has been contradicted by medical science, although current understandings of obesity often conflict. Flegal's meta-analysis of ninety-seven studies covering 2.88 million people found these relationships between current weight categories and mortality.

Definitions of Weight-related Terms, per Flegal from 2010 US data. (Weight of 5'8" adult is not from Flegal, but is used only for reference).				
Term	BMI	Weight: 5'8" adult	Percent of adults	Associated mortality rates
"Underweight"	< 20.0	131 or less	1.7	Significantly higher
"Normal"	20-24.9	132-164	29.5	Slightly higher
"Overweight"	25-29.9	165-196	33.3	Lowest mortality rates
"Obese" (Grade 1)	30-34.9	197-230	20.0	On par with "Normal"
"Severely obese" (Grade 2)	35-39.9	230-263	9.2	Significantly higher
"Morbidly Obese" (Grade 3)	> 40.0	> 263	6.3	Significantly higher

Examining studies that included nearly three million participants, Flegal not only found no relationship between Overweight or Grade 1 Obese with higher rates of death, but the overweight group had the lowest mortality. Higher death rates were confined to the underweight,

severely obese and morbidly obese. As Flegal states: “Grade 1 obesity overall was not associated with higher mortality, and overweight was associated with significantly lower all-cause mortality. In other words, for all the fear about the increased obesity in the United States, the meta-studies indicate that obesity (but not morbid obesity) is not an increased health risk” (71). And yet *TBL* and other shows pathologize all larger bodies. In one episode, Bob, a trainer, says “No matter how heavy, you’re still overweight and you’re still unhealthy” (*TBL*, 13.1). On *TBL 15*, the 5’4” winner ended at 105 pounds. Her final BMI of 18 placed her in the underweight category with a higher probability of mortality than she had when she was overweight, but this was celebrated on the show. A uniformed nurse on *Extreme Makeover* invented a new category: “grossly obese” (*EWL*: 3:7), revealing how these shows present anyone who is overweight.

Reality TV weight-loss shows shame obese individuals as failures. Anna Kirkland and Jonathan Metzl’s provocative anthology, *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality*, argues that connecting health with morality gives political cover to stigmatize people who are poor, obese, or a member of another minority group. It also exempts corporations and governments from the health impacts of their decisions by forcing individuals to bear sole responsibility for adverse consequences of social changes (like the construction of suburbs without sidewalks, or the shift to two-income families that leaves many reliant on processed food). As Kelly Brownell and her colleagues argue, “The notion that obesity is caused by the irresponsibility of individuals, and hence not corporate behavior or weak or counterproductive government policies, is the centerpiece of food industry arguments against government action” (378). Weight-loss shows place blame for obesity entirely on individual choices, thus absolving the food industry and societal trends. Allison, the *TBL* host, illustrated the focus on individuals in the opening of season fourteen: “We are challenging America to tackle childhood obesity. To

help us win the fight, let's bring out three people who will change everything." She then introduced three children, placing all blame and responsibility on individuals.

This model of extreme and quick weight loss promoted by *TBL* and other shows ignores medical recommendations. During Michelle Obama's *TBL* appearance, she asked viewers for a realistic daily goal of thirty minutes exercise or 8500 steps. CDC guidelines advise a maximum weight loss of two pounds a week, but the reality shows ask participants to lose enormous amounts of weight quickly. On *TBL*, two different men lost forty-one pounds in one week and many participants lost over 200 pounds in a season. What might be considered successful elsewhere is denigrated on these, shows; for example, on season fourteen, Michael was chastised for "only" losing twenty-one pounds in the first week. Other shows also normalize excessively quick weight loss. *EWL* expects participants to lose forty percent of their bodyweight in a year, which often means losing several hundred pounds. The trainer, Chris, described losing 100 pounds in three months as "very achievable," and thus it became "disappointing to only lose ninety-seven pounds in ninety days" (*EWL* 1:2). These shows support unrealistic, unhealthy, rapid weight loss.

Furthermore, the reality weight-loss shows promote extremely strenuous exercise, causing frequent vomiting, injuries, and, on *TBL Seven*, hospitalization. Injuries make fitness harder, but the trainers push participants. They see vomiting from exercise as normal; trainer Jillian says, "Either throw up or get on the treadmill" (*TBL* 6:6). Chris on *EWL* purposefully instructed one participant to exercise in a way that "induces what we call 'panic-breathing' really fast and that's usually a place that elicits fear" (*EWL* 2:7). As trainer Dolvett states: "I have contestants dropping left and right. . . . I have to work these guys out harder than ever before" (*TBL* 15:4). That may explain why Tucker Readdy, an assistant professor of Exercise and Sport

Psychology at the University of Wyoming, finds *TBL* does not change audience exercise behavior, concluding that most audience members escape reality via *TBL* rather than seeking to change or problematize the current status quo.

The reality weight-loss shows' exercise regimens are unrealistic for most audience members. *TBL*'s distinct approach to working with kids highlighted their approach for adults. Trainer Jillian stated, "Obviously the approach with the kids is going to be completely different. The goal is to introduce them to an active lifestyle and make it enjoyable" (*TBL* 14:1). Dolvett echoed that view,

"The difference in training kids versus training adults is you want to instill doing things that are activity-based but is wrapped in the presence of fun and staying active and staying outside" (*TBL* 14:1). While one child was sixteen and an adult was eighteen, no one tried to make exercise fun for the adult, although an enjoyable, active lifestyle would provide a more sustainable, long-term model for healthier living.

Thus, reality weight-loss shows move from amusement to moral imperatives about weight, fatness, and weight loss that are communicated to the audience through the contestants. When the shows address outdoor activity and fun movement for adults, they do so in ways that echo the general view that participants must atone to tone. Healthy exercise and pleasure are not part of the script. For example, trainers occasionally take participants outside to push or pull a car, but rarely to ride a bike. Julia, on *Heavy*, finished her tenure on the show by biking 350 miles over several days, which presents the exercise as an extreme option for the extremely fit. On the penultimate episode of *TBL Fourteen*, after participants had lost a lot of weight, trainers finally gave the adults permission to play outside, as if this were an exceptional option. The host Allison announces, "You've earned it!" (14:11). Such scenes suggest that heavier people should

avoid movement that challenges societal ideas of their proper behavior. Both Nyla (*EWL*) and Francelina (*TBL*) stopped dancing because they were larger and started dancing again only after losing weight: “I always knew how to dance. The problem was I didn’t feel confident because I was plump” (Francelina 14:8). David on *EWL* “couldn’t play baseball in gym because the jersey wouldn’t fit” (3:1). “Before bodies” remain confined to invisible, monotonous gym routines. The narrative insists that adults should endure punishing exercise for allowing themselves to become fat.

These shows create a highly-commodified atmosphere; participants leave their homes, jobs, and families for a spa-like setting, with significant personal training. *TBL* pushes participants (and viewers wanting to emulate participants in losing weight) into a narrow range of options defined more by sponsors rather than doctors. According to Nielsen, *TBL* had the second-most product placements of any show in 2011 (the last year this information was released), with 533 placements, including processed foods like pre-packed guacamole tubes, commercially made sandwiches, snack bars, soup, artificially sweetened yogurt, and poultry products. Licensed merchandise in 2011 generated more profits than *Star Trek* (Highbeam). Additionally trainers sell supplements, books, and other merchandise. In addition to in-show product placements, *TBL* has an expansive line of licensed merchandise, including shaping undergarments (perhaps to hide the probable failure of the weight-loss regime). *TBL* even has four branded weight-loss centers, costing as much as \$3,295 a week, and *EWL* has also partnered with a residential weight-loss facility audience members can pay to attend for \$3,999 for the first week. Weight loss on reality television isn’t the result of incremental changes, but involves extreme alterations. Even as these shows put reducing body size out of reach for ordinary people, they normalize prejudice against obese people.

## Shaming Obesity

Several studies have found that shame is counterproductive in motivating healthy food and exercise choices. Jennifer Sanftner, the chair of psychology at Slippery Rock University, and colleagues, followed 171 undergraduate women and found shame was positively correlated with eating disorders while Matthias Conradt, from the psychology department at the University of Marburg in Germany, and colleagues, followed 98 obese Germans for six-months and found “weight-related shame at baseline was a significant negative predictor for problem-focused engagement coping” (1129). Emma Rich, a senior lecturer in the Department of Health, at the University of Bath in the UK, and John Evans, a professor of Sociology of Education and Physical Education at the Loughborough University, also in the UK, argue that the certainty implied in much discussion about weight-loss is unethical because it can lead to size discrimination, which can lead some people towards unhealthy relationships with food and exercise. Yet reality television often shames individuals, especially women, as broken people, rather than having a behavior that should change. *The Biggest Loser* constantly insults its participants with its title; contestants are losers for having weight to lose and they perform fatness in selected clips. As Jennifer said: “I haven’t felt successful my whole life. . . . I always feel like I’m not a good enough mom. I’m not a good enough wife. I’m not the good enough daughter. I mean I feel like I’m not good enough ever” (*TBL*, 15:12). Nate articulated it most clearly on *TBL*: “Why I’m so fat and why I chose to be that way: I think it’s because I’ve never been really good at anything. So being fat is an easy excuse. . . . It’s just a choice to be fat” (14:2). Other shows feature similar messages: On *Losing it with Jillian*, she yells “Why are you going to choose failure when success is an option?!” (1:1) On *EWL*, Ashley stated, “This is a sad,

insecure person. . . . I look in the mirror and I think ‘this weight defines you’” (2:4). Rebecca, a participant on *EWL*, said of her weight: “It means me giving up my dreams. . . . I’m disgusted right now. I feel worthless when I see that number” (3:1). Statements like these re-inscribe fatness as a choice that signifies the total failure of a human being.

Shaming comes into play when the producers select contestants, for they routinely cast contestants to fit a script that includes humiliation, confirming and normalizing anti-obesity prejudice. Contestant selection is competitive, and producers often select applicants who have submitted a self-abasing video (which audiences see throughout the season, usually in grainy, colorless flashbacks). These videos emphasize applicants’ stomachs and show them having trouble with daily activities and eating large amounts of food, performing fatness through both sloth and gluttony. In such debasements, participants and trainers enact the performance of fat; as Jeri Coleman argues, “The stigmatization of fat is insidious in that it is not only the state of being fat that entails stigma, but the concept of fat” (72); in other words, people are shamed, not for choices they make, but for who they are.

Healthy food suggestions are surprisingly absent on reality weight-loss programing, except for product placements. However, many nutritionists urge eating less processed foods, not more. By presenting frequent product placements of commercially processed foods, the reality weight-loss shows suggest that obese participants are gluttons who can’t be trusted to cook for themselves. By avoiding other presentations of food, such as the process of cooking and eating, the shows avoid images of larger people eating sensibly that would contradict stereotypes. Indeed, *TBL* features “temptation challenges” that require contestants to eat *more* calories than each other for prizes; this creates footage of the participants reenacting the gluttony presumed to accompany “fatness.”

Gluttony is reinforced by its partner, sloth. Britni on *Heavy* proclaims, “Most of these individuals have not moved” (1). Tom, on *Heavy*, says he doesn’t move much because of his size: “It’s like I’m in jail, almost, because I just can’t get out and do the things I want to do” (1). The weight-loss shows avoid casting obese people who are quite active, such as triathletes who compete in special “Athena” and “Clydesdale” divisions for heavier women and men. They ignore more active, heavier people who do appear on shows like the BBC’s *Fat Man on a Bicycle*, which documents a self-described fat man cycling through Europe. A recent season of *TBL* did feature Holley Mangold, the Olympic weight lifter, but it didn’t showcase her power or strength. While Mangold has lifted an amazing 562 pounds, trainer Bob condescendingly introduced his non-Olympian friends as examples she should follow. He was explicit, saying, “I want to show Holley that she can be smaller and stronger. Weight goes down; strength goes up” (15:4). Trainers’ condescension typifies such interactions.

The shows present the participants as knowing nothing and the trainers as knowing everything. The fifteenth season of *TBL* introduced a “trainer save” in which trainers “saved” participants who would otherwise have been eliminated, evoking a religious experience. Tanya testifies: “Dolvett said that I was worth being saved when no one else saw it. . . . Dolvett just saved me” (15:4). The opening narration in *EWL* refers to the trainer in reverential language. The voice-over proclaims, “One amazing transformation, and it all starts with him.” On *EWL* Ashely assigns her success to her trainer, saying, “You’ve been a brother, a father, but for the most part you’ve been the man I’ve always needed in my life. . . . my rock” (2:4).

Producers deliberately use participants’ ingrained self-loathing as they perform fatness to advance stigma. Recent episodes of *EWL* imply that participants needed to lose weight before they contacted biological children they gave up for adoption, or birth parents that gave them up,

or celebrated a birthday in Vegas. No one questions the stereotypes implying that one has to be thin to party in Vegas or contact a family member. In 2008, Katherine Sender and Margaret Sullivan hoped *TBL* might reduce fat stigma, but their surveys of audience members found that *TBL* reinforced prejudice. Sarah Domoff also found that “anti-fat attitudes increase after brief exposure to weight-loss reality television” (993). Exposure to only one episode of *TBL* resulted in greater stigmatization.

The fourteenth season of *TBL* included three children in the same narrative of self-blaming. The children had been bullied because of their weight. Rather than focusing on the bullying and the reduction of abusive behavior among children, and supporting the empowerment of victims to protect themselves, the show reinforced the bullies’ message by encouraging the children to lose weight. Susan Koppelman argues that fat shaming is not only ineffective at maintaining normative bodies, but makes life more painful for obese individuals by normalizing bullying, discrimination, and even violence. Heather Libbey found that teenagers persistently teased about weight were more likely to have disordered eating, depression, and suicidal intentions. Yet no adult condemns the bullying of children for weight.

Noah, thirteen, is a good example of the consequences of weight-related bullying. He tells the audience that he quit sports because kids taunted him, but then justifies his own ostracism: “I do get the insults. And I feel like, OK, of course, down in my heart, it really does hurt. And I know I could do something about it, but I haven’t” (14.1). He does eventually triumph but reinforces weight-related norms: “No more being the largest kid in the class! No more being the kid that gets made fun of!” (14:11). No one condemns the ostracizing of the next largest kid. Likewise, Lindsay, thirteen, loved cheerleading and gymnastics, but stopped engaging because she felt shunned. The producers included numerous clips of her discussing the

impact of bullying: “The hardest thing about being unhealthy as a teenager is that girls laugh at me because of my weight” (14:2). Even at thirteen, she conflates a health issue with the supposed morality that justifies social ostracization. The show also highlighted ten-year old Breena: “People would call me names at recess when I walked out of the door, and that’s just not a good feeling” (14:11). Encouraging heavier kids to be more active, including in sports, has a stronger positive impact on their health than ostracizing them, but these shows normalize bullying. Trainer Dolvett presumably addresses kids in the audience when he tells the camera, “These kids are going to represent all those kids out there who’ve been struggling with their weight, dealing with bullies. As they make their changes, guess what? You can do the same” (14:1). On reality television, children, like all participants, must conform to avoid bullying and stigma.

## Gender and Love

Perceptions of fatness are intimately tied with issues of gender. Susie Orbach, Naomi Wolf, and Kim Chernin proclaim, “fat is a feminist issue,” reinforcing that “fat is female” (92) in a “tyranny of slenderness.” Even though basic health requires a higher percentage of body fat for women than men (which is evident by the age of three, see Taylor), US society discriminates against women for being overweight at significantly lower BMI than men. Rebecca Puhl and associates found that women experience noticeable discrimination starting at a BMI of twenty-seven (when a 5’5” woman is thirteen pounds overweight), but men don’t report it until their BMI is higher than thirty-five (sixty-eight pounds overweight for a 5’9” man). Reality television shows mirror this. Women frequently conflate their worth with their weight. A woman in the mid-200 pound range will talk about herself in ways that men don’t exhibit unless they exceed 500 pounds. Female participants frequently speak about being unlovable. Hannah, an outgoing,

thirty-two-year-old, who began at 248 pounds, spoke about her vulnerability in ways that justified societal prejudice: “We were so lost and broken and sad. . . . What I let those pounds do to me . . . I let them just totally rob me of a life. . . . And so many things. Relationships. And who I really am. And what I have to offer the world” (*TBL*: 11:20). The producers reinforce this narrative by cutting to a video of Hannah’s audition as she exhibited her before-body. She asked, “Who could love me like this? I don’t know anyone who could” (*TBL*, 11:20). On the finale, Hannah continued to repeat these assumptions: “I felt like I was nothing. . . . I was so ashamed . . . to admit that you’re failing in life. That you’re failing yourself” (11:21). Even Sunny, a smart, focused sixteen-year-old, internalized the social stigma, explaining, “I really feel that I have to lose weight . . . before I’ll find someone who will find me attractive” (14:2). Kai Hibbard, a former contestant on the show, said the producers cut any evidence of romance among the contestants until they lose substantial weight: “Those 'relationships' weren't allowed to bloom until both partners were skinny enough that their kisses were safe for a presumably very shallow audience. . . . They'd straight up refuse to follow actual couples to catch a glimmer of real romance because, and this was their actual reasoning, ‘Who wants to see two obese people making out?’” (Symon).

Families disrespect obese women. Jill, a thirty-five-year-old teacher, told the audience that “a family member used to tell me that no one would love me because I was overweight” (*Heavy*, 7). Rebecca admitted, “I feel like I never made my dad proud” (EM 3:1), but her twin brother focused more on his dad saying he loved him. On the first episode of *EWL*, Rachel shared the overwhelming sense of defeat and disappointment:

My whole entire life is a disappointment. . . . I won homecoming queen; I won valedictorian; I have a trophy case full of trophies—none of that even seems like

it could ever compensate for the fact that I am a disappointment because I'm overweight. And I don't think I could ever really make my parents proud until I do lose this weight (1:1).

The father of a different Rachel, on *TBL* a strong, optimistic, out-going athlete, stopped talking completely to his daughter, a breach she saw as impossible to heal before losing weight. She poignantly accepted her dad's conditions: "Coming to *The Biggest Loser*, I'm so thankful I've gotten that relationship with my dad back. . . . I've always wanted him to be proud of me and I realize now that he is" (15:12).

Many women on the weight-loss shows see weight as negating all other achievements. Sharon highlighted the shame: "I feel like there's this big sign on me that says 'Loser'" (*Heavy*, 3). Sunny, the sixteen-year old on *TBL*, summed it up: "I always feel that people are looking at me and judging me for my weight rather than the person that I am" (14:1). After the participants had lost a lot of weight, trainer Jillian complained that one woman "is *still* behaving as if she is worthless and incapable" (*TBL*, 11:17), implying her before-body *was* worthless and incapable.

While downward mobility and public panic about obesity does put pressure on men to conform to a thinner standard, weight-loss reality shows rarely suggest that simply being fat makes men unlovable or negates achievements. Similar to Puhl's findings, men are not stigmatized on reality television shows until they are at much higher weights. Dana is the only man under 500 pounds who expressed similar shame. He began at 498 pounds and was only able to acknowledge his homosexuality after losing weight. He explained: "Before, I felt worthless. . . . But now I really feel like my life is worth something because I have something to offer people" (EM 1:3).

The reality weight-loss shows argue that weight also prevents participants from being

good parents. Tumi chose not to consider having children until she lost weight: “I’ve proven that I’m worthy to be a mom and that I love whatever children I’ll have enough to do this” (15:11). On *Heavy*, Sharon shares her concerns about motherhood and blames her weight for shortcomings she may not even have, announcing, “I’ve tried to be [there] for them as well as I could. But I’ve been overweight their whole lives” (3). *TBL* featured a father, TC, whose car was hit by a motor home at sixty-miles-an-hour, breaking his seat on impact. His seat then hit his son who was riding in the backseat. TC blames his weight, not the driver who hit him or the car manufacturer. Just as society blames individuals for systemic issues and the show blames fat kids for being bullied, TC blames his weight for the accident.

Finally, regardless of gender, the shows intentionally work to remove participants’ dignity. Dana, on *EWL*, embraces the societal stereotype saying, “I know that I’m a fat slob of a hog” (1:3). The weigh-ins that end every episode echo this sentiment and use tactics that humiliate the participants while posing as documentation of progress. On early episodes of recent *TBL* seasons, the men had to weigh in wearing only shorts and the women wearing shorts and an exercise bra. Hibbard said participants asked for a shirt, but the producers said: “We needed to see how disgusting we looked because it would motivate us” (*AOL*). The shorts are low-rise, coming below the participants’ bellies. Indeed on a recent episode of *TBL*, a computer simulation shows a contestant two options: he gains weight and wears only shorts or loses weight and is granted jeans and a shirt. Around halfway through each season, *TBL* permits participants to keep their shirts on. This makes the before-bodies look less attractive and after-bodies look more fit, according to societal assumptions about fitness and attractiveness. *EWL* uses a freight scale for initial weigh-ins. The trainer claims participants are too heavy for other scales, but when the show wants to humiliate a contestant by weighing her at work, in front of her colleagues, they

find a regular scale. *Heavy* goes even farther in using camera shots designed to invite the audience to laugh at participants. In episode one there is a shot of Tom with his torn underwear revealed when he bends over. After surgery, the camera shoots him from his legs, so that the viewer can see up his hospital gown. The producers then show a close-up of the tissue that was removed from his body. In these shows, humiliation and stigmatization are the foundation of the entertainment.

Perhaps most surprisingly, un-conditional self-love requires one condition: being slim. After Tanya lost seventy pounds, she proclaimed: “I love myself unconditionally now” (15:13). Fernanda also had to reduce to say, “I am starting to love myself” (*TBL*: 15:15). Ruben, a contestant on *TBL* who previously appeared on *American Idol*, performed a song he wrote for the *TBL* season finale. (It later appeared on the album, *Unconditional Love*.) The words are telling: “There’s a new you and me. When we have love for ourselves, only then can we love someone else” (15:15), implying that the new self (the slimmer after-body) proves self-love and is ironically a necessary condition for unconditional love.

### Normalizing Prejudice

Weight-loss reality shows not only harm the participants by humiliating them and equating normative bodies with lovability and worthiness; they normalize the prejudice many heavier people experience. They illustrate the situation described by Cecelia Hartley:

Fat-phobia is one of the acceptable forms of prejudice left. . . . One study indicates that fat girls have only one-third the chance of being admitted to prestigious colleges as slim girls with similar records. Fat jokes still abound. . . .

Fat has become a moral issue unlike any other type of deviation from what society

considers normal. The fat woman is often dismissed as sloppy, careless, lazy, and self-indulgent. (249)

Participants reflect these findings in their self-descriptions. Jodi quit being a singer, which she described as “the time of my life,” because she couldn’t get over “being onstage thinking that everyone is . . . laughing at me” (*Heavy*, 1). Debbie is sad because “It’s a thin world out there. It’s a thin girl’s world. And I’m sitting on the sidelines. And I’m just trying to be a part of everything” (*Heavy*, 6). Julia wanted to fit in and sees her failure in terms of her weight. She said, “Normalcy is what I look forward to most” (*Heavy*, 8). She wanted to start law school but feared prejudice: “What I’m really afraid of, being a big girl, people will assume I’m sloppy and that I’m lazy. . . . People make snap decisions and I don’t want that decision to be based on me being too big.” Likewise, Francelina wouldn’t apply to medical school because, she said, “I don’t feel comfortable going to a medical school interview and being like this” (*TBL*, 14:9). Sal, a firefighter, was fat-shamed by trainer Bob when he tried out for *TBL*. In a later season he quoted Bob’s repudiation: “If my family’s trapped in a fire and I see you get off that truck, I don’t feel good about their chances for survival.” Sal then concurred: “That changed my life, because it took me back to a day that I had to ask a mom where her two-year-old was in a burning building and it never crossed my mind how she felt” (15:15). No one questioned whether Sal was fit to do his job, but his mere existence as a fat firefighter could possibly distress a prejudiced person. It isn’t the fire that caused the mother distress. The show blames the fat firefighter. No one challenges prejudice. Everyone works to change his or her weight instead.

#### Alternative Narratives

*TBL* has been so successful that it has spawned *TBL* groups throughout the country. Its

narrative, however, is designed for the demands of television entertainment, not health, or self-worth. Shows that grant obese participants dignity, like *Dance Your Ass Off* and *Shaq's Big Challenge*, have failed to gain traction in the United States, indicating that humiliation is as important as weight loss in the marketplace for viewers. Nevertheless, alternatives do exist.

Style's *Too Fat for Fifteen* followed a group of students at a boarding school for obese children. The producers did not select their subjects, and no indications suggest that the producers changed the routine of the school. In this nuanced approach, kids (and teachers) discuss the pain of being bullied and then take self-defense classes to resist. Hayley, a teenage girl, had a father who was clearly stigmatizing his daughter, claiming, "She can't go to college like this" (*Too Fat for 15*, 2:1), but Rachel's mother clearly rejected societal prejudice, standing up for her daughter: "She's a good, kind-hearted person that you can't help but love. But I think that makes her an easy target and that's why the kids are so mean to her because she's not mean enough to fight back. . . . We know we accept her for who she is and how she is; society doesn't" (2:1). The school also puts far more emphasis on food than the reality shows do.

Oxygen's *Dance Your Ass Off* also challenged many assumptions. The contestants auditioned to be on the show with their dancing skills, granting them competence, skill, and self-esteem, which no other US weight-loss reality television show focusing on adults has attempted. A dance teacher proclaimed, "I'm here to show you can be a size 18 and move like a size 2" (Trice, 1). Professional designers put the contestants' outfits together aiming to make them look good, and their dancing scores were averaged with their weight loss, so both counted. The cute, successful, and obese Marissa Jaret Winokur, who originated the lead in Broadway's *Hairspray*, hosted the first season. She defined their different approach: "This isn't a diet. We've tried all the diets and God knows, they don't work. No more feeling bad about yourself. No more feeling bad

about the clothes you're wearing." The show never developed a following in the US but versions have aired in seven other countries.

British television has developed a variety of shows about weight loss and non-conforming bodies. The most interesting, *Supersize vs. Superskinny*, which has run for seven years, pairs a very thin and a very large person for each episode. The show treats both groups with respect, representing food issues as a spectrum. The resident doctor says, "These extreme opposites are far more similar than they think" (1:1). The show's format calls for mutual learning and teaching. Exercise usually includes a lot of laughter among people who like each other. A "flab-fighters" club combines fun activities (rowing, Ping-Pong, gardening) with practical movement (washing cars) and continually emphasizes moderation and that "a bit of slacking" (2:8) is fine. When a super-sizer takes a Jujitsu class, the narrator says, "You don't have to be super-skinny to work these moves" (1:1). The show also emphasizes moderation; the narrator says: "We're in the grip of an epidemic. We're obsessed about our weight, the food we eat and the way we see our bodies. And it's becoming dangerous. Our relationship with food and weight has never been so extreme" (1:1).

The first three seasons featured Anna Richardson, a writer, producer, and journalist. Despite her professional success, she defines herself as a "failed dieter" but has a healthy perspective:

There's nothing particularly wrong with my body but I still think I need to drop a dress size or two. I'm constantly faced with glamorous images of skinny women and made to feel like I don't quite cut it. Like 84% of women in the U.K., I wish I was slimmer. . . . Behind this glamorous façade there's a dark, dark world but despite now knowing this I still feel pressure, as a woman, to be thinner (1:1).

Richardson investigates both various diets and unrealistic beauty standards, looking at things as diverse as liposuction, PhotoShopping, fashion magazines, and societal pressure. After Richardson does a Hollywood photo-shoot, she says, “The pictures we see of big A-list stars; that is not what they look like. They’ve been retouched within an inch of their life. . . . I’ve realized to look this good in this town is just a con” (2:8). The show never describes people as failures, unlovable, or defined solely by their weight. Participants follow moderate daily eating plans aiming at 2000 calories for women and 2500 calories for men. (The US shows usually recommend 1200 calories a day, although Hibbard estimated she had half that on *TBL*.) On *Supersize vs. Superskinny*, when participants return three months later for a check-in, realistic weight changes (between half a stone and two stone—7 to 28 pounds) are celebrated as real achievements.

*TBL* evolved to create more dramatic television, but even *TBL: UK and Ireland* is kinder and more respectful to the participants than the U.S. version. In the U.K., the narration introduces the contestants as “brave” (5:1). The participants’ shorts came to their waists, instead of hanging below their bellies. The host, who spoke about regular exercise sessions, worked out with the contestants and she struggled, paralleling the participants struggle in a challenging workout. When the show had a temptation challenge, the goal was to eat as close to 500 calories as possible. The US version required contestants to eat the most calories to win (while simultaneously chastising the winner), but the UK version acknowledged that people need to eat and challenged them to make thoughtful choices. No one describes the participants as unlovable or as failures.

These differences highlight the ways that the US shows have helped normalize the stigmatization of larger bodies as they construct a narrative of fatness and reflect the incredible

prejudice in US popular culture. Over the years, *TBL* moved towards larger, less-active contestants, who seem to abase themselves more reliably, implying that the voyeuristic element of humiliating others may have become the primary pleasure in the weight-loss shows. Taken together, these shows both reflect and strengthen societal prejudice about obesity. They stigmatize obesity and blame individuals for a societal problem, while pushing the consumption of new products to address over-consumption. As the United States debates increased regulation of food, these shows play into the food industry's narrative that health is an individual issue of self-control, rather than a systemic issue of an unhealthy supply chain and poor societal choices. The narrative of fatness as a performed act helps justify prejudice and bullying, even against children, making it harder for non-participants to lose weight healthily or live with dignity in an increasingly prejudiced society. Ultimately, they are an exercise in humiliation and prejudice, making our society the biggest loser.

Alisa Roost is an associate professor at Hostos Community College at the City University of New York. She can be reached at [aroost@hostos.cuny.edu](mailto:aroost@hostos.cuny.edu).

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