

**Food+ Research Symposium**  
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**Faculty Abstract**

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*Fat-talk Nation: The Human Costs of America's Fight Against Fat.*

ABSTRACT: For the last 15 years America has been home to a society-wide “war on fat” in which not just public health authorities, but every sector of society, and all of us as individuals are engaged in constant “fat-talk” aimed at educating, badgering, and shaming heavy people into shedding pounds. We hear a great deal about the health and economic costs of obesity to the nation, but little about the human costs the war on fat itself might be imposing. My anthropological research examines how the war on fat is playing out in society and with what effects on individuals and society. Despite enormous progress in understanding the biology of obesity, efforts to find safe, effective means to prevent and treat obesity have not yet yielded satisfactory results. But the motivation to lose weight is stronger than ever. In American culture, my research suggests, fatness is not primarily about health; it is about morality and political inclusion. While thin, fit people are celebrated as “good biocitizens,” fat people are deemed undeserving of membership in the community of valued Americans. In an analysis of 250 auto-ethnographic narratives of young Californians, I trace the emergence of our country’s first “war-on-fat generation,” a generation obsessed with their bodies and whose most fundamental sense of self comes from their size. The findings, to be published this spring in *Fat-talk Nation: The Human Costs of America’s War on Fat*, show that regardless of their weight, most feel miserable about their bodies and almost no one is able to lose weight and keep it off. This book shows that the battle against fat, designed to rescue America from obesity-induced national decline, is itself damaging the bodily and emotional health of young people and disrupting families and intimate relationships. The human trauma is disturbing -- and it is virtually unknown. Even as scientific research on obesity continues, we need a cultural revolution aimed at rethinking fat-talk, stopping fat abuse, and dethroning weight as a central measure of human value.