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Title: *Exercising Exclusions: Space, Visibility, and Monitoring of the Exercising Fat Female Body*

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to inspect the position of the fat (female) body in the field of exercise. Specifically, I am interested in fat women's experiences of their treatment while exercising in public. I will argue that in particular public spaces for exercise such as gyms and swimming pools are currently discursively and concretely constructed as "exclusive" spaces for the normative bodied. Bodies that are deemed non-normative, such as fat bodies, are often made either invisible or intolerable in the discourse of physical activity and exercise. Consequently, public spaces for exercise such as gyms or swimming pools are seen as out of bounds for non-normative bodies and this is reflected in fat people's experiences of their treatment doing exercise. Fat women in particular experience disrespectful treatment in such places: they are harassed, ridiculed and commented on. As my material I will use a public discussion concerning fat people and exercise that took place in the Finnish media in the spring of 2015. This paper aims to show that in order to make physical activity and exercise more attractive to fat people, more attention should be paid to its discursive and practical construction as a space for all bodies.

Keywords: Fatness, Gender, Exercise, Monitoring, Body

Introduction: Gender, Exercise, and Monitoring Fat Female Bodies

Exercise is generally considered in a positive light as promoting all-around health and well-being. Its beneficial health effects have been amply demonstrated in research, and public health officials routinely encourage people to engage in some form of exercise to improve their fitness. However, exercise is not always a source of well-being, empowerment, or positive embodied experiences - some body types are not so welcome in the field of exercise. Exercising can be a challenging and sensitive issue for those whose bodies are perceived in some way non-normative. This includes for example, fat, aging, and disabled bodies (e.g. Gailey 2014; Harjunen 2002).

Feminist research has clearly established that thinness is a powerful gendered body norm indicating social acceptability in the Western cultural sphere (e.g. Bordo 1993; LeBesco 2004). Due to the gendered nature of body norms, fatness is particularly stigmatizing for women. Normativity of the female body, especially its size and weight, are tightly monitored (e.g. Gailey 2014; Wolf 1990). The fat female body is a target of mostly negative evaluation, commentary, and social sanctions - both in public and privately (e.g., Gailey 2014; Kwan 2010; Murray 2008). The effects of this stigmatizing gaze are especially felt in situations, such as exercising, where the body is particularly noticeable or in the focus of attention (e.g. Gailey 2014, 37). In order to exercise, especially in public, fat women have to first overcome significant social and psychological barriers - being more likely to connect the experience with body-shaming, embarrassment, and feelings of vulnerability than any pleasure or well-being. Indeed, fear of the negative reactions of others makes many avoid exercising altogether (e.g. Harjunen 2009).

The aim of this article is to investigate the social positioning of the fat (female) body in the context of exercise. Firstly, I am interested in fat women's experiences of how they are treated while exercising in public, and secondly, I want to explore the ways by which fat bodies are

excluded from the field of exercise. This includes discourses and practices that might lead fat women feeling out of place in the field of exercise. As my material, I am using a public discussion in the Finnish media from the spring of 2015 to argue that certain public exercise spaces such as gyms and swimming pools are currently constructed as “exclusive” spaces for the normative bodied - both discursively and concretely. This would explain, in part, why fat people so often feel unwelcome when exercising in public.

In this article, I am especially interested in the apparent paradox surrounding exercise and gendered fat bodies - namely how certain discourses and practices discourage those of non-normative size from exercising, while at the same time also condemning and shaming them for not exercising.

Regarding my analysis of the fat female body in this context, I will draw from Gailey’s (2014) thought on “hyper(in)visibility” of the fat female body, which I will complement with Kwan’s (2010) notion of the “body privilege.” According to Gailey, it is not enough to contemplate visibility and invisibility of the fat body in social context. She argues that in order to understand the paradoxical social positioning of marginalized bodies, the “spectrum of visibility” needs to range from hyperinvisibility to hypervisibility (Gailey 2014, 12-13). Gailey puts forth that the fat (female) body is made hypervisible at one end of the spectrum, in terms of size, but at the same time socioculturally marginalized and stigmatized - at times rendered hyper(in)visible - at the other. Kwan, for her part, uses the notion of “body privilege” to explore the embodied gendered and racial oppression of fat people (Kwan 2010, 145-146). Kwan observes that “body privilege,” of being normative-sized and white, for example, allows people to feel comfortable in their surroundings and public spaces. She says: “Those with privilege are able to perform mundane routines with ease, something those without privilege cannot necessarily assume” (Kwan 2010, 145). As prevailing cultural and social structures privilege normative-sized bodies, fat and racialized fat women lack this privilege. Fat women’s right to take space and go about their

daily lives without harassment is continually questioned by dirty looks and nasty comments, at the same time they often feel overlooked or socially invisible (e.g. Gailey 2014; Kwan 2010).

The Dominant “Obesity” Discourse and the Fat Stigma

Although the research and discourse on fatness have diversified - particularly over the past two decades - biomedical research still dominates understanding and interpretations on fatness (e.g., Saguay 2013). In the 2000s, the so-called “obesity epidemic discourse” anchored fatness in the biomedical sphere even more deeply (Boero 2012). At the same time it started a “fat panic” portraying “obesity” as a global problem and danger to public health, the economy, and morality (Gard & Wright 2005; Harjunen 2017; LeBesco 2010).

Fat people were obviously targets of prejudice long before the rise of the “obesity epidemic discourse” (e.g., Farrell 2011; Gailey 2014). Fatness has long been a social stigma, or negative social marker, and it is powerful. Negative stereotypes about fat people abound, with research showing that they are discriminated against and often treated with disrespect in a range of social situations: for example, in education, health care, and the labor market (e.g., Brownell and Teachman 2000; Härkönen and Räsänen 2008; Kauppinen and Anttila 2005; Puhl and Brownell 2001; Sarlio-Lähteenkorva et al 2004).

The stigma of fatness is layered; it not only concerns a person’s physical size or appearance. In lay discussion fatness is commonly considered a self-inflicted and personal issue due to an individual’s undesirable personal and moral characteristics. It is often construed as an embodied sign of such things as laziness, or a lack of will power and self-control - as demonstrated by Valkendorff (2014) in her study on online discussions on fatness and fat people in Finland. Furthermore, it is assumed that these traits lead to bad choices being made regarding one’s

nutrition and exercise. For example, in the spring of 2015, a survey on Finnish people's views about fatness revealed that most of the 1,096 respondents thought it was at least partly self-inflicted and a result of individual choice (Rinta-Tassi 2015). These moralistic views that shame and condemn fatness are common, in spite of the knowledge that many of the factors that cause fatness - such as illness, poverty, and unemployment - are often beyond the individual's control (e.g., Boero 2012; Harjunen 2017).

The Fat Gendered Body – Hyper(in)visible

In her book *The Hyper(in)visible Fat Woman: Weight and Gender Discourse in Contemporary Society* (2014) sociologist Jeannine Gailey identifies a phenomenon she calls hyper(in)visibility of the fat body, which refers to how her informants experienced the paradoxical way they are viewed on the “the spectrum of visibility.” A fat female body is hypervisible in so far as it attracts a great deal of negative attention, yet at the same time barely visible in the media and various social spaces - so in that respect it remains hyper(in)visible.

Hypervisibility refers to the presence of such marginalized bodies being over-analyzed so that they become a spectacle, rather than just simply acknowledged (Gailey 2014, 12). A common example of this would be the way fat bodies are represented in the media. A typical television format is a sensationalized drama documentary or reality TV show in which every detail of the fat body is scrutinized. Here the fat person is portrayed as a cautionary example of alleged excess, bad lifestyle choices, and so on. In the process, the fat person becomes objectified and dehumanised. Jennings (2010) noted in her research on the shopping possibilities for plus size women how fat bodies are being erased from social spaces. She observed that fat women were more often ignored by staff than normative-size clients. Jennings's interpretation was that a fat body in a women's clothes shop is in the “wrong place.” She says that overlooking fat clients

like this is reflected in the layout of the shop where plus size clothes are usually hidden in a peripheral location such as a back corner or basement where normative-sized clients rarely go. Fat women report that their behavior and choices are often heavily scrutinized in certain social situations such as when doing exercise, eating out, and grocery shopping (e.g., Gailey 2014; Owen 2012; Zdrodowski, 1996). Both hypervisibility and -invisibility are a result of the fat stigma. A body that does not attract any attention is privileged in this sense. Gailey (2014, 10-11) notes that on the spectrum of visibility, the normative-sized female body is a privileged body. On one hand, it shields from constant body policing and public abuse fat women experience, on the other hand, the normative-sized body does not contribute to their exclusion from certain areas of life either. Kwan's (2010) understanding of body privilege is akin to Gailey's description of the positive invisibility of the normative body (Kwan 2010). Although women of all sizes may have experience of one's body becoming a target of unwanted commentary in a sexist society, for example, having a normative body means that one has got some control over the visibility of the body and the size of one's body is not the source of one's marginalization.

Gailey and Kwan's respective research shows how vulnerable to judgment fat women are due to their body's visibility and the stigma that is attached to the fat body. The hyper(in)visibility of the fat female body is about power, a gendered embodied stigma, and body privilege or lack of it. It is about what type of bodies are allowed to be seen, to take up space and to be present in public. The inherent social and political power of the hyper(in)visibility of the fat body is confirmed in Kwan's research, which shows that the experience of "body privilege" is intersectional and that fatness intersects with both gendered and racialized power relations (Kwan 2010).

Material and Methodology used: A Fat Woman at the Swimming Pool

In order to illustrate the hyper(in)visibility and the lack of body privilege of the fat female body in public spaces, I will draw from a public discussion concerning fat people and exercise that took place in the Finnish media in spring 2015. The discussion in question was initiated by a public social media post by a Finnish woman, Hanna Jokinen, on her Facebook page about an incident she had witnessed in her local swimming pool. She had overheard two women commenting and ridiculing a fellow swimmer's appearance behind her back. Her post read as follows (author's translation from Finnish to English).

Greetings to you two middle-aged women at the swimming pool.¹ Have you any idea how rude you are? You saw a severely overweight woman climbing out of the pool after a water running class. First you stared at her, and then you burst out laughing. One of you commented loudly: "We shouldn't laugh, we are the same". Indeed, we should not laugh. I had been watching how diligently this woman trained, unlike you two who mainly gossiped. It is jerks like you that make it so difficult for larger people to even start exercising, when it's something they really need. For many like me, it's not easy to wear a swimsuit with mean people like you around laughing. What the hell is wrong with this world and why do people need to make others feel bad about themselves? If it's that difficult to tolerate different types of people, stay at home. And to that wonderful lady who got laughed at, but worked out so diligently at the same exercise I did: I hope you felt great after the class. I was exhausted! You are my hero. You seemed determined and your training looked efficient. I could not help noticing.

The post spread quickly; it was liked and shared in social media², and was soon picked up by several Finnish media outlets including online news sites, a number of major newspapers³, and the public broadcaster YLE. For about two weeks after the initial post, the discussion rumbled in

¹ The woman who was the target of ridicule at the swimming pool, as well as the two women making the comments, all remained anonymous during the public discussion and have remained so since.

² By the end of the year 2015 Jokinen's post had been liked 28 849 times

³ At least Keskiuomalainen 18.2, Ilta-sanomat 19.2, Aamulehti 19.2 and Yle 19.2.

social media, online news sites, and in the comment sections of newspapers. Jokinen published a follow-up post on Facebook a couple of days after the first (19.2.2015), in which she reacted to the publicity and popularity of the initial post. She also wrote about her own experiences of being bullied and struggles with weight that had motivated her to put up the original post in the first place.

I cried when I opened Facebook and read so many hundreds of lovely comments about the “swimming-pool case”. Almost 19,000 people have liked it and it has been shared almost 3000 times. The issue has been discussed in Aamulehti, Keskisuomalainen, Ilta-sanomat, Radio Nova and Yle Häme. I wrote the post not only thinking about this heroic lady swimmer, but also my own nearest and dearest who have also endured bullying and ridicule and are still scarred by them. I have had my share of being called fatso, ugly, and stupid at school (and later in life). I think I got off easy. Time to fight back, it is never ok to ridicule other people. If you don’t have anything good to say, the least you can do is to say nothing bad. (heart emoticon) THANK YOU THANK YOU, THANK YOU EACH ONE OF YOU. LET’S COME TOGETHER IN LOVE RATHER THAN UGLINESS.

For the purposes of this article, I chose for closer inspection one article and a comments section that were published in the online version of a popular national evening paper Ilta-Sanomat (“The Evening Dispatch”). The article was published on the 19th of February 2015, entitled: “Swimming Pool Case Spreads: So You Decided to Laugh Out Loud.” (Ilta-Sanomat 19.5.2015). This article and the comments section of Ilta-Sanomat caught my attention when examining the various media narratives that Jokinen’s Facebook post had set in motion. I chose this particular article and comments section for closer scrutiny for two main reasons. Firstly, Ilta-Sanomat is the second biggest newspaper in Finland with a

circulation of over 140 000 copies. It is the sister publication of the most important daily newspaper Helsingin Sanomat, and it is widely read across the country⁴. Secondly, the type of publication Ilta-Sanomat is played a role in my decision. It is a tabloid newspaper and its style of reporting often resorts to sensationalism and provocation. In the past, it has reported in abundance on the “obesity epidemic” and “dangers of obesity.” Weight loss success stories, diet advice, and body policing of female celebrities in particular are an integral part of its daily content. Regarding this, the content and tone of the article reporting on the swimming pool incident was exceptional. Even more exceptional was the comments section where the majority of the comments made could be viewed as either positive, understanding, or defending fat people’s right to exercise and to be seen in public. Unlike the people in the earlier mentioned YLE survey or in Valkendorff’s (2014) data who were very negative in their attitudes towards fat people, there were very few comments that would condemn or blame fat people in the Ilta-Sanomat comments section. Many people were encouraging and recounting their own experiences: in short, fat people were not the source of negative comments, those who ridiculed them were.

Predictably, some references to the dominant biomedical “obesity discourse” were present, but they did not dominate the discussion. I will use this rich source of material that consists of the article and the comments made to explore fat people’s experiences of exercising in public and the discourse surrounding fatness, gender and body size acceptability in the context of exercise.

The Ilta-Sanomat article, like the majority of the articles that were published inspired by the Facebook post, was a fairly short one, about one page in length. In the article, the story Jokinen told in her original post was recounted with some (minor) additional editorial material. The comments section was, in fact, more interesting than the article in this case. The Ilta-Sanomat comments section included 400 separate entries.

⁴ Statistical information on Ilta-sanomat on Wikipedia: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ilta-Sanomat>

In order to analyze the content of the comments, I first copied the whole comments section and saved and filed it in a separate Word file. I then moved on to classify the comments thematically based on their content. I identified four major categories and organized the comments in groups as presented below. The groups are arranged in terms of decreasing number - 1 had the largest number of comments, 4 the least.

(1) Comments by people who empathized with Jokinen's post and/or defended fat people who exercise.

(2) Comments that recounted writers' own experiences about exercising or swimming in public relating to body size and weight.

(3) Comments by those who had encountered similar experiences of "embodied others" doing exercise.

(4) Negative comments that either criticized Jokinen's post or fat people.

The first group contained 171 comments, the second 125, the third 69, and the fourth one 19 comments. Moreover, there were 16 comments that I chose not to classify in any of the above groups. They were typically only a few words in length or were off topic. The first group of comments represents a more general discussion relating to Jokinen's post and bullying of fat people. In these comments people typically praised Jokinen's post, empathized with fat people who exercise, and condemned the two women's behavior. Comments that belonged to the second and third group present people's own experiences on fatness and exercising, or having otherwise non-normative body and exercising. About half of all the comments made belong to these groups. In this article, I will focus on the comments in groups two and three, for I am primarily interested in fat women's own experiences of exercising. Moreover, experiences of those whose bodies are marked as non-normative in other ways give added insight to the overall discussion on

“embodied others.” These comments provide for the most relevant information regarding the research question of the article. The fourth group was fairly small, it included just 19 comments. These comments criticized Jokinen for not taking action at the swimming pool or blamed fat people for their own abuse. They were similar to those observed by Valkendorff (2014) – that is, that fatness is considered a self-inflicted problem and that is why fat people are justifiably treated badly. In these comments fat people are seen as responsible for their own bad treatment, because they have “chosen” to remain fat. Weight loss and changing personal habits are suggested as a way to avoid being treated badly

My classification of the comments, as well as my analysis, is informed by my own and other existing research on gendered fat stigma (e.g. Farrell 2011; LeBesco 2004; Owen 2012) and body privilege (Gailey 2014; Harjunen 2017; Kwan 2010). I will next give examples of comments from the groups two and three and discuss them in light of Gailey’s notion of hyper(in)visibility and Kwan’s body privilege. It should be noted here that there were no references to race or ethnicity in the comments. Therefore, I am making an assumption that the writers were white ethnic Finns. This means that one aspect of Kwan’s body privilege, namely racialization, will not be dealt with here.

Comments in the second group dealt with people’s own experiences. In the following, two writers tell about their own experience of being looked at the swimming pool. “Human rights also for overweight people” writes:

It happens all the time. Some people seem to think that overweight people don’t even have the right to go out in public at the same time as others. There’s always someone looking at you with pity. It is not easy to exercise when people are laughing and staring at you.

“Shy Runner” says:

I am an overweight water-jogger myself and every time I go to the swimming pool I can see what people are thinking about my appearance. I think that everyone is silently judging me. People have asked me whether I am pregnant a couple of times – no baby in sight! It has been therapeutic to read these encouraging comments here. Thank you. I am fat due to an illness, but I still feel guilty and blame myself. Those who judge fat people should remember that you can never know why anyone is fat. I would strongly recommend not asking either. Even one look can be deeply hurtful.

Both of the writers seem to recognize the hypervisibility of the fat body proposed by Gailey. They note that it is very common that fat people are looked at and criticized when they are exercising out in public. Both find the judging looks and comments hurtful and being laughed at and criticized makes exercising in public more difficult for them. Meanwhile, “Fatso” talks explicitly about her fear of exercising in public as a fat woman:

I am an overweight woman and my weight is the reason I don't want to exercise, even though I would like to. I used to love swimming a lot, but I can't looking like this [...]. People's gazes, laughs and grins tell me that I am in the wrong place. I am also scared that someone might take pictures of me if I went to the gym [...]. I've read stories of people taking pictures at the gym and posting them online. It is sad. Overweight people are stripped of their human dignity.

The above comment by “Fatso” refers to a notorious case that took place in a Helsinki gym a few years ago. A well-known Finnish female fitness celebrity took a picture of another woman at the gym without her permission and posted it online with derogatory comments for everyone to see. The possibility of being filmed like this seems to add another level of “visibility” to the already hypervisible fat body (see Gailey 2014). Exposing a stigmatized body in social media in a situation where the body is particularly vulnerable to criticism in the first place, can undoubtedly increase fat women’s fear of exercising in public. Someone with apparent body privilege taking

pictures and sharing them publicly in order to ridicule and shame a woman for her fatness demonstrates well the lack of body privilege fat women endure in their daily lives (Kwan 2010, 145).

Apart from swimming pools, gyms were also mentioned as places where one feels the malevolent gaze, comments, and laughter of others, as “Jossuli” did:

I wanted to start exercising at the gym, but shame and humiliation made me leave. People stopped to stare and laugh at me. One young guy said “have you ever seen a whale cycling?” After that I haven’t dared go back even though I wanted to - it’s sad.

Another experience at the gym was recounted by “At the Leaf-Arena”:

It is very common that people laugh at overweight people at the gym. I once heard these young fit women talking loudly about “chubby classes” and so on. When an overweight woman tries to make a change in her life, she gets very mean gazes. I don’t know what right they have to ridicule those who have gained weight over the course of their lives. Granted that the kilos often come by eating too many sweets. I doubt any of us overweight people chooses to be so, especially when you are constantly reminded that you lose your right to live with it. I wish instructors at gyms would react more swiftly to bullying. It should be stressed when joining a gym that everyone has the right to exercise.

All the comments above described the fear of being ridiculed and the very concrete effects this had on a willingness to exercise in public. Hypervisibility of the fat body in the public swimming pool or gym seems extreme, since all of the authors were the subject of negative attention and malicious comments about their bodies. Feelings of humiliation and being stripped of human dignity were mentioned. The women felt humiliated and it is understandable that people would

prefer to shield themselves from this and rather avoid places where they would expect to be humiliated.

However, as the comments in group three showed, fat bodies are not the only marginalized or hypervisible bodies in the field of exercise. The third group consisted of comments that described the experiences of those whose bodies are not necessarily fat, but who look different or move in a non-normative way - people with chronic illnesses, disabilities, and visible scars such as mastectomy scars, for instance.

”Sepelkyhky64” said:

I hear slightly different kind of comments when I go water running after gym. I am normal weight, but my left side is partially paralysed. I have heard people saying that disabled people shouldn't go to the same classes as regular people. So far I have let these comments go, but there will come a day when I will have to say something.

“Oh Dear” wrote:

I have no first-hand experience of this, but I know people who are overweight, disabled, or move slowly that do not want to risk it. There are a surprising number of cases like this. I'd like to say to those who laugh and comment negatively that it's really hurtful and many would like to be “normal.” This kind of behavior really restricts people socially and makes their life less enjoyable.

In these comments, fatness as a stigmatized embodied characteristic is seen in parallel to other non-normative body characteristics, and this makes sense, as certain similarities have been detected in the experiences of fat and disabled people in the research literature (e.g., Cooper 1997; Harjunen 2004; Herndon 2002). The comments show that bodies not meeting the criteria of a normative body often become targets of maltreatment while exercising. In effect, boundaries

between the normal and abnormal are being drawn up in these everyday events. They show just how narrow the range of socially acceptable body size for women truly is, and how transgression of these boundaries results in immediate social sanctions. Like fat women, disabled bodies or bodies whose appearance is otherwise noticeably non-normative are also hypervisible in a way that denotes lack of body privilege (Kwan 2010).

Places for the Fat Exerciser

When I initially read the article and its comments section in *Ilta-Sanomat*, I could not help wonder why the particular fat woman at the center of this discussion was treated so benevolently. I have followed public discussion on fatness for about two decades and found this quite exceptional. Criticism was reserved mainly for the rude women at the swimming pool and those who do not seem to tolerate different types of body around them. Blaming fat people for the way they are treated is so common, and the public's generally negative evaluation of them is so normalized (e.g. Boero 2012; LeBesco 2004; Owen 2012), that these mostly positive comments in a mainstream publication can be seen unusual. One likely explanation is that the fat woman mentioned in the Facebook post was assumed to be a dieter. Although the real reason why the woman was exercising will remain unknown - she could have been exercising for rehabilitative reasons, trying to get fit without trying to lose weight, or just doing it out of pure enjoyment. Nevertheless, attempting to lose weight is presumed, by default, to be the reason for any physical activity that fat people are engaged in (e.g. Harjunen 2017). Some of the comments illustrated well the paradox of laughing at fat people who exercise. As "No comprendo" put it:

I've never understood people laughing at overweight people exercising. It's never ok to laugh, but overweight people who exercise are clearly actively trying to solve their weight problem. Well, there are so many different types in the world.

Or how "Idontgetit" noted:

I don't get why people laugh, for example, at fat people in the gym. They should be respected for doing something about their weight and not just sitting at home eating crisps.

Both of the comments above make the assumption that a fat person exercises to lose weight. This is in line with the contemporary body discourse, which often equals losing weight with trying to get fit or healthy (e.g. Harjunen 2017). Since it is assumed that the fat individual is trying to lose weight, she can now be reevaluated as a responsible individual, who can no longer be held entirely to blame for being fat as she is doing something about it (Harjunen 2009). This problematically suggests that fat people should earn respect by their own virtuous actions. By behaving according to the predominant discourse on fatness, a fat woman is seemingly acknowledging she is individually responsible for changing her body to become socially acceptable. Unfortunately, this role of the dieting fat person is one of the few available that will promise acceptance, empathy, and support from the surrounding community. As Lea Polso (1996) has noted, the dieting fat person is a repentant one.

The Facebook post and the comments that followed on the Ilta-Sanomat website seem to revolve around the hypervisibility and hyper(in)visibility of the embodied fat or otherwise non-normative body (see Gailey 2014). The existing sociocultural schema for fitness revolves around the idea that the exercising female should have a normative-sized, able, and unscarred body. The gaze that monitors and judges this is ever-present. It is notable that although the gender of some of the commentators in the material remained unclear, most seem to have been women. The female body is always under scrutiny due to gendered body norms and expectations (e.g. Bordo 1993), but the fat female body is made hypervisible especially when exercising (cf. Gailey, 2014). From Jennings' (2010) observations on clothes shopping, we can infer that fat women are considered to be socially "out of place" in certain environments. I would argue that when fat women exercise publicly, they are socially and morally not in the place discursively designated for them

as ambivalent as this place might be. Comments, ridicule, and laughter are used to make fat women aware of their proper place in the gendered social hierarchy of bodies.

Exercising in water and swimming are usually recommended for fat people; water exercise is, however, mostly done in public spaces where there are other people present. The bodies in these spaces are also made particularly noticeable because they are wearing only swimming costumes, and so the non-normative form of a fat body is clear for all to see. In these situations particularly, the fat female body is hypervisible, and does not enjoy the comparatively protective shield that normative body size offers. This means that one of the most highly recommended forms of exercise for fat people is also one of the most psychologically and socially demanding.

Swimming is obviously not the only form of exercise that requires the body be revealed. Sports clothes generally do this, and due to the hypervisibility of the fat body, any fat person wishing to exercise needs to overcome their fear of ridicule and discrimination to be able to exercise at all. Overcoming this fear of judgement is critical for fat people who want to exercise, but this should not be the case. Being able to exercise should not depend on fat people's tolerance for abuse or ability to face ridicule.

Conclusion

In this article, I have aimed to show that fat women occupy a paradoxical position in the field of exercise. Exercise is often recommended for fat people; however, there are significant social barriers to overcome. Due to their lack of body privilege and consequences of the hyper(in)visibility of the fat female body in particular (e.g. Gailey 2014; Kwan 2010), fat women who exercise in public are often ridiculed and treated disrespectfully. This may lead to fear or avoidance of exercise in public.

It has been well established that the prevailing narrowly defined idea of an acceptable body size is harmful in a number of ways (e.g. Bordo 1993; Harjunen 2017; Murray 2008). For example, it enforces the idea that there is only one type of body that can be fit and healthy and that a fat body is always unfit, ill, and inactive. It labels fat people as “couch potatoes,” whether or not they move, and produces and maintains prejudices and moral contempt for them. In part due to all of the above, there is also a general lack of *positive* role models for fat people who want to exercise, only negative, anxiety-inducing ones. The cultural (hyper)(in)visibility of fat people who exercise reinforces the idea that exercise, especially in public, is a privilege only for those who already have fit and athletic bodies and want to maintain them. This is illustrated in fat people’s experiences of exercising recounted in this article. It seems that fat bodies are indeed rendered hyper(in)visible in the physical reality of exercising, and not just in the discourse surrounding it. Fatness and exercise have been largely determined as mutually exclusive categories.

Based on my material here, the Ilta-Sanomat comments, it seems that fat people are judged to be in need of doing exercise, yet at the same time excluded from such activities for not being athletic- or normative-looking enough. Paradoxically, it seems that the fat person should already have lost weight before they start the exercising that is supposed to help them to lose weight.

The experiences of fat women recounted in this article reinforce the view that the space reserved for exercise is still not inclusive enough and that presence of non-normative body types is perceived as undesirable. The question remains, how would it be possible to cultivate perception of fat bodies in the more positive light in the context of exercise? This poses a challenge to sports professionals and physical education teachers, to the exercising community as a whole, and to the public debate. We need to make exercise an activity that does not exclude people, but rather invites them to take part no matter what their gender, body’s appearance, or assumed health might be. Obviously, the fat stigma in the field of exercise is not the only problem here.

In order to make sport and exercise more accessible and pleasurable for everyone, we need to re-evaluate the position of fat people in society, unravel the gendered fat stigma, and recognize fatness as a valid and acceptable form of embodiment.

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