

## **An Introduction to Fat Studies and Disability Studies**

Scholars of fatness and disability contend with the nebulous division between the two conditions. Many fat people also personally or legally classify themselves as disabled, yet other scholars argue that expanding these connections further stigmatizes both groups, causing activism to regress.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, parallels can be drawn between treatments aimed at both fat people and disabled people; be it diet plans or corrective surgeries push people to look and function closer to society's standards. However, some accommodations do aid in day-to-day interactions because of the firmly set ways the world is constructed. As disabled and fat people are not a monolith, a facet of these two disciplines is that people have the autonomy to function as they see fit.

The field of fat studies analyzes the lived experiences of fat people, focusing on how assumptions about bodies involve race, class, and gender-based prejudices. Scholars analyze how anti-fat bias is a social justice issue that manifests itself in healthcare, beauty standards, media depictions, and everyday social interactions.<sup>2</sup> Often, fatness is moralized, painting the fat individual and the people around them as morally reprehensible for allowing their bodies to stray from a one-dimensional perception of health.<sup>3</sup> In the prevailing American perception, an individual's body indicates their ability to perform — be it a performance of physical activity, of the ability to fight for their country, of productivity and vocation, or of Western standards of

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<sup>1</sup> April Herndon, "Fatness and Disability: Law, identity, co-constructions, and future directions," in *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies*, edited by Cat Pausé and Sonya Reese Taylor (Routledge, 2021) 88-90.

<sup>2</sup> Cat Pausé and Sonya Renee Taylor, "Fattening Up Scholarship" in *The Routledge International Handbook of Fat Studies*, edited by Cat Pausé and Sonya Reese Taylor (Routledge, 2021) 1-18.

<sup>3</sup> April Herndon. *Fat Blame: How the War on Obesity Victimized Women and Children* (University Press of Kansas, 2014) 2-3.

attractiveness. This one-dimensional definition of health suppresses the nuances of how health is viewed across cultures, ignoring various foods, practices, and expectations for bodies.<sup>4</sup>

The discipline of studies was born following an outburst of disability activism beginning in the 1960s. It focuses on reevaluating perceptions of disability by studying it as an existence that does not need to be repaired. The field views disability as largely socially constructed instead of being a fixed medical definition. Researchers distinguish between the medical mode of disability, which aims to pinpoint physical or mental impairments on individual bodies in a clinical setting, and the social mode of disability, which stipulates that only the construction of the wider world's attitudes and physical spaces reveals impairments.<sup>5</sup> For example, a person who uses a wheelchair only becomes disabled when a building does not have an elevator. Disability is permeable; as anybody can become disabled at any time, academics strive to reshape notions about disability to reflect that it is a potentially universal condition. In 2022, 13.4% of Americans had a disability, including 46% of Americans over the age of 75.<sup>6</sup>

Although the term “crip” was historically used as a pejorative form of the word “cripple,” it has been reclaimed today by certain disabled people to form the basis of the academic “crip theory.” The theory draws parallels between the treatment of disabled people and queer people: both groups are oppressed by society-wide assumptions about how a “standard” person should look and move through the world. Crip theorists assert that any definition of a “normally functioning body” is completely constructed by historical precedent and bias. Crip theorists work to create a future free from expectations of performance.<sup>7</sup> These expectations for disabled people

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<sup>4</sup> Herndon, *Fat Blame*, 11-12.

<sup>5</sup> “Disability Studies: Foundations & Key Concepts,” Jstor Daily, last modified April 13, 2019, <https://daily.jstor.org/reading-list-disability-studies/>

<sup>6</sup> “8 Facts about Americans with Disabilities,” Pew Research Center, Last modified July 24, 2023, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2023/07/24/8-facts-about-americans-with-disabilities/>

<sup>7</sup> Robert McRuer, *Crip Theory: Cultural Signs of Queerness and Disability* (New York University Press, 2006), 2-3.

can manifest themselves through unnecessary surgeries or treatments that aim to treat or hide impairments, such as cochlear implants for Deaf people or prosthetic walking devices that force people to walk.<sup>8</sup> Thus, “crip time” redefines assumptions about the amount of time and energy that it takes to complete a task, considering differences in ability.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Lennard Davis, *Bending Over Backwards: Disability, Dismodernism, and Other Difficult Positions* (New York University Press, 2002) 36-37.

<sup>9</sup> Ellen Samuel, “Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time” in *Disability Studies Quarterly* (2017)