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Title: Can ambivalence hold potential for fat activism? An analysis of conflicting discourses on fatness in the Finnish column series Jenny's Life Change

Year: 2019

Version: Accepted version (Final draft)

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Please cite the original version:

Puhakka, A. (2019). Can ambivalence hold potential for fat activism? An analysis of conflicting discourses on fatness in the Finnish column series Jenny's Life Change. *Fat Studies*, 8(1), 60-74. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21604851.2019.1534458>

Fat Studies – An Interdisciplinary Journal of Body Weight and Society

Can ambivalence hold potential for fat activism? An analysis of conflicting discourses on fatness in the Finnish column series *Jenny's Life Change*

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Can ambivalence hold potential for fat activism? An analysis of conflicting discourses on fatness in the Finnish column series *Jenny's Life Change*

Abstract

In 2017, a publicly funded, nationwide campaign called the Scale Rebellion set out to address fatness through body positivity and fat activism in Finland, with a fat woman named Jenny Lehtinen having a particularly visible role as its figurehead. Some critics of the campaign maintained that Lehtinen's communication lacked focus and was self-contradicting, especially concerning her wish to lose weight. I conducted discourse analysis of a pertinent element of the Scale Rebellion campaign, a 13-part column series called *Jenny's Life Change*, written by Lehtinen herself. The findings suggest that diverse, conflicting discourses on fatness are indeed present in her texts; of these, I have named anti-"obesity," fatphobic, size acceptance, and societal discourses. However, in line with scholars such as Michalinos Zembylas, I argue that Lehtinen's conflicting messaging on fatness is not (only) an expression of her personal opinions but in fact linked to ambivalent fatness discourses circulating in Finnish society and abroad. Further, Samantha Murray has noted that fat activism would do well in welcoming the multivocality often present in (narratives on) fatness, since ambivalence might actually contain potential. One such possibility is the very observation that ambivalence vis-à-vis fatness is not necessarily a sign of being a sell-out or a "fake" fat activist. Instead, it is an indication that at a time when fatness is a stigmatized trait, almost everyone is exposed to conflicting messages about it. Therefore fat activists' ambivalence in relation to fatness should not be judged but rather seen in this larger context.

Keywords

Ambivalence; body positivity; discourse analysis; fat activism; Finland

Introduction

"... fat activism does not have to be coherent in order to be valid." (Cooper 2016, 92)

Like many other countries, Finnish society—the media included—is saturated with one-sided accounts of fat: how it destroys (public) health and how to best get rid of it. A dramatic change came in 2017: The country's public service broadcasting company, Yle, launched a year-long, multichannel (Internet, TV, and radio) body positivity campaign called the Scale Rebellion (*Vaakakapina*), with "Stop Dieting, Start Living" as its slogan. Finns followed journalist Jenny Lehtinen, the campaign's figurehead and a self-proclaimed fat woman, in her quest for a renewed relationship with her body through columns, TV appearances, and intense social media. Two weeks after the Scale Rebellion ended, Yle called it the "people's movement that put an end to crash diets" (Yle 2018).

Not everyone was impressed, however. Critics grew frustrated with the Scale Rebellion because they were unable to figure out its final message: In the end, did it advise the public to lose weight or not (E. Soikkeli, personal communication, March 15, 2018)? In particular, Jenny Lehtinen's ambivalence toward her own fatness was highlighted. The credibility of the campaign was seen to be compromised because its body positive leader ostensibly couldn't make up her mind about whether she herself wanted to be thin or not (Juti 2017). Her columns, written in a personal—and at times emotional—tone, were perceived to reflect these conflicting feelings.

Nevertheless, in this article, I attempt a different reading of this ambivalence. In line with scholars such as Zembylas (2012), I propose that interpreting the *Jenny's Life Change* (*Jennyn elämänmuutos*) columns—part of the Scale Rebellion campaign—that provide the data for this article as if they were solely private musings, and focusing on the columnist as an individual (as some of the critics have done), might not be very productive. Instead, it is more fruitful to examine how her writing might reflect the diverse fatness discourses circulating in contemporary Finnish society (as well as abroad, given the easy access to information produced elsewhere). When the focus is shifted from Lehtinen's conflicting messaging on fatness as an expression of her personal opinions to how the different discourses evoked in the columns are linked to ambivalent discourses moving about in society, it becomes easier to discern how they often conflict each other and are thus more likely to lead to very different understandings of a phenomenon—fatness, in this case.

What is more, Samantha Murray, among others, has suggested that the ambivalence often felt vis-à-vis fat embodiment may contain potential, particularly in the context of fat politics (Murray 2005, 2008, 2010). I offer that one such possibility is the realization that at a time when fatness is a stigmatized trait, ambivalence points to the fact that almost everyone is exposed to conflicting messages about it. This includes those who are supposed to fight against this stigma—such as body positivity and fat activists (Ayuso 2001; Cooper 1998, 2016; Donaghue and Clemitshaw 2012; Maor 2013b; McMichael 2010; Meleo-Erwin 2011; Murray 2005, 2008, 2010). Put differently, given the extent of these various discourses, experienced ambiguity toward fatness is not necessarily a sign of being a sell-out or a “fake” fat activist. Therefore, activists' ambivalence toward fatness should not be judged—as some critics of the Scale Rebellion have done—but rather seen in this larger context.

This article is, to my knowledge, the first to examine the Scale Rebellion, as it is very recent. In addition, Finnish fat activism deserves to be documented and analyzed so that the now-existing supply of information on fat activism “can be made known, archived, made into further resources for people to adopt” (Cooper and Murray 2012, 134, in Maor 2013a, 281). Moreover, the present study answers the call to geographically and culturally diversify fat studies (Cooper 2009; see also Maor 2013a). This is important since “fat rights initiatives outside the United States ... at worst, are exoticized, belittled, or unnoticed” (Cooper 2009, 330).

Fat activism, ambivalence, and discourse

The starting point of this study is that fat activism is a valid form of resilience in the face of fat oppression. Fat activism has been characterized as “a social movement concerned with fatness that has many sites and interests” (Cooper 2016, 2). But because the Scale Rebellion calls itself “the biggest *body positivity* revolution in Finland” (Scale Rebellion n.d.; emphasis mine) on its home page, I want to address why I deem it appropriate to consider the campaign as expressly fat activism. It seems to me that this choice of vocabulary has been made at least partly because “as a concept,” “body positivity” is more familiar to Finns than “fat activism”—in other words, the former sounds more palatable than the latter. This doesn’t mean, however, that the Scale Rebellion is not fat activism.

In her book, *Fat Activism*, Charlotte Cooper argues that “fat activism covers a range of interventions and ... many different activities can be thought of as activism” (Cooper 2016, 93). She points out that as many other forms of activism, fat activism, too, can even be contradictory, in opposition to what has traditionally been thought. Further, Cooper calls some forms of fat activism “ambiguous” and asserts that they emerge when produced “by people who are ‘failed’ or ‘less-than-ideal’ fat activists” (Cooper 2016, 88).

Interestingly, it is precisely ambiguous fat activism that is characterized by puzzlement over the fact that “its context, execution and effects [are] not very straightforward” (Cooper 2016, 85). Moreover, Cooper describes this type of activism thus: “[It] can be provocative and it upsets notions of propriety, purpose and progression in activism” (Cooper 2016, 87). This echoes the Finnish public’s mixed reactions concerning the Scale Rebellion: The campaign has stirred up lively discussions, online and off. Accordingly then, that the Scale Rebellion perhaps does not follow long-established ways of doing activism does not mean it is not activism—it just may be characterized by ambivalence.

Although admittedly an everyday occurrence (Preckel et al. 2015), ambivalence is rarely perceived as a strength; ambivalence regarding fatness specifically has often been portrayed as a negative phenomenon. When one grows up in a culture that clearly favors a particular body type above all others, those not fitting in will at times feel conflicted about their different embodiment, no matter how immersed in activism (Pausé 2017). In recent years, numerous studies have been conducted where fatness and ambivalence have featured prominently (Gruys 2012; Hardin 2015; Kyrölä and Harjunen 2017; White 2014). Still others have discussed ambivalence particularly in the context of fat activism or fat politics—concepts I will use interchangeably (Cooper 1998; Donaghue and Clemitshaw 2012; LeBesco 2004; Maor 2013a; McMichael 2010; Meleo-Erwin 2011, 2012). It appears that ambivalence in relation to fatness is far from a rare occurrence. Nevertheless, not many of these contributions make allusion to the *potential* of ambivalence in fat activism.

In her 2005 article, “(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics,” Samantha Murray’s focus is on fat politics and its (assumed; cf. Cooper 2016, 14–18) demand for “a fat subject with a stable and

unitary 'resisting' consciousness ... that univocally rejects dominant views of fat and is able to fully accept her or his body" (Maor 2013a, 281). Coming from a phenomenological stance, Murray points to the ever-changing nature of the human experience and the impossibility of capturing it in a single still frame. She urges us to acknowledge the constant, internal tug of war a fat woman is faced with: On one hand, there is the call for loving one's body unconditionally, and on the other, the negative discourses that cannot *not* influence the way that body is perceived and experienced.

Murray argues that we "cannot experience our bodies in singular, unambiguous ways. This reality, then, needs to be accommodated in ways where ambivalence does not have to be a kind of guilty secret, but is productive in terms of opening out multiple ways of being" (Murray 2008, 144). Maya Maor (2013b) has subsequently reemphasized the potential for resistance and change that fatness's ambivalence carries, as has Owen (2015). In Samantha Murray's words: "If 'coming out' as fat refuses an ambiguous identity, then it refuses *the possibilities ambiguity presents*" (Murray 2005, 62; emphasis mine).

Zembylas's work (2012) on ambivalent discourses is of interest here. Zembylas interviewed Greek-Cypriot children and youth, concentrating on the descriptions of their feelings about migrants in Cyprus. He found not only that these portrayals were complex and conflicted but, even more importantly, that the interviewees' "emotions [were] linked to ambivalent discourses," themselves framed in the societal level (Zembylas 2012, 195).

Zembylas underscores that the main point of his article is not whether his study participants' perceptions were negative or positive. Instead, his study's contribution is that "overall these participants have perceptions of migrants that are fed by ambivalent emotion discourses" (Zembylas 2012, 205). One of the possibilities ambivalence presents for fat activism, then, resides in the fact that once we realize that ambiguity is not an individual-level phenomenon (at least, not solely)—for instance, Jenny Lehtinen's columns are *not* about one woman who is unable to make up her mind about dieting—the door is opened for us to turn our gaze toward the wider circumstance of discourse.

According to a seminal work on discourse analysis, rather than defining it as a "research method with clear-cut boundaries, it is more meaningful to think of discourse analysis as *a loose theoretical framework*" (Jokinen, Juhila, and Suoninen 1993, 17; emphasis in original). This useful approach has helped me not only to discern between different discourses but also to analyze them in more depth.

The Finnish context

The negative attributes attached to fat persons, familiar from other parts of the world—lazy, dirty, stupid, and ugly (Rissanen and Mustajoki 2006, 120)—prevail in Finland as well (Mustajoki 2018). Fat people are discriminated against in employment (Härkönen and Räsänen 2008; Kauppinen and Anttila 2005) and social life (Rissanen and Mustajoki 2006), among others.

Consequently, antifat attitudes have found their way into several cultural products. Among the most prominent are international weight-loss TV formats such as *The Biggest Loser*, as well as their domestic counterparts, like *Honey, You've Become Chubby* (*Rakas, sinusta on tullut pullukka*, aired in 2013–2016) and *Jutta's Six-Month Superdiets* (*Jutta ja puolen vuoden superdieetit*, aired in 2013–2015). Many magazines boast a regular weight-loss section, and the Internet is full of diverse service providers, coaches, nutritionists, and personal trainers aiming to help Finns become thin. Not surprisingly in this overall context, in 2016, only 16 percent of women and 22 percent of men in Finland were happy with their weight (Yle 2017).

Finally, when discussing different discourses circulating in Finnish society, it is important to look beyond those produced in Finnish and Swedish, the official languages of the country. For instance, ten years ago, 82 percent of Finnish adults aged 18–64 said they knew English at least somewhat (Statistics Finland 2008). This enables the acquisition of information from other linguistic regions, such as the anglophone United States, Great Britain, and Australia, where alarmist discourses about fatness have been active for a long period of time—as has counter speech (see, e.g., Cooper 2010). Further, this information acquisition is greatly facilitated by an almost unconstrained access to the Internet (Statistics Finland 2017). In other words, Finns' access to different discourses is high.

Overview of the case study and methodology

As noted, the Scale Rebellion was a year-long multichannel media campaign taking place in 2017. Its central themes were summarized in the *Scale Rebellion Manifesto*: stop dieting; find love and acceptance for the body; improve the way fatness is approached in the health-care system; bring forth bodies of all sizes in the media, without expressing outrage; and make exercise and health-care services genuinely accessible for everyone (Yle 2018).

The Finnish Broadcasting Company, Yle, who produced the Scale Rebellion, is a public service company. As such, it is 99.98 percent owned by the Finnish state—or actually Finns, because a special Yle tax has been in place since 2013 (Yle n.d.). This fact spurred a municipal politician to rhetorically ask whether the campaign's purpose was to rebel against scales or to show strong opposition against “common sense and public health, with the taxpayers' money” instead (Hyttinen 2017).

The Scale Rebellion has stirred up other online discussions as well. More often than not, when critique has been presented, it has been aimed at the overall campaign. Instead of focusing on specific components, many contributors have questioned the campaign's *raison d'être*. A participant in a now-archived Reddit thread comments: “Fatlogic keeps on spreading... . America is leading and Finland is not far behind” (Anonymous n.d.), while a local newspaper columnist writes: “The rise in obesity has come to a halt [in Finland], but not because people have gotten happy with their weight and bodies” (Tahvanainen 2017). On the other hand, there are bloggers who support the campaign,

pointing out, for example, that it is promoting human rights (Sieluni silmin 2018) and meant for everyone, no matter the size (Ylönen 2017).

A 13-part column series, *Jenny's Life Change*, a pertinent part of the Scale Rebellion, constitutes the data for this article (Lehtinen n.d.). The online series was spread across the year, with a column appearing approximately once a month. The topics match those of the *Scale Rebellion Manifesto*; some monthly themes, such as health care, were discussed in conjunction with other components, such as video clips. The average length of the columns was 607 words, but there was considerable variation: The shortest text contained 342 words, while the longest comprised 1128 words.¹

To analyze the data, I used qualitative content analysis, since it “focuses on the characteristics of language as communication with attention to the content or contextual meaning of the text” (Hsieh and Shannon 2005, 1278). In other words, qualitative content analysis is not (only) concerned with counting occurrences; rather, it aims to probe into the meaning of the words, subsequently grouping them by shared similarities. After particular themes—discourses—started to emerge from the data, I applied purposeful sampling to select the extracts that illustrated the phenomenon under discussion in the most information-rich manner (Palinkas et al. 2015).

This particular group of texts was chosen because they were written by the campaign leader Jenny Lehtinen. I assume that function allowed her the leeway to express herself without limit or restraint. This is valuable, given that this study's purpose is to investigate conflicting discourses in the texts.

Findings and discussion

With discourse analysis as my main interpretative tool, I distinguished four main discourses in the data: anti-“obesity,” fatphobic, size acceptance, and societal.

Anti-“obesity” discourse

To characterize the first thematic set of texts, I am using Deborah Lupton's (2018) term anti-“obesity” discourse. Additional terms often synonymous to it are “obesity discourse” (e.g., Monaghan, Colls, and Evans 2013), and “obesity epidemic discourse” (see Harjunen 2017). I chose Lupton's terminology because firstly and most obviously, “obesity” figures in it, indicating that this discourse sees fatness as “a disease or a precursor to disease” (Lupton 2018, 26). What is more, the prefix *anti-* makes it clear that “obesity” is something to be eradicated.

Being overweight and having body image issues are not a failure due to a person's weaknesses, but caused by a sum of various individual, cultural, and social factors.

And when that's recognized and acknowledged, folks can really get help with their problems. (#2)²

In this section, Jenny Lehtinen does emphasize that “being overweight” does not equal lack of success, clearly aware that this is the prevailing stereotype (Jutel 2005; Puhl et al. 2015; Solovay and Rothblum 2009). At the same time, she can be seen to perpetuate the frequently held assumption that fatness is rooted in individual pathology, such as mental illness (Orbach 1978; for an extensive summary, see Cooper 2010). Moreover, she seems to have adopted the notion, common in medicine and public health, that in the end, fatness is a hurdle: She alludes to “overweight” and body image issues collectively as “problems.” Another excerpt, later in the same column, lends this interpretation of fatness-as-problem further credence:

And does it make sense to tell a person to lose weight if they're healthy but weigh too much? Can we leave them alone as long as relevant indicators, such as blood tests, are OK, even though their BMI wouldn't fit within the ideal? (#2)

Similarly, this excerpt contains manifest elements typical of the anti-“obesity” discourse. First, the wording “weigh too much” betrays the columnist’s view that there *is* such a thing as weighing too much. This echoes Western medicine with its firm emphasis on quantification, measuring, BMI charts, and overall normativization (Lupton 2018). Second, a strong undercurrent of healthism is present when the writer claims that it’s acceptable to be fat “as long as relevant indicators ... are OK.” This viewpoint has been criticized with vehemence. Using the figures of the good fatty and the bad fatty, commentators have pointed out that this logic divides fat people into two camps (Pausé 2015; Rose Water Magazine 2015). The good fatties are those who eat a wholesome diet and exercise regularly. The bad fatties, in turn, are constructed as ignorant sloths who have only themselves to blame if and when they get sick. The neoliberal logic of free will and individual choice further feeds into this rationalization (Harjunen 2017; Lupton 2018).

Fatphobic discourse

While fatphobia is certainly not an unknown phenomenon in Finnish society, it was still surprising to find outright fatphobic discourse in the columns. Although nearly everyone in Finland is at one point or another exposed to the fear of fatness and fat people, it still felt out of place to see fatphobia in the context of an explicitly body positive campaign, created by media professionals, and with nationwide coverage. Nonetheless, I don’t think this translates as Jenny Lehtinen being a particularly fatphobic individual; the juxtaposition of these elements provides a startling example of ambivalence.

Oftentimes, people measure or want to measure my “success” by whether I have lost weight... . It’s also something people speculate on, and sometimes even ask me to my face: does Jenny Lehtinen want to lose weight? I do. I want my weight to become

normalized. In my wildest (and pretty sick) fantasies, often still thumping in the back of my head, I would like to lose half of my body weight. And even if I say that I never ever want to lose weight again, that's a lie as well. I do want to lose weight, every single day, many times. (#11)

The writer is very open about her wanting to diet and her wish to lose a drastic amount of weight. Fat activists and celebrities (as a media person, Jenny Lehtinen is quite a visible figure) are not immune to this kind of ambivalence. *Fat Heffalump* blogger Kath Read, for instance, has written about internalized fatphobia and the responsibility of prominent fat persons to consider the consequences to fat people in general when the former decide to lose weight (Read 2017). She asserts that, in fact, famous ex-fat folks end up reinforcing the existing narratives, in other words strengthening the piece of conventional wisdom that being fat is simply not desirable. Writing about three categories of public figures' positions in relation to their own fatness, Kathleen LeBesco discusses what she calls Traitors. They are those who, when fat, talk openly about feeling good in their bodies and not wanting to change, only to turn to dieting or weight-loss surgery later on, giving an utterly hypocritical impression of themselves (LeBesco 2004, 92–97).

Still, after all [the fat activism], I caught myself recently passing on fatphobia to my child. When they asked me ... if I thought they were fat, I was quick to reply: "Oh no, of course not! Goodness! Absolutely not!" ... I realized that the way I handled my child's question contained a hidden message: It would be just awful if you were fat. ... And above all, I should understand and accept this idea myself: my body is precious and beloved exactly as it is. (#6)

It is obvious that the columnist is aware of, first, that the ubiquitous fatphobic discourse exists, and second, that she has been affected by it—otherwise it would be impossible to pass on fatphobia to her own child. Charlotte Cooper has noted that despite all their work against fat bias, fat activists sometimes “still end up back at square one, blaming [their] bodies for [their] oppression and feeling overwhelmed by [their] fatness” (Cooper 1998, 57–58).

Size acceptance discourse

A third discourse distinguishable from the columns is what I have termed size acceptance discourse. It comes close to body positivity (notably, a form of fat activism itself; Cooper 2016) in that unconditional love for one's body is an integral part of it:

You can and are allowed to love your body, no matter what it's like. The only thing the kilograms can define about you is what the body weighs. (#2)

Body positive fat activist Marilyn Wann, for example, has exhorted her readers to “Ask yourself, what has body anxiety done for me lately? Nothing good, right? So why not get rid of it??? ... You just have to change your attitude” (Wann 1998, 13). Here the possibility of fully accepting one’s body through changing one’s mind (cf. Murray 2005, 2008, 2010) is palpably present. But Jenny Lehtinen expresses caution with regard to this attitudinal transformation:

Many have written [at a related Facebook group] about how difficult it feels to actually genuinely accept oneself. That even if you’re all for the idea, it’s still empty words and repetition without real content. Hey, we’re all in the same boat! This is how it is in the beginning. If certain structures have built up in your mind for years and decades, it takes time to change them. For some, it takes longer, for others, less. I’m one of the former. (#8)

This quote demonstrates that the columnist is cognizant of the ambivalent discourses that make it difficult to adhere to body positive fat activists’ calls for unconditional self-acceptance. In an interview, Hannele Harjunen has remarked that the point of departure for size acceptance in general, and for the Scale Rebellion in particular, is problematic in that the responsibility for change is bestowed upon the individual (Laapotti 2017, 19). According to Charlotte Cooper, size acceptance has “a resigned feel to it” (Cooper 2008, n. p.); fat liberation ideas have been diluted when introduced to mainstream culture and becoming connected to the fashion and beauty industries, in turn producing “a more tentative approach to fat” (Cooper 2008, n.p.).

Societal discourse

I have chosen to name this discourse “societal” because instead of focusing on the individual, as body positivity discourse can be seen to do (cf. Omaheimo and Särämä 2017), societal discourse takes a bird’s eye view, looking at “human beings thought of as a group and viewed as members of a community” (“Society” n.d.):

The Scale Rebellion is about people ... questioning the status quo as regards what kind of a body is good enough, and might [their bodies] be like that. And really find the best way for them to live... . A good life is dependent on so many factors, certainly not on body size only. (#11)

Lehtinen urges her readers to challenge the current situation and societal norms, and this is not the first time. In 2016, before starting the Scale Rebellion, Jenny Lehtinen was a reporter in another Yle television show, *Marja Hintikka Live*. A regular segment of the program was *Jenny and the FatMythBusters* (alluding to the popular TV series *MythBusters*), whose themes were similar to the Scale Rebellion. Possibly the most significant outcome of the *FatMythBusters* was its Facebook group which continues to be active to this day. In June 2018, it had 31,720 members (of all sizes), and there are several posts every day: link shares, photos, and personal stories. Conceivably

propelled by this success, the Scale Rebellion was launched, and it is evident that Lehtinen's columns do speak to many of the anxieties voiced in the FatMythBusters Facebook group:

I want to give people back the right to their own bodies: You are not ugly. Not worthless. You are not a walking health risk. You are a human being with the right to define your body exactly the way you want to. You are allowed to be healthy, beautiful, athletic, hard working, sexy, whatever you want. You also have the right to be treated with dignity everywhere, no matter what you weigh. (#2)

Although Lehtinen's writing style is very vocal, she is not the first media personality to publicly interrogate fat oppression in Finland. One of the first avenues to confront antifat attitudes was the blog *More to Love*. It was active during 2009–2013 and wanted to “represent all the big and beautiful ladies in Finland” (More to Love n.d.). Discussion on Finnish intersectional fat activism is said to have properly begun only in 2016 (Omaheimo and Särmä 2017). It is from then on that activists have started to openly question widespread antifat bias in the form of numerous blogs (such as Vatsamielenosoitus n.d.), Internet sites (e.g., Merimaa and Stolt n.d.), and a theater monologue “Fatso” (“*Läski*”; Omaheimo and Kilkku 2016).

It is noteworthy that multiple—even seemingly contradicting—discourses are emergent within a single column at times. One example is article #2, where anti-“obesity,” size acceptance, and societal discourses are all present. Another instance is article #11, which contains elements of both fatphobic and societal discourses. This demonstrates that instead of Jenny Lehtinen merely referencing the disagreeing opinions on fatness in the society, she is holding inconsistent and even contradictory beliefs and feelings about fatness herself. Furthermore, there is considerable interaction between the discourses. While they have been presented here as distinct for reasons of clarity, in reality, they are simultaneously intertwined.

Conclusions

The Scale Rebellion was an extensive campaign with a broad coverage; as such, it took the public discussion on fatness to a new level in Finland. In many ways, the campaign came to equal the outspoken Jenny Lehtinen. But although the texts analyzed are written by a particular individual, this study's point is not to draw attention on Lehtinen specifically. Neither is my intention to label the discourses discernible in the columns simply “good” or “bad.” Instead, inspired by Zembylas's work, it seems that a more productive approach could be looking at how the different discourses evoked in the analyzed texts are linked to ambivalent discourses circulating in contemporary Finnish society and elsewhere (Zembylas 2012, 195; see also Murray 2010).

According to my analysis, fatness is a phenomenon that, in the *Jenny's Life Change* columns at least, is currently discussed through discourses that I have named anti-“obesity,” fatphobic, size acceptance, and societal. As a columnist, Jenny Lehtinen has had access to and been influenced by

all of these different discourses—among many others, undoubtedly. They have shaped how she, in turn, is presenting fatness in her own work.

This is why it is problematic to interpret Lehtinen's writing as a mere reflection of her personal inability to make up her mind about being fat. Ignoring the role of discourses and calling fat activists—as Jenny Lehtinen was by a critic—“a silly fat woman' who once again lets herself be fooled by the system and tricked to obey the norms” (Juti 2017) can compromise the budding clout fat activism now has in Finnish society. Focusing on “silly” individuals discredits the aims of fat activism and obfuscates the power it could potentially have as a social movement. Furthermore, when the ambivalence expressed by fat activists is labelled as “silliness” in this way, the activists themselves may choose not to communicate their contradictory thoughts and feelings about fatness. This omission and the ensuing silence can, in turn, become mentally burdensome.

It is important to normalize the experience of ambivalence for two reasons: first, in order to prevent fat activists who experience ambivalence from being silenced as “hypocrites” by others; and second, in order to keep fat activists from self-silencing out of fear of being judged hypocritical. Instead of being trapped in ambivalence, centering it as a normal and expected consequence of living in a culture that hates and fears fatness can shore up ambivalence as a powerful place from which to continue the fight to advance the rights and interests of fat people.

Notes

1. Unfortunately, I was not able to access exact data on column readership; however, the columns have been actively shared on Facebook—barring one, hundreds of times, and on occasion, thousands.

2. The numbers refer to the columns, which I have numbered in chronological order. The original language of the texts is Finnish; I have translated the excerpts.

Acknowledgments

I thank the two anonymous reviewers whose insightful comments helped improve this manuscript.

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