

R. M. Waldorf, Library staff, Santa Barbara City College Eli Luria Library
Jonathan Furner, Professor, University of California, Los Angeles

Introduction

Sizeism is defined by Merriam-Webster as “discrimination or prejudice directed against people because of their size and especially because of their weight” (see also, e.g., Chrisler & Barney, 2017, 38). *Weightism* is defined as “bias, judgment, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination toward individuals based on their size, shape, or weight” (Arroyo & Anderson, 2013). The terms *underweight*, *normal weight*, *overweight*, and *obese* are legitimized in large part due to their establishment as weight statuses in the Body Mass Index (BMI) measurement system. In this paper, we critique the use of these terms by library and information science (LIS) professionals through an examination of sizeist and weightist bias in knowledge organization (KO) as reflected in the Library of Congress Subject Headings (LCSH; see, e.g., Smith, 2021). We put forth the charge that information professionals remain complicit in sizeist and weightist discrimination as long as the use of outdated and stigmatizing terminology is perpetuated in the tools (such as lists of subject headings) that are used for the assignment of index terms to documents in catalog records. Throughout this paper we will use the terms *sizeism* and *weightism* interchangeably, while acknowledging that they have slightly different connotations.

Examination of this topic is timely, as the field of LIS is very much participant in, and reinforcer of, structures that serve to continue to oppress marginalized populations (see, e.g., Berman, 1971). People inhabiting body sizes that are deemed abnormal, unhealthy, “overweight,” and “obese” experience discrimination and oppression (see, e.g., Davis & Bowman, 2015; Saguy & Riley, 2005). Assignment of those categories using BMI is inherently flawed, as the BMI measurement does not take into account genetics, environment, mental health, or lifestyle behaviors, all of which factor into weight (Costin, 2007; Bacon et al., 2002). Such discrimination can serve to further compound oppression of people already experiencing social injustice due to sexism, ageism, racism, classism, transphobia, and other structural marginality.

While there has been LIS research conducted in a number of those areas (see, e.g., Adler et. al., 2017; Adler, 2017; Chou, Pho, & Roh, 2018) there has not yet been significant investigation into sizeist bias in the field. An examination of sizeist bias may similarly be undertaken from a humanistic perspective, making use of a social justice lens, as well as from the point of view of medicine, science, and sociology. Part of the work of researchers in many of these fields is to identify terminology that is outdated at best, offensive at worst, and such work is thus directly relevant to designers of controlled vocabularies for whom the goal of inclusivity is crucial.

In the humanities and social sciences, there have been changes over time in the vocabulary used around the issues of body size, weight, and health. A reclamation of the word “fat” has recently been underway, so that many people in the fat activism community refer to themselves and others as “fat” and not “overweight” (see, e.g., Gordon, 2020). About the term “overweight,” they ask: Over what weight? And who determines that exact number? (Braziel, Evans & LeBesco, 2001). An interdisciplinary academic field, fat studies, has emerged that takes a critical approach to fatness as a phenomenon (see, e.g., Rothblum & Solovay, 2009; Cooper, 2010; Saguy & Riley, 2005). And “fatness” and “fat” as terms themselves are now widely used instead of “obesity” or “overweight.” To the extent that these terms have effectively replaced the old in the published literature and in folksonomies, we suggest that now be the time for adjustments to be made to the Library of Congress Subject Headings, as detailed in the next section.



Problems and recommendations

Seven LCSH hierarchies relate at least partially to fat studies and/or sizeism (see also Angell & Price, 2012). These are (1) **Diseases**, (2) **Body weight**, (3) **Persons**, (4) **Discrimination**, (5) **Prejudices**, (6) **Social movements**, and (7) **Anthropometry**. We shall look at each of these hierarchies in turn. Existing subject headings are in bold; proposed subject headings are enclosed in quotation marks.

(1) **Diseases** is a heading occupying the following position in a broader hierarchy with **Science** at its head:

- Science**
- .. **Life sciences**
- **Biology**
- **Human biology**
- **Medicine**
- **Diseases**

Narrower terms of **Diseases** include **Nutrition disorders** and **Metabolism--Disorders**. **Obesity** is found at the next level below each of these latter terms, and is the preferred heading for concepts including "Corpulence," "Fatness," and "Overweight" in LCSH. **Obesity in adolescence**, **Obesity in children**, **Obesity in men**, and **Obesity in women** also appear in this hierarchy.

Problem: Only some works about fatness are written from a medical perspective. Those that are not medical in orientation should not be assigned headings from the **Diseases** hierarchy. Simply being fat is not a disease nor a medical malady in and of itself. But there is currently no alternative to **Obesity** in LCSH.

Recommendation: **Obesity** should be reserved for works about fatness written from a scientific perspective using BMI, while "Fatness" should be established as a heading under **Body image**, for application to works written from nonscientific perspectives. Correspondingly, "Thinness" should also be established as a heading under **Body image**.

Body image is established with five broader terms: **Imagery (Psychology)**, **Mind and body**, **Person schemas**, **Personality**, and **Self-perception**. Its scope note is: "Here are entered works on the visual, mental, or memory image of one's own body or someone else's, and one's attitudes about that image."

- Educational psychology / Intellect / Psychology**
- .. **Imagination**
- **Imagery (Psychology)**
- **Body image**

- Brain / Dualism / Philosophical anthropology**
- .. **Mind and body**
- **Body image**

- Interpersonal relations / Schemas (Psychology) / Self psychology**
- .. **Mind and body**
- **Body image**

- Psychology**
- .. **Personality**
- **Body image**

- Psychology**
- .. **Cognition**
- **Perception**
- **Self-perception**

(2) **Body weight** is a broader term to **Leanness** and **Obesity**, among others, and may be found in four hierarchies:

Science

- .. **Physical sciences**
- **Physics**
- **Weights and measures**
- **Body weight**

Science

- .. **Life sciences**
- **Biology**
- **Zoology**
- **Anatomy, Comparative**
- **Morphology**
- **Morphology (Animals)**
- **Body size**
- **Body weight**

Anthropology

- .. **Physical anthropology**
- **Somatotypes**
- **Body size**
- **Body weight**

Anthropology

- .. **Physical anthropology**
- **Anthropometry**
- **Body weight**

Problem: Again, only some works about fatness are written from the perspective of the physical or life sciences, or physical anthropology. Those that are not scientific or anthropological in orientation should not be assigned headings from these hierarchies. But there is currently no alternative to **Obesity** in LCSH.

Recommendation: Same as for cluster (1): “Fatness” and “Thinness” should be established as new headings under **Body image**.

(3) **Persons** is a broader term to **Overweight persons**, **Short people**, **Tall people**, and **Thin people**, among others. **Overweight persons** itself is a broader term to **Discrimination against overweight persons**, **Overweight children**, **Overweight gays**, **Overweight men**, **Overweight teenagers**, and **Overweight women**. **Overweight persons** is currently preferred to “Corpulent persons,” “Fat persons,” “Large persons,” “Obese persons,” and “Obesity--Patients.” **Discrimination against overweight persons** is currently preferred to “Anti-fat bias,” “Fat bias,” “Fat discrimination,” “Fat oppression,” “Obesity bias,” “Obesity discrimination,” “Oppression, Fat,” and “Overweight bias.” **Discrimination against overweight women** appears under **Overweight women**.

Problem: (a) **Overweight persons** is not analogous in formation to **Short people**, **Tall people**, and **Thin people**. (b) “Overweight” should not be used in preference to “fat” since it denormalizes (i.e., makes nonnormal) the state of being fat, and through its connection with the BMI pathologizes fatness with the subjectivity of *overweight*.

Recommendation: “Fat people” should be established as a replacement for **Overweight persons**; similarly “Discrimination against fat people,” “Discrimination against fat women,” “Fat men,” “Fat women,” etc., should all be established as replacements for existing headings. “Discrimination against thin people,” “Discrimination against thin women,” “Thin men,” “Thin women,” etc., should also be established.

(4) **Discrimination** (currently preferred to “Bias” in LCSH) appears in a hierarchy under **Social psychology**, whose four broader terms are **Human ecology**, **Psychology**, **Social groups**, and **Sociology**:

Human ecology / Psychology / Social groups / Sociology
.. **Social psychology**
.. .. **Interpersonal relations**
.. .. . **Discrimination**

Narrower terms to **Discrimination** include **Age discrimination**, **Physical-appearance-based bias**, **Race discrimination**, and **Sex discrimination**. **Physical-appearance-based bias** is currently preferred to “Body-size bias,” “Size discrimination,” and “Sizeism.” **Discrimination against overweight persons** is a narrower term to **Physical-appearance-based bias**.

Problem: **Physical-appearance-based bias** is not a term that is commonly used in the literature.

Recommendation: “Size discrimination,” “Weight discrimination,” and other terms specific to discrimination against other particular aspects of physical appearance (for example, “looksism” is listed as a variant and is not necessarily tied to body shape, size, or weight) should be established as replacements for **Physical-appearance-based bias**.

(5) **Prejudices** (currently preferred to “Bias (Psychology)” in LCSH) appears in a hierarchy under **Psychology**, whose two broader terms are **Human biology** and **Philosophy**:

Human biology / Philosophy
.. **Psychology**
.. .. **Attitude (Psychology)**
.. .. . **Prejudices**

Narrower terms to **Prejudices** include **Ageism**, **Classism**, **Racism**, and **Sexism**.

Problem: No heading has been established for “Sizeism” or “Weightism” on the same lines as **Racism**, **Sexism**, etc.

Recommendation: Both “Sizeism” and “Weightism” should be established as headings under **Prejudices**.

(6) **Social movements** has two broader terms, **Social history**, and **Social psychology**:

Social history / Social psychology
.. **Social movements**

Narrower terms to **Social movements** include **Fat-acceptance movement** (preferred to “Fat activism (Social movement),” “Fat liberation (Social movement),” “Fat power movement,” and “Size acceptance (Social movement”).

Problem: **Fat-acceptance movement** is fully acceptable as a term for the social movement, but there is no term in LCSH that precisely denotes the (related but different) interdisciplinary academic field of fat studies.

Recommendation: “Fat studies” should be established as a heading under **Education--Curricula**, on the model of **Disability studies**, **Gay and lesbian studies**, and **Women’s studies**.

(7) **Body mass index** appears in LCSH with broader term **Anthropometry**. The sources in the authority record note that, according to Answers.com, BMI “is a measurement of the relative percentages of fat and muscle mass in the human body, in which weight in kilograms is divided by height in meters and the result used as an index of obesity” (LCSH).

Problem: This is misleading and factually incorrect, as BMI does not measure relative percentages of fat and muscle mass. Neither, strictly speaking, is it used as an “index of obesity,” but rather as an index of weight status.

Recommendation: The definition of BMI included in the authority record should be corrected to reflect the factors being measured as only height and weight.

Conclusions

There is a strong movement imploring information professionals to examine and reckon with systemic oppressive structures within the field. The importance of the intersectionality of sizeism, racism, sexism, ableism, and other structural marginality cannot be overstated (see, e.g., Crenshaw, 1991). Sizeist and weightist oppression specifically, as manifested in KO and LCSH, is a problem. There are steps which can be taken to rectify this problem. One place to start is with the recommendations for changes in the seven hierarchies laid out in the previous section.

Furthermore, there are other steps which can be taken in LIS in the effort to begin dismantling weightist and sizeist discrimination. (1) Professionals employed by knowledge institutions must be trained in multicultural competency and sensitivity in order to mitigate discrimination on the basis of body size and prejudice against fatness. (2) Such prejudice pervades not only the intellectual spaces represented by catalogs and subject heading lists, but also the physical spaces in knowledge institutions. An area for further LIS research is that of sizeist oppression as expressed in the construction and design of library buildings, for example, and how they perpetuate environments where patrons and employees face “difficulties navigating physical spaces” and “fitting into chairs and seats” (Davis & Bowman, 2015, 276).

Both intellectual and physical spaces contain barriers to the effective access to knowledge, which we as information professionals are responsible for providing. Information professionals remain complicit in sizeist discrimination as long as we use outdated terminology in our tools for assigning index terms to documents in catalog records. Enacting changes based on the recommendations put forth in this paper would be a preliminary step in dismantling sizeist oppression.

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