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## **Article**

**A Cross-cultural examination of fat women's experiences: Stigma and gender in North American and Finnish culture.**

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**Jeannine A. Gailey and Hannele Harjunen**

### **Abstract**

In this manuscript, the voices of women of size in North America and Finland indicate that there is a shared experience of being fat. Based on cross-cultural analysis of our respective empirical findings, we argue that there is a shared Western fat lived experience that perpetuates a stigmatized gendered landscape of living with a fat body. The emergent themes tended to revolve around two similar contradictions—the phenomenon of hyper(in)visibility and a belief their fatness is temporary or liminal state—both of which lead to an internalization of fat hatred. We argue that these findings stem from the tremendous stigma and mistreatment that both samples of women face in their daily lives. The present study contributes to the literature by addressing two research lacunas: 1) the lack of cross-cultural research in fat studies; and 2) the limited mainstream feminist research from the perspective of fat women.

### **Key Words**

Fat studies, cross-cultural analysis, stigma, women and weight

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### **Introduction**

The vitriol espoused in contemporary societies toward fat persons has been well documented in

the literature (Gailey, 2014; Harjunen 2009; Farrell, 2009; Puhl, Peterson, & Luedicke, 2012; Saguy & Ward, 2011), but few studies have cross-culturally analyzed women's experiences of fatness. The so called "obesity epidemic" has produced an astonishingly uniform global discussion of fatness as a medical problem (e.g. Gard & Wright, 2005). Despite the global effect, both popular and academic discussions of fatness have largely concentrated on the Anglo-American sphere and experience. Charlotte Cooper (2009) has criticized the dominance of the North American perspective in fat studies and provocatively suggested that the discipline should be called "American fat studies".

To our knowledge, there has not been a cross-cultural analysis of fat women's experiences. We argue that this is vital in order to avoid universalizing statements about the experience of fatness in different cultural contexts. In the present paper, we address this research lacuna by demonstrating that the two primary concepts that emerged from our respective studies: *hyper(in)visibility* (Gailey, 2014) and *liminality* (Harjunen, 2009) are shared in both countries and that both phenomena lead to the internalization of fat hatred. This was not necessarily expected, since the United States and Finland are geographically, linguistically, and culturally distant countries. Politically and economically, the United States is capitalist democracy with a strong emphasis on corporate and individual rights, as well as a heavy emphasis on consumerism, materialism, and individualism. Finland is a Nordic social democracy with a strong emphasis on gender equality. However, until the 1960s, Finland was less prosperous and industrialized and urbanized later than her Scandinavian neighbors. In Finland, capitalist consumer culture did not arrive in full effect until the late 1980s. In the fat studies scholarship, the intensification of fat stigma and the discussion of oppressive gendered body norms are typically connected with American style capitalist culture and consumerism (e.g. Bordo, 1993;

Hesse-Biber, 2007). So, while it might not have seemed apparent at first that we would find a shared experience of fatness for women in both cultures, globalization and the move toward neoliberalism in Finland point to the increasing biomedicalization of fat, as does the global emphasis on the “obesity epidemic”.

### **Stigma, Gender, & Postfeminism**

Fat women are considered deviant and stigmatized (Cahnman, 1968; Cooper, 2009; Farrell, 2009; Puhl et al., 2012; Saguy & Ward, 2011; Wann, 2009). Goffman (1963, p. 3-4) conceptualized stigma as a “deeply discrediting attribute” that classifies a person as dangerous or unacceptable based on three accounts: 1) tribal stigma (i.e., race, nation, and religion), 2) an abomination of the body (i.e., various physical deformities), and/or 3) a blemish of individual character (i.e., lazy, dishonest, mental instability, etc.). For instance, fat persons are stereotyped as ignorant, gluttonous, and irresponsible, and are typically characterized as unattractive, repulsive, and unkempt. Being thin or the “appropriate” body size has become one of the central determinants of social acceptability for women (Germov & Williams, 1999; Hesse-Biber, 2007).

This stigmatized status reduces fat women to their body. As Moon and Sedgwick (2001) suggest, many people—upon seeing a fat woman—think that they know something about her, maybe even something that she does not know about herself. Our “collective knowledge” tells us that she is fat because she overeats, eats fatty or sugary foods, and avoids physical activity. In other words, she does not take care of herself (Murray, 2005).

Moreover, the stigmatization of the fat body affects women differently than men (Boero, 2012; Gailey, 2014, 2012; [Harjunen 2009](#); Tischner, 2013). In contemporary Western societies, women are expected to be normatively attractive (thin) and are given considerably less leeway in their bodily presentation (Murray, 2008). Men are expected to have a larger stature and to take

up more physical space (Owen, 2012). In this manner, the stigmatization of fat and pressure to be thin is highly gendered and culturally specific (Boero, 2012; Tischner, 2013).

The obsession with thinness in Western cultures has been attributed to advertising, fashion, capitalism, healthism, and Puritan beliefs that stress moderation and view gluttony as a sin (Fraser, 2009). The media and medical discourse tend to stress individual behaviors as the cause of “obesity”; in essence, people are fat because they engage in too little exercise and over consume unhealthy foods. Purportedly, the “cure” is to eat less and increase one’s physical activity. The problem with this is that it obscures structural obstacles and ignores human variation in size and metabolism.

The idea that everyone can be thin is a culturally constructed myth; yet most people assume that thinness is attainable (Bordo, 2003). Thin bodies bring social status, privilege, and enable escape from size-based discrimination (Solovay, 2000). Research has shown that most people assume that beautiful (including thin) people are more successful in both their professional and personal lives, and that they have more desirable personality traits (Dion, Berscheid, & Walster, 1972). In the West, thinness suggests privilege whereas fatness evokes disdain.

Self-discipline and the control of women’s bodies is thoroughly infused with patriarchy, where women’s bodies confer a status in a hierarchy not of their own making. Women are expected to meet conventional beauty standards and when they do not, they often experience hostility, prejudice, and stigma (Bordo, 2003). Feminist scholars have argued that a postfeminist sensibility has emerged within the neoliberal state because women’s agency and consumer freedoms are touted as women’s empowerment (Gill, 2008). In other words, women are “free” to choose to be “healthy” (i.e. not fat) and engage in self-regulating and disciplinary practices to

maintain a thin physique. As Riley, Evans, and Mackiewicz (2016) state “postfeminist sensibility intersects with neoliberal constructs so that the self is understood as a project requiring transformation, often through modes of consumption” (p. 97). Fat women are compelled to feel guilty about their size and strive to lose weight in order to reduce the “drain” they place on society. The “obesity epidemic” discourse has led to a conflation in health and beauty, and because fat is considered unhealthy and unattractive, fat women are under pressure to “fix” both (Gailey, 2014; Tischner, 2013). Similar to our respective studies, Tischner’s (2013) female participants expressed feeling both tremendous scrutiny, surveillance, and pressure to lose weight to meet societal expectations (see also, Tischner & Malson, 2008).

The rise of neoliberal thought in society plays a role in the demonization of fat and social control of citizen’s bodies. As an economic and political practice, neoliberal ideologies stress privatization, individual freedom, and the downsizing of government. Moreover, neoliberalism seeks to govern not through society, but through the choices and responsabilization of individual citizens (Rose, 1999). In a neoliberal system, individuals are expected to act in a rational and responsible manner, especially as it pertains to the body. One of the ways in which this manifests in a neoliberal state is that it is everyone’s responsibility to be “healthy”, and because fat is framed as unhealthy, those who are fat are subject to increasing social control and surveillance (LeBesco, 2011; Harjunen 2017).

We argue that the increasing global attention on the “obesity epidemic” by the medical establishment, media, and government has fueled an anti-fat discourse and discrimination against fat persons, particularly women. Media, governments, and the medical community frequently tout that “obesity” is quickly becoming the number one threat facing global citizens, and that the

growing number of fat persons is a global crisis (Boero, 2012; Gard & Wright, 2005; Saguy, 2013).

Numerous studies indicate that the “war on obesity” has heightened prejudice (Puhl & Heuer, 2010). For instance, fat women are less likely to be hired (Härkönen & Räsänen, 2008), tend to receive lower wages (Averett & Korenman, 1996; Härkönen & Räsänen, 2008; Sarlio-Lähteenkorva & Lahelma, 2004), and experience inadequate treatment from health care professionals (Rothblum, Brand, Miller, & Oetjen, 1990; Teachman & Brownell, 2001; Young & Powell, 1985). As a result, they tend to achieve lower academic results (Crosnoe, 2007), experience an increase in disordered eating behaviors (Darby et al., 2009, 2007), and a deterioration in health (Amy et al., 2006).

Research shows that fat shaming is not only ineffective as a method to “encourage” weight loss, but that it has lasting and harmful physiological, psychological, and sociological consequences (Puhl & Heuer, 2010; Schvey, Puhl, & Brownell, 2014; Sutin & Terracciano, 2013). While there has been criticism in the literature of the “obesity epidemic”, as well as a focus on stigma and the mistreatment experienced by fat persons, our research highlights the voices and experiences of fat women in two different cultural contexts, both of which have been overlooked to date in the feminist literature (Saguy, 2012).

## **Method**

Both authors recruited fat women for their respective studies using convenience and snowball sampling. When we learned of each other’s findings it became clear that both North American and Finnish had discussed their experiences in the same manner. In order to determine if our respective datasets did indeed share commonalities, we each went back and reanalyzed our data

(Noblit & Hare, 1988). Below we discuss our respective samples and methodology before turning to a discussion of the shared themes.

#### *North American study*

Gailey (2014) conducted 74 in-depth interviews with North American women who were medically classified as “obese”. The interviews were conducted over the phone or in person and lasted on average two and a half hours. This research was approved by the university institutional review board and interviewees received and signed an informed consent document. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The women’s ages ranged from 19-62, five identified as Latina, one as mixed ethnicity Latina, one as Native American, six as African American, one as Gambian West African, and 60 as Caucasian, two of whom are Canadian.

In addition to the in-depth interviews, Gailey read numerous memoirs, autobiographies, and other nonfiction books about the lives of people of size. Gailey subscribed to several “people of size” listservs, as well as Fat Studies and size acceptance groups on Facebook. In other words, Gailey spent several years reading threaded discussions and posts, articles that members post or recommend, and books written by members or those who many members highly admire. Immersion in the “fat-o-sphere” and size acceptance community helped her gain a greater understanding of the needs, issues, and lives of the women interviewed.

Throughout the course of the interviews and observations that took place over several years, various themes, and patterns materialized. Gailey initially used grounded theory to analyze her data (for more on the sample, recruitment strategies, and data analysis see Gailey, 2014). Analysis of the data for the present manuscript involved a close reading and thematic analysis.

#### *Finland study*



Harjunen's data consisted of 35 autobiographical writings and 12 semi-structured thematic interviews with Finnish women. Altogether, the data consists of 47 personal accounts of life as a fat woman. The women's ages ranged from 20 to 65 and they were all white ethnic Finns. Harjunen collected data by placing a research request in one Finnish daily-published newspaper, "Keskisuomalainen", and one weekly published women's magazine, "Anna". In the research request, women "who have experience of being fat in a society that values thinness" were asked to write about their experiences, or, alternatively, to take part in an interview. The informants' approach to the subject was centered on their personal experience of fatness. Participants provided consent when they responded to the research request. Close-reading and thematic analysis was used as the method of analysis for both the initial and reanalysis of these data (for more on the sample, recruitment strategies, and data analysis see Harjunen 2009).

## **Findings**

The joint themes that emerged from these data indicate that the women experienced numerous contradictory experiences, such as feeling simultaneously dismissed and the subject of tremendous scrutiny and that their fatness—despite being fat for most their lives—was viewed as a liminal state that could be altered through "hard work" (Gailey, 2014; Harjunen 2009).

Moreover, we argue that as a result of the above corporeal contradictions our participants have internalized feelings of self-hatred. The biggest difference in our data was that the North American participants had for the most part heard of the body acceptance movement and eight of her women stated that they were happy with their bodies, whereas only two of the Finnish women rejected the biomedical discourse and embodied their fat.

*The phenomenon of hyper(in)visibility*

Contemporary Western societies relegate fat women to a hyper(in)visible space, a phenomenon that occurs explicitly within institutions and implicitly in our interpersonal and imagined worlds (Gailey, 2014). Moreover, the spectrum from hypervisible to hyperinvisible is powerful and profoundly ingrained in our ceremonial social life. To be hyper(in)visible means that a person is sometimes paid exceptional attention and is sometimes exceptionally overlooked, and it can happen simultaneously. Fat women are hyperinvisible in that their needs, desires, and lives are unacceptably overlooked, yet at the same time they are hypervisible because their bodies literally take up more physical space than other bodies and they are the target of critical and frequently disparaging judgment (Gailey, 2014). Fat presents an apparent paradox because it is both visible and dissected publicly—it is *hypervisible*—and it is marginalized, neglected, and erased—it is *hyperinvisible*.

The structural manifestation of hyper(in)visibility is present in the messages projected by the media, medical establishment, and popular culture, while at the individual level “fat” women suffer further effects of hyper(in)visibility through social interactions infused with labeling, prejudice, and sizeism. Fat women are both relegated to the social position of “Other” and relegate themselves to this marginalized social position through the embodiment of fat stereotypes. Gailey (2014) argues that hyper(in)visibility is a mode of “Othering” that subjugates fat women’s lived experiences and reinforces stigma, mistreatment, and discrimination.

Marginalized bodies are not just seen or acknowledged; they are dissected and overtly made into a spectacle (cf. Tischner, 2013). As Tischner (2013) argues, visibility serves as a mode of discipline reminding fat persons that they have a duty to “be responsible” and lose weight. Similarly, marginalized bodies are not simply invisible, they are erased and entirely dismissed, as Rochelle describes in the following quote:

During my teenage years when I was not as heavy, people spoke to me in public, they were nice. You could get friendly conversation out of a cashier or a passerby. During my heaviest and my late 20's it was like, I know I'm the biggest person in here, yet nobody actually sees me. It's almost like being invisible; people look right through you. Cashiers don't even look you in your eyes when they speak to you. Now, at my heaviest, no; it's like dismissive; you're just dismissed before you even can make your presence known (Rochelle, 35, African American, North American).

Rochelle describes her experience as an invisible woman, or as Gailey argues a hyper(in)visible woman. She notes that she has witnessed first-hand the difference in the way people treated her when she was thinner and at her present weight. Rochelle is more than invisible because people do see her, as she states, "she is the biggest person in here", but they have intentionally dismissed her. Therefore, she is simultaneously seen and ignored—she is hyper(in)visible.

Consider another example of how hyper(in)visibility plays out in the lives of the women we interviewed. Here are two different excerpts from the same woman to show how she is in one instance hyperinvisible and in the next hypervisible. In the first, Evelyn is shopping for a strapless bra:

This was three years ago. I walked into a store and there was a lady and she was like, "Can we help you find anything?" I said, "Well, I'm looking for a strapless bra to go with my bridesmaid's dress." She kind of stopped and kind of glances over me and then turns to her coworker and says, "Oh, I don't think we have anything in her size." I'm just kind of like standing there open mouthed like, "What?" I was just shocked that she actually said that and she wasn't even addressing me. It was like I wasn't even there. She was talking to her coworker (Evelyn, 32, white, North American).

It is worth noting that Evelyn is at the very low end of the “obesity category”, in fact she is well below the average of the sample of women in both datasets, yet she still has experienced hyper(in)visibility. This narrative indicates her “social strangeness,” as one not belonging in the store. The sales associate does not treat her as an actual customer when it is clear that she is buying something for herself. She talks to the other sales associate as if Evelyn is not present—she is hyperinvisible.

In the second narrative, Evelyn is negotiating a ride at an outdoor festival:

At an Oktoberfest festival, a couple of years ago, my husband and I we had gone on a particular carnival ride and we decided we wanted to go on the ride again so we hopped off, got back in line, we waited in line for like a half hour. We get up there. We go to sit in the very first, the front seats, and we were trying to pull the safety harness down, but the hydraulics hadn't kicked in yet so it wasn't locking into place. The attendant that was there in broken English he was like, “You're too fat.” I'm looking at him like, “What?” He's like, “You're too big.” I said, “Are you telling me that I'm too fat to sit here? He said, “Yes.” Well, of course, the ride is like full at this point so this was happening in front of everybody else on the ride and so he's telling me that we need to move, that we need to change seats. Like the seats are going to be different sizes in another spot, you know (Evelyn, 32, white, North American)?

Evelyn is hypervisible in that her body has now been put on display for everyone on the ride to see. She was publicly shamed and then had to get up in front of everyone to move to a seat further back on the ride. She was not merely visible to others on the ride, she was made exceptionally visible—hypervisible. In both of the scenarios, Evelyn has been reduced to her body, and her body size has marked her as not belonging and resulted in her being treated

without common courtesy or respect, which is how hyper(in)visibility plays out in the lives of women who are fat.

Below two Finnish informants write about their experiences of hyper(in)visibility. The first woman, 36-year-old Anni (white, Finnish) writes about fat people being a target of disapproving looks, ridicule, and prejudice while in a public place. The second, 20-year-old Maija, (white, Finnish) writes about her feeling of being regarded hyper(in)visible sexually by her peers:

People laugh and sneer at fat people. We really make people laugh. In the shop our groceries are checked out extra carefully, on the bus [people] smile at us knowingly “thank god I am not like that”.

Sometimes I feel bad when my girlfriends do not see me as their equal regarding men and relationships. Maybe they think that I am harmless as a competitor, because I am fat.

Anni’s statement about how people “sneer” and examine her grocery cart was something that Gailey’s interviewees frequently encountered. They experienced hypervisibility when they were in a restaurant or buying groceries in that they felt that their every food choice was judged and assumed to be about their weight. For instance, numerous women stated, “if I order a hamburger or buy chips it is evidence for why I’m fat, but if I order a diet soda or a salad I must be trying to lose weight.” It was also common for participants to be completely dismissed or treated as if they are not present. Many reported that friends, colleagues, and family members would discuss being fat or even “how sad it is to be so fat” right in front of them, rendering them hyperinvisible.

The experiences of both Finnish and North American women indicate that they are frequently made into a spectacle and often completely dismissed. The phenomenon of

hyper(in)visibility operates as a mode of Othering and works to oppress fat women. Therefore, it is not surprising that most of both the Finnish and North American women discuss their fat as a liminal state—one that is separate from their “true self”.

### *Fat as a liminal state*

Fatness is, by and large, considered as a non-permanent state in the sense that change and transformation of the fat body is a prevalent normative expectation. As a result, fatness is commonly thought to be a “phase” one eventually leaves or should leave behind (Harjunen 2009). This idea of non-permanence of fatness is normalized in biomedical discourse, which rests on the assertion that fatness is a “curable” and a temporary condition.

Based on our data, fatness is constructed as a liminal position, and for many, living as a fat woman is a liminal experience. Arnold van Gennep (1960, 1909) conceptualized liminality in his work on the rite of passage and it was later fully developed by Turner (1977). However, the use of the concept of liminality has not been limited to the study of the rite of passage. It has also been used as a conceptual tool to describe and examine a variety of experiences or social statuses that fall somewhere between classifications, or that are otherwise difficult to grasp, explain, or measure. Harjunen conceptualized liminality in the latter sense as a “category of the experience” that is more permanent in nature (see also Little, Jordens, Paul, Montgomery, & Philipson 1998).

According to Turner (1977), being in a liminal space means that one is structurally invisible and, for the moment, beyond definition. Moreover, social exclusion and hyperinvisibility are elements of liminality. The experience of fat women as hyper(in)visible as Gailey (2014) conceptualized, can be regarded as one manifestation of this liminal experience.

Very few of either author’s informants considered themselves “permanently” fat or identified with being fat. “The cultural condemnation and denigration of fat typically leads many

fat persons to view their bodies as a temporary state to be overcome with diet, exercise, or some other weight-loss program.” (Gailey, 2014, p. 34). Most of the women in both studies did not want to identify as fat and distanced their “true self” (i.e. thinner self) from their bodies. Moreover, they expressed that they wanted to lose weight. Nearly all the women, including those who said they had been fat “all their lives” or “since early childhood”, considered being thin as their “normal” body size or saw it as a self-evident goal.

The experience of liminality, of being constantly in-between, affected their sense of agency and how they experienced their bodies. Many dieted in cycles or put their lives on hold waiting for the day they would be slim. Salli, quoted below, discussed that she does not feel she is worthy of “nice” clothes until she loses weight.

I haven't bought “proper” clothes for myself because I think there is no point of putting on anything nice while I am fat. Everything looks ugly. As a result, I have always felt that I am badly dressed. I have thought that I will buy nice clothes only when I am permanently thin and can fit into a size 38 (US size 8). But, I know it might never happen, since I am already 58 years old (Salli, 58, white, Finnish).

One of the Finnish informants, who had been fat for nearly three decades, had recently lost weight. Her feelings can be interpreted as illustrative of the experience of exiting the hyper(in)visible and liminal space of fatness.

Wonderful! Now I feel like a human being again. I did not buy new clothes when I was dieting, I just used the old ones. Only now that I weight 71 kilos I have tried on new clothes and bought new pair of trousers. I felt euphoric when I could fit into the size 42 (US size 12). I had already lost hope I would ever be able to get well-fitting and practical clothes from a shop. I have found my femininity as well: I want form-

fitting clothes instead of ascetic ones I used to wear. I haven't fulfilled all my dreams though, but now I know I can wear what I want. I had not used make up for 25 years and now I even thought of taking dance classes and so on. It seems that the world was behind my kilograms before. Even my personality has changed. I have become more active. It really pays to lose weight! (Raija, 50, white, Finnish)

Raija's weight loss is "proof" that fat is liminal and that life can be fully realized once fatness is shed. Weight loss for her signifies a return to living and "humanness". For some women, the embodied experience of liminality was so strong that they felt that they did not have any clear idea of their body size:

I have always thought that I am fat. Although when I look at the old photos, I can tell it is not true. I was at normal weight for many years, and at some point, I was really thin. I have always gained the weight back sooner or later. And although it has sometimes taken years, I have always felt that I am the wrong size or not thin enough. I think that this feeling of being fat is partly due to the constant shifts in the weight. My head has not been able to follow my changing body. (Anni, 30, white Finnish)

My body and weight have changed so much over the years that it is difficult to know how big or small I am. Every time I have lost weight I have had the same experience. It seems that while my body has changed, my head has yet to grasp the change, so I feel that my body is still big and automatically look for the biggest size in the shop. Even now I have no real idea of my body size. I don't really know whether I am big or small, it has changed so much. (Merja, 30, white, Finnish)

The above quotes reveal that women view their fat bodies as impermanent. Only a handful of women appeared to consciously identify as fat women. Fatness was thought of as a non-



permanent condition even by those women who had been fat most of their lives. What seems to be distinctive feature of “fat liminality” is that it is constructed as a “permanent” state of being, or a “fixed” position, as paradoxical as it may sound. In other words, fatness is constructed as a transitory state, although it is frequently, for the most part, permanent. Furthermore, the denial of the permanence of fatness and the possible consequences and meanings for individuals seems to lead to a permanent state of liminality and give impetus to the experience of being in-between. In this sense, fat liminality is both a practice and a process simultaneously.

The problem with understanding fatness as liminality is that it denies that fatness could be a positive or an important part of one’s experience and identity. Liminality is also an experience category, and it influences how the individual perceives herself as a subject, as well as her possibilities for agency. Living in the liminal sphere results in a precarious existence and subjectivity. Positioning fatness in the liminal sphere restrains understandings of a fat body as a valid basis for subjectivity and condemns the fat woman to a permanent state of in-between.

Moreover, an integral component to liminality and hyper(in)visibility is the separation of the body and the “true self” (i.e. the thin body/self). The conception of the mind as a separate, distinct entity from the body, with the rational mind as superior to the irrational body, infuses common discourse and self-conception. The immaterial rational mind is the seat of free will and is superior to the irrational emotional body, which is the center of desire. This dualism reflects the cultural preoccupation with a soul in the Judeo-Christian tradition and continues to exist as a part of many Westerners’ worldview and influences how they conceive of themselves— “young at heart” or “mentally strong” are common statements that emphasize the mind/body split. In addition to the dominant cultural framing of a mind/body split, research has found that people who are a part of a stigmatized group often want to remove themselves, at least symbolically,

from association with their deviant bodily characteristics (Gailey, 2014, 2012; Hesse-Biber, 2007). Numerous women indicated that they are more than their body. A common refrain included statements, such as, “I’m smart, I work hard, but I just happen to be fat.” Or they would say as Ann (33, white, North American) did, “I mean, it’s a part of who I am. It affects who I am. But it’s not the only thing I am”. Ann makes it clear that being fat affects her, but that she is so much more than her body. She does not want to claim a fat identity because it is only one aspect of her self and she feels that she would be the same person regardless of her body size. Similarly, Jennifer said:

I don’t think about it [being fat] every day, every minute. I have a job. I have friends. You know, I have a boyfriend; I have things to do. I’m not, always thinking about this, you know. So, I guess I wouldn’t want my identity to get totally wrapped up in that idea (Jennifer, 34, white, North American).

Yeah, more than anything else I’m trying to accept myself. The way I am, the way I look. I’m trying to think of myself not so much in terms of my weight as defining who I am, but I think I’m ... I’m an outgoing person, I have a good sense of humor, I think I’m pretty funny sometimes, and so I’m trying to focus more on those attributes than just my weight (Mandy, 32, white, North American).

The split between the body and the subject, a central component of liminality, was often expressed in the form of the phrase: “inside this fat body there is a thin person who is trying to get out”. The split reassures oneself, and others, that “one is not one’s body”, or one’s body does not reflect the “real” or inner person. It communicates that, inside the fat body, the person has the qualities associated with the “normal” thin body. In essence, the inner person deserves to be considered a valid subject, but the stigmatized outer body prevents it. A fat woman lives with the

knowledge that she is not recognized as a completely embodied subject unless the body goes through a transformation, i.e. is not fat anymore. This allows women to distance themselves from the negative characteristics associated with fatness. The separation of the fat body into physical body and the inner self is an expression of liminality and serves a social purpose: when the stigmatized body is separated from the “true self”, the stigma of fatness is easier to manage (see also Kyrölä 2005). The societal message that fat persons are “less than” led to many of our participants internalizing the fat hatred that is propagated in both cultures.

### *Internalization of fat hatred*

Saguy and Ward (2011) conceptualize “fatphobia” as similar to homophobia, in that fat invokes tremendous hatred and fear of fat. Fatphobia exists in contemporary Western society because thin bodies are prized and considered medically, aesthetically, and morally desirable, while fat bodies are denigrated. Fat is so detested that “no one wants to be fat”. In fact, many people adopt radical means to eliminate—or attempt to eliminate—their fat, through extreme caloric restriction or fad diets. This fear of “becoming”—in multiple senses of “becoming”, such as actually gaining weight, but also “becoming” as defining of one’s orientation toward others—or being fat combined with the hatred and revulsion of fat contributes to seeing oneself through the eyes of discriminating others.

Many of the women interviewed saw themselves in the predicament of the “less than” or the “inferior”, as beings deserving of mistreatment. In this regard, they were ugly and lazy humans positioned as the Other. It is in this way that they “became” fat (Gailey, 2014). Sadly, Patricia, 47, white, North American, states that when she hears discussions in the media about the “obesity epidemic” that she “admits” to herself that she is “one of the them” and that she is a

“loser”. She told Gailey that she has cannot express her views about the “obesity epidemic” because she is “one of them”.

Fatness was invariably talked about as something undesirable and shameful. It was reflected in the way many women said that they found it difficult to talk about how they really feel and think about their fatness or their fat bodies, or that they had to hide their true feelings about their bodies. Many had never talked about how being fat affects them, even with their nearest and dearest and were reluctant to reveal to anyone how much they focus on their body size. Most the women, linked fatness to negative feelings such as shame, guilt, and embarrassment. Out of all the informants only a few described their fatness and body in positive or neutral terms. Fatness as an experience was a “private shame” for many.

While the “war on obesity” has increased discrimination and mistreatment of people of size it is not just coming from external sources; fat hatred is internalized as well. For instance, Jessica said:

This may be overblown, but it is a relatively accurate depiction of my fears. I look at my whole life, and it scares me how deeply this current of self-hatred runs in me. I am tired of it, it exhausts me, I don’t want it anymore, but it is as familiar as the proverbial old pair of slippers, and some part of me clings to it like a baby blanket (Jessica, 35, white, North American).

Jessica wants to overcome the feelings she has of self-hatred but makes it clear that this is incredibly difficult because she identifies with the larger cultural views about the harms of fat, which fuels fatphobia outwardly and inwardly. Sue, a 62-year-old, white, North American, revealed that her romantic partner frequently called her a “pig” and other hurtful names. She said, “the minute he would say that, I could feel my shoulders going down and I wanted to sink

into the ground and think, ‘He’s so right. I am such a pig.’” Sue internalized the messages from the larger culture and her significant other. Similarly, Martta, a 44-year old white Finnish woman wrote:

I hate myself like this. I feel fat, even though many probably think that I am now normal sized. I feel anxious. Eating makes me feel guilty every time and I feel that I deserve to be punished for eating and getting fat. I hate my body, because it has betrayed me now by getting fat. It never did before and now I eat normally and gain weight. Nothing feels good any more... it seems like fatness ruins your whole life. I can’t change my attitude, because I have internalized them already as a child. Even death is better than being fat. A relative who was ill with cancer only made me think that now she does not need to diet anymore. I was horrified by my own thoughts, but I am just being honest. It would be great to be the way I am without these feelings of shame and pressure to diet after every meal.

Women’s stories in both cultures about fatness bear so many similarities that one would not know they were collected in two historically distinct cultures. The same deep-seated feelings of shame, guilt, self-hatred, and embarrassment appear in women’s accounts of fatness whether they are Finnish or North American.

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

The present manuscript has made two important contributions to the literature: 1) we bring together data from two cultures to examine the themes fat women use to discuss their corporeal experiences; and 2) we have addressed an area that few mainstream feminists currently theorize about—the lived experiences of fat women. The goal of cross-culturally examining our

respective data was to determine if fat women in two distinct cultures had shared experiences of fatness and to contribute to feminist theorizing on fat women's lives and embodied experiences.

The lived experiences employed by both North American and Finnish women suggest that Western fat women are confronted with fatphobia, stigma, and mistreatment and that they discuss their experiences in similarly contradictory ways; hyper(in)visibility and liminality. As embodied subjects, our participants feel that they are socially hypervisible and hyperinvisible and they are positioned in a permanent liminal state where they are expected to change and become something else. Moreover, they are socially punished for not being able to change and acquire socially acceptable and normative bodies. We argue that the experience of hyper(in)visibility and liminality has resulted in women internalizing fat hatred. They have embodied the messages that are perpetuated in neoliberal Western cultures that fat persons are irresponsible and inferior. They shared experiences of feeling that they were frequently made into a spectacle through the stares that they draw in the grocery store or as they walk down to the street, while simultaneously they were frequently dismissed and entirely ignored as they tried to have their needs accommodated in a variety of settings. The tremendous mistreatment and stigma combined with the hegemonic biomedical conception that fatness is a "curable" our participants tended to view their fatness as a liminal state, despite the fact that most of the women have been fat their whole life. They see their outer fat bodies as different from and not connected to their inner true self and most did not claim a fat identity (cf. Gailey, 2014). Liminality serves the purpose of minimizing stigma and helps fat women cope with internalized fat hatred. At the same time, it perpetuates the fantasy of thinness and the normative female body and ties women to the endless, and physically and mentally draining, project of achieving it. Thus, invoking liminality further.

Hyper(in)visibility and liminality grasp different sides of the same phenomenon: the ambiguity of the fat position and experience as visible/invisible, hypervisible/hyperinvisible, a liminal position and an experience, not a real subject always in-between. The construction of fatness as hyper(in)visible and as a liminal state is one of the central ways by which fatness is both produced and maintained, as a phenomenon and experience, as a marginalized and marginalizing condition that perpetuates stigma and mistreatment in both North American and Finnish culture, which the “obesity epidemic” rhetoric has enhanced. It is clear from our data that the hegemonic fat discourse travels internationally and fatness as a phenomenon and gendered experience seems to transcend borders in this sense, too. We argue that media campaigns and education focused on feminism, bodily acceptance, and the problems with taken-for-granted assumptions about fat are necessary to begin to decrease marginalization, discrimination, and the internalization of fat hatred. We urge international feminists to take action to shift the “obesity epidemic” rhetoric to one of acceptance so that it does not continue to harm and marginalize persons (women) of size.

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### **Conflict of Interest**

The Authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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### **Biographical Note**

[author deleted for peer review]