

Watching the Weight Watchers*

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*Temporary title, courtesy of Cary Beckwith

Introduction

Mary Jean is a Weight Watchers “lifetime member”. The day I met her, she told me to call her MJ, even though her name tag - which she had decorated with little dangling golden charms - displayed her full name in flowery script. On that same day, she also showed me an old picture of herself, from sometime in the early 90s. In the picture she wore a big, comfy-looking navy blue GAP sweatshirt, and she was sitting in a beach chair next to a German Shepherd. She looked a lot heavier then.

“I’ve lost 35 pounds by this point!” MJ told me. Now thin, blonde, and middle-aged, she’s kept the weight off for years with Weight Watchers, earning her a “lifetime member” status. She can now wear the sleek pencil skirts and blouses that she sports at almost every meeting, which go well with her sharp dark-frame glasses. She told me that she “still love[s] Weight Watchers!!” — so much that she is now the official leader of Wednesday evening and Saturday morning meetings at the Little Rocky Hill Volunteer Fire Company Meeting House, just north of Kingston in central New Jersey.

While MJ has already achieved her weight loss goals, most of the other Weight Watchers members who attend her meetings have not. Predominantly white, middle-aged and older women (though there are a handful of regularly-attending men), the members are for the most part mildly- to moderately- overweight. Some are obese. At any given meeting, 20 to 30 of them trickle in from the parking lot, making their way around tables full of colorful Weight Watchers brand products - snacks and exercise equipment - to stand in line for their weekly weigh-in.

As they wait, MJ flits about the line; she hops from person to person, making small talk and sharing recipes. Once, I heard her commiserate with a member about trying to get rid of Halloween candy around the house. Another time, she gave a little demo on how to measure a properly-sized portion of cooked pasta, and admitted, “if I was at home, I’d totally try to squeeze more in there”. While she’s a leader now, she used to be fat. Members see her as one of them.

I was one of them, too, for two months. (Or, more accurately, I tried my best to be.) I joined Weight Watchers in October, participating in weekly meetings, weigh-ins, and the PointsPlus® dieting system. I kept track of my progress with the help of the Weight Watchers smartphone app, just like most of the other members do. As I dieted by their side, each week I listened to them voice their concerns about their bodies, their emotions, their dealings with food, their interactions with other people at meal times,

and their opinions about the larger landscape of obesity in America. I tried to take note of the ways in which Weight Watchers attempts to help them navigate those realms, when their methods succeeded, when they didn't, and why.

In the meetings I attended, it was impossible to separate members' unprompted thoughts from the official Weight Watchers agenda. The two were thoroughly intertwined. Some meeting discussions were serious, some light; some were driven more by members, some by the organization. "Official" topics had varying levels of success and alignment with members' own views and experiences. Despite this variation, it was clear throughout my time there that for many, the group has become an important source of understanding and support. Many appear to have become friends in the weight loss process. They call each other by first name even when they forget to put on their name tags. Occasionally, I'd hear, "did you get my text last night?", or "check out this recipe I found in *REAL SIMPLE* magazine!" from those already seated in their folding chairs while I waited to be weighed in.

"You might want to take off those heavy boots and jacket before you get on the scale!" Joan* told me at my first meeting. "But don't worry," she assured me. "This is a no-judgment zone."

1. The Fat Identity: "you, version two"

On one particular meeting night in October, MJ kicked off our discussion by telling us about an old "version" of herself. She claimed that in one of her previous jobs, many, many years ago, she was actually the go-to "computer person"; now, though, she "doesn't know a single thing about computers, really!" — she confessed that she has to ask her kids for help with her phone, or tablet, or anything else electronic. MJ's goal in telling us this story was to get us to think about our identity, she said. Has it changed over time?

The first to raise her hand to share that night was Linda*, a white, fairly thin woman, aged about 60. Linda has very short light brown hair, a pointed nose and chin, and always sits towards the front with two other short-haired older women. I call them "the trio" in my head.

"Well... I'm pretty extroverted now, but I wasn't always this way," Linda told us.

MJ had inched closer to Linda's chair by this point, smiling and wide-eyed. (Whenever a member begins to share a story, MJ usually holds her interlocked hands close to her heart, tilts her head, and looks with fervently understanding eyebrows at whoever is speaking. This time was no exception.) "Could you tell us more?" she asked, extra-compassionately.

“I was introverted when I was younger, but not anymore. I think I was an introvert because of my weight issue. I was really only friendly with a small group of people that were more like me, I guess.”

“And now - that’s different?”

“Yeah. Now that I’ve lost the weight, I’m actually an extrovert.”

“So your weight makes you more comfortable around lots of people?”

“Yes, much more. Now I think I’m hot-to-trot!” Linda did a little dance with her shoulders as she said this, and the rest of the members in the room chuckled. (The other two in the trio even clapped.)

“That’s *wonderful!*” MJ exclaimed.

Linda nodded. “Yeah! I remember always feeling before like other people were watching me. Especially when I went out with people or when we did activities, like bowling. I know now that I was wrong, but that’s how I felt. I’ll bowl in front of people now!” With a final, self-deprecating laugh, she added, “I still won’t dance, though...”

“Maybe it’s time for some dancing lessons!” MJ said with a big smile. “Thanks so much, Linda. Okay, who’s next?”

Linda’s share presents a typical form of exchange in these weekly meetings. Members are seated - in a semicircle of gray metal folding chairs, three rows deep - and MJ is always at the front of the room, standing by her two easels and demo table. The arrangement makes the atmosphere very much one of a classroom. Usually, MJ asks a question or mentions an issue, members raise hands, and a back-and-forth between the member and MJ follows, combined with a reaction from the rest of the crowd and a smooth transition to the next sharer.

Frank* had his hand raised next that day, ready to go. One of only a few regularly attending men, Frank is short and round — probably about 5’5” — and middle-aged. He wears a Rutgers sports polo shirt almost every week, with all three buttons unbuttoned, so that his thick brown chest hair and gold chain necklace are showing. He is balding on top, but has curly brown hair on either side of his bald spot. His smile makes his cheeks pop up into cheerful little balls. (And he’s almost always smiling.) He is Italian-American — he mentions this quite frequently — and speaks in a thick, Northern-Jersey-Shore accent.

“When I was young, I was an incredible athlete. I know, can you believe it?” he looked around, incredulous himself. “A nationally ranked diver and competitive swimmer. I changed over the years, though... got married, had kids, the wife — she’s Italian-American too — she shoved food in my

mouth. One thing led to another, and I woke up one day and wasn't an athlete anymore... I was *FAT!!!*"

A few members chuckled at the way Frank said *FAT!!!* — presumably made more at ease since Frank was laughing at himself, as usual. (Frank can be very serious and sensitive, too, but more often than not, he's cracking a joke.) He continued through the laughter:

"I'm tellin' ya! One day I remember I saw a side-view picture of myself, and I was like... ho-ly *SHIT!* I made Santa look anorexic!"

The group absolutely erupted in laughter at this. After a few seconds, Frank powered through. (He's quite chatty, and doesn't usually need the regular interjections and prompts from MJ to keep talking.)

"And you know, a nurse at my kid's school is how it really started. She asked me right out if I wanted to join Weight Watchers... and at first, I thought she was singling me out — like, 'hey, Fattie!'" (everyone chuckled) — "but then I thought to myself that no, I really want to do this. I could never get below a certain weight on my own, but with Weight Watchers I lost 40 pounds already!" The whole group clapped loudly and wholeheartedly here, and MJ had some time now to interject.

"That's SO, so great. How do you feel now?" she prompted.

Frank took a second to think about it. "I still have a long way to go," he said, in a more mild and serious tone this time. "But at least now, when I walk through the door, I feel human."

Frank's last statement marked a heavy moment in the room. He wasn't smiling anymore; his lips were pursed into a bit of a frown, actually, and his slow nods were accompanied by tender gazes and head tilts from most other members. A few seconds in thick silence passed before anyone else spoke. In that moment, I found myself thinking, *wow*. The fact that Frank only feels human "now" means that he *didn't* feel human before, when he was 40 pounds fatter.

As disheartening as this was to consider, it makes sense when given the recent history of body fatness in our part of the world. In Western culture, especially in the 20th century and beyond, fat has become a strongly condemned attribute. Fat is typically associated with both medical *and moral* abnormalities, and has been linked to many different types of discrimination (Degher and Hughes, 1999).¹ On the medical side, obesity comes with

¹For example, in an emotional TED talk, physician Peter Attia apologizes for changing the tone of his treatment when an obese patient presented with a gangrenous foot from her type II diabetes, comparing her to a 27-year old normal-weight patient with cancer

some very serious, life-threatening biological consequences. The American Medical Association recently classified it as a “disease” given its strong associations with reduced life expectancy in the 35% of adult Americans it affects (Ogden CL et al., 2014). But it is also crucial to consider its equally serious social consequences. While MJ often repeats the saying, “we’re not here to get skinny, we’re here to *get healthy!*”, I hear members say “nothing tastes as good as skinny feels!” just as - if not more - often.

Perhaps at the forefront of these equally serious social consequences is the stigmatized identity of the “fat person”. Goffman (1963) defined a stigma as “an attribute that is deeply discrediting”, intimately connected to our relationships with others through a “differentness” — or, a discrepancy between whom one *is* and whom one is *expected to be*. By Goffman’s definition, it is safe to say that fat is a deeply stigmatizing attribute, and acts along two of his stigma dimensions: it is both an “abomination of the body” and a “blemish of individual character” (Goffman, 1963, p. 4). Labels such as these can have an enormous effect on how an individual enters and perceives interactions with others, as well as on how the individual views his or her place in larger, healthy, ‘normal’ society. Frank — and perhaps many other overweight individuals, judging by the empathetic expressions of his fellow Weight Watchers members — can feel less than human at the hands of this one discrediting trait.

Back at the meeting on that October night, MJ very gracefully picked up Frank’s heavy moment with a smooth transition. “It’s so hard,” she commiserated, with a soft voice. “It can be startling to see a picture of yourself. But you know that saying...” her voiced picked up in pitch now, a bit more excited. “Actually, do you guys know this saying? Something like - ‘Being overweight is hard; losing weight is hard. Choose your hard.’ Which is exactly what we’re all doing here! Let’s keep going. What about some more discussion of our identities *now*? Do we see our identities changing over time?”

Most members nodded vigorously at this, and a few “yes”s and “absolutely!”s came from the crowd. At this, Charlotte* raised her hand to share. Charlotte is a younger white woman — I’d estimate in her late 30s — with mid-length black hair and classic-style bangs which extend down to her eyebrows. She often wears a gray sweatshirt and yoga pants to the meetings, and speaks in a sweet, high-pitched voice.

“I’m definitely more of a shopper now,” she told us happily. “I used to

who “had done nothing to bring this on herself” (Attia, 2013).

hate shopping before! But now that I fit into all the clothes I try on, it's much more fun.”

As I continued to listen to members share these sorts of feelings about their identities that night, I didn't really stop to think about the fact that everyone immediately began talking about identity in relation to their body weight. We were, after all, at a Weight Watchers meeting, and most of us were (presumably) sitting in these icy gray folding chairs for the same sorts of weight-related reasons. But later, as I went over my notes, I realized that MJ's initial example — as the “computer person” at her old job — had absolutely nothing to do with her formerly being a “fat person”. In fact, she mentioned nothing of her weight at all when she prompted the group. Yet, members immediately jumped onto their identities as ‘fat people’ first.

Perhaps this has to do with the fact that being ‘fat’ could be what Everett Hughes and Howard Becker refer to as a “master status”: a status which “override[s] all other statuses and [has] a certain priority” (Becker, 1963; Hughes, 1945). As Maurer (1999) suggests, fat people may regard themselves - and may be regarded by others - as fat first, and other things second. This could be due to the fact that fatness bleeds into and affects other areas of life. For example, the activities mentioned in members' stories (bowling, swimming, shopping) are realms in which one's body weight would be at the forefront of one's attention, making the stigmatized trait more conspicuous. Or, perhaps their focus on weight was more due to the situation that night — the fact that we were in a WW meeting, or Linda's initial share of a prevs. post- weight loss comparison, could have set the tone for weight-related identity discussion. In any of these possibilities, it was clear that weight played a central role in how these members viewed themselves and their everyday interactions with the world. As Goffman suggested, any identity — even a “stigmatized” or “spoiled” one — can serve to give one bearing and provide a way to organize experience.

After Charlotte's shopping story at the meeting, MJ deftly transitioned from shopping - to clothes - to mirrors - to self-image. Do we have an image of ourselves that we like? That motivates us?

At this, Naomi*, a black woman looking to be in her late 40s, piped up from the back row of folding chairs. Naomi speaks in what sounds to me like a Jamaican accent, and is always dressed in neat slacks and professional blouses — as if she comes to these Wednesday night meetings straight from a day of work.

“I used to have a pair of jeans that I fit into before my son was born,” she

told the group. “But right after he was born, and I started to gain weight, they stopped fitting me. I still have hope, so I’ve kept them in the front of my closet!”

“That’s a great example!” MJ said excitedly. “Those jeans can help to motivate you!”

Naomi chuckled a little bit. “Yeah, well...” she paused, smirking. “My son is almost 27 years old now...”

The group, and MJ, all laughed at this. “Well,” MJ recovered. “As long as we keep our goals realistic, and are willing to do the work, we can each become a better version of ourselves. You can become *you, version two* — and fit into those jeans!”

This “*you, version two*” term cropped up at a few more meetings after this one, where it was introduced. It was designed, MJ had told us, to help us create a “virtual bridge between now and the future” — so that we could imagine ourselves living the way we want.

Frequently, new vocabulary terms are accompanied by short activities, typically involving each of us answering a set of questions out loud as a group or individually in our Weight Watchers booklets. The “*you, version two*” activity was to think about how we might answer the following questions:

- *You, version two* does this in the morning.
- *You, version two* has the following response to a compliment about losing weight.
- *You, version two* loves to do this for activity.
- *You, version two* has the following favorite afternoon snack.

This “version” way of thinking about the fat identity has been echoed in other accounts of fatness, outside of Weight Watchers meetings. Many overweight individuals can tend to view “being fat” as a temporary state — a pit stop along the way to another self, either ‘back’ to a previous version of their body, or forward to an imagined, desired state. For example, in her memoir, professor and activist Jean Braithwaite expresses a sentiment very similar to Naomi’s jeans-in-closet story:

“For many women, the effort to lose weight can be tantamount to a desire to return to an earlier version of themselves. At 18 I already felt that I had been debauched and ruined by my mispent life, my years of wrong eating. Changing my body would

therefore be like traveling into my own past, to get things right this time. I pictured myself as an inventor with a time machine, needing to sneak into historical museums to outfit herself appropriately for each new expedition: traveling back to the 150s, then the 140s, then the 130s, then finally to 120, the golden age where I would junk the machine and stay.” (Braithwaite, 2011, p. 96)

The “version” model of fat identity is crucial for understanding the complicated stigmatization of the fat person. Unlike the more commonly mentioned types of stigma in sociological and psychological literature — more permanent markers, such as race, handicaps, or disfigurements — body fatness is a *fluid* identity status: it can, in theory, be changed. On top of this fluidity, others usually presume that the fat person’s status was entered by the person’s own accord, and should be exited in the same manner. It is this fundamental difference between fatness and other types of stigma that Cahnman points out in his 1968 *Sociological Quarterly* article:

“...contrary to those that are blind, one-legged, paraplegic, or dark-pigmented, the obese are presumed to hold their fate in their own hands...” (Cahnman, 1968, p. 294)

As a result of this presumption, any failure to change one’s status — by, for example, currently being fat — can become “evidence” of moral defect and of weak character. Each time a cue from surrounding others points out the state of the individual’s body (e.g., Frank’s story about the school nurse asking him if he wanted to join Weight Watchers), or when former cues become internalized (e.g., Linda’s feeling as though “other people were watching [her]”, even when they weren’t), the fat person is alerted to his or her marginalized, estranged, and abnormal status. Add to all of this the fact that eating is a biological necessity, and we see endless opportunity for fat persons to be reminded — and for others to be reminded as well — of their place on the outskirts of healthy, normal society.

2. Managing shame: “Is this food worthy *of me*?”

The language that Frank, Linda, and others use to describe their pre-weight-loss feelings are characteristic of an emotion that Goffman (1963) claims is a “central possibility” in the experience of stigmatized individuals: *shame*.

Considered one of the more fundamentally social of all emotions, shame is frequently presented as “a perception of negative evaluation of the self

by self or others” (Scheff, 1988). As such, it is intimately connected to issues of identity. Katz (2001) points out that unlike many other types of emotion which are attached to behavioral counterparts — for example, crying, laughter, or anger — shame is set apart as more of a state of *being* rather than a state of *doing*. When a person experiences shame, he or she is considered to be “*in* shame”, and can be left in a state of powerlessness and deficiency as a result:

“...part of what distinguishes shame is a sense of incapacity for action and a confession to self of moral incompetence in some regard.” (Katz, 2001, p. 145)

Weight Watchers, with its practical plan of focus on “you, version two”, provides a “blueprint...for reconstructing the self” (Maurer, 1999), and is thus in a perfect position to help members more actively manage their shameful emotions.

On one night in mid-December, as I sat in my usual spot — back row, left side, second from the aisle — I watched MJ race to the front of the room by the easels at just a couple of minutes past 5:30pm.

“Alright, everyone!” she began merrily. “I wanted to remind you all before we start that everyone who has attended 6 of the 8 meetings in November and December will get a snowflake charm for your attendance bracelet!” Most of the women perked up a bit. (One of the men said, “oh goody”.) MJ held her wrist out, fingers pointed downward, and dangled her charm bracelet gleefully as she did a little QVC-style turn from left to right for the group to see. As she did this, I saw a couple of women in the row to my right look at each other with impressed and excited expressions. “While the bracelets aren’t the *real* reason we’re here, of course, it’s definitely a perk, right!?”

Weight Watchers is full of rewards like these bracelets. Some other examples include raffle entries for when our attendance record is high, gold star stickers to put in our weight record books when a certain goal weight is achieved, or sometimes little lapel pins for when 5% or 10% of our body weight is lost. Usually, with the exception of raffle prizes, the rewards are presented in person, in front of the rest of the group. MJ often says “we reward good behavior here!” as she doles out stars and pins.

“How did we all do last week with our eating?” MJ asked the group. Displayed on her easel this time was a picture of a healthy-looking plate, with a small amount of meat, a heap of green vegetables, and a few tiny

potatoes. On the top, the page read: *Is this food worthy of me?* “Does anyone have some examples of saying *no* to foods that were unworthy of us?”

At this, one of the younger members sitting to my right raised her hand. She seemed to be about 30 years old, and had long, dark, straight hair, which she wore in a ponytail. I don’t usually see her at the Wednesday evening meetings, but she was attending this one.

“I have a story,” she said. “It’s about *ice cream*. I always get really powerful cravings for sweets after dinner, and this one dinner, I REALLY wanted some ice cream. But not just ANY ice cream... I wanted *Ben & Jerry’s “Phish Food”* ice cream!” At this, some members (myself included) made “oooooh” noises or knowing half-smiles. She continued. “I kept thinking about it after dinner... just kept thinking about it!... until I went into the bathroom, and saw my face in the mirror, and it just looked so... *puffy*. I said to myself, NOPE. That’s it!”

MJ proudly nodded. “So that moment of reflection was all you needed to decide that the ice cream was just *not* worthy of you?” She confirmed.

“Yup. I had a Weight Watchers shake instead. Believe me, I really, *really* wanted that Phish Food ice cream, but I thought to myself that it must be worth a MILLION points!”

At this moment, I was typing her story into my phone (where I use Evernote to type notes during the meetings), but the woman directly to my left thought that I was typing “Phish Food” ice cream into my Weight Watchers app to look up the points value. I stopped typing and looked it up — one serving hovers around 8 points. (For reference: my own daily allotment of points — the number I’m allowed to eat in one whole day — is 26. So a single serving of this ice cream would be over 30% of a day’s worth of food.)

“What sorts of variables go into our equation for deciding whether or not a food we really want is worthy of us?” MJ continued. The group began shouting out some answers, and MJ wrote those which were unanimously agreed upon up on the easel paper for the group to see. I jotted them down:

- Taste
- Weight Watchers points value
- How filling the food is
- How you feel afterwards

A few moments after these seemed to be our settled list, one woman in the back of the room piped up with another: “Oh wait! In my equation there would definitely be a variable for the cost of going to get it. If I don’t have it in the house already.”

“Ah, cost!” said MJ, whipping back around to the easel to write it down.

“Yes... sometimes, my laziness *far* outweighs my desire for the food!”

Lots of other members nodded in agreement as MJ spun around again to face the crowd. “Good one!” she said. “Maybe it’s a good idea to keep those unworthy foods out of the house, then, since just having them around would make us more likely to eat them!”

As we went through these “variables”, I flipped open the weekly bulletin to see what it had to say about the worthiness of food. (Each week, during our weigh-in, members receive a weekly bulletin with recipes, photos, testimonials, and snippets of tips or encouragement.) This week, the bulletin had a picture of some brightly-colored vegetables (celery, cherry tomatoes, radishes, and carrots) next to a bowl of vegetable dip. On the next page were some elaborated food worthiness ideas:

“Ask yourself not merely if the food is worth it, but if it is worthy of *you*. You deserve nothing less. Such a refreshed mindset puts the power in your hands so you can feel good either way: when you enjoy a planned indulgence, and when you choose to say ‘No, thanks.’” (12/17/14 weekly bulletin)

By portraying food choice as a matter of the goodness of the food itself, the official Weight Watchers message puts a negative moral emphasis on attributes of the *food* rather than attributes of the *individual*. This (in theory) might begin to allow individuals the opportunity to feel less like shamed misfits — on the sidelines of normal, healthy society — when what’s actually morally wrong and “unworthy” is the food, not their character.

But despite this official Weight Watchers emphasis, when talking about their experiences with unworthy foods during the meeting, members still honed in on some of their own attributes rather than those of the food. For the first sharer, her own “puffy” face in the mirror was what prompted her to say *no* to the unworthy food; for the second, her own “laziness” simply let her avoid the choice scenario entirely. Similarly, MJ — perhaps without explicitly meaning to — implied that willpower alone might be insufficient sometimes to stay away from unworthy foods, claiming that “just having them around would make us more likely to eat them”.

In order to redirect this natural tendency towards self-focus, Weight Watchers must then combine their emphasis on unworthy foods with another emphasis on empowerment and individual choice:

“Use different words. When you say ‘I *don’t* eat that’ (instead of ‘I *can’t* eat that’) you build confidence—and banish that hint of feeling sorry for yourself.” (12/17/14 weekly bulletin)

This Weight Watchers counterattack attempts to turn shame into pride — to turn the powerlessness of being “in shame” into empowerment through a plan of action. Through the combination of the positive reward system and *food*-shaming (rather than fat-shaming), individuals become responsible - and praised - for their good choices, and receive understanding and absolution from the group for their intermittent poor choices. (It’s the food that’s tempting and ‘bad’ – not us). Their strategy aligns with something another member, Shannon*, told us in a different meeting: that she was here to feel “more in control... and more comfortable in [her] own skin”.

3. Dealings with the dreaded “*food pushers*”

While Weight Watchers seems to provide some clear action plans for managing members’ identities and their associated emotions, the story becomes much more complicated when situations involving *other people* are inserted into the equation.

After our discussion of food worthiness on that same December night, MJ dramatically flipped the “is this food worthy of me?” paper from the easel to reveal a photo of outstretched hands holding a plate. Above the photo was a title: “Fending off food pushers”.

A “food pusher”, MJ explained, is one of those “dreaded” people who try to persuade you to eat something when you might *want* to, but when you’re also trying to lose weight.

“Under what kinds of circumstances do we feel the pressure to eat the food that food pushers push upon us?” MJ asked the group.

Linda and the trio were at this meeting, and one of the non-Linda women spoke up: “When the person made it *just for you!*” Most other members nodded in agreement.

“Yes,” MJ responded. “When someone hand-makes something specifically for you, there’s some serious pressure to try it, so we don’t hurt the person’s feelings, right?” Lots more nods. “Now, are there any food pushers

among us here today? Those of you who have at some point or another pushed food upon others, raise your hand!”

At this, I instinctively raised my own hand, fully expecting that most other members would raise theirs as well. To my surprise, mine was the only hand raised. (I usually don’t share stories in these meetings unless prompted, but I participate in all activities, including polls like this.)

“NO! Never!” yelled one strong-opinioned older woman in the back. “It’s just so terrible for someone to try to force food upon someone else. Especially when they’re trying to lose weight!”

Most of the members at this point seemed visibly angry at the idea of someone pushing food upon them. Many were mumbling to their neighbors, looking disgruntled and shaking their heads. While I couldn’t make out most of the specific words behind the mumbles at this point, the atmosphere for the next few seconds was a tense one, and I got the impression that many of them had been angered during previous interactions with food pushers.

MJ seemed just as surprised as I was. “Really? Only one hand raised? What about the rest of you... think about times when you maybe pushed food on someone, but didn’t really mean to do it maliciously?”

Cricketts.

“Well, we have at least one... Nicole!” MJ turned to me.

My first reaction was to laugh, since the people I usually push food upon find the process more amusing than anything else. I started my story off proudly and honestly. “Well, whenever I’m eating with a *man* — a friend, a boyfriend, one of my brothers, my father, or whoever — I always like to make sure they have a lot of food. And definitely that they eat more than I do!” A few of the women chuckled lightly at this, though not nearly to the extent that I anticipated. My confidence plummeted. I started to feel a little bit self-conscious, so naturally I kept talking to try and make up for it. “I guess that last part is really more about me, and not as much about the other person.”

MJ seemed satisfied, at least. “Yes, there’s less guilt in sharing!”

Another woman from the back: “Misery loves company!”

Most other members said nothing.

In that moment, I was mostly embarrassed, startled by the seriousness of the members’ reactions to my story about food pushing. I suppose I thought at the time that since most of the members were middle-aged women, they would be able to laugh with me about the experience of making sure the men in our lives have enough food. But in thinking about it now, weeks after the meeting, I should have realized just how inconsiderate I was being.

I can only imagine what the members were feeling then. Of course it would be much easier for someone like me - of relatively normal weight - to laugh about a food pushing story than it would be for them.

Even for people who aren't fat, decisions involving food become much more complicated when they have to happen in front of others. For a fat person, that complexity is multiplied — by layers of feelings about themselves, their bodies, the other people, and the situation. (And all because of a trait that isn't even as under their control as others often believe it is.) When considering this, it's much easier to understand the vehement reactions that members had towards food pushers.

Charlotte, in her sweet, high-pitched voice, saved me from my embarrassment. "It's not really about the food," she said. "Food equals love!" She paused. With a final, resigning shrug of the shoulders, she sighed and repeated. "Food equals love."

MJ — smooth as usual — transitioned to the next bulletpoint. "It's true. So true. But we can still think of some concrete strategies to avoid hurting people's feelings," she told us, true to Weight Watchers plan-of-action form. "What are some that we can think of?"

Sweet Charlotte piped up again. "You know, I'm just honest with everyone!" she told us. "Once I was honest with people, telling them I'm doing Weight Watchers, they stopped trying to give me any food. I don't care, I'm *proud* of being on Weight Watchers!" She looked pleased with herself. "In my office at the school, a few other ladies, other receptionists, have their desks in there too, and the ladies always know that I won't eat any sweets from school parties. So they won't even ask me or put the food near me anymore!"

MJ was beaming. "That's awesome! *Hey* — can you tell the group the story? About the mixup?"

Through a few knowing chuckles between Charlotte and MJ, it became clear that Charlotte must have told her a funny story before the meeting.

"Sure! So at the last party my school had, I stayed in the office to keep watch. At least one person has to do it when we have parties, so I volunteered so I wouldn't be near the food!" Most of the members laughed at this. "After the party, a lot of them came up to me and told me that they didn't bring me pieces of cake because they had heard about my '*wheat allergy*'!!!" She and MJ laughed heartily. "I was like, I don't have a wheat allergy! I'm on *Weight Watchers*! It's so funny how people put their own spin on it."

"It *is* so funny," MJ responded, still laughing. "Maybe it was like a

game of telephone — and someone didn't hear the news right or something. But anyway, Charlotte gives us an example about how sometimes extreme honesty is a great way to get people to stop pushing food on you."

Despite Charlotte's clearly demonstrated pride, most other members admitted at this point that they weren't as comfortable being honest about trying to lose weight most of the time. One woman in the back of the room said that she'd be honest "maybe at work" — but that it wasn't so easy in most other places, with other people. I was reminded of some others at a different meeting I heard mention to each other that they hated carrying around Weight Watchers brand products with any logos on them, because they wanted to be "in-cognito". Why might these other members feel more hesitant to be honest about their weight-loss efforts than Charlotte was?

Perhaps — (and this is speculation, as I didn't get to explicitly ask the other members for their own answers to this question) — honesty about trying to lose weight necessarily puts the issue of "being fat" at the forefront of an interaction. When being fat is a stigmatized attribute, it could result in the sort of interaction that Goffman (1963) again writes about in *Stigma* — a "shaky" one for both the "normals" and the "stigmatized":

"Each potential source of discomfort for him when we are with him can become something we sense he is aware of, aware that we are aware of, and even aware of our state of awareness about his awareness; the stage is then set for the infinite regress of mutual consideration that Meadian social psychology tells us how to begin but not how to terminate." (Goffman, 1963)

On top of this base-level shakiness, the interaction can become further convoluted depending on the nature of the social relationship and the emotions each party has towards the other.

"It's not the same thing as the family"

"At work it's always a lot easier to be honest," said blonde, short-haired Karen* from the middle section of folding chairs. "It's not the same thing as the family."

"Okay, let's talk about that," said MJ, with her characteristic nods, hands held together by her chest. "It's just like the scenario I was about to read out to you guys." MJ walked over to her table at the front of the room and pulled out a Weight Watchers pamphlet from her class materials. "Say

you have a brother-in-law who's a *fabulous* cook, and he really pushes for you to try out some of his homemade creations. What do you do?"

"It's hopeless!" Karen said, seemingly talking about her own brother-in-law (or some other male family member). "You just can't say no. And if you try to make him make a healthier version of what he makes, it's like, forget it!" Karen's voice got louder and more annoyed here. "He's gotta do it his way. GOD FORBID someone uses healthy ingredients around our house... the rest of the family would complain about it not being 'real food'!"

In typical Weight Watchers style, MJ shifted the direction of the discussion to *action*: "Okay... so what can we *do* about a situation like that?"

Members started shouting out some options. Many seemed to approve of the idea of accepting the food, but "saving it for later" so that they could "just throw it away!" — not eating it, but not hurting anyone's feelings or "causing a scene" either.

Other ideas involved different variations of lying, which MJ endorsed. If you're invited to more than one party on a holiday, at the first party, say you'll only eat a bit (because of the later parties); then, at the later parties, say you ate so much at the first that you couldn't possibly eat any more. Or, just "bring up some medical issue!" — real or fake. "If I tell people that I need to watch my blood sugar levels, they immediately back off!" said one new lady in the front row. Others chimed in with assertions that everybody tends to "understand medical stuff."

"YES!" said MJ, pleased with the brainstorming session. "If we just blame it on the doctor, then it's not about the person you're with."

Since eating is so often a social activity, it is important to recognize how the presence of other people — especially perhaps those closest to us — can make food-related decisions more difficult. This is particularly the case for Weight Watchers members and others trying to lose weight, since their interactions with food are already complicated ones. It becomes clearer here that fat people are by no means alone in their fatness: their bodies are connected to others through a complex web of emotions, situations, and food.

Though members left the meeting that day with some strategies for dealing with other people, they were weak ones, mostly involving some sort of lying. The domain of Weight Watchers control does not extend past its own members, so it's difficult for the organization to provide tactics to govern something as unpredictable and unique as a relationship with another

person. When it comes to family and food, as NYT op-ed columnist Frank Bruni says, “the calories are proxies for something else” (Bruni, 2014).

4. “They’re starting already in the stores...”

As we move outwards from the self — through the realms of identity, emotions, and relationships — the portrait of how the ‘fat person’ should navigate the food and social landscape becomes more and more nebulous. On top of everything else, Weight Watchers members - and others trying to lose weight - must deal with larger societal forces in food availability and marketing. The holidays make these complications particularly noticeable.

Meetings just before the holiday season were jam-packed with survival tips and tricks for members, who were all very well aware of the difficult eating decisions that lay ahead of them. Once, just before Thanksgiving, MJ asked about our strategies for the “big day”; what did we know was our favorite part? “THE FOOD!” Frank bellowed, laughing, with a look on his face like, why was this question even asked?

On one of these holiday-prep meeting nights in early November, I arrived just a couple of minutes past 5:30. MJ was already up at the front of the room, so I made the decision to sit down and listen to her first (and get weighed afterwards). I remember thinking that her black pencil skirt, matching her glasses, made her look even more sleek than usual that night.

“What would you say, for each of you, is your average weight fluctuation during the holidays?”

Members started shouting out their own answers: “I’d say about 5 pounds”... Frank: “10-15 for me!”.

MJ pulled back the front page of the easel paper to reveal an orange page, which had a multiple choice question on it:

- What do you think an average person’s weight fluctuation is during the holidays?
 - (a) 1 lb
 - (b) 3 lb
 - (c) 5 lb
 - (d) 7 lb
 - (e) 10 lb

The bottom of the page cited a *New England Journal of Medicine* article called “A prospective study of holiday weight gain” by Yanovski et al.² Most of the numbers that the members had shouted were on the higher end — or higher — than the choices visible on the easel.

“Okay. Now check this out,” said MJ. “How much weight do you think the *average* person gains during the holidays?”

The members chimed in as a group out loud again, picking mostly 5 lb and 7lb from the choices.

“The answer is: *ONE POUND!*” MJ explained. “The average person gains only one pound over the holidays.”

At this, most of the members started mumbling and talking to each other, seeming uneasy.

MJ noticed. “You guys seem skeptical. Well, does this change our perception at all? Knowing that people here gain 5-10 pounds during the holidays — is it almost justified?”

Judy* raised her hand to comment. “Well... this is a *prospective* study, and not a retrospective study.” Judy is in her mid-70s, with shoulder-length, wispy blonde-dyed hair, and is a retired medical doctor. (A gerontologist, to be precise.) MJ looked confused, so Judy continued. “You should almost consider this sort of like guessing. I don’t know if the results would be very different, but it’s a prospective study! I’d have to read the article. I can’t say much more.”

Frank, with a concerned look on his face, spoke without raising his hand. “Wait, so... this is what the people *think* it would be? Not, like, here’s what people gained over the holidays?”

MJ tried her best to quell their concerns. “Well, okay, I’ll print out another copy next time so we can take a closer look... but let’s just *assume* that this is correct — that the average weight gain was one pound. Does that change what you’re willing to allow for the holiday season?”

Members started shifting uncomfortably in their seats now. From the back: “what’s the study name again?” “yeah, and what year was it done?”

MJ read the title again. “It’s ‘A prospective study of holiday weight gain’, by Yanovski, from 2000.”

“2000!” Judy yelled, aghast. “Well, that’s outdated, first of all!”

Sweet Charlotte wasn’t bothered by that. “But people always have eaten a lot during the holidays... the holidays have *always* been this way,” she said defensively.

At this, Karen raised her hand and began speaking at the same time.

²<http://www.nejm.org/doi/full/10.1056/NEJM200003233421206>

“*My* perspective is that people who come to Weight Watchers, it’s not just 5 pounds and then we say, ‘oh well!’, and burn it right off after the holidays. It’s that we have issues with food. A lot of it is psychological!” (The group chuckled and chimed in: ‘yeah, we have *issues!*’) She continued. “It’s not a simple thing like, oh, don’t eat too much of this, don’t eat too much of that. There are some people who could eat some cookies, and then stop. Everyone else is salivating over the food, and they’re like, ‘nah, I’m okay’.”

In the meantime, Frank was trying to find the full text of the NEJM article on his phone, but couldn’t gain access. MJ asked him if he had any luck, which he denied. She tried to regain some control over the crowd: “Okay, well, my homework will be to look up the study and print it out for next time!”

This moment was a tense one. Many of the members were scoffing or shaking their heads, not convinced of the credibility of the NEJM study. They seemed to be upset at the idea of being compared to this “average” population (although I can’t know for sure that this is exactly what they were upset about, since I didn’t get to follow up with the members to ask specifically). In any case, it was clear that they were not pleased with whatever sort of message Weight Watchers — or MJ — was out to teach with this particular journal article. Even though MJ managed to recover her authority momentarily, it didn’t last very long.

MJ kept pushing on the holiday topic. “So how many days, *really*, do we find challenging during the holiday season? Let’s think about it.”

“Every one!” someone shouted. “Every single one.”

“Well wait a minute now,” MJ continued. “Let’s pull out your weekly bulletin and check out on page—”

“Ah, I got it!” Frank exclaimed, interrupting her. He had finally gained access on his phone to the full text of the NEJM article. “195 adults were the sample... it says ‘convenience sample’... before, during, and after the holiday they weighed them. I dunno, it’s hard to say this is representative of America!” He was squinting down at his phone screen as he tried to relay the details. “So... they found net weight gain was 0.48 kg, which is like a pound. Something like that.”

MJ seemed ready to settle this business. “I think the point of all this is to realize that we can’t let our assumptions about what we normally gain during the holidays be a justification for going crazy. Right?” No one said anything more at this, so she continued, authoritatively. “For many of us, it’s really just a *handful* of days that are going to be challenging. Only the

real holiday days, the special days. Right?” *Silence*. “So now make a note in your weekly bulletin. How many days in there are really challenging for you?”

MJ started walking through the aisles, handing out pens to those who didn’t have their own. A few members had already started scribbling down their answers, but many of them looked thoughtfully down at their weekly bulletins without writing anything.

At this point, Karen in the back started to gingerly shake her head — almost to herself. A couple of others looked up from their booklets and seemed to notice her. Heads began turning expectantly — to Karen, then to MJ, Karen, then back to MJ. Karen looked like she was on the brink of speaking again. After about 10 seconds of this, Karen piped up, softly at first, but gaining energy with every syllable:

“No... I disagree... I disagree with you,” Karen told our leader.

“Okay!” MJ said happily. (A little *too* happily.)

“It’s *not* just those days—”

“O...okay!” MJ conceded, interrupting her.

“—because they’re starting already in the stores, in the grocery stores, on television...”

Other members began nodding now, mumbling in agreement. Frank was in the front row with a boyish look of excitement on his face: wide-eyed, half amused, ready for a rumble. MJ started nodding too, almost feverishly, as she let Karen finish her short soliloquy.

“You’re confronted with these things for a while,” she said. “You know, all these things that you like.” Many started stirring more in their seats now, and the mumbling got even louder. “That’s setting you up,” she continued. “It’s not just gaining one pound... we’re not at Weight Watchers for that.”

MJ hastily agreed with the members, preventing a complete uprising. But a couple of things became clearer in that moment just before rebellion.

First, there was a strong and overt discrepancy between the members’ experiences of the holidays and the official Weight Watchers message for the week. Members hinted at the fact that they felt Weight Watchers was downplaying their food-related problems. Karen’s “It’s not just gaining one pound”, Frank’s insistence on finding more out about the study population, and Judy’s calling out the old data and the “prospective” nature of the study all suggest that they felt the comparison Weight Watchers was making between them and the NEJM study population was an unjust one.

Second, one of the Weight Watchers bulletpoints for the day (that “the holidays” are really only a few days) perhaps misses out on some important

parts of members' lived experience. The action plan — to make a list of the exact few days that are problematic, and to watch ourselves on those days in particular — can be thwarted by environmental characteristics in the outside world, out of the control of both members and the Weight Watchers organization itself. Karen's observation that "they're starting already in the stores, in the grocery stores, on television..." points to the powerful role that marketing can (and does) play in the types of foods most often found in members' surroundings (Nestle, 2014). While the choice itself to eat is ultimately a member's own, it is made a much more complicated one when we consider who actually has control over the landscape of available and promoted foods from which that choice is made.

Even outside of holiday discussions, when I hear members talk about food - before, during, and after the official meetings - they consistently use language which suggests that finding "good", worthy food isn't as straightforward for them as one might imagine. They frequently share "tips" with each other for new snacks, or "tricks" for turning store-bought foods into their healthier versions. I almost always detect a hint of surprise in members' voices when food is found to be "not that bad!" or "actually pretty good for you!" — as if all are constantly on the lookout for that healthy gem amidst a sea of unexpectedly destructive items.

I'm reminded here of a conversation I had at a different meeting with Mary*. Mary is in her early sixties, with short, dyed-black hair, and is usually quiet while she knits blankets in the back row. (They're for her grand-nephews.) Mary told me one day about a new type of Greek yogurt she just started buying from the grocery store. "A girl at work told me about all these new flavors!" she explained. "They even have *pumpkin* now! I hope it tastes like pumpkin pie!" While I laughed along with her as we chatted, I was surprised to hear that Greek yogurt came in such new, exotic flavors. It's typically portrayed — in commercials, in magazines, and even in news articles — as a healthier, plainer, more protein-packed version of regular yogurt. But now it comes in *pumpkin* flavor? I knew that Mary was working hard to lose weight, so I assumed that she believed this new flavor to be a healthy option for her. But when I got home after the meeting, I checked it out online: it's got 19 grams - about five teaspoons - of added sugar. (The WHO recommends eating a maximum of six teaspoons per day.³)

³<http://www.who.int/mediacentre/news/notes/2014/consultation-sugar-guideline/>

The members here at least have Weight Watchers to help direct them. Even though sometimes the organization might oversimplify their food-related problems, and also floods them with its own marketing and weight loss products (it is, after all, a *company*), members can still benefit from the support and information from the group. Once Mary scans one of her pumpkin yogurts into her Weight Watchers phone app, she'll know that it's perhaps not as healthy as all the commercials tend to insist. But I can't help thinking of all the other overweight and obese people who are not middle-to upper-middle class like these members are. Many can't afford the luxury of a Weight Watchers app to tell them that one yogurt could contain almost all of their recommended daily dose of sugar. What about them?

Conclusion: a “world of food”

A new Weight Watchers television commercial was released just before Christmas this year. In the first scene, a woman - dressed in business casual, not too overweight, just a bit - is sitting in her office at work, typing on her computer. As she looks around to adjacent cubicles, she sees that her female coworker's keyboard is made of cheese, a man in a shirt and tie is drinking a cup of candy dispensed from a water fountain, and the front desk receptionist is taking a bite out of her phone, which is made out of chocolate.

“When you're trying to lose weight,” the narrator says, “it seems like food is everywhere.”

Food *is* everywhere for these members. If there's one overall impression I took away from my time with them, it's that a significant portion of their everyday lives involves having to very carefully think about food — how to learn which ones are healthy, how to diet inconspicuously, and how to avoid the constant bombardment from other people and marketers, who aren't always out with their best interests in mind.

Members were constantly mentioning the ways in which their eating and weight situations took up their time and energy outside of meetings. Charlotte told us she volunteered to keep watch at a school party so that she could be away from the food. Once I heard one member tell another that she had to give her garbage disposal a nickname - Igor - so that she could tell herself to “feed Igor instead!” when she was about to eat too much. Mary told us that she didn't get any fitness activity in one week, since she went out to eat at a restaurant three times, which “messed the whole week

en/

up”. Karen said she and her colleagues declared their work station to be a “NO FOOD ZONE!”—they put up a sign and everything.

Even dieting along with them for two months, I started to feel it too. I started instinctively pulling out my phone and clicking on the Weight Watchers app before and after I ate. I felt imaginary pressure from colleagues who knew that I was participating while they watched me pick out what I’d eat for lunch. I said no to delicious foods offered to me by people I cared about, even when I was hungry. I once felt so hungry at 2:30am that I smuggled a granola bar from my own kitchen into my bedroom so that the friend I live with wouldn’t hear me fiddling with the wrapper. Feeling hungry most of the time is not pleasant. But their weight loss experiences are exponentially worse: imagine feeling all of this while *also* feeling unhealthy, abnormal, and ashamed.

Luckily, these members have the Weight Watchers group to understand and help them. Despite the fact that the practical strategies the organization offers become weaker as they deal with realms increasingly outside of their control — into social relationships, family, culture, and marketing — their “no-judgment” atmosphere for the most part provides a space for members to learn from each other and commiserate. They share healthier recipes, they praise each other for their achievements, and they joke around in ways that might not be so easy outside the meeting house walls.

Sadly, most overweight and obese people do not have this luxury. Many have all of the same internal, biological, social, and environmental pressures to deal with, but without the help of an official program. Eating is an intricate process, and there are so many factors that go into food choice: what you’re hungry for, how much time you have, what you’re feeling, what’s available to you, who’s with you, who you’re feeding, and how much money you can spend, among others. (These all happen to be incorporated into the titles of cookbooks I found on the display table one meeting, in Figure 1). Even if you know what to do, it’s difficult when the environment sets you up: the portions are big, the plates are deep, and the ads are loud. Add to all of this the *biological* realm — the fact that everyone has different genetic predispositions to obesity, varied resting metabolic rates, and diverse gut biomes — and that complexity is compounded.

“We *need* to be here,” Karen once said, and I believe her. It’s a complicated landscape — of expectations, emotions, other people, and food — and we all must navigate it together.



Figure 1: Cookbooks displayed at the Weight Watchers meeting on 12/17/14.

THE END

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“Seymour’d told me to shine my shoes just as I was going out the door with Walker. I was furious. The studio audience were all morons, the announcer was a moron, the sponsors were morons, and I just damn well wasn’t going to shine my shoes for them, I told Seymour. I said they couldn’t see them anyway, where we sat. He said to shine them anyway. He said to shine them for the Fat Lady. I didn’t know what the hell he was talking about, but he had a very Seymour look on his face, and so I did it. He never did tell me who the Fat Lady was, but I shined my shoes for the Fat Lady every time I ever went on the air again – all the years you and I were on the program together, if you remember. I don’t think I missed more than just a couple of times. This terribly clear, clear picture of the Fat Lady formed in my mind. I had her sitting on this porch all day, swatting flies, with her radio going full-blast from morning till night. I figured the heat was terrible, and she probably had cancer, and—I don’t know. Anyway, it seemed goddamn clear why Seymour wanted me to shine my shoes when I went on the air.

It made sense.

...

I don’t care where an actor acts. It can be in summer stock, it can be over a radio, it can be over television, it can be in a goddamn Broadway theatre, complete with the most fashionable, most well-fed, most sunburned-looking audience you can imagine. But I’ll tell you a terrible secret—Are you listening to me?

There isn’t anyone out there who isn’t Seymour’s Fat Lady.”

J.D. Salinger, *Franny and Zooey*, 1961