

## **‘It’s worse for women and girls’:**

### **Negotiating embodied masculinities through weight-related talk**

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#### **Abstract**

Numerous critical analyses have already established the profoundly gendered nature of normative body ‘ideals’ and weight-management practices in Western cultures. Such studies have, amongst other things, elucidated how body dissatisfaction, ‘dieting’ and other weight-loss practices are discursively constituted as both feminised and feminising. Critiquing the over-determined normativity of thinness as a key index of femininity, these analyses have also highlighted how fatness, as abjected flesh, is equated with the feminine and how, in the context of an alleged ‘obesity crisis’, ‘fat’ men, as well as women and children, risk stigmatisation. An emergent research literature now explores men’s engagement with body ‘ideals’, weight-management and ‘body projects’ more generally. This article builds on that work, exploring the negotiation of embodied masculinities in the weight-related talk of men who risked being labelled ‘overweight’ or ‘obese’. Drawing on interviews (N=37), the study illustrates how ‘big’ men attempted to shield their threatened masculine identities by contrasting their own bodily bigness, corporeal concerns and embodied practices with those of women and girls. Also attentive to sexualities, ethnicity and class, this article illustrates the context-specific, intersectional and relational (hierarchical) nature of embodied masculinities and body projects in these ‘epidemic’ times.

**Keywords:** masculinities; gender; obesity discourse; fatness; stigma.

#### **Introduction**

In Western societies fatness is routinely discredited as abject, abhorrent, ugly and despised (McPhail 2009). Fatness is also claimed to be a disease, of epidemic or pandemic

proportions, which must be tackled (WHO 1998). Yet, amidst pervasive quasi-religious moralising about gluttony and sloth, disease metaphors do little in constructing more forgiving definitions of ‘obese people’ (sic) (Evans 2006). The suggestion is even made in one UK government report that stigmatisation should be increased in order to encourage people to lose weight (UK Parliament 2004), a view echoed in the social science literature with reference to broader public health agendas (Bayer 2008; though see Burris 2008).

Under such conditions, fatness is a socially constructed stigma that may ‘spoil’ identities (Goffman 1968). Restated, the social meanings of fatness or obesity may discredit the so-called overweight and obese on hierarchies of moral worth. Furthermore, as explored in qualitative research on women and girls (Evans et al. 2008, Malson 1998, Malson and Burns 2009a), widely recycled obesity discourse may fuel body anxieties and ‘eating disorders’. In the larger context of gender inequality, much of this literature, as with antecedent fat activist writings and feminist theorisations of bodies, offers important insights (e.g. Cooper 1998, Malson, 1998, Malson and Burns 2009a, Bordo 1993, Wolf 1991). However, when critiquing the ‘invisibility of the fat man (sic)’ in feminist research, Bell and McNaughton write: ‘So widely is the net of deviance and its attendant gaze being cast, that it is impossible to continue to deny or downplay the impact of the war on fat on both women *and* men’ (2007: 126, emphasis in original). While social scientific studies explore distinct subcultures where men’s corpulence is acceptable or even desirable (Monaghan 2005), it is clear that the dominant Western (medicalised, state legitimated) meanings of fatness and weight-loss interventions may threaten men’s embodied sense of masculinity. Obesity researchers and government reports, for example, position ‘overweight’ or ‘obese’ men as soft, sick, vulnerable, frail and even pregnant-looking (National Audit Office 2001, Schauss 2006). In short, ‘abject’ fatness threatens cohesive masculine subjectivities (see Kristeva 1982) amidst oppressive power structures that are reproduced through what Bourdieu (2001) terms symbolic or communicated violence.

Such processes are complex and paradoxical. McPhail (2009) contends that anti-obesity rhetoric, when viewed historically and contemporaneously, re-establishes the dominance and normativity of patriarchal masculinity and other power relations amidst pervasive social anxiety (e.g. about the early Cold War in Canada or the current War on Terror in the USA,

the incursion of women into the labour force and changing family structures). Arguably, the reproduction of gendered power through obesity discourse occurs at a collective level, through an anti-obesity offensive that targets abject feminine and feminising fat, while also threatening masculinity at a micro-social level by compounding the demonization of fat bodies that have allegedly ‘failed’ in their duty to be fit, healthy, strong, independent and ready for action (Monaghan 2008). Other tensions and contradictions also emerge on this battlefield: men labelled overweight or obese are expected to undertake ‘body work’ (Gimlin 2001) in order to ‘win the fight against fat’ and exercise self-care, much in line with the feminisation of health concerns (Moore 2008). And, in meshing with the broader commodification of gendered bodies in consumer culture, the normative aesthetics of ‘the looking-glass body’ (Waskul and Vannini 2006) intersect with experiential, pragmatic and visceral modes of male embodiment (Watson 2001). Indeed, as explained by Gill et al. (2005), bodily appearance and ‘body projects’ are increasingly entwined with the regulation of normative masculinity ‘within particular social, cultural and moral universes’ (p. 37).

Grounded in data and seeking to build upon this literature, our paper considers how a group of men, who risked being discredited as ‘overweight’ or ‘obese’, constructed embodied masculine identities. Drawing on interviews (N=37), we explore men’s efforts to contrast their own bodily bigness, corporeal concerns and practices with those of women and girls. Far from voicing a ‘rhetoric of competing victims’ (Connell 2000: 193), these men repeatedly claimed that the cultural degradation of fatness is more consequential for women whom, they argued, are more likely to become ‘obsessed’ about weight and weight-loss practices from girlhood onwards. For example, media pressure to look beautiful (fashionably thin) was discussed, as part of a quasi-feminist critique wherein women often came to embody the normative *and* pathologised subjectivities and practices of a fat-hating culture. As will emerge, by ‘doing gender in/equality’ in their weight-related talk, these men can be seen to be ‘doing masculinities’ in a broader society wherein ‘fat male embodiment’ is discrediting. In short, these men, many of whom had sought to lose weight, precariously negotiated their own gendered identities amidst stigmatising (emasculating) obesity discourse and their embodied fat-phobic dispositions. Also attentive to sexualities, ethnicity and class, our analysis illustrates the context-specific, intersectional and contested nature of embodied masculinities and body projects in these ‘epidemic’ times.

## **The research and data analysis**

Details of this research, undertaken in Northern England between 2004 and 2006, are reported elsewhere (Monaghan 2008). However, in brief, our analysis draws on data generated during in-depth interviews with 37 men as part of an Economic and Social Research Council funded study on male embodiment and weight-related issues. Most interviewees would be defined medically as ‘overweight’ or ‘obese’ based upon self-reported weight and height. The sample was recruited by the lead author and his male research assistant primarily through slimming clubs, friendship networks and a fitness centre, and included eighteen current or former slimming club members. The sample is not representative of British men (e.g. only one man reported he was gay, most men were of white ethnicity), though it has provided rich data. Interviews explored a range of issues such as the meanings of health, physical activity through the lifecourse, food and diet, the body and efforts to lose weight. In line with the British Sociological Association’s statement of ethical practice, research entailed obtaining informed consent, use of pseudonyms, respecting respondents’ right to withdraw from the study and ensuring their well-being (see Monaghan 2008: 21-31).

With regards to the sample’s characteristics, the mean age was 43 and the median age was 41. The youngest was 16 and the oldest was 79. Most men fell between the ages of 31 and 59 (four men were over 60 and eight were under 30). The mean and median age for the eighteen men who had joined slimming clubs was 49 and 53 respectively, with most of these men in their forties and fifties.<sup>1</sup> All men were employed, in full-time education, or retired. Most interviewees were from working-class backgrounds, though some were from the professions. Occupations included mechanics, night-club security, teaching, slimming club management and nursing. All interview data were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed within a broadly critical discourse analytic framework. Transcripts were indexed with identifying codes using computer software, Atlas.ti, enabling efficient comparison of data within and across cases and a systematic analysis of emergent themes.

In the following analysis we will focus on how men constructed embodied masculinities under three headings: (1) gendering ‘bodily bigness’, (2) negotiating the negatives of ‘fat male embodiment’ and (3) doing masculinities by doing gender in/equality. These headings

are ‘second-order’ social scientific constructions that are grounded in interviewees’ ‘first-order’ understandings of their social reality (Schutz 1967). Restated, these three themes emerged from a repeated reading and analysis of the interview data, notably exchanges where discussion explicitly addressed the gendering of weight concerns as interpreted by men in their commonsense lifeworld. Such exchanges included respondents’ volunteered comments as well as responses to semi-structured questions on the meanings of men’s and women’s bodies, dieting and appearance concerns. When devising these headings and undertaking our analysis we did not wear theoretical blinkers. Other substantive theories and research in gender studies, for example, sensitised us to processes occurring in the data (similarly see Charmaz and Mitchell 2001). However, as will be seen below, men’s talk forms the ‘meat’ of our study and, in the interests of offering a rich sense of men’s accounts, we quote interviewees’ verbatim.

Following a first reading of the entire data set by the first author and a subsequent reading and re-reading of indexed data extracts by both authors, we discussed and agreed that the three headings presented below best categorised men’s gender identity work. Accordingly, our analysis explores men’s precarious efforts to reframe their corporeality as constitutive of, or non-threatening to, their gendered subjectivities, including systematically patterned talk about women’s body size/weight concerns and weight-loss practices. Of course, other themes were recorded during this research. For example, there are rich data on the compatibility of physical fitness and ‘bigness’ in a range of gender validating sports, critiques of the Body Mass Index and playful or aggressive appropriations of discrediting labels (see Monaghan 2007, 2008, Monaghan and Hardey 2011). Our current analysis does not stand alone, so to speak. However, our concern here is to report and analyze previously unpublished data on how men, whom medicine might label overweight or obese, constructed gendered identities in a world where ‘fat’ *and* dieting have been defined as predominantly female preoccupations. Read as displays of perspective or moral forms, men’s talk figured in the construction of embodied masculinities.

### **Gendering ‘bodily bigness’: ‘You’re more of a man’**

It’s the hunter. It’s the caveman thing, isn’t it? It’s a primitive ... if you’re a big lad you’re a good provider. (Mike, 41, who had been told to lose weight by his doctor)

'Male fatness' - like 'female fatness' - may be discursively constituted in a multiplicity of often contradictory ways. One complicating aspect of these multiple constructions is the functional ambiguity of 'bigness' which, like 'weight', could refer to physical bodies comprising variable proportions of adipose and lean tissue. As illustrated by Mike's comment, men tended to use the word 'big' when referring to sizeable male bodies. This term emerged as a self-descriptor in interviews even when, for example, men talked about negative labelling from various people such as doctors and people in the street who discredited them as 'fat' or 'obese'. Possession of a 'fat identity' did not negate the possibility of identifying as a 'big lad' or 'big fella' with dignity and self-respect.

Self-identifying as 'big' is understandable in a fat-phobic society where vocabularies of the discredited male body and 'the aesthetic' potentially spoil identities (Monaghan and Hardey 2011). In contrast to 'fatness' or 'obesity', 'bigness' can imply an acceptable and even desirable masculine presence. The gendering of male bodyweight and size, to continue with Mike's invocation of the caveman hunter, is crucial in this process. In contrast to normative constructions of femininity – as petite, taut and slim (Bordo 1993, Malson 1998, Malson and Burns 2009b) - men's 'bigness' was not construed so exclusively in terms of abject flesh or as always-already disqualifying such men from hegemonic gendered subjectivity. Occasionally the cultural equation of masculinity with physical bulk mobilised a construction of men's weight or size precisely as an index of masculinity. As stated by Lenny, whose 'looking-glass body' (Waskul and Vannini 2006) was reportedly credited by his wife even though she had urged him to try the Atkin's diet:

A part of me says 'yeah you look like a man, you look big, look strong, you look like you could look after yourself'... I mean, I look in the mirror at myself and (.) you know and I get home and I strip off and I look in the mirror at myself, and my wife is there. And I'm like [laughing] 'yeah, I've got a nice ...' [more laughter]. Yeah, I love it. And she's there like going 'yeah, it's nice'. (Lenny, 33)

Big Joe, a night-club bouncer and one of the largest respondents in the sample who like Lenny was not currently dieting, also positioned himself in a masculinity-validating universe:

I think with guys, with blokes, it's more of a manly thing. You're more of a man. If you're a big guy people think 'Oh yeah, he's a big guy. He is a man's man'. I've had girls come up to me and say 'I like big men'. You know what I mean? They'll come up and say 'you're married aren't you?' 'I am love, sorry'. [Mimicking the woman] 'Ooh, well never mind, I'd have had ya'. [Usual voice] 'I'm sure you would (.) I'm not married really!' (Big Joe, 33)

In these extracts being a 'big guy' is construed as masculine, connoting strength, an ability to 'look after yourself' and heterosexual desirability. The 'big guy' or 'big lad' in Mike's, Lenny's and Big Joe's talk is constituted as 'manly' such that 'bigness' works here to enhance hegemonic masculinity within broader configurations of gendered practice (Connell 2005). Having a 'big' body means 'you're more of a man', embodying a masculine physical presence and occupation of space in ways that are felt to validate ~~his~~their gender within heterosexual relations.

This construction of bigness as masculine is, however, highly subject- and context-specific. Such specificity is evidenced when, for example, the discursive regulation of gendered and racialised subjects interface to produce the 'big' bodies of black and/or working-class men as problematically *too* masculine. The precarious status of Lenny's identity and 'bigness' was very much related to the university context where he was undertaking a degree mainly among white middle-class women. After saying 'I don't like looking, this masculine. I feel threatening to other people', Lenny mentioned his minority ethnic status and how he felt he had been stereotyped as a gangster by another student: 'there's a lot of stigma, stigma, you know, attached to being black, being big. There's one lady who always dropped hints about drugs and guns'. Lenny dismissed this as 'the kind of crap that goes off in today's intelligent kind of circles' but added: 'maybe if I shrink myself down, and I look less threatening, then I won't come across as being this, er (.) such a threat'.

The strong, capable and sexually desirable masculinity that Lenny's bigness signifies, at least in his re-presentation of his home life, is thus displaced with reference to the more impersonal and discrediting university context. Lenny as the marginalized student rather than happy husband presents a distinctly negative construction of the 'big black guy'. In this account, his bigness still signifies masculinity but its articulation as hyper-masculine (in terms of racist 'gangster' stereotypes and other prejudices) 'spoils' his identity, positioning him as

threatening and possibly criminal. His racialised size is made to signify a very negatively construed (stigmatised rather than valued) masculinity.

Such ‘spoiling’ of a ‘big guy’ identity can similarly be seen in the intersections of fat-phobic and class prejudices that position big working-class men as deviant. While men sometimes proudly identified as ‘fat bastards’, other men felt deeply discredited if they were labelled as such by other people (especially if ‘bastard’ was replaced by other emasculating expletives) (see Monaghan and Hardey 2011). As suggested by Goffman’s (1968) theorisation of stigma, discrepancies between ‘virtual’ and ‘actual’ identity - or normative expectations about what a person *ought* to be and the attributes an individual *actually* possesses - can be understood as ‘spoiling’ identities. Such instances of ‘spoiled’ masculinities also illustrate, first, how social inequalities may be articulated on and through ‘fat’ male bodies and, second, the precariousness and context-specificity of positive constructions of men’s bigness, especially when there is little ambiguity that such bigness refers to fatness. These processes are also observed among men embodying masculinities that are ‘subordinated’ (Connell 2005) in terms of sexuality. Barry, a gay man in his mid-twenties who, since coming out, had gravitated towards the size-positive ‘Bear’ subculture, explained how affirmative reactions were highly contingent:

In the mainstream gay community you wouldn’t get somebody come up and rub your belly and go ‘phwoar’ at your belly. But you get it all the time in the Bear nightclubs. All the time! I was in a club in Manchester on Saturday, there with my top off dancing away. And somebody was rubbing my belly going ‘phwoar’ and I was going [playfully] ‘bugger off’ and I was laughing, but yeah you’d never get that anywhere else.

Thus, in contrasting his experience in Bear clubs with what he termed a ‘bitchy’ or ‘body fascist’ gay mainstream, Barry, like Lenny, pointed not only to a positive construction of ‘big’ masculinity but also to the context-specific and subject-specific rarity of such affirmative interpretations (see also Filiault and Drummond 2009).

Similar to men identifying as heterosexual, Barry typically used the word ‘big’ rather than ‘fat’ given its functional ambiguity. This usage accorded with his description of Bear subculture where ‘big’ was a generic referent for large male bodies (also, Monaghan 2005).

And, more generally among men, positive constructions of ‘bodily bigness’ were rendered



all the more precarious because they tended to rest on this elision of any distinction between adipose and muscular bulk – a distinction that could always re-assert itself. In the following extract, Big Joe struggled to maintain the positivity of his own size in the face of this differentiation between muscularity and fatness - especially when his attention shifted to ‘the front’ of his ‘big’ body, rather than his broad shoulders and ‘massive back’. We would add that this divisibility of the male body is highly relevant in such talk: ‘big’ as an index of credited masculinity is tied to particular body parts, especially the shoulders, rather than the stomach:

You can see some guys, and you’ll say to your mate, ‘he must work out’. But there’s a big lad, and then there’s a big lad. If you know what I mean? You’ve got some guys who are big big, people like myself - [quietly] ‘he’s a big fella’ – then you’ve got somebody who obviously works out who is very defined muscular. And for some reason, I don’t know why, these bodybuilders wear the tightest T-shirts they can find. Now, I certainly wouldn’t wear something like that because it’d look obscene. So, obviously, it’s to show his muscles off. Fair enough. But, then you’ve got (.) I mean, I’ve had people say to me – I mean, I’ve got a massive back. I’ve got a huge back. A guy, a few months ago, who is a bodybuilder .... And he was saying, ‘Fucking hell Joe, you’ve got a MASSIVE back. I’d love to have a back the size of yours’. I went [surprised tone], ‘Well, thank you [laughs] do you want the front to go with it?’ He says, ‘No, you’re OK’. But again it’s, the way I look at it, I am big but I’ll hold my head up. And I’ll stand-up straight. And it’s, although you’re big, you’re still projecting a stature as such.

While framing his own bigness positively as ‘projecting a stature’, Big Joe also differentiated between types of ‘big lad’; between ‘somebody who obviously works out, who is very defined muscular [sic]’ and somebody who may be enviably ‘massive’ but whose body is also produced here as potentially ‘obscene’. Such obscenity is a recurrent theme in the larger fat-phobic society wherein fatness is the abject of the streamlined, civilized body.

In short, while men’s talk clearly evidenced positive constructions of ‘fat’ male bodies as ‘big’ and therefore masculine, their accounts also illustrated: (a) that such constructions were credited only in certain contexts, for example, in Lenny’s home but not at university, or in Bear clubs but not mainstream gay culture; (b) that, in the intersecting discursive regulation of gender, ethnicity and social class, social inequalities often re-configure ‘big’ male bodies

negatively as signifying ‘spoiled’ rather than valued hyper-masculinities; and (c) that the distinction between adipose and muscular bulk tends to resurface in talk about masculine ‘bigness’ such that the negatives of ‘fat male embodiment’ cannot be entirely evaded.

### **Negotiating the negatives of ‘fat male embodiment’: Invulnerability and indifference**

One way in which men sought to counter the stigmatisation of men’s fatness, and implied subordination on gendered hierarchies, was through a highly familiar cultural construction of men as ‘invulnerable’ to aesthetic judgement. Such talk often included reference to same-sex friendship groups. To return to Big Joe, whose masculinity provided a ‘status shield’ that (partially) deflected the stigma of ‘morbid obesity’ (sic):

A big guy can carry his weight and be quite happy. If you’re in a group of blokes, and you’re the big guy, they don’t tend to make an issue out of it. Whereas with a group of women – I mean, I don’t know, I might be completely wrong. But if there’s a big girl in a group of other women, and the topic of conversation could be fashion, and ‘I’ve got this lovely bikini’ and they’re made to feel exiled from that group slightly. Whereas you don’t tend to get that with guys.

In contrast to Big Joe, Noel, who was much smaller in size, talked about how his ‘mates’ give each other ‘grief’ about being fat. Nonetheless, both men constructed a narrative wherein men, unlike women, were generally indifferent to the possibility of felt or enacted stigma:

Ah. With guys, well, I get grief for it. And all my mates get grief. I give grief for it. But it generally washes over us, whereas a woman will take it a lot more to heart. I know from my ex-girlfriend, that when she did start to put weight on, and if she heard something, that would be it [i.e. she would be very upset]. Whereas guys would be like [shrugs his shoulders]. (Noel, 29)

Such indifference is suggestive of masculine emotional resilience or toughness, differentiating ‘appropriately’ masculine narrators from ‘sensitive women’ and perhaps ‘weaker men’. Such talk emerged in interviews with older as well as younger men and men at different stages in their ‘dieting’ careers. While Noel and Big Joe were in their late twenties

and early thirties respectively, Ned was in his late fifties. Unlike Noel and Big Joe, Ned was attending a commercial weight-loss club after a nurse told him he was almost obese. Yet, while Ned invoked health reasons for dieting, he also said he was unconcerned about his weight, much in line with normative constructions of fat male embodiment within and beyond his peer group. For Ned, men's 'weight' was neither troublesome nor deserving of attention, even among men with 'a pretty big tummy':

Weight didn't bother me, you know, if we're being very hard and fast with men. Certainly I have friends who at our age, late fifties, that begin to get a pretty big tummy on them etc. But we don't sit and discuss it. Whereas ladies with appearance etc. etc. do.

Thus, although many of our participants, Big Joe, Noel and Ned included, were or had been engaged in weight-loss practices, 'fatness' was also framed as something about which men were largely, if not entirely, indifferent. While some respondents - especially very large men from the slimming club - voiced hurtful accounts of stigma and how this impacted their loved ones (see Monaghan 2008), they also presented themselves as 'well-balanced' individuals who personally 'don't tend to make an issue out of it' and even if they 'get grief for it', 'it generally washes over' them. By framing the issue as such, 'fatness' was, at least temporarily, rendered either irrelevant or peripheral to masculine worth.

These understandings resonate with numerous feminist critiques of 'dieting' and beauty 'ideals' as gender oppression (e.g. Bordo 1993, Malson, 1998, Malson and Burns 2009b, Wolf 1991). Nevertheless, in the contemporary context of an alleged 'obesity epidemic' the construction of 'excess' weight/fatness as irrelevant or peripheral to self-worth is unlikely to be entirely successful even for men (Monaghan and Hardey 2011). Such constructions, after all, implicate other modalities of embodiment, such as 'the visceral' or biological (Watson 2000) that are reportedly put at risk by 'overweight' and 'obesity'. Medicalised and government-endorsed anti-obesity campaigns pathologise 'bodily bigness' as unhealthy fatness such that, regardless of gender or any other indices of identity, the 'fat' subject is constituted as a failed neoliberal citizen (Guthman and Dupuis 2006, Malson 2008). Indeed, when accounting for why they were 'dieting', men cited, inter alia, health-related concerns alongside reference to media moral panic (e.g. how 'the obesity time bomb' would result in a nation of heart attack victims) (Monaghan 2008). While such concerns often prioritised visceral, experiential and perhaps pragmatic modes of embodiment (e.g. a desire to

ameliorate health problems, feel fitter and become more mobile), the aesthetics of normative embodiment still surfaced in men's weight-related talk in terms of the putative 'obscurity' of 'extreme' fatness and the cultural idealisation of a streamlined physique. Understandably, the latter cultural theme was more commonly raised by younger men, suggesting the salience of the lifecourse (as well as ethnicity, class and sexuality) in mediating the looking-glass body. As discussed in social studies of the body, younger men as well as women have become increasingly subject to body 'ideals'. As Gill et al. (2005: 38, original emphasis) write:

Men's bodies are on display as never before, from the muscular heroes of the cinematic action genre, to the 'sixpacks' that grace the covers of *Men's Health*, and the 'superwaifs' of contemporary style magazines ... However, it is not simply that the *number* of images of the male body has increased; more significant is the emergence of *a new kind of representational practice* in mainstream popular culture, depicting male bodies in idealized and eroticized fashions, coded in ways that give permission for them to be looked at and desired (Moore, 1988; Simpson, 1994).

And, while these 'ideals' tend to eschew the often extreme slenderness of culturally idealised female bodies, they nevertheless dictate a lean physique. Crawshaw (2007) analyses similar discourses in *Men's Health* magazine, where bodies are perfectible and 'men are constructed as active and entrepreneurial citizens able to maintain their own health and well-being through the judicious management of risk in contexts appropriate to dominant discourses of hegemonic masculinity' (p. 1606). Moreover, although women's bodies may still be subject to more intense scrutiny than men's, the aesthetic nevertheless problematises gendered subjectivity for men as well as women who are labelled fat and/or feel 'inappropriately' fat in a fat-phobic culture. As numerous scholars (e.g. LeBesco 2001, 2004, Braziel 2001) argue, fat is often understood as feminised and feminising flesh. Hence, while corpulent women are rendered abject as both fat and as female (Mazer 2001), men's 'fatness', in being similarly feminised, represents a distinct threat to masculinity (Mosher 2001). Accordingly, weight-loss regimes may be instrumental in eradicating 'the abject' feminine from the male body (McPhail 2009). At the same time, though, 'dieting' as a feminised (and, for women, feminising) practice (Orbach 1978, 1993, Malson 1998, Malson and Burns 2009b) also potentially threatens men's identities.

This discursive context thus produces a dilemma for men who might be deemed ‘fat’ and who seek or have sought to lose unwanted weight, especially through dietary means. Not only are their bodies socially constructed through obesity discourse as feminised (e.g. as abject, weak, frail and sickly) but the everyday means of recuperating a leaner and therefore (more ‘acceptably’) masculine physique are also often feminised. This was a potential issue for men in this study, especially interviewees recruited in commercial weight-loss clubs. Hence, these men went to some effort to resist the broader cultural (emasculating) meanings associated with ‘body work’ (see Gimlin 2001), i.e. the project of making the body look slimmer in line with ‘the aesthetic’ and everyday normative prescriptions.

### **‘Does my bum look fat in this?’ Doing masculinities by doing gender in/equality**

As suggested in some of the data presented so far, one of the most prominent ways in which men countered this feminising potential of fatness and ‘dieting’ was through an explicit differentiation of their own weight concerns and weight-loss practices from those of women. As discussed further below, there were two main elements in this process. First, men emphasised that the cultural pressure on women to embody slenderness was far greater than the pressure on men. Second, men repeatedly focused on the aesthetic and hetero-normative values accruing to women’s bodyweight in ways that (implicitly or explicitly) framed explanations for women’s weight concerns as categorically different to their own and other men’s (also Gill et al. 2005). Consider some words from Dom, a mechanic who attended a commercial weight-loss group with his wife and who accounted for his own efforts to lose weight in terms of health, stigma and responsible fatherhood. For Dom, women are appearance-oriented and require male reassurance or validation of an ‘acceptably’ slim (enough) body. This, it was claimed, is in direct contrast to his concerns:

Women go ‘does my bum look fat in this?’ Like, you know? It wouldn’t bother me like. I wouldn’t say to the wife, you know, ‘do these pants make my arse look big?’ (Dom, 44)

Here fatness for women is framed exclusively in terms of (women’s concern with) heterosexual attractiveness: an issue of whether her ‘bum *look[s]* fat’ *to him* (emphasis added) in contrast with Dom’s seeming indifference to his wife’s (or perhaps anyone else’s) aesthetic evaluation of his ‘arse’. As with Gill et al.’s (2005: 38) research on men’s body

projects, such talk is indicative of how men who ‘work on and discipline their bodies’ also work on ‘disavowing any (inappropriate) interest in their own appearance’.

Men differentiated their own (and other men’s) concerns from those of women by framing women’s weight-loss as primarily or entirely an aesthetic project of conforming to a heteronormative ‘beauty ideal’. Perhaps unsurprisingly this difference was frequently explained in terms of greater socio-cultural pressures on women to achieve a particular ‘look’. For example, restricted access to socialising opportunities and unequal pressure on women to look ‘right’ in order to acquire a male partner, ‘peer pressure’ from their girlfriends and, most frequently, the media (notably television and magazines) were all blamed for women’s [perceived](#) preoccupation with slenderness and weight-loss, even when, according to narrators’ estimations, particular young women they encountered did not even need to lose weight. Ray, recruited from a weight-loss club, remarked:

There is a girl [at the club] no names mentioned but I think she’s, she doesn’t look as if she needs to lose any weight but she is there losing weight. Now I don’t know whether she’s been trapped up with all the images that you see in magazines and television that you have got to have this super slim body and, you know, beautiful figure to be part of this world. And I think there is a lot of sadness there, you know, when you cannot really appreciate your own body the way it is. (Ray, 55)

Ray thus frames this ‘girl’s’ weight concerns as unnecessary, regrettable and possibly culturally produced. This ‘doing masculinity through gender in/equality’ had particular salience for men attending commercial weight-loss clubs (generally typified as feminine space) and for particularly large men (with a concomitantly heightened risk of emasculating stigma). However, other ‘big fellas’, who were not members of weight-loss clubs, expressed similar sentiments, thus suggesting that these are more widely circulating views. Big Joe, who had no interest in joining a weight-loss club (which his wife regularly attended), talked about these ‘aggressive’ media influences and their impact on women:

Women have it pushed in their faces all the time, with these supermodels and stuff on telly. Again, it all depends on what people perceive you as. You’ve got all these images thrust upon you of skinny women. And in magazines this is how you should be. And you don’t tend to get that in the male environment. You get the men’s magazines but they

tend to be about the birds with the boobs out. And the latest flash cars and the latest gadgets and gizmos. And you get the women's magazines and it's all the latest little miniskirts, and it's all to do with clothes. And this is how you should look. So I think women feel that they need to conform more to that side of it, where they need to be a small size 8 [UK dress size].

The ways in which bodies are represented in the media, the ubiquity of 'images ... of skinny women', the relative homogeneity of female body norms and the prescriptive emphasis on how women 'should look' were, at least implicitly, criticised by men. This talk was a vehicle for doing masculinities insofar as men had a concerned (and sometimes incredulous) eye on the everyday significance of these widely disseminated images for their wives, daughters and granddaughters. Al, aged 54 and from the slimming club, said 'Aye, I mean, sadly I've got a 12-year-old granddaughter who's concerned about her size' before complaining about the media presentation of 'Posh spice' (the waif-like Victoria Beckham) as a 'role model' for many girls and young women. Such images and 'pressures' were criticised for re-producing a context in which women and girls are made to 'feel that they need to conform more to that side of it'. These accounts can, we would argue, be read as quasi-feminist critiques of the media's promotion of fashion, 'beauty' and the 'thin ideal', as perhaps unfair and unreasonable *and* as a major explanation of higher rates of anorexia and bulimia among girls and women. Equally important in this context, men's talk constructed gendered boundaries, consolidating men's presentation of their own weight concerns and habitus as distinctly non-feminine. According to their definition of the situation, men were not subjected to such intense pressures and, hence, even if engaged in weight-loss practices, were neither appearance-oriented nor 'need[ing] to be a small size 8'.

In short, these men framed women's and girls' weight-concerns as very different from men's and often accounted for that difference as being a consequence of culture. However, as suggested by Ray when referring to 'one girl's sadness' and inability to 'really appreciate' her body, men's culturally-oriented talk was sometimes interwoven with more psychologising accounts. These accounts tended to portray women as hapless 'victims' of the media, mentally weak, irrational, disconnected from reality and/or 'naturally' appearance-focused. As with those 'interpretive repertoires' or 'practical ideologies' reported in Gill et al.'s (2005) research on male body projects, normative masculinity was enacted and policed through such talk. Jim, who attended a slimming club with his wife, explicitly talked about

different socio-cultural pressures on men and women but also attributed women's weight concerns to 'a woman's perception' and, at least implicitly, framed his wife's discontent as irrational. (Elsewhere in this interview Jim talked about going on a diet because he thought he looked pregnant in a photograph and had 'man boobs' [see Monaghan 2008]):

A woman goes out [clothes shopping] slightly overweight, sees something, puts it on, 'oh no it looks like a sack of spuds on me!' Cos then she sees a nice slim girl come out of the other cubicle. And it looks nice on her. And she thinks 'oh it looks fat on me!' It's a woman's perception of life through her eyes. She doesn't take into account her partner's eyes and perception. I mean, you know my wife. My wife to me has never been fat regardless of her weight. She now buys 12-year-old children's jeans. And they're wide round the waist, but she's still not happy. (Jim, 56)

Similarly, Al, a much bigger 'fella', blamed the media but simultaneously implied (perhaps unintentionally) a derogatory construction of women as too easily influenced cultural dupes:

But the media, and everything's obsessed with size 8, size 10. I mean it used to be a size 12 but we've come down a couple from there. ... She [my adult daughter] has got the perfect figure. She's a size 10, but she reads all the magazines and gossip books. And she's seeing all these magazines which focus on Cameron Diaz's 'is that cellulite?' You know? You know? And it's, it's brainwashing. (Al, 54)

While both Al and Jim were personally cognisant of and sensitive to men's vulnerabilities (they talked about suffering from depression in the past), this narrative of women as susceptible to 'brainwashing' was further consolidated through a construction of women as vain and pathological. Whereas Al complained about 'stick insect' women at his workplace, who talked about 'dying if they didn't lose seven pounds before going on holiday', Andy, also from the weight-loss group, said:

Women are vainer aren't they? They are, aren't they! Men don't give a damn, big fat slobs, when they get ... women, the one's that are bulimic and anorexic. It tends to be a woman problem isn't it, rather than a male problem. So it's all down to image. You have to have that image, they look beautiful, makes them feel good. Whereas men don't care as much. So it's, they've been brought up with nice dresses and what have you. And the lads



get all the scraps [he laughs]. You know what I'm saying. I mean women have to look beautiful don't they? It's what they're there for. It sounds sexist but they're bought up to look nice. And you've got somebody looking fat and they feel horrible. (Andy, 52)

While there are, again, references here to cultural pressure and socialisation – that women are '*bought up* to look nice' (emphasis added) – gender differences in weight-concerns were psychologised. In contrast with men who were portrayed as 'big fat slobs [who] don't care as much', women were labelled 'vainer', image-obsessed and more prone to pathology.

In short, men articulated both quasi-feminist critiques of unequal cultural pressures on women *and* more psychologised and derogatory constructions of women as vain, irrational and easily influenced. Psychologising talk defined women's weight-concerns as both insidious and superficial, framing women's putatively fragile sense of self as tied to the 'looking-glass body' from girlhood onwards. Whether men critiqued cultural norms and/or re-articulated derogatory gender stereotypes, what is clear from such talk is that gender in/equalities were functional. By doing gender in/equality, men differentiated their own weight-concerns and practices from women's and girls', thus bolstering a more 'acceptable' masculinity that *was* threatened by unwanted weight/fat and perhaps also by efforts to slim down. Such talk, when set against the background of larger men's accounts of stigma, could also be read as implicitly critiquing normative corporeal concerns that risk spoiling big fellas' identities, i.e. other people's (unreasonable) aesthetic disdain of fatness in a visually oriented culture, which was consequential in triggering many men's dieting careers (Monaghan 2008).

### **Conclusion: Socially fitting masculinities in a supposedly fat nation**

The aesthetic, which valorises the slender or lean body in contemporary consumer culture, is also rationalised by 'weighty' biomedical discourses. This aesthetic is increasingly presented as a 'healthy ideal' against which few people measure up: 'everyone everywhere' is allegedly affected by the 'obesity epidemic' (Gard and Wright 2005: 13). Public health officials assert that the majority of Western populations are placing their health at risk because of their 'excess' weight/fatness or are suffering from a 'chronic disease' (WHO 1998). Accordingly, the putative obesity epidemic constitutes a global public health issue, demanding an answer (typically in terms of lifestyle interventions, such as dietary change and exercise). It is in this

context and a broader visually-oriented consumer culture that denizens of ‘fat nations’ are constructed as (potential) consumers of remedial action and ‘targets’ in the war on obesity.

Yet, amidst this ‘apparent’ democratisation of weight concerns, gender is as pervasive as ever. The bellicose (male coded) war on obesity draws from, reproduces and amplifies deeply gendered constructions of fatness as abject flesh. Indeed, whereas fat has been defined as a ‘feminist issue’ (Orbach 1978), today it is also socially constructed as an emasculating issue that is increasingly affecting male bodies. For those ‘fellas’, ‘lads’ or ‘guys’ who might also identify as ‘big’, obesity discourse potentially spoils their identities through representations of fat men as weak, frail, sickly or pregnant-looking (NAO 2001, Schauss 2006). Turning men into women, as Bourdieu (2001) explains in his study of masculine domination, serves to humiliate them, representing a form of symbolic or communicated violence that is hardly conducive to health and well-being. To return to our eclectic use of Goffman (1968) and Connell (2005) *on the dynamics of interaction*, the emergent discrepancy between ‘big’ men’s virtual and actual identities potentially subordinated these respondents on embodied hierarchies. As with the aforementioned theorists, we view such fraught empirical phenomena as processes that are dependent on situations and socially structured relations rather than the product of ‘fixed character types’ (Connell 2005: 81). Yet, as observed during this research, men, including those who were seeking to lose weight (or had previously tried to lose weight), demonstrated resilience even when they had been stigmatised as obese. When negotiating the negative meanings ascribed to male obesity, these men were not passive victims who simply accepted the pervasive degradation of bodily bigness as emasculating fatness. Rather, men’s weight-related talk became a vehicle for constructing ‘normative’, ‘acceptable’ or socially fitting masculinities, albeit as part of a precarious project that was subject- and context-specific and surrounded by ambivalence.

Grounded in data, our paper has contributed empirical insights into the negotiation of embodied masculinities at a time when ‘big’ male bodies are increasingly subject to pernicious scrutiny, or what Crawshaw (2007: 1606) terms ‘neo-liberal strategies of health governance’. Although by no means exhaustive of the data set or representative of all men who perhaps risk the stigma of obesity, our analysis has provided additional insights into the construction of embodied masculinities amidst interacting social inequalities and fat disdain (which is itself a vehicle for sexism, ageism, racism and classism). Connecting with critical weight studies, influential sociological theory, research into social aspects of

bodies/embodiment and men's body projects, we have considered some of the ways in which masculinities are negotiated in the contemporary context of obesity discourse. This is a context where men's, women's and children's bodies are increasingly rendered unacceptable; where 'fat' threatens to spoil gendered identities and/but where everyday weight-loss practices such as 'dieting' are also feminised. This is a difficult discursive terrain where the 'looking-glass body' risks being shattered in a war on obesity that lends a sense of objectivity and seriousness to the widely circulating aesthetic. As with McPhail's (2009) research on men's obesity in Cold War Canada, there are echoes here from the past wherein the abjection of 'excess' flesh is a means of policing gendered boundaries in 'crisis' times.

In analysing men's weight-related talk our paper has elucidated three main interconnected themes, which (partially) shielded men's embodied identities in fat-phobic environments. This, we would add, is at a time when some public health representatives and policy advisors are calling for more stigma as a legitimate intervention in supposedly fat nations. First, we explored how men resisted discrediting constructions of fat as abject and feminising through counter-constructions of masculine 'bigness' and invulnerability to weight-concerns. Second, we noted how men's more affirmative self-definitions - which often required the tactical elision of (valued) muscular versus (obscene) adipose bulk - remained precarious given the cross-cutting of weight-prejudice with other inequalities (e.g. ethnicity, class and sexuality). Such inequalities position non-white/working-class/gay men as always-already problematic in a society where *any* 'fat' person is deemed pathological and a 'failed' neo-liberal citizen. Third, we considered how, in the context of this hostile discursive field, only-ever-precariously defended 'big' or 'fat' masculinities were buttressed by 'gender in/equality talk'. Here interviewees 'did' masculinity by differentiating their own and/or other men's weight-related concerns and practices from those of women who were deemed more vulnerable in a visually-oriented culture from girlhood onwards. Indeed, men often narrated an unhappy picture consisting of dissatisfied or even deeply troubled women who were preoccupied with their weight and looks, albeit against a backdrop where many 'big fellas' also talked about their own vulnerabilities and the corrosiveness of the aesthetic (Monaghan and Hardey 2011). Here the masculinities of 'big', 'fat' and/or 'dieting' men were defended by employing quasi-feminist critiques of cultural norms, practices and industries and/or voicing patriarchal gender-stereotyping accounts of an alleged weight- and appearance-focused 'female nature'. In short, men underscored the (culturally enforced and/or 'naturally' psychological) gendered inequalities of body 'ideals' and weight concerns, rendering the public issue of obesity and

associated private body troubles generally 'worse' for women and girls. In the discursive field of peremptory and supposedly democratic obesity rhetoric, the masculinities laid siege to in this symbolically violent war were both attacked and defended on the more-than-familiar battle lines already drawn between and within the genders.

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<sup>1</sup> The lifecourse and ‘quest for longevity’ has been described elsewhere as an important consideration when accounting for men’s dieting careers, with one respondent from the slimming club stating most of his peers were ‘roundabout 50’ and concerned about dying and regaining their lost youth (Monaghan 2008: 88; though, there were many other recurrent triggers for dieting such as enacted or felt stigma). The age of each interviewee is provided in the ensuing analysis in order to give readers additional contextual information.