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MIKE & MOLLY – AN OTHER WORLD

A thesis submitted to
the Graduate College of
Marshall University

In partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

in

English

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the impact of the television show *Mike & Molly* on the modern debate related to fat in America. The thesis uses the work of Michel Foucault as well as disability scholars such as Lennard Davis and feminist scholars such as bell hooks to examine how a comedy show like *Mike & Molly* can further disenfranchise fat people in society. The thesis shows that fat makes people an Other in society, and television shows and other forms of comedy that mock those who are fat just reinforce that Other status.

Introduction: Fat – It’s a Weighty Word

When people use the word *fat*¹, certain images come to mind. For some, it might be the random stock footage of overweight people on every news story about weight. For others, it might be a fictional character like Fat Albert. Still, others might think of neighbors, cousins or friends. For people who fit the descriptor of fat, it might mean all of those things or none of those things. It is more likely a word that -- like many slurs -- creates a hegemonic world in which the fat are a disenfranchised group. That disenfranchisement, just like for all minority groups, is enhanced by fat jokes. Unlike the jokes at the expense of many other minority groups, fat jokes are considered acceptable in American culture and even in polite society. Although we as a society can still find fat funny, other minority groups have advocated to remove from television, movies and other forms of culture many of the jokes that were once acceptable. Fat is an acceptable topic for humor in America, one that doesn't seem as if it will abate any time soon with the rising rhetoric of the "obesity epidemic."

It isn't a surprise that America worships thin. The standard for beauty in America promoted across television screens is a thin woman. Plenty of studies and books have explored this celebration of thin in culture; yet, as the standard for beauty has become more of a celebration of thin, America's waistlines have continued to grow. Media reports regularly tell us that America is facing an epidemic of obesity, but, at the same time, other media outlets remind us that we can lose weight through a magic diet or run distorted pictures of models as ideals that cannot be achieved. Both thinness and fatness are constructed in society, and right now the thin

¹ There are a multitude of words that could be used to describe those who are considered overweight. A commonly used word, "obese," is described by the *Oxford English Dictionary* as "Very fat or fleshy; extremely overweight; (Med.) having a body mass index of 30 or above. Also in extended use" (obese, def. a *OED*). Fat has two definitions that are relevant here: "Of animals or human beings, their limbs, etc.: In well-fed condition, plump; well supplied with fat" or "In unfavourable sense: Overcharged with fat, corpulent, obese" (fat, def a and b, *OED*). In this paper, "fat" will be the primary word used to describe someone who is overweight.

version is winning in the overall media landscape. Television is a big part of the construction of both fatness and thinness.

Television programs, even those that focus on fat characters such as Mike and Molly perpetuate those constructions. The show focuses on two characters who are fat and falling in love. Creator Mark Roberts said in 2010 about month's after the show's debut: "(W)e're just trying to put on a fun show about two people falling in love..." (Porter). *Mike & Molly* may seem like it is about two people who are falling in love and happen to be overweight, but what it actually is about is encouraging all of us to fit into a body norm. *Mike & Molly* perpetuates the social construction that fat is undesirable, that it is unacceptable. The construction of fat in *Mike & Molly* comes from the main characters of the show and how they are treated by the show's secondary characters (who are mostly thin). Both main characters are fat, and, as the series begins, they are in a place of struggle in their lives. They join Overeater's Anonymous, and that step toward thinness allows the characters to grow in a new way -- by finding each other and falling in love. The show makes multiple fat jokes, many of them at the expense of the characters Mike and Molly. The two characters are not only mocked by the thinner characters on the show, they themselves participate by mocking other overweight people as well as laughing at the jokes made at their own expense.

In the narrative of television, Mike and Molly are disabled characters. Disability scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder, in their article "Narrative Prosthesis," say that disability has a long history as a storytelling device in books: "The body's weighty materiality functions as a textual and cultural other -- an object with its own undisciplined language that exceeds the text's ability to control it" (Mitchell and Snyder 275). In *Mike & Molly*, the title characters represent a cultural other. They are the center of the show, but the narrative around two people who are fat

reinforces a cultural norm of thinness by the titular characters being a constant target for the fat jokes on the show. In fact, the pilot episode has more than 15 jokes mocking the weight of the Mike character, nearly 10 jokes aimed at the Molly character and at least five other jokes aimed at other characters deemed as “fat” on the show. That is more than 25 jokes at the expense of the overweight people on the 30-minute show. Not only are there multiple jokes at the expense of these characters but the characters themselves make many of those jokes or even laugh or expand on the jokes. Just like a book or other form of media, there are many layers to the construction of the characters of *Mike & Molly* and how they represent what is going on in the broader cultural spectrum.

The construction of fatness

Fat was once considered a desirable trait, but that changed in the 20th Century². Now fat is considered a negative trait and is stigmatized. Sociologist Gerhard Falk says fat stigma has roots in psychology, but that it is present in American culture: “American culture has made fat people either invisible or the object of ridicule. This ‘invisibility’ is mainly practiced by the media whose use of overweight actors or announcers is extremely limited” (Falk 86). The construction of fat in American society has been honed through the media, which helps define social norms, as well as through medical rhetoric about health³. In fact, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention says that in 2009-2010, 35.7 percent of Americans were considered obese (CDC). The addition of the rhetoric of medicine has enhanced the stigma

² Before the 1800s, “a beautiful woman had plump cheeks and arms, and she wore a corset and even a bustle to emphasize her full, substantial hips” (Fraser 11). Laura Fraser says that began to change between the 1880 and 1920, when the image of fat started to change and medical rhetoric started describing it as an unhealthy choice.

³ Michel Foucault suggests that the entire approach to modern medicine was created and Fraser says that the medical discussion that suggested fat was unhealthy likely began with hints that it is a health risk. Today, there is no shortage of medical reports that connect fat, specifically obesity, with a multitude of disorders such as diabetes.

surrounding fat. It is part of what makes fat jokes acceptable. As shown with other disenfranchised groups, tying the group to a negative medical condition (more specifically a disease) strengthens its stigma. So if fat is considered a negative attribute, what is the norm? For American women, that cultural norm seems to be a white, extremely thin, young woman. When you look at magazine covers, flip TV channels or go to the movies, you are more likely than not to see a woman who represents that norm. What is considered that norm is most certainly constructed by society according to disabilities studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson:

“Normal has inflected beautiful in modernity. What is imagined as excess body fat, the effects of aging, marks of ethnicity such as ‘Jewish’ noses, bodily particularities thought of as blemishes or deformities, and marks of history such as scarring and impairments are now expected to be surgically erased to produce an unmarked body. This visually unobtrusive body may then pass unnoticed within the milieu of anonymity that is the hallmark of social relations beyond the personal in modernity” (Garland-Thomson “Integrating” 360).

In other words, our normal state is expected to represent the beautiful, which is constructed in culture as thin. In a world where some quick work on a computer can change someone’s appearance almost completely, achieving the beauty of the norm is nearly impossible. Despite the fact that the majority of people cannot be considered beautiful by this constructed form of normal, that remains the expectation.

The construction of fatness also comes from the medical community. The current “obesity epidemic” is heightened by the medical community’s rhetoric. In simplest terms, medical officials say that Americans as a whole are getting fatter and that children are seriously plagued by obesity. The cause of this “epidemic” is as diverse as the person who shares the

statistics; but ultimately more people are considered obese and that in turn leads to a rise in obesity-related diseases like diabetes and heart disease, the rhetoric tells us. This rhetoric also has been heightened by the growth of the diet industry over the 20th Century. In 2010, the efforts to sell weight loss was a \$59.7 billion industry (Rao). That industry is helped by a rhetoric in the medical community that describes fatness as unhealthy and unwanted:

“Together, the gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class and ability systems exert tremendous social pressures to shape, regulate, and normalize subjugated bodies. Such disciplining is enacted primarily through the two interrelated cultural discourses of medicine and appearance” (Garland-Thomson “Integrating” 359).

The weight of this attention placed on fat in culture makes those who fit the category of fat seem as they are not part of culture, that they are the other to the world that endorses thin.

This form of rhetoric is constructed just as the criteria for what is the norm are constructed. Philosopher Michel Foucault notes that science and medicine have been constructed slowly over the course of humanity:

It is useless, then, to say that the ‘human sciences’ are false sciences; they are not sciences at all; the configuration that defines their positivity and gives them their roots in the modern *episteme* at the same time makes it impossible for them to be sciences; and if it is then asked why they assumed that title, it is sufficient to recall that it pertains to the archaeological definition of their roots that they summon and receive the transference of models borrowed from the sciences.

(Foucault *Order* 366)

Foucault suggests that science and medicine, which are considered facts in our society, are really just as fallible as the humanities. Science has been created in the same way that language

was created. They are both developed through societal structures and therefore each are constructed through societal expectations.

The rhetoric of fat in the modern episteme, which is constructed through social and medical means, is that fat is a negative, that it is a social problem. Social problems are cultural according to disability scholar Harlan Lane: “(S)ocial problems are constructed in particular cultures, at particular times, in response to efforts of interested parties” (Lane 77). Because fat has been elevated to the level of social problem, it has become a focus in pop culture. Not only do diet commercials litter multiple television programs, but television shows and movies as well as the news media all offer varying views of the “social problem” of fat. In *Mike & Molly*, the characters themselves are the cultural construction of fat. Obviously, they are created by writers, but the behavior and dialogue of those characters help construct the social problem.

Both Mike and Molly attempt to lose weight from the very first episode of the show. They attend Overeaters Anonymous meetings where each shares their experiences as people who are fat. In the pilot, Mike shares his fears that, if he continues to overeat, he will never find love. Not only does he share his feelings, but he does so in a self-deprecating way, making fun of himself as he struggles to fit into the cultural norm. He recognizes that, in order to meet societal expectations, including marriage and traditional family models, he must lose weight. He buys into the social construction that says fat is bad, that fat makes you an outcast. Molly also attends these meetings and she begins to talk with Mike after he shares with his fellow Overeaters Anonymous members. His candid admission about whether he can find love as a fat man is what draws Molly in. She is attracted to him because he acknowledges that he is required to fit into this cultural norm.

Disability scholar Lennard J. Davis says cultural norms are an expectation that diminishes those who don't fit into those norms:

We live in a world of norms. Each of us endeavors to be normal or else deliberately tries to avoid that state. We consider what the average person does, thinks, earns, or consumes. We rank our intelligence, our cholesterol level, our weight, height, sex drive, bodily dimensions along some conceptual line from subnormal to above-average. (Davis 3)

Both in world of *Mike & Molly* and in the world of their audience, the default for normal is thin. The main characters strive to fit into that world of norms, but those constructed as fat can't meet that norm. Normality is even more important for the stigmatized, according to disabilities scholar Lerita M. Coleman Brown: "For stigmatized people, the ideal of normality takes on an exaggerated importance. Normality becomes the supreme goal for many stigmatized individuals until they realize that there is no precise definition of normality except what they would be without their stigma" (Brown 187). Because a world without stigma eludes the characters, normality -- in their case losing weight -- becomes even more important. They can be accepted into a full life, including marriage and kids, only if they fit a norm. Because the characters buy into this notion, they continue to be disenfranchised.

Fatness and identity

The characters of Mike and Molly are not only constructed as fat, it is their main identifying feature. The identity construction of a character is similar, yet different, from that of actual human beings. Television characters often have a key identifying factor that develops with that character over the months or years that a show remains on the air. For example, Archie Bunker of *All in the Family* remains fully entrenched as a racist curmudgeon who was taught

lessons in tolerance. Monica Gellar from *Friends* remains a former fat person with insecurities and obsessive compulsive tendencies that come from that position as a former fat person.

Sheldon Cooper from *The Big Bang Theory* remains a brilliant person with social foibles that cannot be thwarted by his friends. Unlike movies, which construct characters with a two or three hour window, television has the opportunity to develop characters (and therefore character identities) over weeks, months and even years. Because of this ongoing method of playing on a characteristic, television provides a good tool for rhetorical analysis of identity.

Foucault says that, in the development of science, identities became attached to science classification systems. By categorizing animals according similarities, differences are in turn stigmatized:

Identity and what marks it are defined by the differences that remain. An animal or plant is not what is indicated -- or betrayed -- by the stigma that is to be found imprinted upon it; it is what the others are not; it exists in itself only in so far as it is bounded by what is distinguishable from it. Method and system are simply two ways of defining identities by means of a general grid of difference. (Foucault *Order* 144-45)

Medical rhetoric about fat provides a scientific mode of difference that makes those who identify as fat feel stigmatized. If fat is someone's main identifying characteristic, then that shortchanges all of the other aspects of identity in that person. On *Mike & Molly*, the main characters do have other characteristics -- such as Mike being a kind person and Molly a literate and well-traveled person -- but those characteristics are always overshadowed by their weight. The constant barrage of jokes about weight diminishes other aspects of their personality. It perpetuates an idea that fat can be the only identity for those characters and for other people who are fat.

Mike and Molly also have strong connections to older generations. Mike has an overbearing mother who is constantly trying to end his relationship with Molly. Molly lives with her mother and sister despite being a fully grown adult with a good job. The older generations' continuous influence on the lives of the younger generation supports what disability studies scholar Brown theorizes about the treatment of those with disabilities: "Some stigmatized people become dependent, passive, helpless, and childlike because that is what is expected of them" (Brown 186). Mike and Molly both have a childlike aspect to their personalities that is only increased by their constant interactions and control from the older generation. In fact, in the first episode, Molly is introduced exercising on a machine as her mother walks in the room eating a large piece of chocolate cake. Her mother, who is very thin, talks about how delicious the cake as she calls Molly "big boned" ("Pilot" *Mike & Molly*). This scene shows that her mother wants to keep Molly fat, which in the context of this show, means that she remains in a child-like state. Her "disability" of fat is perpetuated by her mother, and Molly feels the need to resist that treatment by her mother and attempt to fit into a cultural norm.

Reverting to a child-like state isn't the only issue, however, as Molly's resistance to fat shows that she is resistant to that identity. Accepting the social constructs of fat, as noted before, means acceptance as one who deviates from the norm. Molly's character aspires to that norm, yet disability studies scholars endorse a society that embraces difference rather than aspires to expectations of normality. Disability studies scholar Simi Linton argues for the disabled to accept their identity as a means of change: "The degree and significance of an individual's impairment is often less of an issue than the degree to which someone identifies as disabled" (Linton 12). By rejecting a portion of her identity, Molly enhances the negativity surrounding fat rather than resists it. Linton argues for a large-scale acceptance of disability but acknowledges

that many factors lead both the disabled and the non-disabled to resist that acceptance. For those who are disabled, as well as those who are fat, identity can be tied closely to the body, according to Davis:

Thus the body has an identity that coincides with its essence and cannot be altered by moral, artistic, or human will. This indelibility of corporeal identity only furthers the mark placed on the body by other physical qualities -- intelligence, height, reaction time. By this logic, the person enters into an identical relationship with the body, the body forms the identity, and the identity is unchangeable and indelible as one's place on the normal curve. (Davis 8)

Whereas body changes may not be possible for many people with disabilities, fat is a factor that can be changed. Changing fat may not be as simple as many might suggest, it is something that can almost always be reversed.

The changing nature of fat makes it a different identifying characteristic than other body stigmas. Whereas someone who is blind or deaf might be encouraged to get a procedure to mitigate those disabilities, those who are fat are expected to change their disability. The rhetoric for removing fat as one's identity is pervasive. Commercials for weight loss are shown on every channel; the unhealthiness surrounding fat is the focus of multiple news reports; and those who are not fat are featured television screens, movies, magazines and newspapers. Fat is considered an unacceptable body type and the message is clear throughout society. *Mike & Molly* might seem to be accepting of this identity on the surface, but the characters' constant struggle with weight shows that they are characters who don't find that identity acceptable. According to Davis:

The identity of people becomes defined by the irrepressible identificatory physical qualities that can be identified and indeed criminalized, particularly in the sense that fingerprints came to be associated with identifying deviants who wished to hide their identities. (Davis 8)

The characters of Mike and Molly, much like many fat people in society, feel their identity as a fat person is stigmatized to the point that it can feel almost criminal. To be a fat person in a world of multiple diet options (but also in a world of more and more food options) is considered a poor characteristic for one's identity.

Fatness and hegemony

The representation of fat as a deviation from the normal makes those who are fat an Other. The work of Foucault and Linton show that fat people are transformed into an Other in the same way that those who are homosexual or disabled: "Disability studies, in contrast, focuses on the external variables: the social, political, and intellectual contingencies that shape meaning and behavior" (Linton 6). External factors also shape attitudes toward fatness and representations in culture are some of those factors. Culture can perpetuate the other in fatness by continuing to make it an unwanted trait. By categorizing sameness (in this case thinness), Foucault says that difference is highlighted. Thus, fat becomes the other to thin. Therefore those who are identified as fat are automatically an Other.

An Other in this situation is dominated by the Same. The Other is directed by the cultural expectations of Sameness to fit into a norm. The creation of an Other that is dominated by what is considered a Same fits into a feminist theory, according to feminism scholar Sonia Foss: "Feminist criticism has emerged as one method by which scholars engage in research designed to intervene in the ideology of domination" (Foss 157). In a world where fat is lambasted regularly,

there is clearly a sense of domination from a culture that supports thin, according Davis: “The implications of the hegemony of normalcy are profound and extend into the very heart of cultural production” (Davis 17). The hegemony of normal, in this case thin, is supported by cultural representations like *Mike & Molly*. All of the characters of the show fit into a disenfranchised group. None of the characters fit what is considered a norm, and those characters are also supporting a hegemony that doesn’t endorse their difference from the norm. Many episodes feature Mike and Molly each with his or her respective groups and how those characters then interact with a Mike and Molly as a couple. Mike’s best friend and police partner is a black man. The two of them regularly go to a coffee shop and interact with a waiter who is black and African. Mike’s mother is a cook at Molly’s school and is older and divorced. Mike’s friend Carl lives with his grandmother, who is also old and regularly serves as a source of advice for both Mike and Carl (continuing the infantilization of both of them). Molly lives with her mother and sister, who are both thin. Her mother eventually starts dating a fat man as the show goes on. All of these characters don’t fit the societal norm of white, heterosexual male.

On the surface, a show that features no regular characters that fit a cultural norm may seem like a good idea, the show’s attempt to make those people fit into the cultural norm just perpetuates hegemony. Disability scholar James Charlton says that hegemony is often not maintained through forced means but, rather, through societal methods: “The primary method through which power relations are reproduced is not physical -- military force and state coercion -- but metaphysical -- people’s consent to the existing power structure” (Charlton 153). By trying to fit into a cultural norm, the show’s main characters are perpetuating hegemony. The show’s coercion comes in the multitude of jokes at the expense of the characters of the show. Because the show opens with a fat jokes, viewers are conditioned from the first scene of the show to

laugh at those who are fat. In addition to the fat jokes, Carl is often the butt of Mike's jokes about him living with his mother. The waiter regularly makes jokes about Mike's weight and there is no shortage of old men jokes related to Molly's mother's boyfriend. Jokes are a subtle form of coercion because they point out the differences in people and make fun of them. Thus, they reject difference and endorse sameness.

Stigmas and a desire for normalcy are often related to hegemony, according to disability scholar Susan Wendell: "Idealizing the body and wanting to control it go hand-in-hand; it is impossible to say whether one causes the other" (Wendell 343). This control of the body seems to carry more significance for women. Fat women are stigmatized more than men and the basic premise of *Mike & Molly* plays into that. Though the title of the show contains a male and female name, the story is told primarily through Mike's point of view. The majority of the show is about Mike and how he interacts with Molly and her family. Molly is in a diminished role, despite being one of the titular characters on the show. The character of Molly is not made fun of as often as Mike. In the pilot episode only about eight of the show's 27 fat jokes are focused on her and those all come from her or a member of her family (who are other women).

Also, Molly has little identity outside the character of Mike and therefore, she remains in a more diminished role, which also supports a hegemony of men are dominant, according to Wendell: "In addition, disabled women suffer more than disabled men from the demand that people have 'ideal' bodies, because in patriarchal culture people judge women more by their bodies than they do men" (Wendell 343). Because Molly is being judged both for being fat and for being a woman, she suffers a higher level of stigma than other characters on the show. She cannot even be the source of humor as her difference is something that must change. In other words, her being fat isn't funny, it is just wrong.

Conclusion

It is clear that in our society, fat means difference, a difference that can be subject to humor at the expense of those who experience that difference. Those who identify as fat are stigmatized not only for their bodily state but also because it is a state that can be considered easy to change, according to Brown: “At some level, therefore, most people are concerned with stigma because they are fearful of its unpredictable and uncontrollable nature. Stigmatization appears uncontrollable because human differences serve as the basis for stigmas. Therefore any attribute can become a stigma” (Brown 188). There is societal pressure to change for any disenfranchised group, but, for fat people, it is something considered attainable. Cultural influences, such as the show *Mike & Molly*, perpetuate this notion not only mocking those who are fat, but also having fat characters strive for thinness. By striving for normalcy, the characters support a hegemonic society in which thin is the only acceptable body type.

Chapter 2: An Angry, Fat Woman

Melissa McCarthy isn't the traditional Hollywood bombshell. She is a beautiful woman who is also fat. She has been working as an actress for years, but it wasn't until her role in *Bridesmaids* that she became famous. In *Bridesmaids*, McCarthy plays Megan, one of the bridesmaids who is fat and unapologetic about her size. She blurs gender roles by being sexually aggressive and not dressing in a traditionally feminine manner. She is unkempt and unashamed to go after what she wants. In refuting the expectations of femininity in *Bridesmaids*, Megan is the character who garners the most laughs in the film. Her nonconformity makes it OK to laugh, but the character's resistance to societal norms makes her seemingly resistant to that negativity as well. The audience is laughing at her expense because of her resistance to traditional gender roles, but that resistance is also what makes her memorable. The character of Megan doesn't construct her identity through cultural norms. Instead, she resists those cultural norms by defying expectations of femininity and the shame expected from those who are fat.

McCarthy's breakout in *Bridesmaids* came a year after the debut of her successful sitcom *Mike & Molly*. McCarthy's Molly character couldn't be more different from Megan. Molly dresses in a traditionally feminine way. Molly is assertive but often weakened by the negative criticism of her weight that comes from her family as well as the societal pressures that diminish the overweight. Megan refuses to be defined by her weight, whereas Molly is completely defined by her weight. The Molly character has an identity that is formed by societal expectations. Throughout the series' first two seasons, she is focused on losing weight to fit into a societal expectation of femininity.

Both of these characters scrutinize ways in which the weight of female characters are explored in culture. In movies and television, fat women are often relegated to funny sidekick or

angry fat person. Because of their weight, they don't conform to cultural norms and that resistance to conformity forces them to be ridiculed or to ridicule others. Fat characters aren't allowed to be a traditional lead in a movie or television. Being fat people, they must be punished in one form or another. They are always the Other even when they are seemingly confident characters such as Megan or a titular character like Molly. Megan is a sidekick, the funny friend who gets the laughs. Molly is the lead character, but she is driven to become a thinner woman, one who is a more traditional lead character. Megan, as the butt of the jokes, fulfills the need for society to laugh at the overweight. Molly is there to remind women that being overweight isn't acceptable.

Both Megan and the character of Molly would be what feminist scholar Cheri Kramarae would describe as a muted group. As women and as fat women, they are not part of society's dominant rhetoric of the body, which idealizes thin as a norm. Megan resists that dominant rhetoric. Molly aspires to be a part of that rhetoric, but her diminished societal role makes that a virtual impossibility:

The language of a particular culture does not serve all its speakers equally, for not all speakers contribute in an equal fashion to its formulation. Women (and members of other subordinate groups) are not as free or as able as men to say what they wish, when and where they wish, because the words and norms for their use have been formulated by the dominant group, men. (Kramarae "Muted" 19)

As women, Megan and Molly automatically fit into Kramarae's muted group category. From birth, they are born into the disenfranchised role of woman. They are encouraged to achieve a ideal, norms which disability studies scholar Lennard J. Davis says that all people aspire to:

We live in a world of norms. Each of us endeavors to be normal or else deliberately tries to avoid that state. We consider what the average person does, thinks, earns, or consumes. We rank our intelligence, our cholesterol level, our weight, height, sex drive, bodily dimensions along some conceptual line from subnormal to above-average. (Davis 3)

By being fat and women, Megan and Molly's diminished role is increased exponentially. Both aren't allowed to fully engage in society because of their roles as women as well as being fat. Megan sheds femininity, whereas Molly strives to become the societal ideal. In both modes, they are excluded from the cultural norm.

The character of Megan is resistant to the cultural norm, but her role as a sidekick who is there to generate laughs makes what seems like a positive role actually a negative one. Much of the humor surrounding Megan comes because she resists traditional modes of femininity. She has a deep voice, she resists cultural norms of hair, makeup and clothing. Her mode of dress is more typically male. She is also an aggressive character, a trait not normally associated with femininity in movies. When the bridesmaids are discussing what the bridal shower should be, Megan's suggestion is a fight club where they beat up the bride. When the bridesmaids and the bride go on a plane to head to a bachelorette party, Megan makes aggressive sexual advances toward the plane's air marshal. She places her leg up in front of him and when he moves it, she tells him "somebody found a souvenir" (*Bridesmaids*). That phrase alone shows that she doesn't view herself as a person, but, rather as, object. She recognizes that she is not going to be the subject of the traditional male gaze in the way her more feminine and thin counterparts are, and, therefore she pushes herself into the male gaze. Her aggressive advances toward a man both resist a female stereotype but also enforce it. Because of her attempt to become to object of

sexual desire, she becomes the source of humor in the movie. Because fat people are desexualized, her wanting to have sex with a man is funny. Megan also serves a character who drives the main character into reconciliation with her best friend as well as a romantic relationship. Megan is a character of contradictions. Although she is a supporting character who performs as one who is confident in who she is, her role in the movie is to be the source of humor. Her resistance to cultural norms isn't progressive, it is funny. Although there is a notion of acceptance of nonconformity in the way Megan is unashamed of herself, the movie's desire to make her a joke diminishes that strength.

Whereas Megan is a contradiction in fat confidence, Molly is a character who serves as a constant reminder of the body rhetoric in our society. She is designed to remind people that being overweight isn't OK. Molly is driven by this need to be part of a dominant rhetoric that may not ever be a possibility for her to join. Because of this exclusion from society, Molly is motivated by her desire to lose weight and she is angry about it. She can be humorous and make jokes, but ultimately when it comes to her weight, Molly is angry about losing weight and the fact that she has to lose weight to fit an ideal. She is smart, well read and beautiful, but unfulfilled because of her weight. She falls in love with Mike but still considers that love conditional upon her fitting an ideal.

In the first episode of the series, Molly's first time on camera has her on an exercise machine singing "Brick House." In that scene alone, she is showing her desire to lose weight and fit into a sexual stereotype of a woman with a desirable (thin) body. Her mother comes into the room eating cake and the first glimpses of Molly's anger are shown. She lashes out at her mother about eating cake in front of her. The scene sets up the constant push and pull between Molly and her weight. Her thin mother can eat a large piece of chocolate cake sitting on the couch,

whereas Molly has to work out and watch what she eats to become thin, Molly is angry about that. After this incident, she goes to an Overeaters Anonymous meeting where she is touched by Mike's story about struggling with eating and strikes up a conversation with him. Molly is the aggressor in the relationship. The dieting Molly is very aggressive. She asserts herself in her flirtation with Mike. Two episodes that really showcase her aggression and anger are the season one episode "First Kiss" and the season two episode "The Dress." In both episodes, Molly displays aggressive and even angry behaviors, which force her into a role of penance with Mike because of that behavior. In "First Kiss," she isn't afraid to show her bowling prowess at first but then must cede to Mike. In "The Dress," she confronts a traditional female role -- the bride. In both the "First Kiss" episode and "The Bride" episode, Molly's aggression shows that she serves as a diminished role both because of her gender and because of her weight.

In "First Kiss," Mike decides to ask Molly out on a date to go bowling, an area where Mike excels. Once at the bowling alley, Mike tries to offer lessons in bowling to Molly in a somewhat condescending way (he presumes she doesn't know how to bowl). Once Molly starts to bowl, she hits two strikes in a row and Mike starts to feel insecure. Weight is at play throughout the scene. In the opening of the scene, Mike is negotiating with the waitress to bring him 12 French fries to meet his portion control diet. Molly says she tried that diet and "gained 14 pounds three freaking gummy bears at a time" (*Mike & Molly* "First Kiss"). There is an underlying sarcastic and angry tone to Molly's memory of her diet. After they discuss dieting, Molly hits two strikes, says, "boo-yah, that's what I'm talking about" (*Mike & Molly* "First Kiss"). Her tone is more aggressive and less feminine. Mike then yells at the waitress, "Where are my 12 French fries?" (*Mike & Molly* "First Kiss"). The reaction by Molly almost shows that

discussion of dieting puts Molly into her aggressive mode, a mode that emasculates Mike. The discussion of dieting makes her angry and separates her from her Mike.

In the next scene, Molly begins to show some penance by apologizing to Mike for taking his money. At the diner that Mike frequents, the waiter Samuel makes a joke about Mike's weight and suggests that Mike made up a girlfriend to fool his friends. Molly and Samuel, begin to have an intellectual conversation (leaving Mike out of the discussion) and eventually land on William Shakespeare, quoting *A Midsummer Night's Dream*: "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind,/And therefore is winged Cupid painted blind./Nor hath Love's mind of any judgement taste; /Wings and no eyes figure unheedy haste" (Shakespeare *Midsummer* 234-37). The fact that Molly and Samuel choose to quote these lines is significant. First, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is a play deeply delving into a fantasy world where people fall in love. In the television landscape filled with relationship comedies centered around thin people, *Mike and Molly* can appear as if it is a fantasy world where fat people can fall in love. A common joke about fat people being set up on dates is that they have good personalities or that they are smart. The first line that is quoted on the show is: "Love looks not with the eyes, but with the mind" reflects that sentiment. Mike and Molly cannot fall in love for their looks, as they are fat and therefore unattractive, suggesting that a blind Cupid could have very well put them together. The choice of Shakespeare's work suggests another layer of the disenfranchisement of the characters. Mike views himself as not only an overweight man but as someone who is not intelligent. Molly is intelligent but can't be beautiful. Molly recognizes that she is the subject of this blind Cupid and is therefore angry about it. Mike remains in the jolly fat guy role whereas Molly becomes the angry dieting woman who recognizes that she must change to remove the fat aspect that puts her in a diminished role.

By the end of the episode, Mike and Molly are bowling again, but this time Molly recognizes that showing off at bowling isn't considerate of Mike. She fully commits to her penance, and that is rewarded by Mike telling her that he appreciates that she is good at bowling and giving Molly their first kiss. Molly is allowed to excel at bowling once she receives permission from Mike. It is also OK because she has recognized her role as a woman and a fat person. She cannot be on equal footing with a fat man or a man because of her diminished role. Through an episode where Molly seems to be showing that she is a multi-faceted character, the subtext is that being multifaceted is not OK. She cannot be good at bowling or use her knowledge of Shakespeare unless she recognizes that she is inferior and those skills can only be used with the permission of the patriarchy. She cannot be complete and she cannot show her anger at her role as an Other without showing her remorse as well.

That anger followed by remorse is also at play in the second season episode called "The Dress," which features Molly furiously dieting to lose the last seven pounds she needs to fit into her wedding dress. The episode begins with an angry Molly deep into her wedding planning. She is at the bridal salon with her mother and sister and, early in the episode, Molly is angry and ready to challenge anyone who gets in the way of her goal. When the dress doesn't fit, Molly lashes out at her mother's lunch invitation: "I have six pounds to lose; am I in this by myself?" (*Mike & Molly* "The Dress"). The fact that Molly is lashing out at others is important, but who she is lashing out is more important. She challenges the store clerk, as well as her mother and sister, all of whom are thin and fit a more traditional standard of beauty. The opening scene of this episode sets up the extra pressure placed on Molly by her impending nuptials. There is a standard for beauty in our society, but there is a hyperstandard of beauty surrounding brides. The rhetoric of bridal beauty can be seen everywhere from bridal magazines, to wedding-themed

television shows like “Say Yes to the Dress” and movies that portray weddings as an ideal.

Brides in these forms of media tend to be thin, or if they are not thin, they are desperately trying to become so. A fat bride is not a societal ideal in any way and the character of Molly sees how she is resistant to the ideal. As a woman, Molly is already defined as an Other; the addition of her weight compounds that definition. To be an Other and be a bride would be a challenge, but to be an Other with additional modes of disenfranchisement attached makes her role as a bride even more challenging.

To cope with those societal pressures, Molly goes into an extreme dieting mode, which elevates the character’s anger. She starts forcing Mike to get up for runs in the morning and to eat beets, kale and carrot smoothies. She yells at her mother for putting two bananas in her dinner and spiking her glycemic index thus forcing her to retain weight. She runs into a fellow Overeaters Anonymous member at a spin class and that woman’s weight loss sends Molly over the edge. She leaves the class and considers eating a candy bar hidden in Mike’s car. She resists that urge but then gets into a confrontation with a woman who hits her car. The woman gives her five dollars and says, “You buy yourself a slice of pizza and we will call it even” (*Mike & Molly* “The Dress”). Molly hits the woman’s mirror, knocking it off, and says, “Now we’re even” (*Mike & Molly* “The Dress”). This confrontation, which is her most violent of the episode, comes after Molly withstands her temptation to eat. It is a Pyrrhic victory, however, because she is angrier after resisting a candy bar and that resistance fuels her anger. Her obsession with her weight and her weight as a bride comes to a head. The entire episode has been leading up to this point where her anger at dieting has taken over her life. Mike sums up her actions when he says: “I don’t know who that woman is ... I thought I was marrying a sweet little schoolteacher, not some car kicking lunatic” (*Mike & Molly* “The Dress”). A dieting Molly is an angry Molly, one

who is motivated by ascribing to a societal standard of beauty that she doesn't meet. As with the "First Kiss" episode, Molly is again forced into a role of apology and a form of condescension from Mike, who says: "Listen, you don't have to squeeze into some wedding dress to look perfect to me, you are already the most beautiful woman in the world" (*Mike & Molly* "The Dress"). In this form of penance, Molly seems to be sated by an endorsement of beauty from a male member, or dominant member, of society. The worth of her body is seemingly judged through the eyes of a member of the patriarchy. Despite this, Molly turns right back to her mode of dieting and desire to fit into the dress. Whereas Mike is part of the patriarchy, he is also a member of a diminished group as an overweight man. He cannot provide help with Molly's identity construction, which is formed through societal expectations, because of his diminished role.

Whereas the *Bridesmaids* character Megan resists cultural norms which places her more firmly in a muted group, Molly's desire to participate in cultural norms just pushes her further into that muted group. This aspect is on display not only in her anger while dieting, but also in the overall tone of the show. Whereas *Mike & Molly* is purported to be about two characters, the show's title is misleading. Whereas other popular sitcoms such as *Will & Grace* balance the storyline between the eponymous roles, in *Mike & Molly*, Mike dominates the show. In each episode, the viewer gets a deeper look at Mike's life from the multiple scenes when he is at work talking with his police partner Carl to the few scenes featuring Molly. The show is told primarily through Mike's perspective. His reflections on their relationship are discussed at length while Molly is relegated to a few scenes with her family where she says that she likes Mike or realizes that she loves Mike. Mike is a fully developed character who shares his insecurities and successes, whereas Molly is reduced to her frustrations with dieting and losing weight and shown

only in context of her co-dependent family who contribute to her fatness as well as to the mother's alcohol abuse and sister's pot smoking. On the surface, the show seems as if it is about two people falling in love, but it is really about Mike falling in love with Molly. Even as a lead character, Molly is diminished.

The representations of fat in both *Bridesmaids* and *Mike & Molly* reflect our societal expectations about and for fat people. Fat has become constructed in the 21st Century as a negative trait and forms of culture reflect that societal implication. The identity of fat people, specifically fat women, is formed every day by a society that reminds us that not only is fat ugly, but it is medically unsound. Michel Foucault in *The Birth of the Clinic* shows how medicine has been constructed in our society and how that construction has formed our views of health. Today's medical rhetoric shows us a world where fat people are a problem and our culture has embraced that medical rhetoric. In Megan and Molly, we see people who are resisting but also endorsing that dominant rhetoric. Megan resists it to become the source of humor; Molly desperately tries to conform to this ideal but struggles because this medical ideal is formed through something that may not be attainable by everyone. Both are endorsing a societal norm, which is also constructed through media and enhanced by the rhetoric of medicine.

Early in the series, the Molly character recognizes how the cultural norm of thinness and the medical rhetoric of health related to thinness have created an ideal she is expected to achieve. This ideal has stigmatized an overweight Molly and that stigma makes her angry. She knows that achieving what is perceived as normal will be a challenge and she expresses anger about it. A television show that embraces her anger at not fitting into a cultural norm just embraces the cultural norm all the more. Molly is angry about that but also embraces it. This treatment of fat as a problem plays into disability rhetoric, especially the rhetoric that focuses on stigma. Lerita

M. Brown says that fear is what give stigma its intensity (Brown 187). Molly is driven by the fear that her weight will keep her from living a life that would considered culturally normal.

Creating a character that is driven by this fear just reinforces concepts of stigmatization:

“Making stigmatized people feel responsible for their own stigma allows non-stigmatized people to relinquish the onus for creating or perpetuating the conditions that surround it” (Brown 189).

By perpetuating the stigma of fatness, Molly (and the show’s writers) are perpetuating our expectations of fatness -- that fatness is ugly, unhealthy and not normal.

“Normal” is a word that evades many fat people and the character of Molly represents that. She knows that she is not normal, but that doesn’t mean that she must change. Our desire for Sameness isn’t necessarily the best societal option, according to disabilities scholar James C. Wilson: “We need to remember that genetics is variation, and that variation is not only healthy but essential for the survival of a species” (Wilson 59). Wilson’s concern is that genetic studies will eliminate certain disabilities, but eliminating fat is just as problematic. Variation of size should be just as important as variation of skin color and disabilities. A world where women feel pressured to conform to a certain body type enhances disenfranchisement and enhances a consumer industry that preys on women. The dieting character of Molly reinforces expectations that women need to conform to thinness.

Because dieting is an experience that is shared by most women, it also creates Molly as a sympathetic character for women. Women are supposed to relate with her struggles to feel good about her body and find a person who will love her. Molly is supposed to be an everywoman. Women are supposed to feel connected with her struggles because the rhetoric of dieting and perfect body types are so pervasive in culture. Foucault argues that sympathy can actually reinforce what was created by a dominant culture:

Sympathy is an instance of the *Same* so strong and so insistent that it will not rest content to be merely one of the forms of likeness; it has the dangerous power of *assimilating*, of rendering things identical to one another, of mingling them, of causing their individuality to disappear -- and thus of rendering them foreign to what they were before. (Foucault *Order* 23-24)

Society's body norms, specifically for women, are designed to make all women fit into one type. That rhetoric is assimilated time and again through images of thinness as well as through commercials for dieting that target fat women. Our culture tells women that no one can be happy unless they achieve that ideal of thinness. The character of Molly is angry about that but perpetuates it nevertheless with her desire to be the Same. Molly refuses to accept her role as an Other, which just reinforces her role as an Other.

The rhetoric that promotes healthy bodies as thin bodies just adds to the disenfranchisement and identity construction of fat women. As noted before, being a woman already means that you are an Other. Being fat also means you are an Other. Fat women face a hegemonic world that is similar to the disenfranchisement of women of color. As women, they are part of one disenfranchised group but the fat adds even more to that disenfranchisement. It is not as simple as being disenfranchised times two, being fully part of two disenfranchised groups limits fat women even more. Part of the reason for this diminished role is that fat women will face reinforcement of that disenfranchisement from men and women from varied cultural backgrounds. This disenfranchisement isn't helped by rhetoric that disguises itself as empowering to women, but is really oppressive, such as diet ads that imply women are in charge of their own bodies. They create an ideal body that drives women into thinking that they are

setting goals and achieving them rather just conforming to a body ideal. Susan Wendell in discussing disabilities stresses that we are inundated with these images:

Our physical ideals change from time to time, but we always have ideals. These ideals are not just about appearance; they are also ideals of strength and energy and proper control of the body. We are perpetually bombarded with images of these ideals, demands for them, and offers of consumer products and services to help us achieve them (Wendell 342).

Consumer products drive a desire for an ideal body, but culture subsumes this ideal body concept. The ideal body is an undercurrent in television, movies and other cultural phenomena. Molly as an everywoman feeds into this ideal body culture.

The concept that fat women face a higher level of disenfranchisement can be enforced by the feminist theories of scholars of color. Women of color faces an exponential disenfranchisement as well. bell hooks argues for a resistance to dominance that doesn't separate women of color from the discussion.

While they are aware that sexism enables men in their respective groups to have privileges denied them, they are more likely to see exaggerated expressions of male chauvinism among their peers as stemming from the male's sense of himself as powerless and ineffectual in relation to ruling male groups, rather than an expression of an overall privileged social status (hooks 48).

hooks' theory of approaching feminism as a resistance to dominance can also be used to discuss the challenges of fat women in society.

hooks recognizes that dominance is what creates oppression and that dominance is not always limited to one race. Dominance is perpetuated through men and women of all races.

Women in lower class and poor groups, particularly those who are non-white, would not have defined women's liberation as women gaining social equality with men since they are continually reminded in their everyday lives that all women do not share a common social status. Concurrently, they know that many males in their social groups are exploited and oppressed (hooks 48).

Fat women are also kept in a different social class. There is a reason that Molly is a schoolteacher and not a wealthy woman. Being a teacher at a public elementary school perpetuates her everywoman status, one that creates that sympathy but also reinforces the class structure where we place fat women.

Sojourner Truth spoke in 1851 about the separate treatment received by women of color in her speech "Ain't I a Woman." Responding to criticism from a man that women are weaker and need help, Truth says: "Nobody ever helps me into carriages, or over mud-puddles, or gives me any best place! And ain't I a woman?" (Truth 410). This "Ain't I a Woman" speech seems relevant to "The Dress" episode of *Mike & Molly*. Molly throughout the episode feels as if she is unable to fit into this expectation of womanhood. She cannot be the traditional bride; she cannot even fit into her wedding dress. Truth was speaking of a set of standards that apply to women vs. a set of standards that apply to women of color. In modern society, a set of standards apply to women vs. fat women, who aren't expected to be brides. They are expected to be jolly companions or to be struggling to fit into societal standards. They can't be a leading lady, and have to be disenfranchised from that role, even on their own wedding day.

The disenfranchised don't get to see themselves represented in culture often. The representations that are part of movies and television often continue to support the hegemony, the understanding that we must all conform to a norm or a Same. Representations of people who

are different, or Other, are often relegated to minor characters, characters who try to represent more than one cultural Other to help culture seem as if it is being diverse. Add a fat, African-American friend and a show seems to have represented the diversity of the world, but it really has just supported that disenfranchisement even more. *Mike & Molly* is more culturally dangerous than a show that just adds a minority character to fulfill an illusion of supporting difference in culture. Because of our society's obsession with weight, creating an entire television show around characters, particularly a female character, who are fat can have a lasting impact on our societal expectations. By making the characters on that show, particularly the female lead, solely focused on fitting into a cultural norm, it only reinforces that cultural norm. Reinforcing that norm eliminates true diversity in our television landscape, which in turn that feed into a societal standard, or hegemony, that is resistant to diversity.

Stigmas of weight place a burden on the disenfranchised group of fat people. Shows that perpetuate those stigmas seem on the surface to be resistant to those stigmas, but are even more damaging than having no representation of people of diverse backgrounds. The character of Molly seems to be an everywoman who struggles with her weight, but her one dimensional focus on weight just showcases how important weight is to success in our society. Her character never feels complete as a fat woman, which is the expectation that women of weight are supposed to take from this show. Whatever its intentions might be, *Mike & Molly* tells fat women that difference is not OK and Sameness must be achieved. As Foucault noted, removing difference making all of us identical. By discouraging the resistance to fat women, we are also resisting difference. We are encouraging a world of Sameness in which women are all of the same size and potentially look the same.

Chapter 3: Mike Feels Like a Woman

Seeing a fat leading man on a television sitcom is nothing new. The sitcom landscape has long featured heavier men and the skinny women who love them. Some recent examples include *Still Standing*, starring the fat Mark Addy and skinny Jami Gertz, *According to Jim*, starring Jim Belushi and a Courtney Thorne Smith, and *The King of Queens*, starring Kevin James and Leah Remini. One major difference between *Mike & Molly* and other sitcoms featuring fat men and that Mike loves a fat woman. These fat male characters are often the target for fat jokes in the sitcom world, but the way that Billy Gardell portrays Mike, he is just happy to be in on the joke. Mike is many ways is the opposite of the character of Molly in the show. Mike takes on the jolly fat guy role and Molly bears the angry fat woman role. Mike does this by being the center of most of the jokes about weight on the show, which are designed to emasculate him and force him into the role of an Other. By marginalizing Mike, *Mike & Molly* reinforces that notion that fat goes against the societal expectations of weight. It further entrenches fat people into a disenfranchised group.

The title might suggest that *Mike & Molly* is a show centered around two people, but the show is really about Mike and his quest for love with Molly. The show is told through Mike's perspective with a few scenes in each episode focused on Molly alone. Mike's role as the central figure of the show is important. It shows that further marginalization of the Molly character, which feeds into her angry stereotype, but it also means the constant barrage of fat jokes aimed at Mike carry more significance. Every character on the show at one point or another, acknowledges Mike's weight and more often than not, that acknowledgement is through a joke at Mike's expense. The character also passively accepts these jokes by laughing along with his friends and family and rarely defending himself against the barrage of jokes about his weight.

This passive acceptance of humor, some of which comes across as mean spirited, shows Mike in a diminished role. Mike is accepting a form of punishment, a punishment he feels he deserves because of his weight. Mike's acceptance of the jokes at his expense, show a lack of self confidence, which aligns him with rhetoric of disability, according to disability rhetoric scholar Tom Shakespeare: "Lack of self-esteem and self-confidence is a major obstacle to disabled people participating in society" (Tom Shakespeare 269). Shakespeare is arguing for a social model of disability, one that is inclusive of those with disabilities. The rhetoric of *Mike & Molly*, which regularly diminishes the character of Mike in relation to his weight, reinforces Shakespeare's argument, which supports inclusion which Shakespeare argues that society (as well as *Mike & Molly*) oftentimes rejects. This rejection of inclusion is shown in the character of Mike, who is socially repressed not only as a character on the show, but the viewers who find the constant barrage of jokes at his expense amusing. Because Mike is fat, jokes are his punishment and that punishment is deserved because he is fat.

The entire series begins with a joke at Mike's expense. In the opening scene of the show's "Pilot," Mike orders a single hot dog without toppings, the diner waiter Samuel, an immigrant from Africa, mocks his attempt at weight loss by saying, "May I suggest you come to my country where everyone is fashionably thin due to lack of food" ("Pilot" *Mike & Molly*). This opening scene sets up a theme that will be used throughout the show, Mike attempts to lose weight and his weight is continually mocked by the people in his life. In addition to placing Mike in a diminished role because of his weight, the show also regularly emasculates Mike. Despite being a white male, a traditional member of the patriarchy, Mike's weight removes him from that patriarchy. Mike cannot serve as a role model of normalcy. Because Mike passively accepts this, he is consenting to that role as an Other. His consent removes him from that patriarchy.

Disability rhetoric scholar James Charlton shows that complicity to a regime, further entrenches that regime: “All regimes, regardless of political, philosophy, have ruled through a combination of forces coercion, legitimation and consent” (Charlton 153). Charlton argues that hegemony functions not solely through oppression, but through the oppressed accepting and endorsing that oppression. Mike endorses his oppression through his acceptance of the jokes at his expense.

Mike is further entrenched into this disenfranchised group by the relationship between his mother Peggy and his best friend and police partner Carl. Both Peggy and Carl serve to emasculate Mike in different ways, but they both use a passive-aggressive form of manipulation. Mike’s relationship with his mother is co-dependent, with his mother manipulating Mike to serve her own purposes as well as feeding him more food than necessary to keep him fat. Mike’s mom Peggy is using Mike as a replacement for her ex-husband. Peggy keeps Mike in a passive position, which Mike feels he deserves to be because he is fat. Carl and Mike have a relationship that is more similar to two female friends rather than as traditional male friendships. Carl and Mike tell each other how much they love one another and aren’t afraid of hugging. They have a supportive relationship, but Carl still is the main source of fat jokes aimed at Mike. Mike’s relationships with Peggy and Carl are on full display in two season one episodes, “Mike’s Not Ready” and “Mike’s Apartment.” These episodes offer insight into how Peggy and Carl emasculate and diminish Mike as well as Mike’s general acceptance of that diminished role.

“Mike’s Not Ready” shows Mike’s insecurity about his weight. The episode opens with Mike making fun of himself, and diminishing his own job as a police officer, or an authority figure, as he returns from a date with Molly. Molly praises him for getting fellow movie goers to be quiet by flashing his badge, but Mike jokes, “It wasn’t even my badge, it was a York Peppermint Patty” (“Mike’s Not Ready” Mike & Molly). Even when receiving praise for using

his authority as a police officer, Mike diminishes himself. Mike is diminishing himself to avoid a traditionally feminine attitude toward the body -- he doesn't want Molly to see him naked. Mike is ashamed of his body, much in the same way that women are taught to be ashamed of bodies that do not fit a social norm. This shame is heightened by his weight, but Mike is also emasculated throughout the series. This equates weight to a form of disability, which Susan Wendell relates to feminism: "(D)isabled women suffer more than disabled men from the demand that people have 'ideal' bodies, because in patriarchal culture people judge women more by their bodies than they do men" (Wendell 343). Traditionally men aren't judged as harshly for their bodies, but *Mike & Molly* works toward changing that notion. Having two main characters who are overweight and trying to lose weight, puts both of those characters into a mode where they are trying to meet a societal norm. Mike is subjected to the body ideals just as much as the women that Wendell is discussing. Mike's jokes about his own weight highlight his acceptance of his emasculation. Mike has placed himself into a feminine role where he is constantly mocked for his weight. In society's traditional relationship roles, Mike would be the woman.

This episode reinforces that notion that Mike is trying to fit an ideal by his constant resistance to admitting to his own shame about his body. In most episodes, Mike readily accepts his friends' joking about his weight, in "Mike's Not Ready," he reacts angrily to these jokes, but then comes to accept his diminished role. In a scene in the diner (where most of the jokes at Mike's expense occur), Mike loses his police hat, and Carl tells him he should get a strap. That leads to an angry response from Mike: "Sure, why don't I just get a propeller on top and go full Tweedledum" ("Mike's Not Ready" *Mike & Molly*). Mike equates his lost hat and Carl's criticism to being infantilized. Whereas Mike accepts his emasculation, being treated like a child is something that he rejects angrily. Mike recognizes that he is being diminished and doesn't just

laugh it off as usual. Despite Mike's anger, in the next scene between Carl and Mike, Mike is wearing the strap on his hat which Carl suggested. Whereas Mike doesn't like being treated like a child, he eventually accepts that as well. Once Mike has fallen into the role that Carl has created for him, Mike confesses that he didn't try to have sex with Molly and Carl recognizes immediately that Mike is insecure about his physique. When Carl suggests this, it just makes Mike even more angry. It isn't until later in the episode when Mike and Carl are intoxicated and planning on going to a strip club that Mike admits his insecurity about being naked. Mike makes his confession as he and Carl decide to do a traditional male sexual activity -- going to a strip club. After this confession, the Mike and Carl hug, and end up at Molly's house. Mike confesses his insecurity to her and she invites him inside. The episode ends with Mike and Molly in bed, choosing not to have sex, and Carl and Samuel sleeping on the floor of the room. Because Carl and Samuel are in the room with them, it shows there is no chance of sex, or nudity, for Mike and Molly. The friends who mock Mike are literally preventing him from having sex by being in the room with Mike and Molly. They remain there to show that Mike needs support from others before he can move forward with his own story. He is not independent but actually dependent on others for emotional well-being.

Mike's lack of independence in his emotional well-being is even more evident in his relationship with his mother. That relationship is explored in the episode "Mike's Apartment," which also is the episode where Mike and Molly have sex for the first time. Throughout the episode, Mike's friends and Molly's family encourage each of them to behave in ways that are considered more sexy. Mike's friends encourage him to make improvements to his apartment, as they throw in some fat jokes. Carl tells Mike he should hang some drapes in his bedroom, which Mike says he has done. Carl responds: "Those drapes should have happened years ago. I'm

surprised your neighbors didn't start a petition" ("Mike's Apartment" *Mike & Molly*). This is a joke that could be on any sitcom, but, because of it being on this show, it is a fat joke. *Mike & Molly* conditions the audience to think fat is an acceptable source of humor. There are even jokes at Molly's expense in this episode when her family encourages Molly to wear a thong and to wax her private areas. All of this guidance by friends actually marginalizes each of the characters. Because they are fat, they cannot be sexual beings and therefore require guidance by friends and family to show them how to have sex and be sexy.

As others are offering their infantilizing support, Mike's mom Peggy tries to drive a wedge between Mike and Molly. Peggy discovers the relationship when she calls during Molly's visit to Mike's apartment. After Mike rushes her off the phone, Peggy calls back faking chest pains. Mike and Molly rush to her house, where she suggests Molly looks like a man and that she has a mustache. Once they leave Peggy's house, Molly suggests to Mike that his mother may be manipulative, which he denies. When his mother calls again, Molly gives Mike an ultimatum, choose sex with Molly or his mother's phone calls. Mike chooses Molly, which sets up a paradigm for Molly in the series: Mike's mother continues to try to interfere in their relationship, always resistant to Molly. Mike navigates this relationship, but usually chooses Molly. He has replaced his mother with Molly, who is an aggressor in the relationship. Molly's aggression continues the emasculation of Mike; he is passive in everything, including his personal relationship.

Mike throughout the show is shown to be dependent on other characters, whether it is his mother, his partner Mike or eventually Molly. This dependence feeds into the disability rhetoric that shows fat as a disabling condition. Wendell says that dependence is a form of oppression as well: "Dependence on the help of others is humiliating in a society which prizes independence"

(Wendell 347). The infantilization of Mike feeds that dependent role even further. Mike's mother longs for his dependence on her. Disability studies scholar Lerita M. Coleman Brown also notes that dependence feeds into stigma: "Some stigmatized people become dependent, passive, helpless, and childlike because that is what is expected of them" (Brown 186). The stigma facing the character of Mike is his fatness and his dependence on his mother; his police partner and eventually Molly all feed into that stigma.

In formulating a television character, the writers of *Mike & Molly* have constructed an identity for Mike, one that is passive and accepting of the criticism surrounding his weight. It is also an identity that makes Mike an Other, one who is outside of the societal norm. Mike understands his role outside of norm, yet still tries to fit into that societal norm by losing weight. In some ways, Mike's identity is defined by the stigma that surrounds fatness, and stigma is a created notion as philosopher Michel Foucault notes in *The Order of Things*:

"Identity and what marks it are defined by the differences that remain. An animal or plant is not what is indicated -- or betrayed -- by the stigma that is to be found imprinted upon it; it is what the others are not; it exists in itself only in so far as it is bounded by what is distinguishable from it. Method and system are simply two ways of defining identities by means of a general grid of difference." (Foucault *Order* 144-145)

Foucault is saying the stigma doesn't exist on its own, stigma is created. Mike's attempt to lose weight shows that he knows that his stigma could be minimized if he removed himself from a stigmatized group. Whereas he is in that stigmatized group, Mike remains fully a part of that group, falling into the expected roles for this stigma -- to be passive and accept ridicule for his fatness.

As noted earlier, Mike is also given some feminine characteristics, ones that place him in a diminished group, outside of the patriarchy. His weight places him in a disabled state, which in our societal rhetoric is one that should be easy to overcome, according to Wendell: “Disability is also frequently regarded as a personal or family problem rather than a matter for social responsibility” (Wendell 340). Mike’s acceptance of the jokes at his expense surrounding his weight are pointing out the “personal problem” of his disability. The people in Mike’s life are mirrors of what society expects of men. They remind him that weight keeps him from being a fully formed member of the patriarchy, but they also continue to diminish him like his mother providing food to keep him fat and Carl constantly reminding Mike of what he loves to eat. Mike’s friends and family enable as well as downgrade him, which also fits into Wendell’s theory: “Nevertheless our cultural existence on controlling the body blames the victims of disability for failing and burdens them with self-doubt and self-blame” (Wendell 344). Mike, as shown in the “Mike’s Not Ready” episode, is afraid that his fat body isn’t worthy of affection or love. He is filled with self doubt, which fits his characterization as a disabled person under Shakespeare’s theory. The character of Mike is continually diminished and episodes of the show that showcase his self-doubt are reinforces this social rejection of Mike because of his weight.

Whereas Mike is diminished and stripped of his masculinity in some ways, his role as a police officer does connect him with modern notions of masculinity. Men’s studies researcher Kevin Alexander Boon argues that in a post-Sept. 11 world, police officers, firefighters and mail carriers are among those considered modern heroes:

Masculinity is, most precisely, a general term used to denote characteristics linkable to variant levels of testosterone, which has been socially and culturally associated with men as a result of a broad generalization based on observed

characteristics across human populations. The hero figure is a hyperbole of those masculine characteristics, and it functions as a means to assuage an innate fear of mortality, which is inexorably linked to the human instinct for survival. Thus, the greater the threat to an individual or a group's survival, the greater the need for heroes. Furthermore, those within a threatened group who incline toward absolutes are more likely to overtly believe in heroes (Boon).

Mike's role as a police officer should place him in a hero status, according to Boon's theory, but his weight diminishes that role. Just consider, how many comic book heroes or even hero cops on television and movies are overweight? Mike is a police officer because that gives his character masculinity and allows him to be the leading man. The constant criticism of his weight brings him down, to one who isn't in power and is controlled by the hegemony.

Men studies theorist R.W. Connell challenges notions of masculinity in culture. He notes that theories of gender relations are "more sophisticated" and are being developed: "A second impulse was provided by recognition of the co-existence of multiple masculinities, requiring attention to the dynamic relations of hegemony and marginalization among groups of men" (Connell). Applying Connell's theory, Mike would fall into a marginalized group of men because he doesn't fit into the model of masculinity. Mike's marginalized role could be examined by highlighting his difference to a cultural model of masculinity like Arnold Schwarzenegger. Schwarzenegger and the character of Mike are both body focused, but Schwarzenegger is known for his muscular physique formed from his days as a body builder, according to men's studies researcher Ellexis Boyle. "Indeed, what is most compelling about Schwarzenegger is that no other bodybuilder before or after him has achieved the same level of fame in mainstream culture, nor been able to use their body to the same economic and political

ends” (Boyle 154). Schwarzenegger has built a career around his body, a body that fits an ideal for society. Mike’s character is the center of a show, a show that is all about his body and how it doesn’t fit a societal ideal. Mike exists as a character who takes on a heroic role (as a cop, a role that Schwarzenegger has taken many times), and shows how Mike fits into a new form of masculinity, one where the man is emasculated and takes on a more feminine role.

Even in his masculinity, Mike falls into a diminished category. His character is passive, which is the expectation of the disabled, according to disability studies researcher Simi Linton: “In addition, disabled people are rarely depicted on television, in films, or in fiction as being in control of their own lives -- in charge or actively seeking out and obtaining what they want and need” (Linton 25). Mike isn’t geared toward getting what he wants, which is why Molly is the aggressor in the relationship. She asks him out, she encourages them to have sex the first time, she helps him resist the passive acceptance of his friends and family. Mike accepts his role but longs for something more with comes through his relationship with Molly.

Mike’s passivity is used in *Mike & Molly* to show a mode of fat that is not acceptable in a society that celebrates thin. Having a fat lead character on a show could be a position that supports a more inclusive view of the world, but Mike functions as a reminder that thin is an ideal and those who are fat are an Other. Mike’s resistance to accept of his weight just heightens that view of the fat as an Other. Mike and the jokes used to bring him down show that men also have a body expectation in modern society. Using Connell’s theory, Mike shows a new form of masculinity, one that embraces a thinner ideal for men, one that resembles the ideal that has been present for women. Mike’s emasculation and acceptance of a diminished role further show that fat is an unacceptable body type in society.

Chapter 4: Fat -- the Punisher

It is a familiar story in modern culture, boy meets girl, they end up getting married and live happily ever after. It is the theme of countless movies and television shows, which feature culturally norm couples. When that couple doesn't fit the cultural norm, then that path becomes a little more rocky. *Mike & Molly* takes two complete seasons before it brings together the two main characters for their wedding. They go through ups and downs and by the time they reach the wedding episode, it is a long path to the altar. This path is rocky because the weight of the characters forces Mike and Molly into the role of an Other. Their fat bodies place them into a mode where they have to be punished before they can head down the altar -- or to their "happily ever after."

As noted earlier, Mike and Molly each take on different societal expectations of fat in society. Mike is passive and accepts the fat jokes at his expense whereas Molly takes on a more angry fat person mode. Mike is emasculated and is portrayed as a passive person willing to accept a multitude of fat jokes aimed at him. As the lead character of the show, Mike functions as a reminder that fat is unacceptable. How Mike is treated reinforces the idea that men are also subjected to societal expectations of weight. This expectation of thinness for men comes from a new form of masculinity, which pushes men toward a thinner ideal. Mike's emasculation entrenches him into the Other group, one that cannot escape that label without losing weight.

Molly is also subjected to the bodily expectations of society, but as a woman her role as an Other is compounded. Much like women of color, Molly has been placed into two minority groups that are considered outside of the societal norm -- being a woman and being fat. This does more than diminish her times two because she is fully part of two diminished groups. Also, Molly's emphasis on losing weight, shown through multiple episodes, shows an underlying

anger at her position as an Other. She reacts angrily to the dieting and exercise that she must do to achieve the societal expectations for her as a woman, as well as a bride. She is aggressively resisting her role as an Other.

Together, Mike and Molly represent a relationship between two characters who are outside of the cultural norms. Because they exist outside of those norms, they are regularly punished for their decision to be a couple. There are some examples of this throughout the first two seasons, but two episodes relating to their wedding in the second season highlight how the couple is punished. “Molly Can’t Lie” and “The Wedding” show how the characters overcome that punishment before they can move forward toward a traditional “happy ending.” Mike and Molly as a couple provides an opportunity to examine the representations of fat in society even further, because they can reflect off one another. The viewer sees fat people through the eyes of fat people, particularly through fat people who want to remove the stigma of fatness from their identities. How Mike and Molly react to each other, gives the viewer insight into their identities, according to disability scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson:

To be held in the visual regard of another enables humans to flourish and forge a sturdy sense of self. Being seen by another person is key to our psychological well-being, then, as well as our civil recognition. Staring’s pattern of interest, attention, and engagement, the mobilization of its essential curiosity, might be understood as a potential act of be-holding, of holding the being of another particular individual in the eye of the beholder. (Garland-Thomson “Beholding” 205)

Viewers see the characters of Mike and Molly through the way they see each other, which is with love, but also through each character's longing to remove themselves from their Other status.

Mike and Molly don't want to be considered fat and all the negativity they associate with that label.

Disability studies scholar James Charlton argues that those who are considered disabled, such as fat people in society, are subject to forms of oppression. The punishments faced by Mike and Molly show that they are being oppressed, which Charlton says is a form of control:

“Oppression is a phenomenon of power in which relations between people and between groups are experienced in terms of domination and subordination, superiority and inferiority. At the center of this phenomenon is control. Those with power control; those without power lack control” (Charlton 152). In both of these episodes of the series, Mike and Molly are put into situations that are out of their control. In “Molly Can't Lie,” the two lose their wedding venue and in “The Wedding” Molly faces travel obstacles to her nuptials. Both episodes offer forms of punishment for each character as well as obstacles to getting married.

The “Molly Can't Lie” episode begins with Mike, Molly and Mike's mother Peggy outside a priest's office at a church. Peggy is trying to get the Catholic church to make an exception and marry the two of them. Before they go in, Peggy encourages them to lie if necessary, which Molly resists. To this, Peggy says: “Please don't tell me she is going to be herself in there” (*Mike & Molly* “Molly Can't Lie”). Peggy is making a joke that acknowledges Molly's anger toward the societal expectations of her weight. The joke also reinforces Mike's passivity, which is enhanced through his relationship with his mother as noted in an earlier chapter. Once in the meeting with the priest, Molly refuses to commit to raising their children as Catholic, whereas Mike says whatever he thinks the priest wants to hear. Because of this disagreement, the priest refuses to marry them. This scene highlights how Mike and Molly

function individually in their relationship. Molly resists the roles set before her (she won't commit to something she doesn't want to do) and Mike passively accepts his fate. As the episode progresses, Mike and Molly fight about the incident at the church. Mike reacts angrily to Molly's aggression, criticizing her for refusing to accept a passive role: "It didn't have to happen if you would have just followed by lead. Maybe if you talked a little less and listened a little more we wouldn't be in this mess" (*Mike & Molly* "Molly Can't Lie"). Mike, although he generally passive, reacts with anger to Molly's resistance to passivity. He is angry at Molly for not fitting a role that he deems as appropriate for fat people -- attempting to please those who are in a position of power. Molly is angry at conforming to the expectations of those in power. Despite these differing modes, the couple reunites, but this is done off camera, which is a passive mode of storytelling. Carl's grandmother encourages them to marry at her church. When they meet with the minister, he is more flexible than the priest was and agrees to marry them. This episode shows that to take a step toward marriage, they needed to receive some sort of punishment, in this case losing their venue and then having a fight. The couple had to be taught a lesson to get closer to marriage. Even the DVD's episode description implies a lesson is in order: "Molly learns honesty is not always the best policy when her frank discussion with Father Justin costs the engaged couple their wedding chapel (*Mike & Molly* "Molly Can't Lie"). Molly is punished for her aggression in this episode, but Mike is punished for not accepting his passive role as well. When Mike resisted Molly's aggression, he was forced out of the relationship until he recognizes that he needs to appreciate Molly's aggression. As they are subjected to being controlled by others, Molly is more aggressive toward Mike, showing that she attempts to control him. Both are forced into a form of punishment before they can marry. Both have to accept the roles that each of them take as an Other before they can move forward into their relationship. Mike has to

accept Molly's aggressive resistance to her status as an Other, and Molly has to take on some of Mike's passivity to accept her role as an Other.

In "The Wedding," the couple is again challenged before heading down the aisle. Most episodes of the show feature a multitude of jokes at Mike's expense, this episode features only a couple of jokes about Mike's weight, which comes late in the episode. In the first scene of the episode, Mike's mother describes him as a "handsome groom" (*Mike & Molly* "The Wedding"). Mike is spared fat jokes because he receives a form of punishment as he spends most of the episode waiting for Molly to arrive at the church. He is forced to wait for love while Molly is put through a series of challenges. First, she returns home from the hairdresser with a ridiculous hairdo that leads her to say: "I wanted to look beautiful and this isn't beautiful" (*Mike & Molly* "The Wedding"). Molly's first punishment is that the stylist messes up her hair and makes her feel ugly. After the hair is fixed by her sister Victoria, Molly's driver says the car has been towed and they don't have a limo to go to the church. Victoria drives Molly to the church, but runs out of gas. Eventually, the two get a ride from a friend of Victoria's who has a car that is fueled by McDonald's French fries oil. As Mike waits at the church, he begins to think that Molly isn't coming. He criticizes himself by saying: "I knew it was too good to be true. What was I thinking? Some big lug like me was actually going to marry that beautiful princess" (*Mike & Molly* "The Wedding"). Carl makes his first joke at Mike's expense by suggesting he is just hungry. When Mike is at his lowest, Molly arrives. They share a romantic moment and then Mike tells her she smells wonderful, and she says, "It's French," alluding to her picking up the scent of French fries from her ride to the church. The episode's next scene is the two getting married. Mike does suffer some punishment in this episode, but Molly is the character who goes through more challenges to the altar. She faces both an appearance and a transportation issue.

Most of the episode's plot focuses on Molly trying to get to the church. Mike's expectations of getting married may have been delayed, but Molly is the one who suffers the most. Mike's passivity is rewarded whereas Molly's aggressive behavior creates more challenges for her. This is also represented in how each of them are physically treated in the episode. Mike is considered handsome from the first scene of the episode, whereas Molly receives a bad hairdo and a lousy limo driver, both of which need to be fixed before she can move forward. Molly's punishments send a message that resistance to body norms can lead to punishment from society.

Whereas these punishments align with societal expectations about weight, they come at the hands of writers who make a series of rhetorical decisions about characterization, plot and humor. Whereas conflict is a major source of comedy, the conflict of *Mike & Molly* seems to focus mostly on the weight of the characters. Taking the wedding episode as an example, Molly faces some challenges in getting to the church, which is a common trope used in movies and television, but the challenges that Molly goes through are used as a setup for jokes at Mike's expense. Her being late allows Carl to joke about him being hungry and therefore cranky. Molly has to get a ride from a car that uses French fry oil, thus forcing her to smell like a French fry. That sets up a joke that Mike likes the smell of French fries. The writers not only choose to put the characters through difficult situations, but they do so to find humor in the weight of these characters. Whereas Mike is the subject of many jokes, Molly is the character who has to go through the most challenges to get to the altar. Not only is she punished in the wedding episode, she is also punished in the episode where they find a minister and in the episode where she gets a wedding dress, as noted in an earlier chapter. The writers use Mike as a target for jokes, but they use Molly as the person who needs to learn the lesson of passivity or to be more like Mike.

Disabilities studies scholar Simi Linton says that passivity is used to diminish the disabled, which in this case is fat people:

Disabled people, like women and the natural world in general, are often rendered as passive. This idea is sustained by other ideas available both within and outside science. Consider, for instance, how terminology used for some groups of disabled people erase complexity, intentionality, and competence. (Linton 95)

By being someone who is passive, Mike lacks complexity as a character. The rare glimpses at depth in Mike's character, such as his nervousness about being naked in "Mike's Not Ready," are focused on his weight. His primary motivation seems to be to lose weight and to love Molly. Molly is given a little more complexity; she is often shown as the more intelligent person of the two, but again is mostly defined as person who wants to lose weight and one who loves Mike. Their weight and their affection for each other are a major defining characteristics for each character.

With regular plot points that focus on Mike and Molly's desire to lose weight, the characters continue to be pushed toward an expectation of a thin body type. Garland-Thomson contends the disabled feel pressure to conform to societal expectations: "This flight from the nonconforming body translates into individual efforts to look normal, neutral, unmarked, to *not* look disabled, queer, fat, ethnic or raced" (Garland-Thomson "Integrating" 360). Mike and Molly don't want to deviate from the cultural standard. Because of the commonality of a desire to be thin, Mike and Molly both are punished by a society that doesn't accept their body type. They want to be different, but until they are, they will continually be limited by the disability of their weight. And because that is happening with two characters of two different genders, they represent that bodily pressure exists for both men and women.

By using two characters who are overweight, *Mike & Molly* promotes emulation of body types. Philosopher Michel Foucault points out that emulation forces a distorted connection between things:

The relation of emulation enables things to imitate one another from one end of the universe to the other without connection or proximity: by duplicating itself in a mirror the world abolishes the distance proper to it; in this way it overcomes the place allotted to each thing. But which of these reflections coursing through space are the original images? Which is the reality and which is the projection? It is often not possible to say, for emulation is a sort of natural twinship existing in things; it arises from a fold in being, the two sides of which stand immediately opposite to one another. (Foucault *Order* 19-20)

Foucault is arguing that emulation forces a connection, or a twinship between two things, but that emulation may not be based on an original image. As society interprets body standards, those standards may not be based in reality. In television, what is projected isn't always real. When a television show like *Mike & Molly* projects a twinship between two characters, how they emulate each other may not be associated with reality. Foucault also says that emulation extends beyond opposition: "One may be weaker, and therefore receptive to the stronger influence of the other, which is thus reflected in his passive mirror" (Foucault *Order* 20). In *Mike & Molly*, Mike is shown as the weaker half of the twinship. Mike is passive and accepting whereas Molly is aggressive and resistant to societal expectations. Mike's adoration for Molly shows a passive acceptance of his role as an Other, whereas Molly's continued resistance shows a refusal to accept that role as an Other. Because Molly is the dominant form in this twinship, her desire to achieve a body norm dominates the show. In other words, because she doesn't want to be fat,

Mike & Molly shows that fat is an unacceptable mode of existence. Because of Molly has the strongest desire to no longer be fat, she receives the most punishment.

Punishment is a form of control, but acceptance of that punishment shows how the characters accept that control. Lack of control is a common criticism for those who are fat, who are considered unable to control their weight and by consequence, their lives. Susan Wendell through her work in disability studies notes that controlling the body relates to societal expectations about body types: “Idealizing the body and wanting to control it go hand-in-hand; it is impossible to say whether one causes the other” (Wendell 343). Wendell connects disability studies and feminism, that could intersect and apply to fat as well. After all, fat is considered a medical condition and, as noted earlier, rhetoric of medicine has shown that fat is an unacceptable body type. Wendell suggests people want to create an ideal body, much like how Mike and Molly desire a thin body.

Mike and Molly’s body type is also a big factor in how sexuality is portrayed on the show. In the first two seasons of *Mike & Molly*, the couple are not shown in the midst of having sex. They are shown before they decide to have sex and they are shown sharing the same bed, but they are not shown performing a sexual act beyond chaste kissing. The sexual lives of the couple are rendered irrelevant, which is a common practice when it comes to sexuality and fat people. Fat advocate and lawyer Rebecca Jane Weinstein discusses how the sexuality of fat people is diminished in her self-published book *Fat Sex: The Naked Truth*. Weinstein notes how poor body image is a common trope: “Have you noticed that on television and in the movies, any time a fat person gets into a sexual relationship, the primary storyline is about the emotional conflict of whether their partner actually finds them attractive and the angst around taking off their clothes?” (Weinstein x). As noted earlier, Mike was subjected to this trope in the episode

“Mike’s Not Ready” where Mike is uncomfortable with Molly seeing his body. At one point in the episode, Mike struggling with his body image resists his dieting and says: “Why should I maintain this figure if no one is ever going to love me?” (*Mike & Molly* “Mike’s Not Ready”). Mike doesn’t think he is worthy of love or a sexual relationship if he is not thinner. Molly even admits later in the episode that she is also anxious about showing her naked body. This insecurity about body images marginalizes the characters by making them asexual. They aren’t interested in sex because fat people should have sex by society’s standards. Weinstein says those standards don’t coincide with reality:

So, okay, even if it appears our culture believes fat people are gross, the people living in our culture are, well, doing them. And it’s not just that fat people ‘let themselves go’ after marriage, so post nuptials we are condemned to have sex with fatso. Actually, secretly, or perhaps not so secretly, a lot of people desire sex with the not-so-svelte. There is much evidence of this -- procreation for one -- but the most powerful is the sex industry. (Weinstein *vii-viii*)

Weinstein uses the existence of multiple sex sites related to large women as part of her evidence that fat people have sex and that fat people are considered sexually attractive. In the world of *Mike & Molly*, which promotes cultural norms, sexuality is only an option if the fat person recognizes that they shouldn’t be fat to be sexual people. It is one more factor showing that weight diminishes the characters and removes them from an acceptance in society.

Mike and Molly are also both working class characters, which could represent another form of control. Molly is a teacher and Mike a beat cop. Molly aspires at one point to become a principal, but is denied that promotion. On the other hand, Mike doesn’t seem to have aspirations beyond being a beat cop. Both Mike and Molly work in situations where they answer to other

people. They may have some control over their domains, but they are in roles with little societal influence. Disability scholar Lerita M. Coleman Brown says this inability to move to a different class in society is common for those who are disabled: “Many stigmatized people are not encouraged to develop or grow, to have aspirations or to be successful” (Brown 186). Whereas Molly had some aspirations, her inability to move ahead in her job shows that society cannot accept fat people in roles of authority.

Mike & Molly isn't the first show with fat working class characters as the leads.

According to fat studies scholars Beth Bernstein and Matilda St. John, the 1980s-1990s show *Roseanne* “centered around the lives of a fat couple, but their weight was, amazingly enough, never the punch line” (Bernstein 267). The jokes on *Roseanne* focused on family issues and the struggles of being working class. *Mike & Molly* on the other hand is completely focused on the characters' weight. Money issues, a common theme in *Roseanne*, is rarely discussed in *Mike & Molly*. In *Roseanne*, Roseanne and her husband Dan accepted their weight, Mike and Molly are constantly resisting their weight. *Roseanne* depicted a couple who struggled to raise a family as they cope with money problems and other issues, *Mike & Molly* seems to be a show more focused on weight and the perceptions associated with that weight. Time and again on *Mike & Molly*, the characters are forced to confront issues that surround their body types, not them as human beings. Mike and Molly have problems because they want to fit into a body norm, not because sometimes life presents challenges. The relationship between these characters shows the growing interest into body standards in American society. In the 1990s, *Roseanne* could depict a couple who just happen to be fat. In the 2000s, *Mike & Molly* depicts a couple who are together because they are fat. The main defining characteristic of both Mike and Molly is their weight.

By using a couple who struggles with their weight, *Mike & Molly* further entrenches thin body ideals. Individually, they can represent struggles with weight, but as a couple they reflect those issues, thus enhancing the negativity that each character feels towards fatness. Mike and Molly both desire to be more thin and in turn more culturally accepted. They have some of the same problems that sitcom couples face, but they face more forms of punishment because of their body types. The viewer isn't meant to see Mike and Molly as a normal couple, they are forced to see a couple who struggles with themselves and therefore with each other.

Conclusion: Fat is Having a Moment

Melissa McCarthy has become a bit of a rising star since her roles in *Mike & Molly* and in the movie *Bridesmaids*. Her budding movie career brought her first lead role in a movie in early 2013 with *Identity Thief*. McCarthy's movie did not receive much critical praise, but it did garner attention because of a review from well-known film critic Rex Reed. The *New York Observer* film critic criticizes McCarthy more for her weight than her performance, calling her "cacophonous, tractor-sized" and a "female hippo." Reed says: "Melissa McCarthy (*Bridesmaids*) is a gimmick comedian who has devoted her short career to being obese and obnoxious with equal success" (Reed). In a review where Reed clearly dislikes the movie, he places the blame for its problems primarily on McCarthy, noting her costar Jason Bateman (who is thinner) is too good for the movie. The review garnered some attention from feminists, who criticized Reed for his method of criticism that focused primarily on McCarthy's weight. Many of the online review's more than 1,200 comments also call out Reed for his use of language.

The form of criticism that focuses solely on a person's weight isn't new, but this criticism has become more commonplace, done through a much wider array of media, as the anti-obesity movement has become more prevalent in America. Media and forms of culture are attempting to regulate the bodies of women (and now men) everyday. Hardly a week goes by without some new medical study focused on weight or weight-related health issues is featured in news media. As the rhetoric of fat has been growing, so has the resistance to those bodily expectations. Much of the resistance has focused on the regulation of women's bodies, but there is a growing resistance to the limitations that this body rhetoric has placed on fat people. Rebecca Jane Weinstein received some national attention in 2012 for her book *Fat Sex: The Naked Truth*, which spurred a segment on the *Today* show. As a fat activist, Weinstein discusses the myth that

fat women don't have sex and notes the hostility that seems to surround fatness in our culture: "There is a subtle and overt hostility toward fat in just about every arena in life. There is a war against it, after all" (Weinstein *vii*). Weinstein is reacting in part to the medical rhetoric coining a war on obesity in America, but also to the attitudes about fat that are pervasive in culture. Doctors and medical studies regularly report that fat is becoming more of a problem, one that needs to be stopped. Much of this medical rhetoric suggests that all fat people are unhealthy. The rhetoric conveys a limited view of fat, one that ignores individuality not only in health, but in personality. Media reports and commercials reinforce this view of fat by discussing weight as a primary factor in health without always using medical evidence to support that notion. This medical influence creates a society that is permissive of weight criticism. Reed's criticism of McCarthy's work that focuses on her body, rather than her acting, is one example of the influence of this growing rhetoric against fat.

Because fat is associated with negativity in society, it shapes the identity of those who are fat. Fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco uses queer studies scholar Judith Butler to explain how discourse surrounding fatness is an attack on identity:

It is arguable that current discourse surrounding body size and shape has worked to incorporate the protests of fat people against their own bodies; when civil rights are being argued for on the basis of the genetically determined helplessness of fat people, the fat body is effectively rendered uninhabitable. This power of language isn't purely abstract, either; it enacts physical and material violence on bodies.

(LeBesco 3)

The discourse of fatness, particularly negative discourse, has become commonplace, so commonplace that fat bodies are considered "uninhabitable." Medical rhetoric, mostly

disseminated through the news media, regularly reminds fat people that their bodies are not acceptable and are in fact a risk to their lives. Associating fat with a matter of life and death puts even more pressure on fat people to lose weight. That pressure is also perpetuated through television shows like *Mike & Molly* and *The Biggest Loser*, an unscripted show centered on weight loss. Those shows, in addition to news media, commercials and other cultural influences, reinforce those the notion that a fat body is an unacceptable body.

As media and culture have created more pressure on fat bodies, those with fat bodies are becoming more resistant to that expectation. Lacross, Wisconsin, television anchor Jennifer Livingston rallied against a viewer who criticized her weight in October 2012. Crediting the community with giving her support for the criticism on her weight, Livingston say: “attacks like this are not OK” and calls the viewer a bully (“CBS anchor”). After this segment aired, Livingston’s response to this weight criticism received nationwide attention. By calling the man who criticized her a bully, she is acknowledging his attempt to control her body. Much in the way that bullied schoolchildren are expected to comply to the requests of a bully, Livingston says the viewer was trying to bully her into a body type that the viewer deemed appropriate. Livingston was resisting a societal influence to control her body. This resistance is such an anomaly in the current cultural climate, it garnered attention on a national scale. Livingston serves as a role model for those who are considered fat. She not only acknowledges that her body type does not fit society’s expectations, Livingston fights for control of her own body. The attempt to bully Livingston to conform to society’s body standards coincides with LeBesco suggestion that fat creates and identity that can only be an Other: “When you think about it, only Others internalize things (like oppression), thus rendering their *surfaces* invisible” (LeBesco 3). Fat people are expected to remain invisible, or passive. What Livingston did was make fat

visible. She didn't "internalize" her oppression, rather she turned that oppression into a chance to show that criticizing fat is not acceptable.

Livingston and many feminist and fat studies scholars increasingly are pointing toward how culture influences an expectation of a normal body, or a standard body. America in the 2000s has a body expectation for men and women to be thin. This standard body also spreads into the world of weight loss surgery and of plastic surgery, shaping bodies and faces so that people move closer to the societal standard. This standard erases fat, disability and most importantly difference. Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland-Thomson, using the research of Sander L. Gilman, an American cultural and literary historian who is known for his knowledge of the history of medicine, says cosmetic surgery creates a "normate" body type and the related reconstructive surgery:

(E)liminates disability and enforces the ideals of what might be thought of the normalcy system. Both cosmetic and reconstructive procedures commodify the body and parade mutilations as enhancements that correct flaws so as to improve the psychological well being of the patient. (Garland-Thomson "Integrating" 360)

Cultural influences enhance this "normalcy system," where difference is eliminated and sameness is encouraged. As noted earlier, Michel Foucault pointed out the dangers of Sameness as well, saying it is sympathy and can lead to assimilation and making things identical (Foucault *Order* 23-24). Both Garland-Thomson and Foucault are saying that a push toward what society dubs a normal body removes difference and makes all people the same. The rejection of difference in all of its forms (racism, ageism, sexism, et al) further disenfranchises those who cannot become part of the "normalcy system." To be included in society, those who are disenfranchised are encouraged erase what makes them different.

This pressure to conform to body norms has long been a source of discussion in feminism, but that pressure for a thin body for men is growing. More images of men showing off their toned abdominal muscles, a feat that isn't easily accomplished by every body type, are becoming prevalent. Expectations of masculinity are starting to include expectations of an ideal male form as well, which creates a new form of masculinity as noted earlier using the theory of R.W. Connell. In exploring how thinness is pervasive in society, Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber's *The Cult of Thinness* discusses how thinness is used to diminish women but also discusses masculinity and how it is traditionally viewed: "Our culture judges a man primarily in terms of how powerful, ambitious, aggressive, and dominant he is in the world of thought and action" (Hesse-Biber 32). Our heroes in culture tend to be physically strong, often having a muscular body type, and take action. This expectation of masculinity is shown in super hero movies, as well as romantic comedies where men are often forced to take action to reunite the couple. Mike in *Mike & Molly* is rendered passive because he doesn't fit that societal ideal. He can't be the dominant male character that is commonplace in culture, because his body type doesn't fit that norm. The label of fat renders men weak in society, and encourages them to conform to the body ideals that have long been expected for women.

Weakness is a common association for those who are fat. It is assumed that they do not garner the willpower to lose weight or exercise. Weakness solidifies that those who are fat are an Other. As Others, they have their own community, one that is shown through shows like *Mike & Molly*, where only two fat people can fall in love with one another. A sense of a community is commonplace for those who are disenfranchised. Disability studies scholar Harlan Lane examines the connection between those who are deaf and how they form their own community: "The particular way in which society understands alcoholism, disability and so forth determines

exactly what these labels mean, how large groups of people are treated, and the problems they face” (Lane 78). The understanding of fat as a form of weakness, or as fat people being considered outside of the norm, shows a sense of community between those people. As noted in earlier chapters, fat creates a form of disability where the person is rendered passive, or angry, but those who aspire to remove themselves from the barriers of those disabilities are encouraged to remove those labels. In other words, fat people are encouraged to lose weight through diets, television shows and movies that not only promote thin as an ideal, but fat people who want to fit that ideal. When culture offers fat people primarily as people who no longer want to be fat, it perpetuates the ideal of thinness. When fat people resist that expectation to lose weight, they are ridiculed, like McCarthy’s character Megan in *Bridesmaids*, or considered an anomaly like the news anchor Livingston defending her weight on the air. Both are showing a resistance to bodily expectations but that resistance is considered rare. In a sense, they are memorable for resisting expectations, but if fat bodies were actually accepted, their weight wouldn’t be a point of discussion. If weight were not considered a negative trait, Megan wouldn’t be amusing when she is sexually aggressive and Livingston would never have to go on air to defend herself.

Literature, and more recently television and movies, promotes expectations of societal body standards. Disability studies scholars David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder suggest in their theory of Narrative Prothesis that literature uses disabled characters to shed a light on facets of humanity: “Within literary narratives, disability serves as an interruptive force that confronts cultural truisms” (Mitchell and Snyder 275). Mitchell and Snyder argue that certain traits, often disabilities, are given to characters to highlight the negativity of those characters, such as a villain having a limp. Using this theory, those who are fat and unhappy about it are showing a “cultural truism” that fat is unacceptable. Mike and Molly highlight the problems with being fat,

rather than the acceptance of one's identity. Characters who are fat can be part of what disability studies scholar Simi Linton would call limited participation: "It promotes a false sense of acceptance because the norms and standards of the able-bodied majority are imposed and held up as an ideal to which all should aspire" (Linton 53). Using Linton's theory, fat people fear that acceptance is out of reach for fat people until they lose weight. As long as people are fat, they are not allowed to fully participate in society.

Limited participation is one of many problems with encouraging sameness or forcing people to resemble one another. Foucault says sameness forces us to encourage resemblance: "(R)esemblance is situated on the side of imagination, or, more exactly, it can be manifested only by virtue of imagination, and imagination, in turn, can be exercised only with the aid of resemblance" (Foucault *Order* 68). By using resemblance as a guide, Foucault says that it forces imagination that only focuses on sameness. Cultural influences, particularly television series, are created by writers who can take the characters they create on many paths. When writers create a show like *Mike & Molly*, they are endorsing resemblance. In creating Mike and Molly, the writers could have shown fat people who are happy with their weight. They could have shown people who want to lose weight but have identities that go deeper than weight loss. Instead, the writers of *Mike & Molly* have chosen characters who aspire to sameness; they have chosen to write about the importance of resemblance. In creating a show about fat people that encourages them to be thin, the show creates even more pressure for fat people to fit into the cultural standard of thinness. When television shows like *Mike & Molly* represent fat people, it doesn't provide a representation of fat that represents the intricacies of fat identities.

Even if the world of *Mike & Molly* is fictional, it represents and encourages the pressure to fit a thin ideal for Others in society. The show creates an exaggerated sense of normality,

which comes from stigma, according to disability studies scholar Lerita M. Coleman Brown: “For stigmatized people, the ideal of normality takes on an exaggerated importance. Normality becomes the supreme goal for many stigmatized individuals until they realize that there is no precise definition of normality except what they would be without their stigma” (Brown 187). Stigmas stress the importance of normality and when culture reinforces those stigmas; it creates even more pressure for those who don’t meet those ideals.

As body ideals continue to be perpetuated by culture, one way to change that culture is to provide fat people in a broader context in culture. Fat people should be more than a source of humor or ridicule, they should be represented as complete human beings. Comedian Margaret Cho experienced the pressure of television body expectations during her show *All American Girl*. Cho acknowledges that the body pressure pushed her toward an eating disorder. Cho now wants to reclaim the word fat:

I am actively trying to get better. But I do have a disease that is deadly as cancer or AIDS. Anorexia kills. Bulimia kills. I am still sick. I am in remission I guess, but the virus lives in me. Dormant for now. But it’s there.

I want to educate people about my disease. It’s caused by ignorance and casual cruelty. I want to stop the spread of my disease. (Cho *ii*)

Cho is one of many people trying to form new identities associated with fat. They are aided by the work of scholars in the growing fat studies field and by resistance to body standards, such as Livingston and McCarthy receiving support from those who do not approve of negative associations related to their weight.

Becoming aware of the standards that culture sets for those who are fat is the first step. The next step is to change how we approach those who are overweight in culture. Feminist

Gloria Anzaldua promoted finding new ways to examine the confines of rhetoric that diminishes women:

At some point, on our way to a new consciousness, we will have to leave the opposite bank, the split between the two mortal combatants somehow healed so that we are both shores at once and, at once, see through serpent and eagle eyes. Or perhaps we will decide to disengage from the dominant culture, write it off altogether as a lost cause, and cross the border into a wholly new and separate territory. Or we might go another route. The possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react. (Anzaldua 86)

Anzaldua discusses women of color, but her work can also apply to fat people. What reaction to the criticism of McCarthy's weight and Livingston's on-air defense of her body type do is react, not act as Anzaldua suggests. Fat people need to forge new identities of fatness in culture that go beyond the limited scope used in society.

Through Anzaldua's suggestion, the future could provide more characters like Hanna on Lena Dunham's *Girls*, who is unapologetic about showing her fat naked body (*Girls*). Characters can also be like Rebel Wilson's Fat Amy in *Pitch Perfect*, who introduces herself to two thin women as Fat Amy. When the women ask why Fat Amy says: "Yeah, so twig bitches like you don't do it behind my back" (*Pitch*). Both of these characters are unafraid to identify themselves as fat, but that doesn't solely identify those characters. They have insecurities and have sex lives. Hanna regularly shows her naked body without shame. Fat Amy routinely discusses her active sex life and offers one of the more enigmatic musical performances in the movie. They are more than a few punchlines; they are characters who are more fully developed, who are not identified solely by fatness.

Most of all, we should be more aware of how body standards affect our identities.

Feminist Helene Cixous discussed the regulation of bodies in her 1975 work *Sorties*:

We have turned away from our bodies. Shamefully we have taught to be unaware of them, to lash them with stupid modesty; we've been tricked into a fool's bargain: each one is to love the other sex. I'll give you your body and you will give me mine. But which men give women the body that they blindly hand over to him? Why so few texts? Because there are still so few women winning back their bodies. Woman must write her body, must make up the unimpeded tongue that bursts partitions, classes and rhetorics, orders and codes, must inundate, run through, go beyond the discourse with its last reserves, including the one of laughing off the word 'silence' that has to be said, the one that, aiming for the impossible, stops dead before the word 'impossible' and writes it as 'end'.

(Cixous 287)

Just as Cixous is arguing for women to resist body standards set forth by men, we must also resist body standards set forth that render bodies the same. Resisting a body standard celebrates difference. It celebrates that every person does not need to look the same, or to perform the same. Accepting variations in body is as important as accepting differences in skin tone, in gender, in sexuality. Accepting multiple body types celebrates the diversity that provides a broader world and more inclusive world.

Conclusion

As a person who is fat, I have traditionally avoided media that I expect to offer negative associations with fatness. When I first heard about *Mike & Molly*, I refused to watch it because it seems like an excuse to make fun of fat people for a half hour every week. As I have examined

the show, I realize that the writers of the show are trying to be sensitive to the issues surrounding fatness in our culture, but this sensitivity is just reinforcing that negative association. In responding to the viewer who called her fat, Livingston said, “You think I don’t know that” (CBS). That is a sentiment that I commonly share. Do writers of *Mike & Molly* think that fat people don’t know that their being fat poses challenges in society? Every person I know that is fat is well aware of their weight and have found their own identity that is shaped in part because of that weight. As a scholar, I hope that I can continue to point out the methods used by society to diminish those who are overweight but also who are diminished for other traits that seem outside of the norm. I, like many others, want to see representations of myself on television that don’t have to acknowledge the character’s weight. I want to see two fat people fall in love, not because they both go to Overeaters Anonymous, but because they understand the challenges that each of them faces by being disenfranchised in society. I also want to see a skinny man fall in love with a fat woman in television and the movies. This isn’t uncommon in life, but it seems to be something that cannot be accomplished in movies and television. Most of all, I want to see characters who are defined by more than one quality. After all, I am a woman; I am fat; I am a scholar; I am a sister; I am a daughter. I am not one of those things; I am all of those things and much more.

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Office of Research Integrity

May 28, 2013

Maureen Johnson
3111 Brandon Road
Huntington, WV 25704

Dear Ms. Johnson:

This letter is in response to the submitted thesis abstract titled "*Mike & Molly – An Other World.*" After assessing the abstract it has been deemed not to be human subject research and therefore exempt from oversight of the Marshall University Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Code of Federal Regulations (45CFR46) has set forth the criteria utilized in making this determination. Since the information in this study does not involve human subjects as defined in the above referenced instruction it is not considered human subject research. If there are any changes to the abstract you provided then you would need to resubmit that information to the Office of Research Integrity for review and a determination.

I appreciate your willingness to submit the abstract for determination. Please feel free to contact the Office of Research Integrity if you have any questions regarding future protocols that may require IRB review.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads 'Bruce F. Day'.

Bruce F. Day, ThD, CIP
Director

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Maureen Johnson

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Goals

I have goals in both academic research and in teaching. In academic research, I have been exploring the use of rhetoric in society, specifically in cultural representations of body issues. My thesis has been exploring the cultural representations of fat in television shows, specifically the show *Mike & Molly*, and how those shows are reflective of our culture's understanding of weight. I also see the pedagogical benefit of the application of rhetoric on our culture. I look forward to find ways to help students explore and understand the world by applying the skills of writing through the use of rhetoric.

Education

Marshall University, Huntington, W. Va.

Bachelor's degree in journalism (1995)

Master's degree in English (in progress with 4.0 grade point average)

Relevant coursework

Rhetoric and composition

Composition theory, exploring mechanisms behind teaching composition theory such as revision, assessment, and reflection.

Feminist rhetorics, examining works by bell hooks, Gloria Anzaldua, Sonia Johnson and more to apply how feminist rhetorics are at work in today's society.

Visual rhetoric, analyzing a variety of media, including photography, film and quilting

Body rhetoric, exploring disability studies, reading Michel Foucault and exploring cultural influences on the rhetoric of the body.

Literature

Multiple works by William Shakespeare, specifically research on Hamlet and A Midsummer Night's Dream.

Read and conducted research on Beowulf and other Anglo-Saxon poetry.

Read and conducted research on Jane Austen, specifically research on *Persuasion*.

Read and conducted research on 20th century English and Irish poetry, specifically the poetry of D.H. Lawrence.

Conferences and memberships

Attended the 2012 CCCCs conference

Presented a paper "Mike & Molly -- A Dangerous Stereotype" in the Fat Studies tract of the 2013 Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association Annual Conference in Washington, D.C.

Presented a paper called "*Persuasion* -- In Sickness and Health" at the 2013 Stand for Women Conference in Huntington, West Virginia.

Member of the Society of Women Scholars

Other relevant experience

Metro Editor at The Herald-Dispatch, Huntington W.Va., 2005 to present:

Planning content for a daily newspaper

Supervising reporters, which includes coaching reporters about writing and research methods.

Copy editor and page designer, Charleston Gazette, Charleston, W.Va., 2004-2005

Page design, particularly Life section fronts and Sunday Page 1.

Graphics editor, Charleston Daily Mail, Charleston, W.Va., 1995-2004

Supervised photographers, copy editors and artists as well as coordinating work with other departments in the newsroom and the corporation.

Organized multiple newspaper projects, such as the spelling bee, a local band festival sponsored by the newspaper and other special projects utilizing the newspaper staff.

Other duties include: copy editing, editing and uploading stories onto the Internet, movie review writer, writing entertainment-related stories and participating in the daily planning of the newspaper.

Journalism awards

Honorable mention, William Randolph Hearst Editorial Writing Contest, 1993.

W. Page Pitt School of Journalism and Mass Communications Award for Editorial Writing, 1994.

Best Front Page Design, West Virginia Press Association, 2000.

The Herald-Dispatch employee of the Month, December 2006.

Best Special Section, West Virginia Press Association, 2007

Best Special Section, West Virginia Press Association, 2009

Attended Poynter Institute seminar on visual journalism in 2001.