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Academia's Anti-Fat Problem

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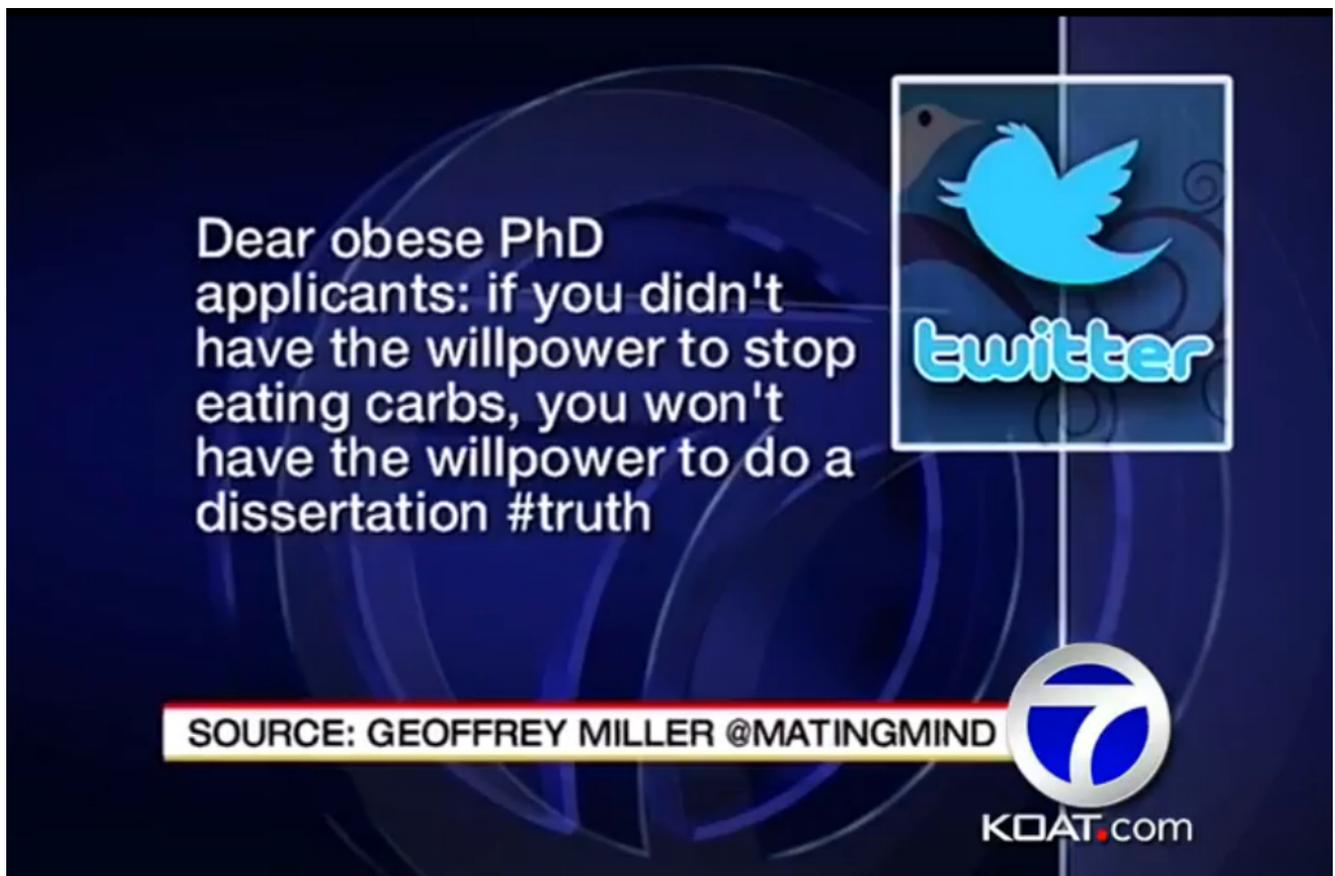


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ACADEMIA'S ANTI-FAT PROBLEM.

by [Amy Farrell \(/profile/amy-erdman-farrell\)](#)

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"Dear obese PhD applicants: if you don't have the willpower to stop eating carbs, you won't have the willpower to do a dissertation #truth"

That [tweet from University of New Mexico evolutionary psychology professor Geoffrey Miller \(http://www.psmag.com/health/geoffrey-miller-fat-shaming-tweet-chinese-eugenics-59327/\)](#) ignited uproar last week. Criticism of Miller was swift and powerful—national media and his department chair Jane Ellen Smith (who herself does research on eating disorders and body image) called out Miller's fat-shaming. At first, the

professor defended himself, saying that getting a PhD is "about willpower/conscientiousness, not smarts" but he quickly deleted the original tweets, replacing them with "sincere apologies to all for that idiotic, impulsive, and badly judged tweet." He then added that "obviously my previous tweet does not represent the selection policies of any university, or my own selection criteria." He went on to claim that his tweets were actually part of a research project, designed to measure reaction to outrageous posts.

Certainly it's understandable that many see this as a cautionary tale for the new media age: prominent professor taken down by a few seconds of thoughtless commentary on twitter. But this is about more than a nasty tweet. First, Miller's comments provide us with a clear window onto the daily and pernicious discrimination that fat people face. When reading his note on his UNM webpage that he is looking for "[bright, motivated, conscientious students](http://psych.unm.edu/people/directory-profiles/geoffrey-miller.html)" (<http://psych.unm.edu/people/directory-profiles/geoffrey-miller.html>) for his psychology lab, one can easily infer the invisible words, "No fat students need apply."

Scholars like [Rebecca Puhl](http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/who_we_are.aspx?id=331) (http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/who_we_are.aspx?id=331) and [Sondra Solovay](http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/548220.Sondra_Solovay) (http://www.goodreads.com/author/show/548220.Sondra_Solovay) have found [clear evidence of weight discrimination](http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/resources/upload/docs/what/bias/Bias-Discrimination-and-Obesity.pdf) (<http://www.yaleruddcenter.org/resources/upload/docs/what/bias/Bias-Discrimination-and-Obesity.pdf>) and bias in employment and higher education. Professor Miller's tweets give those studies a visceral punch, allowing us to clearly see and feel the discrimination that can be easily hidden behind words like "bright, motivated and conscientious." In other words, a fat PhD candidate cannot, according to Miller, be bright, motivated and conscientious" because he *already knows* that a fat person is inferior to a thin person.

Miller wrote that "obese PhD applicants" will fail because of a lack of "willpower" and "conscientiousness." This misconception didn't arise out of the blue. These ideas are deeply rooted in the origins of [19th century scientific racism](http://www.amazon.com/Natures-Body-Gender-Making-Science/dp/081353531X) (<http://www.amazon.com/Natures-Body-Gender-Making-Science/dp/081353531X>) — the same school of thought that provided "evidence" that black people were "biologically" inferior and thus required white paternalism and that women were physically and mentally weaker and similarly deserved patriarchal control. The eminent scientist Georges Cuvier even [performed an illegal autopsy](http://web.mit.edu/racescience/in_media/baartman/baartman_m&g_june95.htm) (http://web.mit.edu/racescience/in_media/baartman/baartman_m&g_june95.htm) on an African

woman by the name of [Sara Baartman](http://www.jhu.edu/jhumag/o6o9web/sara.html) (more commonly known as the Venus Hottentot) to "investigate" whether she was indeed human, or, rather, one of the "missing links" between humans and apes. He concluded that she was indeed "human," but not until he had classified all the characteristics that confirmed her inferiority. Along with other suspect bodily signs — dark skin, female genitalia — he frequently mentioned her fat, a clear sign of her atavistic traits, "proving" that she harbored uncivilized characteristics. Other scientists — such as the well-known criminologist [Cesare Lombroso](http://www.amazon.com/Criminal-Woman-Prostitute-Normal/dp/o822332469) (concurring, identifying fat as a clear sign of bodily inferiority, of one's lower place on the evolutionary scale.

This contemporary evolutionary psychologist, Geoffrey Miller, so well known for his work on the "biological" pull for smart phones and human mating patterns, has in his unrestrained tweets, pulled back the cover on supposed scientific neutrality. As scholars [Michael Gard and Jan Wright](http://www.amazon.com/Obesity-Epidemic-Science-Morality-Ideology/dp/o415318963) have argued, "evolution" often gets evoked without any real scientific evidence, especially when making claims about the "thrifty gene" or other such dubious "proof" of the characteristics of fat people.

Along with encouraging a marvelous outpouring among fat activists (see especially Cat Pause's *Fuck Yeah! Fat Phds*) [Fuckyeahfatphds.tumblr.com](http://fuckyeahfatphds.tumblr.com/), Geoffrey Miller's tweets may have served a good purpose: to illuminate the continuing and insidious power of the belief in the evolutionary inferiority of fatness. We have to be able to see it to fight it.

Amy Erdman Farrell is the author of [Fat Shame: Stigma and the Fat Body in American Culture](http://www.amazon.com/Fat-Shame-Stigma-American-Culture/dp/o814727697) and teaches at Dickinson College.

Related Article: [Sized Up: Why Fat is a Queer and Feminist Issue](/article/sized-up-fat-feminist-queer-disability).

BY AMY FARRELL

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