

The consequences of being fat are deeper than we realize

In the book “Unshrinking,” philosopher Kate Manne argues that fatphobia is a form of structural oppression.

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Review by Judith Warner

By the time she turned 30, Kate Manne had earned a PhD from MIT, served as a junior fellow at Harvard and been hired as an assistant professor of philosophy at Cornell. She went on, in short order, to write an award-winning book on misogyny (“[Down Girl](#),” 2017), a celebrated critique of male privilege (“[Entitled](#),” 2020) and, in addition to her steady stream of academic work, many high-profile essays on racism, feminism, rape culture and politics in the most prominent publications across the English-speaking world.

She was becoming a big deal. And through it all, she did her best to make herself small, sometimes jeopardizing her ability to write and think.

When a psychiatrist she visited for depression seemed to suggest she might have ADHD, Manne “leaned into” the “surprise” diagnosis, procuring a prescription for Adderall, which she had heard was a great appetite suppressant. For the better part of five years, she then used the drug to sometimes go days without food, enthusiastically upping the dose even as she became increasingly “anxious and frenetic and wild with rage,” her marriage suffering, her work derailed. As a first-time author, she turned down an all-expenses-paid book tour because she couldn’t face the thought of being seen and photographed. She starved herself, eating nothing for 17 out of 30 days, too hungry to sleep, too consumed by “brain fog” to reason, to connect with her husband and baby daughter, to “be an agent.”

All of this because she was, in her own words, “fat” and had been fat for most of her life. Sometimes “small fat,” sometimes “large fat” — like many fat activists and fat studies scholars, Manne prefers these terms to language this community considers pathologizing, like “overweight” or “obese.” And, above all, because the self-hatred that derived from being “fat” was strong enough to hijack her brain, overwhelming her common sense, prodigious intelligence and simple self-interest.

In “Unshrinking,” a finalist for a National Book Award, Manne takes a hard look at a number of key points in her life when her mind betrayed her body in just this way. She explores how she struggled as a “fat philosopher” — a representative of a field that prizes “muscular and compact” forms of argument and “prides itself on sharpness, clarity, and precision” — to “reconcile my image of my body with its role in the world as the emissary of my mind.” That mismatch, she quips, has been her own, real-life “body-mind problem.” But it’s really no laughing matter.

Manne wrote this book after losing nearly 50 pounds in one year, largely through brutal bouts of self-starvation. During one such period, after seven days of nothing but plain sparkling water, she watched her field of vision “go fuzzy, then brown, then black” while seated on a doctor’s exam table. She managed to snap to, thanks to sheer rage: Informed that she was about to pass out, her doctor had given a little wave and left the room. “Earlier,” she notes drily, “he had complimented me on my rapid weight loss.”

After this wake-up call, Manne decided she wouldn’t let her beloved daughter grow up in a home — in a world — where being thin was valued far above physical and mental well-being. She vowed to “stop dieting, to stop obsessing, and to live peaceably with my body ... to be, in a word, unshrinking.” She willed herself to stop blaming herself for her body’s “soft borders” and unruly appetites. To stop seeing her weight as a problem; stop seeing her battle with it as her fight alone. She was, after all, a specialist in moral, feminist and social philosophy, trained to wage war in fields that are “political and structural,” not “psychological and individualistic.”

And, from that centering, the path became clear: “The solution is not to improve our self-image or love our bodies better,” she writes. “It is nothing less than to *remake the world* to properly fit fat bodies, and to effect the socially transformative recognition that there is truly nothing wrong with us.” In other words, rather than fight her fat, she would lead the fight against fatphobia.

Manne’s definition of fatphobia is sweeping: It is, she writes, “a feature of social systems that unjustly rank fatter bodies as inferior to thinner bodies, in terms of not only our health but also our moral, sexual, and intellectual status.” It is “a serious, and underestimated, form of structural oppression,” she argues, and it expresses itself in the myriad ways our society stereotypes, discriminates against and even punishes girls and women — and, to a lesser extent, men and boys — whose bodies don’t conform to our thin, muscled and, frankly, childlike ideal. (Not to mention to the much broader category of “normal” on the BMI scale — a weight range now exceeded by nearly three-quarters of our adult population.)

These forms of discrimination, gathered damningly in Manne’s book, include pervasive playground bullying and negative assumptions by teachers about fat children’s capabilities. (Even some parents, Manne cites research to show, are less likely to pay for college for their fatter daughters than for their thinner ones.) They also include employment discrimination of all stripes and wage penalties for fat women in particular; overt mockery and scorn by airline passengers toward fat travelers who can’t use a standard seat belt or entirely fit into their assigned seats; and the not-always-concealed disdain of doctors who, on the assumption that fat people are “lazy, undisciplined, weak-willed, and less likely to adhere to treatment or self-care recommendations,” spend less time with them and screen them less frequently for cancer.

For Manne, fatphobia explains why we persist in believing that being of a higher-than-“normal” weight causes poor health, and early death in particular, when the research is far more ambiguous. Citing research from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, she argues that the mortality risks linked to fat are “represented by a U-shaped curve, with being either very fat *or* very thin correlated with — and not necessarily causing — premature death.” She wants a public acknowledgment that the relationship between obesity and poor health is complex, that even the best studies can be contradictory, and that the media consistently elects to cover the most fear-inspiring research.

Manne finds fatphobia behind that negative bias. It also, she believes, explains why people persist in dieting — a Sisyphean challenge that almost always fails long-term — and turn in large numbers to dangerous, life-limiting weight-loss surgeries. (Drugs like Ozempic get short shrift in the book, probably because their use skyrocketed after Manne finished the bulk of her research.) She believes that fatphobia operates through “diet culture” in a process very similar to gaslighting: convincing its “victims” to ignore their own perceptions and sign on to a version of reality that’s patently untrue: “This dry rice cake is so satisfying. This delicious, fatty food is actually nasty, even disgusting,” she illustrates. “We just need this one new supplement. We just need this meal kit service. We just need this exorbitantly expensive piece of exercise equipment. ... This isn’t about being thin; it’s about being *strong*.”

Manne argues that living in a fatphobic world is at least as dangerous as living with extra weight. She writes that there is “considerable evidence of the adverse health effects” of being subjected to social stigma and having “high internalized weight bias.” She cites research that says those effects include high blood pressure, blood glucose and triglycerides, abnormal cholesterol, and heightened levels of inflammation and cortisol. Dieting is known to lead to deleterious long-term health outcomes too, not to mention mental health problems, including disordered eating like Manne’s own. (Manne believes she only “came close” to developing atypical anorexia, an eating disorder that shares all of the symptoms of anorexia nervosa, except for being underweight. But in this argument, she’s not entirely convincing.)

When Manne attacks fatphobia and diet culture with the tools of her specialty, her arguments offer an elegant and fascinating new take on a much-picked-over area of feminist study: According to the rule of “ought implies can” in moral philosophy, she writes, “you have a moral obligation to do something only if you *can* do it; or, equivalently, you are *not* obligated to do something that you *cannot* do.” By extension, she says, the “oughts” around losing weight for the sake of individual “health” (or in the interest of our collective health-care cost “burden”) don’t have moral grounding. Given recent science showing that most diets don’t work, that exercise doesn’t reliably lead to weight loss and that weight is highly genetic, “we cannot then be blamed for not doing the near-impossible,” Manne writes. “Fatness is by and large out of our control, making the supposed moral obligation not to be fat likely moot from the beginning.”

Other parts of the book, however, feel less fresh. Manne’s critique of beauty culture in particular will have a distinctly vintage feel for anyone who has been reading similar feminist criticism over the past four or five decades. But then, those of us who have been around for that long are really not the demographic for whom Manne, who is in her early 40s, is writing.

Her target audience is millennials and, in particular, Gen Z, that rising mass of underemployed, underpaid young people, raised amid the vast inequality and unceasing traumas of post-9/11 America, many of whom see themselves (not necessarily falsely) as the too-latecomers in a rigged system that has already distributed its spoils. These are her students and their peers, readers who will avidly nod along when she talks of “late-stage capitalism” and “structural oppression” and perhaps won’t question whether Manne overstates society’s role in shaping her harmful body-focused behaviors. (Of her Adderall misuse, she makes a striking admission: “I lost the kind of agency that is hard-won for me on a good day.” That awareness is fleeting, but it crystallizes a feeling some readers may have about her general argument.)

In many ways, “Unshrinking” is a perfect manifesto for a generation that struggles to find a sense of agency. It’s “late-stage feminism,” perhaps: what remains in a post-*Roe*, post-MeToo world.

Judith Warner’s most recent book is “And Then They Stopped Talking to Me: Making Sense of Middle School.”

Unshrinking

How to Face Fatphobia

By Kate Manne

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