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'You Can't Be Supersized?' Exploring Femininities, Body Size and Control within the Obesity Terrain

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In an atmosphere of neo-liberalism and healthism (Crawford, 1980), the war on obesity targets both genders (Monaghan, 2008). Such is the pervasiveness of obesity discourse that very few escape its evaluative gaze. All adults are to a large extent held responsible for their own health and well-being, and health is equated with body size by health professionals, the media and the general public alike (e.g. Department of Health, 2008; also see LeBesco and Braziel, 2001). As outlined in Chapter 1, dominant obesity discourse, and 'epidemic psychology' (Strong, 1990) with which it is associated, construct 'fat' as unhealthy and slimness and weight loss as inherently good. Whilst such ideas are contested in critical weight studies (see Campos, Chapter 2 in this volume), the conflation of 'being healthy' with 'losing weight or maintaining a low bodyweight', recycled as discursive 'truth', is omnipresent and goes largely unquestioned within Western cultures. Both men and women who are seen as fat in everyday life risk being discredited by obesity discourse and its associated 'concerns'. It is imperative then to recognise that these discursive effects can cause serious harms. These not only include probable stigma, discrimination and spoilt identities for 'large' individuals (e.g. Murray, 2005; Throsby, 2007) but also potential detrimental effects on the physical and mental health of individuals of any size. The equation 'only slim = healthy' can facilitate the rationalisation of 'bulimic' behaviours like purging as 'healthy' (Burns and Gavey, 2008) and generally contributes to many people having disturbed relationships with food and eating (e.g. Lupton, 1996; Orbach, 2006a). These harms are socially distributed according to various axes of power, including sexuality, ethnicity, age and profession (Probyn, 2008, 2009).

One highly significant axis of power distribution is gender and, despite the pervasiveness of obesity discourse, we argue that gender equality within this medicalised and aestheticised terrain is still as elusive as in other areas of society. Generally speaking, women's and men's bodies and identities, their femininities and masculinities, are produced and regulated in qualitatively different ways and inscribed with different meanings. Women, particularly within Western cultures, have historically and currently been subject to considerably greater 'pressure' than men to conform to gendered body ideals particularly, since the 1960s, to slimness as a key signifier of ideal 'femininity' (e.g. Bordo, 1993; Smith, 1990). Whilst pressure on men to conform to particular body ideals is also increasing (e.g. Bell and McNaughton, 2007; Gill, 2008), the ideal masculine body is socially constructed as tall, strong, muscular and lean (Frith and Gleeson, 2004; Monaghan, 2007). A male body that is sizeable, and even technically overweight or obese based upon BMI, is at least entitled to occupy its space (Connell, 1987; Morgan, 1993, cited by Monaghan, 2007). Moreover, bodily appearance and hence bodyweight

and shape is also less prominent in hegemonic constructions of masculinity-in-action than it is in typically more passive constructions of emphasised or 'normative' femininity (Smith, 1990).

This gendering of how appearance figures in constructions of sexed/gendered identities can be understood in the discursive context of Cartesian dualism and the culturally entrenched, hierarchical binaries of mind/body, man/woman, culture/nature, rational/irrational (Malson, 1998). Whilst we cannot treat women as one homogeneous group, with women's subjectivities being inflected by class, ethnicity, age and other cultural forces (Butler, 1999; Probyn, 2009), in Western cultures these Cartesian discourses add to the ways in which femininities are produced and constituted in terms of bodily appearance and consequently the intense production and regulation of women through their bodies. The constructions of 'body fat' and of 'female bodies' converge on 'fat' women's bodies in as much as both 'fat' and women's bodies are construed as uncontained, uncontrolled and dangerous to a Western patriarchal order (Grosz, 1994).

That the female body has been and still is repeatedly constructed in Western cultures as inherently uncontrolled and thus in need of control has been noted by a number of writers and, as Grosz (1994: 203) maintains, the 'metaphorics of uncontrollability', common in 'literary and cultural representations of women', are constituted in terms of women's bodily functions. This applies particularly to processes around sexuality such as menstruation and pregnancy, where themes of uncontrollability (in the form of menstrual blood flow) and undefined boundaries (in pregnancy) are signified:

> Can it be that in the West, in our time, the female body has been constructed not only as a lack or absence but with more complexity, as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow; a viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or simply the phallus but self-containment – not a cracked or porous vessel, like a leaking ship, but a formlessness that engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order? (Grosz, 1994: 203)

Thus, whatever its size or shape, according to this reading the female body *per se* is constituted as formless, uncontained and lacking control; as threatening to cultural (patriarchal) order and thus requiring containment. 'Fat' on female bodies, we would maintain, compounds (rather than initiates) this construction.

Contemporary Western discourses of femininity and beauty in which the (heteronormatively) attractive woman is construed as small and slender have similarly been analysed as both reactions to and expressions of women's relative lack of power and status in contemporary Western cultures (e.g. Chernin, 1983; Lawrence, 1979; Orbach, 1993); as gendered 'ideals' which stamp 'control' on a female body that is culturally constituted as uncontrolled (Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1998); and as a requirement which effectively incapacitates women from taking a more powerful role within society through what Wolf, for example, calls the 'Professional Beauty Qualification' (e.g. Wolf, 1991). In short, women may be constrained

and disadvantaged by the additional energies and other resources they may be persuaded to expend on 'maintaining' their bodies, a drain on resources which equates to inequality. It is not through a 'sovereign power' of men (or any other group) or through its lacking in women, but through the discursive constitution of what a woman/man should be and look like (which in turn is inflected with issues of class, sexuality, age and ethnicity) that women are ultimately disadvantaged. Murray (2008) has recently articulated similar concerns in *The 'Fat' Female Body*. Incorporating reference to her own experiences of fatness, she states that fat women are constituted as an 'aesthetic affront' to society (even in twentieth century medical journals), adding: 'what underpins the current "panic" over "obesity" in contemporary Western culture is a moral anxiety about the preservation of fixed gender identities and normative female sexuality and embodiment' (pp. 2–3).

This is not to say that men are under no pressure to work on themselves and their bodies as signifiers of personhood and masculine identity, and, indeed, many men may endeavour to negate aspects of their physicality that could be construed as woman-like (e.g. man breasts) whether directly by altering the flesh (diet, exercise, surgery) or indirectly through aggressive bravado (Monaghan and Hardey, Chapter 3 in this volume). Furthermore, there is a more general sense in which late modern citizens should engage in body work regardless of their own sex-specific corporeality. Valuing the individual, autonomous, self-improving and self-regulating individual is a characteristic of neo-liberal societies, where we – men and women – are 'obliged to be free' (Rose, 1996: 17) to 'choose' the 'right' actions 'for understanding and improving ourselves in relation to that which is true, permitted, and desirable' (Rose, 1996: 153). The actions we 'choose', for example, choosing how much and what we eat – can be understood in terms of what Foucault termed technologies of the self:

> [T]echnologies of the self, which permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. (Foucault, 1997: 225)

In relation to health and health management in Western nations, the ‘cultural realities’ of what is true, permitted and desirable are constituted within medical discourses, which converge with contemporary discourses of consumer culture and aesthetics in classifying bodies as normal or pathological, healthy or unhealthy. These discourses, employed in, for example, governmental ‘health campaigns’ like the ‘Change for Life’ initiative in the UK (Department of Health, 2004; 2008), are utilized in turn in promoting products and services from fitness studios to supermarkets (e.g. http://www.change-4-life.org/worcester/) all promising to help us make the ‘right’ choices for a ‘healthy’ life. Our argument is then not that men somehow escape the regulatory power of this ubiquitous neo-liberal technology of a healthy self – or what Rich and colleagues (Chapter 6, this volume), term an ‘surveillant obesity assemblage’ – but that the operations of healthism are inevitably gendered, playing out sometimes quite differently in the interstices of the discourses in which health and gender are constituted. Our aim in this chapter is therefore to explore some of the significances of the ways in which fat bodies are also always-already gendered bodies, grounding this exploration in qualitative data and a Foucauldian discourse analysis of women’s *and* men’s talk about ‘*fat women*’ and (un)controllable femininities.

The research and analysis

The analysis presented here is drawn from a three year study into the experience of ‘being large’. In total, 24 women and five men were interviewed individually and in focus groups. The following is based on data collected during one focus group with men and one focus group with women, as well as individual interviews with women and men. The recordings of these conversations were transcribed verbatim<xen>[1]</xen> and anonymised with pseudonyms. We

have taken out the interviewer's non-verbal interjections from the quotes to aid readability for the purpose of this chapter only. The data were discursively analysed, using a broadly Foucauldian approach.

There are many versions of discourse analysis, with varying degrees of emphasis on an investigation of micro-interactions (under investigation of interpretative repertoires) at one end and a focus on broader discursive practices and potential political critique at the other end of the scale. These two ends of a scale are frequently termed discursive psychology (DP) and Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA) respectively (Willig, 2008). Both discursive approaches are grounded in the post-structuralist notion that language does not reflect or transparently represent social reality, but that dynamic and ever changing versions of social reality are constructed through language (Gergen, 2009). They consider discourses as inconsistent and variable, and as constructed in social interaction as well as constructive of objects, subjects and realities. However, whilst DP focuses and locates this construction within discrete events of interaction, within which versions of the world are actively created between the respective individuals involved (Wiggins and Potter, 2008), FDA turns its focus onto which discourses are available to individuals within certain societal, cultural and political contexts (Parker, 1997; Wiggins and Potter, 2008).

For Foucault, discourses are historically and culturally located, dynamic webs of statements, which are interrelated with other statements (Foucault, 1989/1972). Within these discursive fields knowledges and realities are constructed, and the types of discourses available determine what can be said (and by whom), and what types of objects, subjects, realities and ways of being are constructed (Parker, 1992). Foucault closely links knowledge with power which he sees as joined in discourse. Knowledges, or 'regimes of truth', are constituted in discourse, which in turn creates fields of possibilities – of acting, being and knowing. There is a reciprocal relationship between power and knowledge, and this power/knowledge transcends all aspects of life (cf. Hollway, 1989; Malson, 1998).

The subject in post-structuralist theory is constituted and regulated in discourse, and through dynamic and 'power-infused processes of embodied subjectification' (Papadopoulos, 2008: 143). This means that whilst the availability of certain discourses produce particular possibilities of 'doing' and 'being', subjectivities are not only imposed and either accepted or rejected but produced and reproduced through embodied experiences within these fields of possibilities (cf. Papadopoulos, 2008; Smith, 1990). In FDA we thus investigate not only what discourses are available and deployed by individuals but also look at what Parker calls the micro-level, that is how these discourses are used and how subjectivities are produced within them, in order to be 'able to identify the ways in which processes of ideology and power find their way into the little stories of everyday life' (Parker, 1997: 293) and our embodied subjectivities.

The discourses FDA examines are not to be understood as the discrete statements by individual participants that discursive psychology analyses. They occur or exist through the articulation of statements and the relations between a number of statements but no direct interaction between speakers is necessary or, as Foucault (1989/1972) puts it, the respective authors of the statements need not be aware of the relations between his and other author's statements, neither do the authors need to know each other, or even be aware of each others' existence. As such the pieces of discourse we investigate will always only be a fragment of the discursive field they belong to and the relations that form the discursive field are always shifting and dynamic, and as such always only provisional, never fixed (Foucault, 1989/1972). The aim is to locate statements within discursive fields and explore their relations with other statements, the

knowledges, regimes of truth and power-relations that are constituted within their discursive fields and consequently what subject positions and ways of being are constructed and made available within them (cf. Malson, 1998; Malson *et al.*, 2006).

There is no agreed one way of doing Foucauldian discourse analysis, and we would therefore like to briefly outline the steps taken in the analysis presented in this chapter: By reading and re-reading the transcripts we familiarised ourselves with the data and dominant themes were identified. These overriding themes, for example 'gender', were further analysed by marking and copying out all the pieces of text in the data that referred to it. Coding categories in respect of the construction of objects/subjects within the text were identified and transcript extracts copied and pasted into extract collations per object/subject. One collation of extracts was pulled together for each of the following: construction of gender differences; women (e.g. in talk about women's position in society, restrictions on women's lives and choices, and so on); large women; femininities (as in the performance of being a woman, e.g. what signifies being and feeling feminine); men; large men and masculinities. A category labelled 'miscellaneous' contained all extracts that offered an additional aspect of gender, something that was not entirely covered by the other coding categories mentioned above (one example is Erika's talk about supportive women friends, where she draws on discourses of female friendships). Within these data-collations, we identified sub-themes on the object/subjects constructed, discourses employed and the construction of meaning within them. These sub-themes, meanings and discourses were drawn together in a table of constructs, including some of the interview/focus group extracts which our interpretation was based on.

An important part of discourse analysis is the application of one's data to existing literature and theory, in order to locate it within discursive fields (see above) or as Parker puts it to 'soak what you have {text-in-process, in the form of interview transcripts} in this resource' (Parker, 2005: 98). Literature used here includes works by Susan Bordo (1993; 1998/1990),

Sandra Lee Bartky (1988; 1990), Elizabeth Grosz (1994) and others, as well as writings of Michele Foucault (e.g. 1977; 1988; 1991). Having decided what sub-themes should be analysed in detail, the information collated in the table was thus pulled together and analysed in relation to existing literature and theory.

In our analysis, we are not concerned with, for example, any generalisable differences in men's and women's views but, rather, with how 'fat women' are discursively constituted (in both women's and men's talk) and with the gendered constructions of embodied 'fat', control, dieting and empowerment. In the following we focus on the convergence of constructions of 'fat' and 'femininity' on 'fat women's bodies' and with the ways in which constructions of 'female fat' are articulated. Drawing on accounts from both men and women – and focusing on the themes of appearance, the 'uncontrolled female body', woman as body, eating and dieting, and finally empowerment – we explore how this gendering of 'fat' plays out in accounts of living as a fat person and, particularly, as a fat woman.

Appearance

As argued elsewhere (Tischner and Malson, 2008), in/visibility plays a central part in the dynamic construction of 'fat' women's subjectivities. This was articulated during the focus group discussions:

> Erika: And I *do*, I *do* find as well when uhm (.) even the really close circle of friends that I got in {city}, *really*, really supportive women of similar age and things, I'm, I am always very careful what I eat when I'm with them (.)/hmm/(.) because I don't want to be seen to overeat/several: yeah/by them. (Women's focus group)

Even within the close circle of 'really supportive women', Erika construes herself as watchful of what she is eating in order not to be seen to be eating too much (similarly, see Murray, 2008). Of course not all 'large' women will be as careful and concerned as Erika about how they are seen. Significantly, however, awareness of one's appearance, of being seen and 'read' from one's appearance and visible actions in ways that might be stigmatising, was described in the women's focus group as a general concern not only of 'fat' women but of *all* women:

> Erika: yeah (..) it, what would be interesting would be whether the size, you know, 10s and 11, 12s in this world, how often *they* feel attractive, or whether they think, 'oh my bum looks big in this, or my …', you know =
>
> Debbie: = they *do* actually, I've got a friend /Erika =it's people's perceptions/ she's a size 8 and she, she says 'oh, my bum's really big'/{quiet laughter}/ and I was like 'yeah, right, o.k.'/{laughter}/and then she, she asked me to go for coffee one day and I went 'couldn't possibly walk down the corridor with you, your bum is *far* too big'/={collective laughter}/and she felt really upset, and I'm like 'uh,

> irony?'/{collective laughter}/so, yeah, I, I think whatever size you are, you, you hate certain lumps and bumps about yourself. (Women's focus group)

> Deya: I have had all these problems with uhm other people's perceptions of how I should look and that's all it is, really, it's not about you as a person at all. I mean how you are inside your head is nothing to do with how you look/I: no/but, the world today, society today (.) they just look at the outside, uhm a and that's what you (are) judged on, you know, and *so we've all become*, (we all sort of from) the inside looking out constantly inspecting our (.) you know, chassis, like a car or something (emphasis added). (Interview)

Thus, women in general are constructed here as concerned about their appearance and how their bodies will be judged by others and in this context are constituted as vigilantly self-critical of their own bodies and/or body-parts: 'whatever size you are, you, you hate certain lumps and bumps about yourself' and in 'society today' we are all 'constantly inspecting our, you know, chassis' (a tellingly masculinist metaphor that underscores how gendered bodies are socially constructed and experienced under a masculinist gaze). Indeed, the women in our study often constructed their bodies more like a collection of body parts to be assessed- 'lumps and bumps' and bums – than as integrated wholes. 'My bum looks big in this' is frequently presented as a ubiquitous refrain of women, and we encounter it in jokes, the media and day-to-day talk. It is received with the collective laughter of recognition by the women in the focus group, as something that is very familiar.

This ubiquitous concern with physical appearance and the production of the body as a collection of body parts requiring improvement is part of what Shilling (2003) calls the 'body project', the lifelong endeavour to perfect the body. In this context, lifelong 'overweight' is construed as something necessitating a lifelong commitment to weight-loss and institutionally sanctioned control – as articulated in the following accounts from the women's focus group:

> Laura: I went to a dietitian when I was 7/hmm/because I was picked up by the health screening at school as being overweight, and (.) that was the beginning. Dietitian when I was 7 and diets (.) ever since (.). (Women's focus group)

> Debbie: I was a size 16 going to comprehensive school, and look, […] I think, crikey, size 16, I'd *love* to be a size 16 but, looking back I felt enormous going to school/yeah/and I was the biggest girl in the school. (Women's focus group)

The women participants here construe their lives as constant battles with their weight, starting at an early age. These battles, which are, of course, mandated and legitimated by 'the war on obesity' as well as a 'fashion-beauty complex' (Bartky, 1990; also, see Monaghan, 2008), are fought on the grounds of *both* health and appearance. And in both discursive terrains 'large' women are positioned as in need of improvement. 'Fat' is culturally constructed as ugly (Malson, 1998), and being thin, albeit nowadays also 'toned and slightly muscly' (Arthurs and Grimshaw, 1999), is generally considered beautiful or 'ideal' for Western women. At the same time, discourses of beauty have dovetailed in recent years with discourses of health (Arthurs and Grimshaw, 1999; Malson, 2008) such that through the near interchangeability of 'health' and 'beauty', beauty 'on the outside' is read as health 'on the inside' (Riley *et al.*, 2008). And, within

a neo-liberal context, health (on the inside) is constituted as a matter of individual responsibility where everybody – men and women – is held responsible for their own health and deemed able to change health through 'health behaviours' (cf. Rose, 1996).

Whilst the production and maintenance of a healthy body is now constructed as a lifelong project *for all*, the lifelong project of appearance 'enhancement' remains distinctly feminised, even whilst it is also increasingly aimed at men (Gill, 2008). Women become actively engaged in 'doing femininity' through working on their bodies (cf. Smith, 1990; Ussher, 1997), which become 'body projects' of subjectivity, regulated through a nexus of discourses of heteronormative beauty, health and femininity. For Dorothy Smith (1990), women's work on their bodies is part of the complex relations and discourses that 'define' and produce femininity. The recent convergence and conflation of 'health' (that is, a particular version of health, constituted through weight rather than other indices of the physical body) with 'beauty' and 'femininity' can be seen as further consolidating the regulation of women's lives as lifelong body projects.

The above accounts can also be seen as drawing on the discourse of Cartesian dualism in which the body is constructed as a separate, inferior entity to the mind, which needs to be controlled by the mind (Bordo, 1993). Drawing on these discourses, in the above excerpts, women are constituted as critical observers of their own bodies such that the scrutinising subject/mind is separated from the body constituted as an object of her critical gaze (see also Blood, 2005) and, as we have outlined above, in need of control and containment.

The gendering dynamics of body size

The containment of the female body in contemporary Western culture and its apparent threat to cultural/patriarchal order is (in part) achieved through the construction of the 'ideal' woman as slim (Bordo, 1993) – a body that is ornamental, streamlined and expressive rather than instrumental and capable of exceeding its own limits. This culturally constructed and constraining equation of normative 'femininity' with slim/small bodies – objectified-bodies-in-the-world, more so than embodied-subjects-that-physically-work-in-and-on-the-world – is articulated in the following excerpts from the women's focus group where, one could argue, emphasis was given to our primary instrument for acting on and changing the world (i.e. the hands) as well as women's fashions (thus connecting back to our section on appearance):

> Debbie: I feel *less* feminine (.) because of my size (..)
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> Judy: I can't say I have ever felt feminine=
>
> Debbie: =then I also have my father's large hands rather than my mother's small hands, so (.) […] I feel, the bigger I've been, the less feminine I've, I've felt.
>
> […]
>
> Laura: In a lot of shops you do now also get a petite range/hmm/for small and short people/yeah/I'm torn between the two because I'm not very tall/{laughter} […]

> Erika: But isn't petite such a (..) […] connotations/{group comments}/are nicer connotations than *plus*/yeah {laughter}/your petite is one end and plus is the other. (Women's focus group)

In the above excerpts, large bodies, or indeed just large body parts like hands, are associated implicitly or by default with men and masculinity. Being small in height in itself is not enough: femininity is construed here as 'petite', as small in every sense and every direction – something that is also observed in Monaghan's (2008) study where men sometimes justified their 'bigness' through appeals to embodied masculinity ('being more of a man') in contrast to women who were normatively positioned as ideally 'petite and small' (p. 48). Laura jokes that she is torn between the plus and petite women's clothes sections of shops as she is 'not very tall'. Through the laughter in the group this dilemma is constituted as a joke. Despite the fact that she is 'not very tall', as a 'fat' woman, Laura would not call herself petite in earnest, which, in contrast to 'plus size', is positively construed. 'Your petite is one end and plus is the other' (Erika). The 'plus size' conjures up images of adding on more, of too much, of excess. In addition to connotations of excess appetite as well as excess body, the excess signified by 'plus size' resonates too with the construction, outlined above, of woman as excessive, expansive and uncontrollable, in need of containment (Grosz, 1994). In the excerpts above, Debbie, Laura and Erika articulate their disqualification from this petite feminine 'perfection': their 'plus size' bodies signifying not an 'ideal' diminutive and contained femininity but an 'improper' excess of flesh (and perhaps appetite) on a body that, in being female, is already constituted as an excessive and uncontrolled liability (see also Ussher, 1991).

The thin woman's body, then, signifies the 'ideal' feminine woman, which, at the same time also signifies the inferiority of women in a patriarchal society – a body, and thus person, one (man) does not have to take seriously, and need not feel threatened by (cf. Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1998; Wolf, 1991). Normative femininity is constructed as, and signified through, smallness, fragility, emotionality and frivolity, all characteristics that are constructed as inferior to men's rational and unemotional mode of operation (cf. Malson, 1998). Sarah Crawley (2002), in her very entertaining 'autoethnographic rant on dresses, boats and butchness' argues that women's bodies are also socially constructed as less able than men's bodies. This construction of the idealised, i.e. small, female body, as being not as capable as a man's body was also evident in our data. In contrast to the constructions of the 'fat' woman as lacking control and therefore 'being no good' for a job, discussed above, here her size was construed as working for her in respect to gaining respect in the (male-dominated) workplace. As can be seen, however, this entailed negating her femininity in order to 'pass' in a domain where instrumental rational action, and getting 'one's hands dirty', took precedence over other forms of gender validation:

> Lucy: I worked for quite a long time, well for *19* years for {communications company}, and 13 of those years I spent as an engineer (.) uhm, I was the second woman in {city} to become (.) an engineer (.) uhm, the girl before me was slim, blonde and (.) the guys used to do everything for her (.) whereas *I* was (.) not as overweight as I am *now* but I was still overweight, and, hence, I (.) more rapidly became accepted because I was seen as being possibly stronger (.) and more able to do the *job* than being a delicate thing/general murmur/I mean one of the guys that I was, an out and out, uh, not quite a misogynist but going that way (.) one day at tea break sat down and said, well, yeah, well *you*, Lucy, you're just one of

> the lads (..) and I actually th- (..) took that as quite a compliment/(inaud)/in that I've been accepted as being just *me*/yeah/(Women's focus group)

Similar to the above quotes where 'largeness' was construed as non-feminine here again being overweight is produced as signifying non-femininity, however, this time not in an entirely problematic way. The above extract positions Lucy as 'one of the lads', as a non-feminine woman within society, generally, and one could say thereby disqualifies her from femininity as conventionally defined in terms of appearance comprising a streamlined physicality (and other aspects of the body, such as blonde hair). However, in contrast to the earlier positioning of 'fat' women, Lucy here also constructs her 'overweight' as enabling her to gain respect in a male-dominated work environment. By not being 'slim' and 'blonde' (and typically woman-like) she is being considered an equal who can hold her own like the other 'lads' she works besides. Dorothy Smith (1990) uses the phrase 'fatness as a repudiation of the local organization of femininity' (p. 183), to describe the way in which being 'fat' can free women from the 'doctrines of femininity' (p. 171). These doctrines of femininity, that is the socially constructed notions of what makes a woman, are being distributed and reinforced through the discourses of femininity within the mass media and day-to-day talk, but also through women's compliance with them. Women gain 'membership' in the discourses of femininity, through the adoption of the practices and appearances prescribed within the doctrines. The images women thereby create are being 'read' by others – often in terms of the above discussed signifiers of femininity, i.e. thin/small, emotional, frail, caring for others, passive, and so forth, and in relation to the male-dominated workplace as possibly less able or 'incompetent' (e.g. Nicolson, 2002; Orbach, 2006b; Smith, 1990):

> When they lose weight, that is, begin to look like a perfect female, they find themselves being treated frivolously by their male colleagues. When women are

> thin, they *are* treated frivolously: thin-sexy-incompetent worker. (Orbach, 2006: 22; original emphasis)

Some women may thus intentionally break the interpretative circle and avoid the doctrines of femininity, in order to avoid the thin/feminine/incompetent complex (cf. Crawley, 2002). We are not suggesting that women intentionally become 'fat' in order to succeed in the world of engineering or other male-dominated work-environments, and the dynamic constructions of women within the discursive fields of the workplace and capabilities remain problematic. Whilst some 'large' women (who are seen to be like men or 'lads') are positioned as competent and respected members of a predominantly male work-force within discourses of embodied masculinities and femininities in the above excerpt, the discourses equating normative femininity with less capability, irrationality, lack of self-control, and so forth, stay in place. These discourses were also evident in talk about food, eating and dieting in our study.

Women's diets, food and freedom: From personal troubles to a public issue

As numerous commentators have observed, and as briefly outlined above, Western culture places very high value on self-discipline and the size of one's body is seen as a signifier of a person's self-control (e.g. Lupton, 1996; Rose, 1996). The gendered body is not only personal in such a terrain, but also very public. Women, in particular, may be evaluated by others and themselves and seek to construct their embodied identities in relation to these dominant and highly publicised discourses. This is reflected in constructions of (feminine/feminising) fat as signifying an absence of control, with self-control construed as dieting or not eating:

> Judy: you cannot buy a woman's magazine now, without it offering you a *diet* on the front page, to make you feel as if, if you're a woman you gotta be on a diet, if you're fat you gotta be on a diet/hmm/and you *cannot* get away from it, wherever you move. (Women's focus group)

In the above quote dieting is construed (in magazines) as a woman's and a 'fat' person's duty, with a personally experienced trouble becoming a public issue (Mills, 1970/1959) as manifest through ubiquitous obesity discourse. This imperative not to eat in order to lose weight is continuously constructed in discourses of health, discourses of femininity, and indeed in the common narratives we come across on a daily basis<xen>[2]</xen> as reflected in the excerpts

below. As can be seen and in accord with recent observations in critical weight studies (Evans *et al.*, 2008; Monaghan, 2008), medical practice and medicalisation are also very much implicated in such talk, thought and action – a commonly recycled and potentially injurious obesity discourse that cannot be divorced from gender and which is imbued with militarised metaphors that are also part of everyday parlance (e.g. 'battling' with one's weight):

> Sue: I think it's it it's again, it's a judgemental thing I mean partly in the in the medical services now it's *such* a big issue that, you know, if you cross the, *dare* to cross the door for anything, even if it's just a vaccination for a holiday, you know they will be uh, you know you are not gonna not gonna get out without getting on the scales, you know, and it's uhm (..) it's, it's frustrating because, you know, you can't lead your ordinary life because *this*, the fact that you are, you know you got a weight problem, will get in the way. (Interview)

> Jemima Cobleigh: I did once say to somebody they made made a comment about eehm needing to needing to lose weight and I said oh yes I know it's such it's it is such a battle. 'Well all you've got to do is stop eating isn't it?' I looked and I went o.k. thank you for your helpful advice. Well and they were they were big as well and eehm it was a it was a chap actually and he was going on and on and on about me needing to lose weight and I'm like well excuse me but have you actually looked at yourself? I mean I don't normally because I know how hurtful it is but I was just getting so in … that he felt I I that he could comment about me. (Interview)

The socially accepted norms of 'perfection', of health and beauty, are constructed, circulated and maintained through the above mentioned discourses in texts, images, talk and action. As such our practices, our technologies of the self, are regulated in and through discourses. As articulated in the excerpts above, there is no getting away from the discourses of health and beauty that construct women as 'ideally' always dieting and dieting/not eating as a feminised<xen>[3]</xen> practice.

This normalisation of women's dieting (see also Orbach, 1993) was constructed in the men's focus group as a counterproductive and harmful social pressure which 'must be a great deal worse' for women, a view that is also expressed by men who have participated in other studies (Monaghan, forthcoming):

> Rich: I think that sort of diet thing is, must be, *must be*, I cannot say *it is*, but I, but I would imagine it must be a great deal worse {for women}/I: hmm/In my view it must be a great deal worse (.)

> I: In what way?

> Rich: All the social pressure to, to, to not eat uhm (.) which is basically, I mean, the whole way through, it's an unhealthy thing because what it ends up doing is, […] you tend to eat more and more privately/Don: mhm/(.) which means it's actually doing the opposite/Don: mhm/you know the social pressure is actually having the opposite effect to what (.) you would imagine the social pressure would. You'd think the social pressure would, would depress somebody's eating when act-, in fact it's pushing the eating into a private place where it can actually be (.) uhm (.) more, you know, they could be eating more, and *more* unsuitably, because uhm, because what you eat in private tends to be (.) you know portable (inaud) tasty foods tend to be much worse for you. (Men's focus group)

Thus Rich suggests that 'the diet thing' is 'a great deal worse' for women than men and goes on to construe this as counterproductive by drawing on everyday understandings of criminal(ised) practices such as drug-taking, which he presents as 'pushed … into a private place', resulting in 'over-indulgence'. Significantly while Rich articulates a 'woman-friendly' account that is critical of 'the diet thing' his argument is also premised on a assumed 'unsuitable-ness' of the 'eating more' that he suggests women do in private spaces.

Representations of women eating in secret have also been analysed by Bordo (1993) in her work on advertisements for food products. Women, she suggests, are generally depicted eating publicly only in a restrained way, but as indulging in food once hidden away behind 'do not disturb signs'. Thus Bordo claims that 'female eating is virtually always represented as private, secretive, illicit' (p. 129) and links this also to Victorian times, when women were instructed that it was not appropriate for them to show unrestrained appetite:

> The representation of unrestrained appetite as inappropriate for women, the depiction of female eating as a private, transgressive act, make restriction and denial of hunger central features of the construction of femininity and set up the compensatory binge as a virtual inevitability. (Bordo, 1993: 192)

This dynamic in the construction of 'eating what one wants' for women as something that was wrongly pushed 'underground' by society's disapproval on the one hand, and as problematic on the other hand, was also evident in the following excerpts. Here, again, unrestrained eating was construed as an act of freedom and rebellion yet, at the same time, as a problem, as trouble:

> Judy: I don't think I was *really* fat until I, after I'd had the children, but the *real* problem started when I left my husband and I was allowed to do what I wanted to do for the first time in my life (..) I can eat when I want, and eat what I want, whenever I want (.)
>
> Debbie: The same thing happened to me when my mother died. I went from (..) not, only having chocolate on the weekends or whatever and then mum died and I could have chocolate every night of the week if I wanted to, so I did/yeah/and I've grown 10 stone within (.) 3 years/yeah/(Women's focus group)

> Linda: I wouldn't eat a pudding {when eating out with mum} because I would, mum would frown upon that, uhm, I probably wouldn't have starters, I probably just have a main course and it probably would be salad {laughter}
>
> Laura: Trouble *is*, you then go home afterwards ={laughter}= and you make up for it/several: oh yeah/because it's that reaction, it's like 'now I *can* have what *I* want to have'/yeah, it is isn't it/(..). (Women's focus group)

In these excerpts, the women represent themselves as grasping some freedom in eating what they want. Having been controlled by others in their eating habits for a long time once they can eat what they want they will. The controlling is here not constructed as general social pressure but as happening within family structures, with the women (apart from Judy) positioning themselves as rebelling against maternal (or sometimes a husband's) disapproval. Lupton (1996) describes how young adults, when moving out from home, enjoy the new-gained power over what they could and could not eat, and similar discourses of shifts in power relations are at work here. From being disempowered by husband or mother, women construe themselves as then enjoying self-determination in relation to food as soon as they can. However, this freedom of eating, this rebellion, is still enacted behind closed doors, done in hiding, and still constructed as something that is 'trouble'. Whilst positioning themselves as rebels within discourses of familial and patriarchal control, the dominant and stigmatising discourse of the 'fat' overeater is held in place within these articulations. The simplistic conflation of the stereotypical 'obese' body with gluttony and/or the eating of 'bad' food within these discourses is contested by some fat activists (e.g. Cooper, 1998) as well as writers from other disciplines (e.g. Jutel, 2005; Keith *et al.*, 2006; Murray, 2005), and the identity struggle it imposes on 'fat' individuals is reflected in our research data. In Laura's comment, confirmed in the collective laughter of recognition it receives, there is a dynamic tension between, on the one hand, finally getting the food one wants but, on the other hand, construing this as a rebellion against a seemingly appropriate or necessary

(maternal/patriarchal) control. As such the women here position themselves as troubled rebels, who may be 'wrong' for indulging their appetites.

Empowering women's 'fat'?: Strategies for managing potentially spoilt gendered identities

Being 'fat' was not always construed as wholly negative, however, although positive aspects may entail other drawbacks for women, for example a negation of normative femininity, as discussed above in the context of male-dominated workplaces. Within the discourses articulated in our study, 'large' bodies were constituted as empowering in various circumscribed ways. As mentioned above, the construction of embodied masculinities and femininities is mediated by issues of class, sexuality, professions and subcultural aspects; in relation to (sub)cultural aspects of embodied 'fat' masculinities Monaghan (2008), for example, has provided a detailed discussion with reference to men's accounts. In our focus group, size was also construed as potentially empowering for women albeit, as seen in the following focus group excerpt, with reference to modes of comportment that are equated with masculinity (violence and conflict management). What readers may also observe in this extract, and in connecting back to some of our previous analysis, is evidence of ongoing identity problems for some of these women vis-à-vis dominant discourses that equate valued femininity with physical appearance:

> Erika: But it's also partly how we feel about *ourselves*, though, isn't it, how we/Laura: yeah/project ourselves (.) and how (.) 'cause I, I think occasionally being big has actually *helped* me, where, for example, I used to work in an FE college, in the library there, and we, we had a huge fight break out in the middle of the library, so I just stood in the middle and, 'right, you go there, you go there' (.) *big* (.) you know, and, and, they had to take notice of you, uhm, no doubt if I had been much smaller but still with a loud voice, may be I could have done it, but the fact that I was *physically* big gave me, empowered me to enable me to do that (.) so I think it, it's partly how *we* feel about ourselves as well/hmm/because how often do any of us feel really, really attractive? (..) {quiet laughter}. (Women's focus group)

In the above account, being 'large' is associated with strength and with not being 'messed around', a small benefit, one might say, given a) normative idealisations of valued femininity which women often measure themselves against and b) the larger symbolic assault on people who are routinely discredited as inappropriately fat or obese within interpersonal interactions, public health campaigns and the current war on obesity. Erika construes being 'physically big' as empowering and enabling, drawing on a discourse of liberal individualism to construe empowerment as a product of 'how *we* feel about ourselves' – a feeling that comprised ambivalence and contradiction and was publicly shared following Laura's emphasis on 'we'.

Nonetheless, in seeking to manage spoiled identities and stigma (Goffman, 1968), being seen and heard as a 'fat' woman was also construed as empowering in other places and in ways

that did not necessarily entail negating their femininity as conventionally defined (e.g. being fashion conscious or engaging in dance). Also, some of the participants in our research who identified as fat, found it empowering to see larger individuals achieving in areas that are socially constructed as reserved for 'slim' people (e.g. running). Eileen spoke about wearing shorts in public, for example, and Charlotte talked about her dancing and orienteering friends:

> Eileen: I mean I personally haven't got a problem with wearing things like shorts /I: mm/ um, but I'm, I've got big friends and I've got friends that wouldn't wear sleeveless tops […] and I've even had people stop me in the street and say oh I've always wanted to wear shorts, I just wanted to say 'oh God you've just made my day seeing you in a pair of shorts'. (Interview)

> Charlotte: I guess I *do* carry these internalised notions of what a 'fat' person can do and it's important to me to be around people that that kind of buck those notions like (.) my friend {name} is a dancer she's just an incredible dancer/I: Hmm/and you know, uh and not just like (.) a {laughing} crappy dancer, she's like a da, a prop, a proper professional dancer and she's fat and my friend {name} in Norway does orienteering and, you know, she runs around in the woods with a map and she's my size, and you know I find that (.) just amazing and kind of nearly nourishing to be around people like that. (Interview)

Visibility and being seen has long been associated with the 'male gaze' (e.g. Coward, 1984) and surveillance (Foucault, 1977). However, as Foucault (1977) argues, power is productive as well as constraining. As detailed in work elsewhere (Tischner and Malson, 2008), being visible as a 'fat' woman and watched by others takes on a different significance here, as it is constructed by both Eileen and Charlotte above as having a productive rather than constraining power. There is in these accounts a similar emphasis on the *visibility* of women's large bodies but the power-relations that are constituted in Eileen's and Charlotte's accounts are normalising of bigger women's bodies and enabling rather than excluding and disabling. In addition, the positive effects of being seen and seeing other 'large' individuals are not only constructed on a one-to-one basis with one person learning from one other. They are constructed at a social as well as an

individual level – as leading to a normalisation of the visibility of, and perhaps subsequently improved acceptance of 'large' people.

Conclusions

One of the major themes discussed in this chapter has been the gendered dynamic around control. The constructions of 'fat' and femininity converge on the 'large' woman's body, in as much as her body in terms of both its size and its gender is made to signify a lack of self-control, self-containment and thus as threatening to (patriarchal) order (except, perhaps, in the context of some male-dominated work environments, as discussed above). This threat then becomes contained through a positioning of 'large' women within discourses of health, femininity and beauty as in need of improvement to be achieved through a 'body project' of self-scrutiny and a life-long battle with her bodyweight. The current atmosphere of healthism, the ever-intensifying 'war on obesity' and the conflation of health and beauty thus produce an evermore restrictive prescription of available 'body projects'. The 'obesity debate', in our view as feminist social psychologists, thus needs to be expanded beyond its rather limited and limiting horizons to explore these complex gendered discursive interactions and the various ways they may produce and regulate the embodied lived experiences and identities of women of all sizes. In connecting with other feminist literature we would add that this is with an awareness of many Western women's often already troubled relationships with their bodies, food and dieting.

We would stress that women are not passive dupes within these complex discursive systems and dynamics of power, however, but position themselves as active agents within these projects of body, health and femininity. They may simultaneously accept and reject the subject positions of, for example, the 'troubled' eater on the one hand and rebel on the other hand, in their accounts of eating with other people and in private. There is an ambiguity between taking control over their eating by eating in private, and at the same time construing this private eating as problematic. In all of these, there are also tensions and ambivalences with regards to the negotiation of stigmatising identities and stereotypes that would position fat people as gluttonous and out-of-control.

'Large' bodies were not only construed as problematic but also as empowering at times. However, as observed, the negation of negativity also often entailed the negation of normative femininity with becoming empowered also meaning becoming more 'masculine' in places (e.g. becoming 'one of the lads' or forceful and potentially violent). At other times, our respondents' discourses 'fitted' with ideals of femininity in a way that was subjectively experienced as empowering by them (e.g. with reference to fashions and professional dancing). Whilst we have focused our analyses in this chapter on a gendering of 'fat' which, we have suggested, often

disadvantages (fat) women, we have also sought to illustrate how women who participated in our study offered accounts that moved beyond and resisted the reductionist and truncated terms of dominant obesity discourse so that fat bodies figured as empowered, strong, enabling and able to engage in activities (e.g. orienteering) that are often socially constructed as reserved for slim people. Increasing the visibility of 'fat' individuals engaged in such activities was constructed as normalising of the 'fat' body and as such as validating and potentially aiding the social acceptance of fat. The latter may be difficult for obesity epidemic alarmists to accept. However, considering the social construction of health and well-being, for the individual 'large' person there are potential benefits to be derived from the discursive expansion and diversification of acceptable body shapes and sizes vis-à-vis embodied identities, relationships and health practices. Some of these themes are taken up in subsequent chapters, such as Charlotte Cooper's account of fact activism (Chapter 7) and Lucy Aphramor and Jacque Gingras' chapter on dietetics and Health in Every Respect (Chapter 8).

<fn-group type="endnotes">
<en><label>1</label>The following transcription conventions were used:

{laughing/laughter} spoken whilst laughing

{} passages (e.g. names) anonymised by researcher or additional explanations that are not part of the original interview

[…] denotes were small sections of the transcript have been cut out

(.) (..) (…) pauses – more points denote longer pauses

() inaudible or unclear passages, so the accuracy of the transcription is not guaranteed

do – Italics denote words/phrases that were emphasised/stressed by the interviewee

// – interjections

= denote beginning and end of overlapping speech or if there was no break between the to speakers' utterances

(↓) denotes a drop in volume in the word/phrase following the symbol.</en>

<en><label>2</label>On a recent trip to Munich, the first author was reminded of this socially constructed female duty to watch ones calorie intake and to choose diet drinks (and foods), by an air hostess: When offered a drink, Irmgard asked for a can of coke, and was promptly presented with a can of *Diet* Coke. She responded to the offer by saying: 'Could I have "proper" coke, please?' The air hostess, pointing to the red non-diet coke can on her trolley, with an incredulous tone in her voice

asked: ‘This one?’ and after Irmgard’s confirmation added: ‘It’s just that ladies don’t ask for diet coke, but always mean it’. It seems that diet coke is construed as the standard for ‘ladies’.</en>
<en><label>3</label>For excellent discussions of the implications of this construction of dieting as feminine for ‘fat’ men, please see Stearns (1997) and Monaghan (2008).</en>

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