



Weight-Based Shame as an Affective Determinant of Health

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Image from World Obesity Federation (www.worldobesity.org)

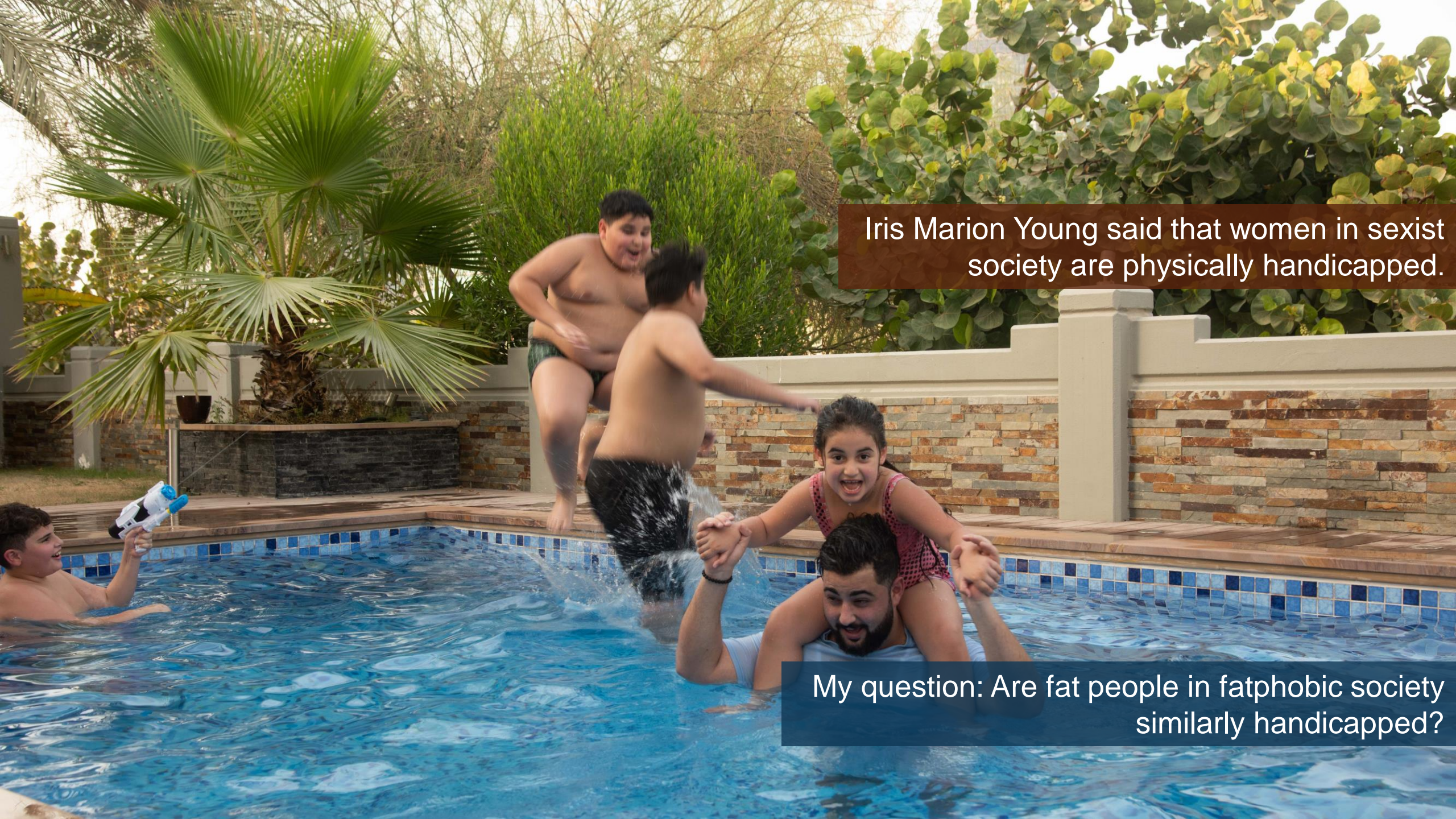
Outline

This is me →

- Responding to Barry Lyons' and Luna Dolezal's 2017 article, "Health-related shame: an affective determinant of health?"
- Phenomenology is uniquely well placed to explore affective states like shame.
- I will focus on one strand of the lived experience of fat people, namely, motility.
 - Does shame affect the motility of fat people?
 - Does this affect their health?

In this presentation, I use 'fat' as a value-neutral term to refer to bodies with more adipose tissue than is considered normal or acceptable.





Iris Marion Young said that women in sexist society are physically handicapped.

My question: Are fat people in fatphobic society similarly handicapped?

Shame

- “a self-conscious emotion in that the object of shame is oneself...” (2017, 257)
- “...shame is ***linked to one’s core identity***...”. (2017, 258)
- There is evidence that fat people are more prone to shame. For example, Westermann et al. (2015) found:
“When faced with social exclusion, individuals with obesity do not respond with more intensive negative emotions in general compared to controls, but with a specific increase in shame.”

Trainer Jillian Michaels berates a participant in the reality TV weight loss competition *The Biggest Loser*.



Weight stigma and physical activity: a 'Catch-22' dilemma?

- Fat people are constantly being told to 'move more', but when they do engage in physical activity, they are often exposed to stigma and end up feeling *more* shame.
- *The Weight of Expectation* comic, and the research on which it is based (Williams and Annandale, 2018), give us a phenomenological insight into weight-based stigma and body shame.
- These 'get under the skin', affecting not just beliefs but how one feels and knows one's own body – that is, how one constitutes one's body.

Image from *The Weight of Expectation*, a comic produced by Act With Love art collective, illustrated by Jade Sarson and based on research by Oli Williams and Ellen Annandale
www.actwithlove.co.uk/woe





“objects and mere bodies”

- In “Throwing Like a Girl”, Young describes the ‘modalities of feminine comportment’, showing how girls and women are conditioned to move less freely and less confidently than boys and men.
- I want to suggest that, in many contemporary societies, fat people are conditioned in comparable ways.
- “At the root of those modalities...is the fact that the woman lives her body as *object* as well as subject. The source of this is that patriarchal society defines woman as object, as a mere body, and that in sexist society women are in fact frequently regarded by others as objects and mere bodies.” (Young, 2005, 44)

Mariah Carey exemplified the ‘like a girl’ throwing style when she threw a ceremonial first pitch at a game in the Tokyo Dome in 2011.

I'm interested in what makes them so alluring to picture editors. My gut reaction is that big-arse-small-chin freaks the normal out, but with a big turn, all they can do is identify with the chair. Goldilocks isn't particularly fat, in my opinion. It's the intersection of implied ugliness and discomfort that makes the use of the image so full of hate. I appreciate it's also about how pictures get sold and used in news media, for example there is probably a pool of images available to editors, and this is based on the deals that news providers have with picture agencies.

Thoughts? Share 'em!



GETTY IMAGES/SHOOT OPEN
Excess weight is kind of a big deal.



headless fatties | lol fat acceptance
loifatacceptance.wordpress.com

Why the "headless fatty" photo has got to go (and other h...
fitisafeministissue.com

The 'Headless Fatties' and Their Health
thesociologicalcinema.com

Headless Fatties - Dr Charl...
charlottecooper.net

Headless Fatties - Dr Charl...
charlottecooper.net



The headless fatty: an effigy of hate, discrimination...
richardtardif.com

Headless Fatties - Dr Charl...
charlottecooper.net

Headless Fatties - Dr C...
charlottecooper.net

Headless Fatties - Dr C...
charlottecooper.net

Headless Fatties - Dr Charlotte Cooper
charlottecooper.net

Headless Fatties - Dr Charlot...
charlottecooper.net

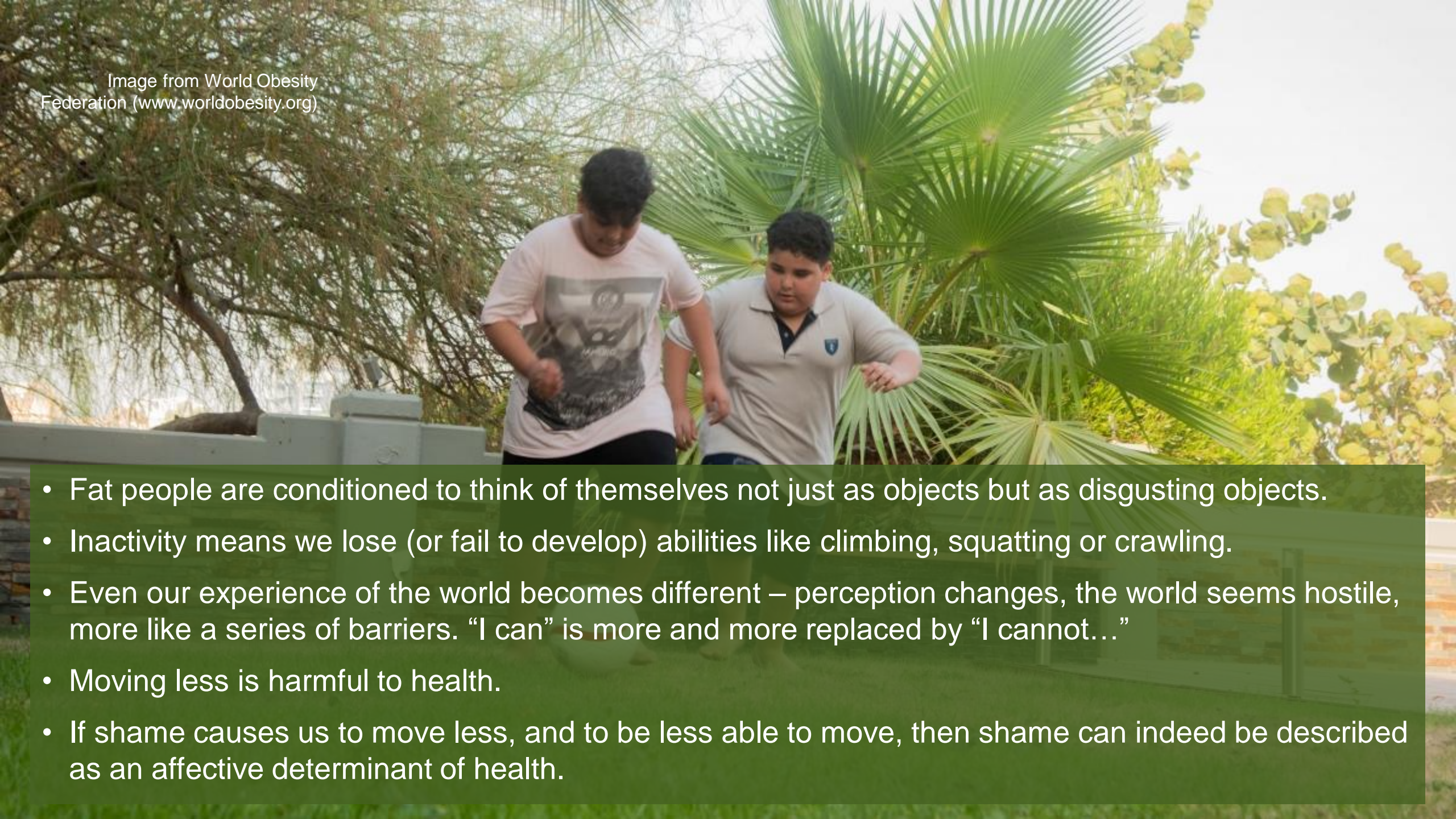
“objects and
mere bodies”

Charlotte Cooper coined the term “headless fatties” to refer to this widespread phenomenon of depicting fat people from the neck down.



“Our attention is often divided between the aim to be realized in motion and the body that must accomplish it, while at the same time saving itself from harm. We often experience our bodies as a fragile encumbrance, rather than the medium for the enactment of our aims. We feel as though we must have our attention directed upon our bodies to make sure they are doing what we wish them to do, rather than paying attention to what we want to do *through* our bodies.” (Young, 2005, 34)



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- A photograph of two young, overweight boys attempting to climb a low, grey concrete wall. The boy on the left is wearing a white t-shirt with a graphic print and dark pants. The boy on the right is wearing a light-colored polo shirt with a small crest on the chest and dark pants. They are both looking down at the wall, appearing to struggle. The background features lush greenery, including large palm fronds and other tropical plants, under bright daylight. A semi-transparent green box with white text is overlaid on the bottom half of the image.
- Fat people are conditioned to think of themselves not just as objects but as disgusting objects.
 - Inactivity means we lose (or fail to develop) abilities like climbing, squatting or crawling.
 - Even our experience of the world becomes different – perception changes, the world seems hostile, more like a series of barriers. “I can” is more and more replaced by “I cannot...”
 - Moving less is harmful to health.
 - If shame causes us to move less, and to be less able to move, then shame can indeed be described as an affective determinant of health.



Fighting back?

- Participants in Williams' and Annandale's research loved 'getting a sweat on'.
- Sweat functions as a 'carnal cue' allowing the participants to feel/know they have 'done something positive'.
- We need more opportunities for people of all sizes to explore what their bodies *can* do without being shamed for how their bodies *look*. If shameful self-objectification is a vicious circle, perhaps it's time to start a virtuous one.

References

- Cooper, Charlotte. 'Headless Fatties'. Accessed 15 July 2020. <http://charlottecooper.net/fat/fat-writing/headless-fatties-01-07/>.
- Dolezal, Luna, and Barry Lyons. 'Health-Related Shame: An Affective Determinant of Health?' *Medical Humanities* 43, no. 4 (December 2017): 257–63. <https://doi.org/10.1136/medhum-2017-011186>.
- Westermann, Stefan, Winfried Rief, Frank Euteneuer, and Sebastian Kohlmann. 'Social Exclusion and Shame in Obesity'. *Eating Behaviors* 17 (April 2015): 74–76. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.eatbeh.2015.01.001>.
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- Young, Iris Marion. *On Female Body Experience: 'Throwing like a Girl' and Other Essays*. Studies in Feminist Philosophy. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Thank you!
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