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# Intimate portraits of fat women eating: The missing discourse of joy in food

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**ABSTRACT**

Although some researchers have addressed fat women's complicated feelings about their bodies and fat stigma, little is known about fat women's eating practices, particularly their positive or joyful eating experiences. This study drew from semi-structured interviews with 20 fat women from a diverse community sample ($M_{age}$ = 40.4, SD = 11.83, 40% queer-identified, 50% women of color, wide range of body weights) collected across the United States to examine their responses to questions about their emotions about eating, particularly positive emotions toward food. We identified five themes of how fat women conceptualize emotions about their positive and joyful experiences with eating: 1) ambivalence about eating "bad" food; 2) feeling proud of not eating too much; 3) food as a reward or incentive; 4) food as a connection to loved ones; and 5) food as a symbol of travel memories. We found an absence of unadulterated food pleasure and noted the insidious ways that fat stigma and fat negativity crept into fat women's narratives about food, even when they reflected on joyful or positive experiences. In particular, they constructed restraint as good, certain foods as bad, and joys of eating as incentivizing themselves for hard work or struggle. That said, stories of food as a bridge to loved ones and travel memories offered a window into other possibilities for resisting the overwhelming food negativity directed at, and internalized by, fat women. Ultimately, though, we found a missing discourse of joy in food, undergirded with cultural and emotional assumptions about fat women eating.

**KEYWORDS**

Eating; food narratives; emotions; gender roles; body image

The gendered components of how women eat and conceptualize food have long pointed to a number of key contradictions: women are expected to deny themselves food and be thin, but they also must feed others and invest energy into food preparation; women are inundated with messages about health and wellness yet often report overwhelmingly negative body images along with confusion about how to be healthy; and food is constructed as the "enemy" but also as a source of comfort (Charles and Kerr 1986; Leipämaa-Leskinen 2007). For fat women, these gendered components of eating and food have become even more complex and muddled. A key irony of fat female embodiment is that fat women are imagined to be always eating, and yet their eating practices are often rendered invisible (Gailey and Harjunen 2019). Many fat women described public eating, including at restaurants or at work, with trepidation, believing that thinner people judged them incessantly for their food choices (Bombak 2015; Hunt and Rhodes 2018). Fat women overwhelmingly face pressures not to eat in public (Hunt and Rhodes 2018), not to eat too much in front of their friends and family (Maor 2012), or to eat in secrecy and shame (Chrisler 2012). Cultural stories about the monstrous, abject fat female body, with voracious appetite and little regard for decorum, serve as a specter invested with emotional charge in contemporary culture (Gordon 2023; Owen 2015)).

Still, remarkably little is known about women's joyful or positive eating experiences, perhaps because the discourses of excess and restriction are constantly circulating. Although some researchers have addressed fat women's complicated feelings about their bodies and fat stigma (Chrisler 2012; Farrell 2011; Saguy and Ward 2011; Talleyrand et al. 2017), and have at times focused on fat women's feelings about fat subjectivity (Chalklin 2016; Rørtveit, Åström, and Severinsson 2009) or weight loss and weight management (Gailey and Harjunen 2019), research has largely ignored fat women's positive or joyful eating experiences. In this current study, we addressed this gap by exploring how fat women constructed their practices of eating

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underneath the shadow of both dieting and wellness imperatives, and, alternatively, how they sometimes enjoyed parts of eating and enacted resistance to those frameworks.

## The emotions of eating

Researchers have long posited that eating experiences are not merely practical but also quite social and emotional, producing a range of responses to individual foods and to meal experiences more broadly (Altheimer and Urry 2019; Macht and Simons 2000). Marketing departments often rely on tactics that incite certain kinds of emotions (e.g., craving, longing, joy) to encourage consumers to buy certain kinds of foods (Jiang, King, and Prinyawiwatkul 2014). Emotions and food choices intersect in a variety of ways, as people choose foods based on their emotional state, just as they suppress eating certain foods due to their emotions, or they eat to regulate their emotions (Macht 2008; Welsh 2011). In this way, a tension exists between body image experts and researchers, who often want to enhance well-being by giving people tools to feel better about their bodies (Piran 2015), and the demands of the marketplace, which often artificially induces certain emotions (both positive and negative) to intensify the drive to consume (Reith 2018).

Though relatively rare compared to studies of negative eating experiences, some research has addressed the joys and pleasures of eating in the general population (though notably not while specifically studying fat women). A study of Indian, German, and American adults found that having positive emotions about eating correlated with decreased health risk factors six months later across all three populations (Sproesser et al. 2018), suggesting a link between emotions and physiological health outcomes. This raises questions about what contributes to having positive emotions about food. One qualitative study of pleasurable eating experiences found that the pleasures of eating connected not only to the food but also to the physical environments of eating and the social factors of eating (e.g., who people ate with, the context of the meal, etc.) (Macht, Meininger, and Roth 2005). Associations between positive sensations and positive emotions during eating experiences were described as the most pleasurable. Further, people who enjoyed eating had an explicit intention to enjoy their food, ate slowly, focused on their environments, and engaged in social activities before, during, or after the meal (Macht, Meininger, and Roth 2005).

People have a wide range of emotions when engaging in eating, suggesting that food can elicit emotions across the spectrum of human experience. Specific tastes have been associated with particular emotions, as sweet flavors elicited happiness or surprise, bitter flavors elicited anger and disgust, and salty or sour flavors were associated with all emotions (Robin et al. 2000). Women who were asked to eat a chocolate bar reported feeling overwhelmingly joyful and guilty, as joy was elicited by the sensory pleasures of chocolate but guilt was induced by negative thoughts associated with eating chocolate, particularly its fattening qualities (Macht and Dettmer 2006). Similarly, people felt emotions about foods they avoided, as women who ate less meat tended to have strongly negative feelings toward meat, including disappointment and dissatisfaction (Rousset et al. 2005).

Researchers have found that links between emotions and eating have pointed to both positive and negative outcomes for people. Participants felt more anger when eating impulsively or carelessly, and they felt more joy when eating more consciously and with the intention of enjoyment (Macht 1999). Meals eaten during states of heightened emotion—both positive and negative—tended to be larger than those eaten during neutral moods, though positive moods had a stronger impact on food intake than negative moods (Patel and Schlundt 2001). Researchers have theorized that associative learning mechanisms bind positive emotions to food intake, while emotion-regulating eating may link unpleasant emotions to "mood control eating" or the desire to regulate emotion rather than to satisfy hunger (Booth 1994); in this way, people link both positive and negative emotions to an impulse to eat.

Compared to men, women may be particularly vulnerable to absorbing more negative cultural attitudes about eating and getting fat (Dalley, Toffanin, and Pollet 2012). Women were particularly prone to label different kinds of food as "good" or "bad" in a moral sense, and built these judgments into their routine speech patterns (Murcott 1993). Built into the framework for women's eating behaviors are assumptions that eating often provokes negative, rather than positive, emotions. The concept of "emotional eating," that is, eating too much when feeling negative emotions to cope with those negative emotions, has also been found in studies of women's eating behavior

(Frayn and Knäuper 2018). Women of all body sizes who felt negative emotions often reported more motivation to eat and more intense bodily symptoms of hunger (Macht and Simons 2000). Emotional eating has been associated with both emotional dysregulation and the presence of negative emotions, particularly for fatter women (Czepczor-Bernat et al. 2020).

A plethora of studies have shown that women with eating disorders feel strongly negative emotions toward food and eating. Those women who associated dieting with a denial of pleasure and an ideological commitment to avoid unhealthy foods reported more signs of eating disorders and lower psychological well-being compared to other dieters (Lindeman and Stark 2000). Binge eating behavior was preceded by emotions of anger, loneliness, disgust, exhaustion, and shame (Zeeck et al. 2011). Women with eating disorders also reported more depression and anxiety, suggesting that negative emotions toward food are sometimes linked to mood disorders (Schulz and Laessle 2010). These findings again reinforce the idea that people's conceptualization of food is dynamic, responds to the contexts of eating, and interacts with emotions and identities (Bisogni et al. 2002).

## Fat women, emotions, and food

Differences between fatter and thinner women appeared in the literature on emotions and food, as fatter women not only negotiated gendered messages of restraint and the thin imperative, but also wrestled with social norms that deemed their bodies a "failure" (Murray 2008). Compared to thinner women, fatter women reported liking food less, seeking out less healthy foods, and eating less often because of need and hunger; conversely, they reported more concern about weight control, more perceived need to regulate their emotions about food, and more concern about violating social norms compared to thinner women (Renner et al. 2012). Notably, fatter women reported far less satisfaction with eating compared to thinner women (Sob, Siegrist, and Hartmann 2023) and far more negative views of food compared to thinner women (van Strien, Donker, and Ouwens 2016), suggesting that fatter women may see eating as less joyful than thinner women.

Fatter women may also perceive a wide range of foods as distressing. In one study, fatter women who ate high-energy foods reported more sadness, shame, and fear compared to thinner women, as higher-energy foods were viewed by fatter women as "unhealthy" and "dangerous" (Macht, Gerer, and Ellgring 2003), again suggesting that emotions often drive feelings about food and food intake. Another study of adolescents found that, when participants were shown pictures of different foods and asked to rate their emotions toward each one, fatter participants described palatable foods far more negatively than average-weight participants, and average-weight participants described more positive emotions toward palatable foods compared to fatter participants (Barthomeuf, Droit-Volet, and Rousset 2009). Additionally, fat women in heterosexual committed relationships reported both that they suppressed negative emotions about food when they were around their male partners and that when doing so, they overconsumed food; the opposite relationship was noted for thinner women (Butler, Young, and Randall 2010). Fatter African-American women reported self-consciousness about their bodies when triggered by family, friends, and media to feel negatively about their bodies, and an ambivalent relationship to food, particularly about tensions between eating "junk food" and healthy food (Talleyrand et al. 2017). These findings collectively suggested that fat women perceived food as a series of landmines with the potential to elicit negative emotions or intensify the stigma they felt even in their intimate interpersonal relationships.

Nevertheless, interventions such as Health at Every Size, an intervention that focuses on weight inclusivity and non-dieting as well as approaches to eating that emphasize wellness and intuition, helped to ameliorate some of the negative impacts of living in a fat-negative culture (Bacon and Bacon 2010). One study of fat Brazilian women who participated in a Health at Every Size intervention group found that participants felt more autonomy and pleasure in eating, more familiarity with the practices of cooking, and decreased automatic eating after their engagement with this group compared to those who did not participate (Sabatini et al. 2019), again suggesting that resistance to anti-fatness can occur individually and at the level of policy and cultural norm shifts.

## Research questions

While the literature has demonstrated clear links between food and emotions—both positive and negative—there is some evidence that fat women may experience food differently compared to thin women, particularly in terms of access to positive emotions and joyful experiences. Further, because there is so little research on fat women's subjective feelings about food, conflicts between the enjoyment of food and the restriction of food may show up differently for fatter women in their narratives about eating. In this study, we asked two primary research questions: First, how did fat women conceptualize, narrate, and talk about positive experiences about eating and food? Second, how did women's narratives about positive eating experiences reflect common messages about gender and eating in the culture at large?

## Method

### *Recruitment and participants*

This study utilized qualitative data from a sample of 20 adult fat women ($M_{age}$ = 40.4, SD = 11.83) recruited in the spring of 2021 from across the United States. Study participants were recruited through the "gig" listings of the local online section of Craigslist from numerous cities (e.g., New York, San Francisco, New Orleans, Denver, and Phoenix). Finding participants through Craigslist has some limitations, but it allows researchers greater access to people from different ages, races, and sexual identities than community snowball samples (Head et al. 2016) or convenience samples of undergraduates (Alto, McCullough, and Levant 2018). Craigslist also attracts women from more diverse age, sexual identity, and social class backgrounds compared to Facebook and Google AdWords (Antoun et al. 2016; Head et al. 2016; Warren, Smalley, and Barefoot 2015). The advertisement asked for women over 18 who "identify as fat or overweight" to participate in a Zoom interview study about their "feelings about being fat and the social aspects of fatness." Interviewing on Zoom allowed for access to a diverse group of participants across multiple geographic areas while also honoring people's need for safety during the second year of COVID-19 (Oliffe et al. 2021). Identifying data were removed, and each participant received a pseudonym to ensure anonymity.

Demographic questions, including participants' body weights, were asked about at the end of each interview. The group of women we recruited was highly diverse: 50% (10) white and 50% (10) women of color (five African-American, three Asian/Pacific Islander, one Mexican-American, one Native American); 60% (12) heterosexual, 25% (5) bisexual, and 15% (3) lesbian women; and a diverse array of sizes within the category of "fat," including 15% (3) women less than 200 pounds, 50% (10) women between 200–250 pounds, 20% (4) women between 250–300 pounds, and 15% (3) women more than 300 pounds. All participants identified as cisgender. They were paid $25.00 for participating in the study. All participants consented to have their interviews recorded and fully transcribed.

### *Procedure*

All interviews were conducted on Zoom and lasted approximately 90 minutes. Questions asked included a variety of topics about their bodies, relationships, and feelings about fatness. In all, 17 questions were asked, including follow-up questions as needed. Some of the other findings of this larger study were published in a recent book (Fahs 2025). The study and the specific interview protocol were both approved by the Institutional Review Board. All participants were interviewed by the first author.

Responses to two questions guided our analysis: "What's the single most joyful eating experience you've had?" and "When do you feel the happiest or most content about food and eating?" These questions were scripted, but served to open up other conversations and dialogue about related topics; follow-up questions, clarifications, and probes were free-flowing and conversational.

### *Thematic analysis*

Responses were analyzed qualitatively using a phenomenologically oriented form of reflexive thematic analysis that draws from feminist theory and gender theory (Braun and Clarke 2020). This mixed deductive

and inductive and data-driven type of analysis, emphasizing reflexively open evaluation of the data and steering away from overly positivistic assumptions (see Braun and Clarke 2025), allowed for groupings of responses based on women's responses to the questions about joyful eating experiences (e.g., bewilderment, connections to family, etc.), looking broadly for their conceptualizations of this phenomenon rather than engaging with specific words and phrases. We created the themes and discussed a broad coding scheme before each of us independently made an early list of tentative themes and appropriate quotes. After we finished this initial review, we met again and looked for similarities between our early codes. We agreed on most of these initial codes; in the one instance that we did not, we resolved this discrepancy through discussion. Once these initial codes were generated, we reread the transcripts to see if each of us coded the same passages in the same way (similar to the recommendations of Campbell et al. 2013). We then finalized the themes by reviewing lines, sentences, and paragraphs of the transcripts, looking for patterns in their ways of describing their positive experiences with eating.

We followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) suggestion that the generation of themes does not follow a purely linear sequence because inductive techniques generally follow a more recursive process where they move back-and-forth throughout the phases. These patterns were then turned into broader themes that linked data excerpts from individual interviews into a broader discussion of how the whole dataset operated. Finally, we combined our inductive analysis with the concepts of previous research that informed our interview guide and literature review. Data analysis was guided by a critical realist perspective (Braun and Clarke 2006) that emphasizes the social construction of fat women's eating experiences. This approach highlights and situates informants' perspectives and subjectivities within larger power structures, but also acknowledges that, even for marginalized voices, some accounts of "reality" are more central than others (Parr 2015). In the case of the present study, we focused on how fat women made sense of their positive or joyful eating experiences.

## Results

We identified five themes associated with how fat women conceptualize their positive and joyful experiences with eating: 1) ambivalence about eating "bad" food; 2) feeling proud of not eating too much; 3) food as a reward or incentive; 4) food as a connection to loved ones; and 5) food as a symbol of travel memories. As evident in the following descriptions, some participants' responses overlapped between themes in that some participants' responses fit into multiple themes.

### *Theme 1: Ambivalence about eating "bad" food*

A surprisingly common response characterized food as producing a combination of pleasure and shame, suggesting deep ambivalence about some types of eating. Audre (29, African-American, bisexual, 230 pounds) felt pleasure when eating what she perceived as "bad food" alone and away from others' judgment, but that feeling was followed by immense feelings of shame: "Eating by myself is the best. When someone questions what I eat, that's when I feel ashamed. When I'm by myself just eating what I want, I'm happy. Like the other night, I had like two bags of chips and a Twix and M&Ms and Skittles, and I was just chilling and eating all by myself, like grazing, and it felt good. But then obviously, the next day it was just instant shame. I hid the wrappers so my boyfriend wouldn't know." This same pattern of feeling pleasure followed by shame also happened to Isabella (30, Mexican-American, heterosexual, 236 pounds): "When I'm enjoying something I'm craving, and I finally get to have it, that's a great feeling. But then I've overdone it, and I feel bad about it. I often consume so many carbs, and I know I shouldn't, but I still do it anyway." This tension between joyful eating and overwhelming feelings of shame showed the fleeting, contradictory, and painful process of trying to enjoy food outright and unconditionally.

### *Theme 2: Feeling proud of not eating too much*

Other fat women described joyful eating as simply not eating much at all. Winnie (49, Native American and white, heterosexual, 260 pounds) could not recall any positive eating experiences other than success with dieting: "I guess when I see that I lost weight, or I feel good from working out, or that I see that my clothes

feel looser, and I can fit into something different, that's my high point." Hannah (27, white, bisexual, 220 pounds) talked about happy eating in moral language, referencing herself as good or bad when consuming food and emphasizing her restrictive eating as joyful for her: "I would say I'm joyful when I feel like I 'earned it.' This week, for instance, I've been trying to lose weight, and I exercised four days this week, which is big for me, and I ate less than I normally do, so I feel like I'm excited for this weekend when I'm going to reward myself with food that I like and look forward to. Those sorts of instances make me feel content. It's a reward for restricting my calories." When I pushed her to consider a single most joyful eating experience, she replied, "I don't think I've had one. Nothing really stands out. I've never thought about food like that, so nothing comes to mind." This sense of moralizing food and enjoying food only to the extent that they limited their consumption again revealed how the logics and practices of diet and wellness culture often limited the ways that fat women experienced and interacted with food. The idea of food as intrinsically pleasurable was confusing and baffling to some fat women.

The most common responses to questions about joyful eating were narratives of fat women feeling happy when they controlled their food intake. Kellyann (37, white, heterosexual, 190 pounds) only felt joy about eating when she ate less: "I feel the happiest and most content about food I'm eating when I'm in control. When I can say I'm gonna have one-fourth of that pie and not eat any more, or when I have one small nonfat latte, not a large latte with vanilla or chocolate. Being in control of my eating habits makes me happy." Similarly, Laila (30, African-American, heterosexual, 200 pounds) also said that control of her eating made her feel joy: "My high point with eating is when I want something, and I do little portions and don't overdo it. I've always had a problem with that." This message of control mirrors how weight-loss marketing often emphasizes reclaiming control over the body and minimizing impulses to eat.

### *Theme 3: Food as a reward or incentive*

Some fat women praised the taste of certain foods only after they had long bouts of dieting or eating less pleasurable foods. Esther (59, white, heterosexual, 318 pounds) focused on unique flavors of individual, less healthy foods as pleasurable: "If I've been good, and I haven't had something to eat in a really long time, like roasted Brussels sprouts or Burger King, which is maybe like once every six months, like a Whopper Junior with cheese, or that falafel, the aftertaste is like total contentment for me. Once I get that little thrill or that taste of something, I probably won't eat it again for like another six to eight months. It was just to satisfy that craving." Here, what people *should* eat gets supercharged with feelings of genuine joy when breaking restrictive rules. Yvette (31, African-American, heterosexual, 325 pounds) described her most joyful eating as unrestricted access to something she had not tasted in a long time, but she also worried about over-consumption: "The happiest is when I've had a taste for something that I haven't had and that I can finally eat, like sushi. My favorite is when I go to an unlimited sushi or hotpot, and I get to eat all the food I want in one setting, and it's like you're tasting and indulging in so many flavors, but then I'm no longer being cautious of what I'm eating or being aware of calorie intakes, so that's depressing." This sense of wanting certain foods, indulging in them, and then feeling guilty about their excesses showed the complexities surrounding the joy fat women often felt about food.

### *Theme 4: Food as a connection to loved ones*

In contrast to the austere and conflicted messages so far, a few fat women expressed food pleasures in the social contexts of marking special occasions, or as a way to feel connected to people, families, and social groups. Della (57, white, lesbian, 227 pounds) connected joyful eating to memories of her mother and grandmother within her Italian culture: "I think about my mom and my grandma. I just like having food made for me. I like being served; I liked having food served to me. I like to cook, but it's one of the few positive nurturing experiences I had with my family. I remember as a child cooking with my grandma. Me and my sister would make gnocchi and help her roll the dough and all that kind of stuff, so there was a lot of family around food." Similarly, Tahi (29, Pacific Islander/Tongan, heterosexual, 265 pounds) characterized food at Polynesian birthday parties as her most joyful eating experience: "Polynesian birthday parties are awesome. There's a little celebration, especially at a kid's first birthday party. We just went all out and did the whole shebang and did dinner with everyone and just had a big party. It's as big as a Quinceañera to us,

with lots of great food!" Similarly, Bei (32, Korean-American, heterosexual, 180 pounds) associated joyful eating with celebratory events with family: "One is celebrating with a large group of people or eating together on good occasions if I made the food myself and put a lot of hard work into it and it came out tasting pretty good. I love birthday celebrations where my family would prepare a cake for me, and we went out to celebrate too." Patty (44, white, heterosexual, 290 pounds) associated food and connection with her father: "On Christmas Eve one time, my dad picked up some really nice T-bone steaks, marinated them, and they were probably the best things I've ever had—good company and overall a really fun time." In these examples, food appreciation and pleasures were only allowed when building or reinforcing emotional connections through family time, nostalgia, ethnic pride, and feeling nurtured through communal familial rituals.

### *Theme 5: Food as a symbol of travel memories*

Connecting food to place and identity, some fat women linked joyful eating to tourism narratives about travel, adventure, novel experiences, and certain locations where they tried new foods. Jayden (57, white, lesbian, 220 pounds) associated joy with an amazing espresso in Amsterdam: "I have friends in Amsterdam, and they have this enormous hand-pulled espresso machine, and my girlfriend and I stayed at their place for two weeks. It's just like *boom*, *boom*, *boom*! Cranking out those espressos like nuts! It was just amazing. I remember having breakfast with it every day. It was so nice." Sharon (40, white, heterosexual, 323 pounds) recalled eating in Italy as a high point of her eating: "When I got to spend an afternoon in Italy, that was really wonderful. It felt special, just the fact that I was eating in Italy, I guess." Octavia (32, white, bisexual, 200 pounds) remembered her time studying abroad in Russia as a food highlight for her, emphasizing connections with other people and relationality in her response: "When I was studying abroad in Russia, there was this one restaurant and basically all they served was Russian-style pies, which are like savory fillings and pastry. It was such a great restaurant, and they were very cheap. We would go there a lot just as poor students. I just remember the whole experience. It was really warm and crowded and comforting, and we're all eating this new food together." This sense of unique and original newness connected to travel and adventure appeared without the typical worries about restraint, overindulgence, and control. Traveling seemed to open new doors for joy about eating on its own terms, particularly as women had novel experiences that differed from the monotony or restrictions of home.

## Discussion

While quantitative studies have found that fat women rarely endorse enjoyment of eating (Sob, Siegrist, and Hartmann 2023; van Strien, Donker, and Ouwens 2016), our study revealed that the situation may be more bleak than that. When directly asking women about instances of pleasurable eating, many fat women could not express an unconditional moment of food contentment or bliss. Our findings affirm the difficulty fat women seem to have in experiencing food as a positive aspect of their lives. Notably, we did not ask for their general emotions about food in this study, but rather, specifically attempted to elicit *positive* feelings about food. The difficulty fat women had in immediately identifying these experiences was notable, as was the creeping of fat stigma and fat negativity into their positive eating experiences (e.g., restricting food as a positive eating experience). While previous research found that women tended to report positive feelings about eating when they made healthy choices (Sob, Siegrist, and Hartmann 2023), our findings suggest that stigma avoidance was one of the key factors in how most fat women experienced joy in eating. *I am not being judged. I am not confirming negative stereotypes about fat people. I am not losing control over my eating.* While this is understandable given that fat women live in contexts that undermine their ability to experience bodily autonomy and joy, it is nevertheless a dire comment on how deeply and aggressively fat stigma gets internalized and ingrained within fat women's minds. The ability to (temporarily) escape the stigmatizing gaze of others felt joyful, overriding the experience of food as inherently nourishing, tasty, or pleasurable. It seems that the (imagined) presence of the judgmental, chastising "Other" was omnipresent in fat women's eating practices. The rather insidious ways that fat stigma and fat negativity crept into fat women's narratives about food, even when they were reflecting on a single joyful or positive experiences, showed

how readily they could construct restraint as good, certain foods as bad, and the joys of eating as incentivized only through hard work or struggle.

This is all the more alarming given that fat women are often derided as being monstrous, abject, always-eating, always-consuming, and always-failing (Owen 2015). There is a cruel irony here: the stereotypes of the voracious (happy?) eater have collided with the experiences of stigma to strip away both the ability to freely eat and the ability to enjoy eating at all. We initially expected to hear more stories of favorite foods, recipes, or specific dishes; how food connected to culture, memory and place, and friends and family; or more stories of how food is a source of joy and pleasure, relaxation and bonding, connection and adventure, or simply an expression of mundane pleasure or simple happiness. While a few fat women did have stories like these—most notably in relation to food as a link to family, or food as connected to travel experiences and place—most of the narratives in this study detailed a relationship to food as something they battled against, struggled to control, and felt shame and guilt about. Food, it seemed, had become a key source of conflict in their way of relating to the world, particularly as it became attached to negative emotions like shame, anger, disgust, embarrassment, and impulsivity.

That so many fat women felt essentially cut off from positive associations with food—or at least the kinds of positive associations not fraught with stigma avoidance—and yet carried the weight of stigma associated with fat bodies, suggested a deep interplay and detrimental links between embodiment, emotions, the pathologies of wellness culture, and the practices of eating. This could perhaps signal an important future direction for work in Health at Every Size or other kinds of medical settings that discuss or talk about food and eating, as joy in eating matters and is an important part of the human experience. These findings also point to the ways that fat women's eating gets wedged into another impossible corner: it is hypervisible and yet invisible (Gailey 2014). Fat people live a conflicted and ironic existence where they are stereotyped everywhere and authentically seen almost nowhere. (The headless fat body, seen in endless news stories of fat people, only further emblematizes this problem.) We "see" fat people, yet know very little about their subjective experiences. There are numerous assumptions made about fat people eating, and yet their actual stories and feelings are largely missing from discourses of food, as Gailey (2014)'s work implies.

Consequently, their relationship to food—an intimate part of their lives—also exists within a paradigm of contradiction and conflict, visibility and invisibility. Researchers know relatively little about fat women's eating experiences, and yet it seems ubiquitous, written onto the body, laden with assumptions about motivations and drives and hunger and permissiveness. There is much talk about fat women's eating, and yet almost no one has actually asked them about it (This again reminds us of the current conversations about weight loss drugs like Ozempic and Wegovy, where fat women are constantly being discussed, but very few people are directly talked to about their experiences with the drugs, see Fahs and Swank 2026.). Certainly, there is a cultural blind spot around the enjoyment of food in general, and particularly for women, and much of the discussion of food enjoyment is shaped by corporate interests trying to maximize consumer spending (Kwan 2009). The lack of attention to fat women's emotional experiences of eating reflects broader cultural patterns of oversimplifying rather than complicating stories of fat bodies. Perhaps the assumptions that fat people enjoy eating underlie the lack of attention to actually *asking them* about this. And, notably, the findings do not necessarily suggest that they do enjoy eating. There is, in essence, a missing discourse of joy in fat women's eating stories, again pointing to the hypervisibility of fat women's eating and hyperinvisibility of their emotions about food (Gailey 2014). In line with Ahmed's (2013) work on the politics of emotions, it seems that emotions of dread and disgust have adhered to fat women's eating stories, pushing out opportunities for joy and elation.

Looking more closely at our data, it does seem that there are a few areas where fat women were able to resist the overwhelming deluge of fat negativity in their eating practices. They constructed eating as a link to loved ones, particularly mothers and grandmothers with whom they have cooked. This sense that family cooking rituals can elicit powerfully positive emotions deserves more attention, particularly given that fat women identified so few areas where they felt not only permission to eat, but enjoyment in that indulgence. Similarly, if travel memories offer a window into potentially positive and joyful eating experiences for fat women, this suggests that associating food with being away and out of one's normal routine may offer opportunities for positive feelings that outweigh the typically negative associations between food and stigma. Perhaps being a cultural outsider, as in travel experiences, reduces the power of the "eating rules" present for fat women, just as travel often encourages people

to prioritize pleasure and novelty (Laing and Frost 2017). Moreover, travel food memories may really be about connection to loved ones and ways of relating culturally and socially to groups of people; feeling connected to people was, in essence, a key part of the appeal of these food stories. Both connections to loved ones and travel food experiences are areas that could offer new directions for interventions in enhancing body image, nurturing more healthy relationships to eating, and bolstering fat women's sense that food can be joyful and pleasurable. Still, fat women's access to traveling can be limited by social class, just as not all fat women have family members who enjoy joint cooking sessions and food rituals. We nevertheless see it as worthwhile to pursue new directions for enhancing fat women's access to positive emotions about food and eating.

## Limitations and future directions

Certain research decisions may have affected this study's results. For example, asking specifically about foods they like, people they enjoy eating with, or their favorite restaurants might have elicited different kinds of content than the broader questions we asked. Future studies could also build on our findings by specifically asking about stigma avoidance with food, connections to loved ones through food, and travel memories about food, with the intention to more fully explore how these become linked to positive emotions. The joy of *not eating* may also warrant more future research, particularly as overlaps between "normative" fat eating and eating disordered attitudes and behavior might become muddled. Further, because these interviews occurred during the second year of the COVID-19 pandemic, this could have impacted the results, as food enjoyment dropped during the early stages of the pandemic (Coakley et al. 2021) and public health messages warned that higher BMI increased risks of COVID-19 hospitalization and death (Dolezal and Spratt 2023). Studies could also look quantitatively at these questions by including lists of words and associations with food and asking fat women about them, or by measuring positive attitudes about food through several of the excellent existing tools available already (e.g., Sproesser et al. 2018's Positive Eating Scale). Further, more direct engagement with the full weight spectrum and how smaller and larger types of fat interact with participants' feelings and responses about food could be useful in future studies, especially as researchers continue to nuance and expand notions of the "fat experience."

Building on the work of intersectionality, our data point to the importance of looking at fatness in relation to various other social identities, particularly race, gender identity, ability and disability, size, and social class. Given that different groups are more associated with social tropes of corpulence, "monstrosity," and unruliness, particularly queerness, disability, and poverty, understanding how this impacts eating experiences is crucial. Future research could also see if food norms might allow fat women of different races and social classes (Beagan, Power, and Chapman 2015) to enjoy food more, including the impacts of cultural norms of collective eating (e.g., Latinx communities) and fears of "excessive" bodies (e.g., stereotypes of fat Black women). Finally, comparing impressions of food joy across women of different body sizes might be fruitful, particularly because thinner women have reported more shame than celebration when eating pleasurable foods (Kuijer and Boyce 2014). How emotions about food differ when women are closer or further away from the white, able-bodied, thin ideal is a compelling site of further study.

Ultimately, the fuller picture of fat women's experiences with eating—positive, negative, ambivalent, and everything in between—deserves more attention and close analysis. It seems that these experiences are hiding in plain sight, represented as culturally ubiquitous and yet ignored and largely neglected as sites of research and study. To understand fat women's experiences of eating is also a conscious effort to resist the invisibility that fat women face around their eating practices, making room instead for fat women to illuminate the strange interface between how they internalize and resist dominant messages about control, discipline, freedom, and pleasure.

## Author's contribution

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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