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UNDESIRABLY DIFFERENT

Hyper(in)visibility and the Gendered Fat Body

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In this chapter, I discuss the phenomenon of hyper(in)visibility as one way to understand the gendering of fat bodies. I became interested in fat studies when I was in graduate school and learned about a behavior called “hogging” from the local weekly entertainment guide. Hogging, as it was described, is a practice where men, usually in groups, bet about who can have sex with the fattest woman or it is where men will use, and sometimes abuse, fat women for sexual gratification. My colleague and friend, Ariane Prohaska, and I decided shortly thereafter that we had to learn more about this deplorable practice. We launched a small study where we interviewed undergraduate, heterosexual men and conducted a content analysis of blogs and forums. What we learned, in sum, was that the men who engaged in these behaviors were seeking to prove to each other that they were “real men” through sexual conquest and the degradation of fat women and that they thought their actions were justifiable because, in their eyes, fat women are desperate and/or easy (Gailey and Prohaska 2006; Prohaska and Gailey 2010).

Following that research, I began to study the emerging academic field of fat studies and focused my attention specifically on fat women and how they negotiate living in an anti-fat society. I started that research interviewing fat women about their life course, paying particular attention to their sexual and dating histories, but as the interviews progressed, I broadened my focus to capture a more complete picture about how they experience their bodies, lives, and world as fat women. It was through in-depth interviews with 74 women that I conceptualized the phenomenon of hyper(in)visibility (Gailey 2014), a predicament where one is exceptionally visible and invisible, often simultaneously.

In what follows, I present how hyper(in)visibility can help us understand the intersection of gender and fat. My goal for this chapter is twofold: (1) to conceptualize and illustrate the spectrum of visibility and the phenomenon of

hyper(in)visibility; and (2) to demonstrate how the phenomenon of hyper(in) visibility operates by discussing the societal expectations of fat ciswomen, fat cismen, and fat queer people.

The Spectrum of Visibility and the Phenomenon of Hyper(in)visibility

It is through our appearance and bodies that we communicate to others our social location. Social location refers to our social position vis-à-vis our race, ethnicity, gender, age, able-bodiedness, body size, and so forth. The ways these social categories intersect affects how we are perceived by others as well as where we are positioned in the social hierarchy. I contend that human bodies exist on a spectrum of visibility from hypervisible at one extreme and hyperinvisible at the other. We are all visible and invisible at times, but it's how visibility and invisibility function that is a both a consequence of the social hierarchy and simultaneously reinforces that same hierarchy. For example, those who are able-bodied, white, middle or upper class, cisgender, and thin are at the top of the social hierarchy and have the most privilege. They are seen when it benefits them and ignored when it does not.

Contrast this with the way that queer people, those with physical disabilities or disfigurements, and fat persons are treated by strangers. As visible as they appear and feel, they experience invisibility in numerous social settings, to the extent that they're often completely dismissed or erased. Moreover, they notice people's stares, looks of disgust or ridicule, and often have a feeling of being "onstage" (Gailey 2014, 10). Those with privilege are socially invisible. They don't receive the same looks of judgment, ridicule, or contempt that those who are marginalized do. People with privileged bodies are able to slip in and out of visibility and invisibility easily and when it is convenient for them. In contrast, those with marginalized bodies are paid exceptional attention or are exceptionally overlooked, often simultaneously.

Hyper(in)visibility is the phenomenon whereby marginalized bodies are subjected to both an extraordinary amount of attention and scrutiny and are simultaneously completely disregarded and dismissed. I argue that contemporary Western societies relegate fat people to a hyper(in)visible space, an experience that occurs explicitly within institutions (e.g., hidden from view in corporate endeavors that showcase thin women) and implicitly in our interpersonal and imagined worlds (through shunning particular body types in everyday life and the internalization of fat hatred) (Gailey 2021, 2014; Gailey and Harjunen 2019). Fat women and queer people, and increasingly, fat men, are hyperinvisible in that their needs, desires, and lives are grossly disregarded, yet at the same time they are hypervisible because they're the target of a disproportionate amount of critical judgment.

At the extremes, a hyperinvisible person is nearly or totally deprived of recognition, and a hypervisible person will be heavily scrutinized or paid a

tremendous amount of attention...I argue that the prefix “hyper” is necessary to understand the process of Othering. Being seen and socially acknowledged means that we exist and that we matter. Yet as Goffman (1963) writes, most people grant strangers in public the courtesy of civil inattention, which simply means that most people will pass strangers on the street or in a public space without commentary or inspection. But this courtesy of civil inattention is often not granted to fat people, particularly fat women, because strangers expect that women, especially when in public, should be accommodating to the male gaze by being attractive (thin). In what follows, I demonstrate how hyper(in)visibility can help us understand the intersection of gender and fat by discussing how it impacts cisgender women, cisgender men, and queer people.

Fat, Gender, and Hyper(in)visibility

Western heteronormative cultural norms dictate that women should be beautiful (thin), and if they aren't they are compelled to at least try to be, which typically means losing weight. In addition, fat represents a challenge to the identification as sexual (Murray 2004) because body size is connected to the heteronormative system of meaning and value that establishes what it means to be masculine and feminine and prioritizes men's pleasure in sex.

Gender is not an inherent quality of an individual, instead it is a performance or a social doing where individuals, through their interactions with others, demonstrate their mastery of either a masculine or feminine presentation (Butler 1993). This takes place in accordance with the societal expectations about the “appropriate” roles for men and women. In the West, the gendered order is typically referred to as “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1987), which is the template for the way men should behave *and* look, the goals to which they should aspire, and the type of women they should be attracted to, date, or marry. In this context, hegemonically masculine men dominate women and subordinated men. Women are expected to accommodate the interests and needs of men, a concept known as “emphasized femininity” (Connell 1987), which includes meeting the normative standards of beauty (thinness).

Cisgender Women

Emphasized femininity works to sustain hegemonic masculinity and heteronormativity; in essence, they're two sides of the same coin. Fat women's bodies are typically not considered to align with the feminine ideal because their body symbolizes both domination (due to its size) and resistance to idealized femininity (thinness) (Gailey 2012). Farrell (2009, 261) notes,

as women gained more political and geographic freedom in the early 20th century, they were increasingly curtailed by a set of body disciplines that

mocked and denigrated all those who did not seem to display proper modes of bodily control.

Women who don't appropriately attend to and "invest" in their bodies are shunned and viewed as deviant. As Dolezal (2015, 110) writes, "a woman's subjectivity is structured by the self-consciousness of being constantly under surveillance and visible as a result of objectification." Hence, women cannot move their bodies freely, as their bodies are always already made known to them by society.

Fat women's bodies uniquely demonstrate characteristics associated with both masculinity and femininity, which at the outset seems paradoxical. Their bodies are masculine because they take up "excess" space and their body is ultra-feminine because it is soft, curvy, and fleshy. Moreover, fat women's bodies are read as simultaneously nonsexual and hypersexual (Braziel 2001; Farrell 2011; Gailey 2014, 2012). However, the fact that fat women are both masculine and feminine and sexual and nonsexual is perpetuated by the phenomenon of hyper(in)visibility.

Fat women regularly have to deal with hypervisibility because they often receive disapproving stares and commentary while exercising (Harjunen 2019), grocery shopping (Gailey 2014), sitting in class (Stevens 2017, eating out (Owen 2012), sitting on public transportation (Huff 2009; Owen 2012), on social media and blogs (Hynnä and Kyrölä 2019; Taylor 2018), in television shows (Taylor and Gailey 2019), shopping for clothes (Jennings 2010) and when interacting with health care professionals (Gailey 2014; Wilson 2009).

In a study with fat college students, Stevens (2017) found that the phenomenon of hyper(in)visibility was made more salient in the types of spaces that exist on college campuses, such as dining areas, recreation centers, classrooms, and predominantly undergraduate bars near the campus. Respondents noted that it is often difficult to fit in the desks in classrooms or easily move down the aisles between the desks, which simultaneously makes them both hypervisible and hyperinvisible because their bodies aren't considered in the design of public spaces.

Similarly, Harjunen's (2019) research on fat women who exercise in public painfully demonstrates the ways in which fat women are publicly castigated and shamed when wearing a swimsuit. Her research reveals that strangers stare, make clearly audible comments about how "she shouldn't be in public in a bathing suit" while simultaneously assuming that she's fat because she doesn't exercise and overeats. Fat women who wish to exercise are hypervisible when they do so in public because they're made into a spectacle and hyperinvisible because they sometimes have difficulty finding swimsuits or workout clothing in their size, and many come to avoid public exercise altogether (Gailey 2014).

This sort of mistreatment and stigmatization happens in nearly all social settings, and sometimes even in places where one would expect to feel safe. Calogero et al. (2018) argue that therapists must employ weight inclusive therapy because of the overwhelming research that shows that fat women are frequently not safe in therapy due to the hyper(in)visibility they experience. The last thing someone

needs when they enter therapy is to have their lives and experiences be reduced to their bodies or body size. Both Gailey (2021) and Monaghan (2008b) argue that the obesity epidemic discourse, fat oppression, and marginalization are forms of symbolic violence because the treatment of fat people is so deplorable that it can easily be seen as a form of non-physical violence. Moreover, anti-fat sentiments and the experience of hyper(in)visibility leads many fat people to internalize fat hatred (Gailey 2014).

As Harjunen (2017, 89) writes, “[Women] are actively encouraged to think of self-governance and disciplining the body as sources of empowerment and pleasure.” Women who don’t find pleasure in body work or who don’t engage in intentional weight loss are viewed as deviant and violating one of the most fundamental gender roles for women. When women don’t subscribe to the popular cultural demands they are frequently subjected to vitriol and erasure. Unfortunately, fat men are also increasingly judged for having an “unruly” body and, like fat women, are apt to internalize fat hatred and express dissatisfaction and contempt with their body (Tischner 2013).

Cisgender Men

Fat men also violate gender norms, not surprisingly, in a similarly paradoxical manner, which has a significant impact on the way they see themselves and how others see them. Yet, there has been much less theorizing about fat men and boys’ bodies. Gilman (2004, 32) expressed this concern nearly 20 years ago, writing

the scholarship since the 1960s has focused almost entirely on women’s bodies and on patriarchy, the body of the fat boy has, in fact, long been a source of “fascination, concern, horror, [and] interest” representing as he does “the outer limits of the performance of masculinity.”

Research indicates that men in the United States are increasingly presenting with eating disorders and body dysmorphia, engaging in diets and weight loss behaviors, as well as using cosmetic surgeries and procedures to correct their “uncontrollable” bodies (Monaghan 2008a, 2008b; Mosher 2001; Tischner 2013).

Fat bodies, in most respects, are the opposite of the muscular, hard, and chiseled body prescribed by hegemonic masculinity; the one exception is that fat bodies are large and take up space, which is commonly associated with masculinity. Yet, fat is typically feminized, and femininity is relegated to the marginal position of Other, while masculinity is most closely associated with being human. For men to achieve hegemonic masculinity they must reject any and all things feminine or risk being subordinated. Gilman (2004, 19) writes, “the very notion of a hobbled masculinity seems to be built into the image of the fat man.” Monaghan (2008a), one of the first scholars to focus nearly exclusively on fat men, views fat oppression as an emergent process that is directed at both men and women’s bodies, though

he does acknowledge that it's aimed at bodies that are positioned as feminine regardless of their biological sex. Monaghan (2008b) draws our attention to the fact that the violence associated with the war on obesity is of particular concern to women because they experience fat hatred as a gendered (misogynistic) practice, but men who embody what Connell (1995) conceptualized as "marginalized or subordinated masculinities" also risk humiliation and hyper(in)visibility due to fatphobia.

Bell and McNaughton (2007) state, "fatness has long had threatening implications for men, given the ways it potentially undermines normative forms of masculinity" (127). Fatness has the *potential* to emasculate men, especially if the fat is distributed in the hips or chest. Men with adipose tissue in their chest are often said to have "man boobs" (Bell and McNaughton 2007; Lozano-Sufrategui et al. 2016; Monaghan 2008a). However, one component of hegemonic masculinity is to take up space, which fat bodies do. In this way we can see that fat men aren't held to the same narrow standards regarding their appearance as women, but gendered appearance norms have begun to shift. Men's bodies were historically overlooked because their primary currency was their occupational status and wealth. Yet, as gender and sex roles change, men's bodies have increasingly become sites of contestation. As men become increasingly objectified we could begin to see more fat men internalize fat hatred and experience discrimination.

Previous research indicates that some men will develop self-protective strategies, such as hiding their bodies from public purview and using humor to cover up that they're hurt or offended by anti-fat comments, i.e., they become hyperinvisible (Lozano-Sufrategui et al. 2016; Monaghan 2008a, 2008b; Tischner 2013). In fact, it's "common knowledge" that fat men are supposed to wear a shirt while swimming because their bodies are deemed unsightly. In fact, onlookers sometimes express disgust quite openly, whereas friends or family might joke about his "man boobs" and protruding belly, rendering him hypervisible. Some fat men have reported being "mothered" or infantilized by women, especially coworkers and friends (Monaghan and Hardey 2009). For instance, in a study of men enrolled in a weight management program some discussed experiencing hyperinvisibility when they're mothered by women because they saw it as a sign that they aren't attractive and aren't manly (Lozano-Sufrategui et al. 2016).

Queer People

Scholarly writing about queer and fat goes back to the late 1990s and early 2000s when fat studies was in its infancy. Charlotte Cooper (2012) began writing on fat and queer activism in the 1990s and scholars like Kathleen LeBesco and Hanne Blank quickly followed. Today there's an increasing number of scholars working on the intersection of queer and fat but it is still sorely understudied. White (2021) argues that trans studies and fat studies share many similar goals, i.e., they're both interdisciplinary, both are oriented toward anti-oppressive goals and they

both focus on the theorization of nonnormative embodiments; but there's little research that focuses on trans and fat. White contends that this significantly limits our understanding of the relationship between gender and fat. While my research unfortunately can't fill this gap, I would like to highlight what has been written and illustrate how great the need is for more research on queer and fat, especially fat and transgender and gender nonbinary people.

Queer bodies, in a heteronormative society, are viewed as abject because homosexuality and gender nonconformity are direct repudiations of the hegemonically masculine gendered social order. Fat queer people experience their bodies in ways that cisgendered fat people don't (White 2014). Cisgenderism is a helpful way to think through this.

Cisgenderism (Ansara and Hegarty 2012) is the system of thinking and practice—based on the assumption of a cisgender norm—that invalidates people's own understanding of their genders and bodies, including misgendering, pathologizing, marginalizing, and binarizing people. Examples of cisgender norms include assuming that because someone looks masculine that they were assigned male at birth, calling someone "sir" or "ma'am" on the assumption that everyone is male or female, or asking personal questions about a person's sex life and medical interventions when one finds out that person is transgender. These examples clearly show that queer and/or trans people's adherence to gendered expectations will impact the way they are treated by those within and outside the queer community. Moreover, hyper(in)visibility would provide a useful tool to investigate the processes and mechanisms at place for the lived experiences of queer and trans people.

Allison Taylor (2018) studied queer fat femme blogs and found that fat femmes often experience hyper(in)visibility. Her research demonstrates how queer fat femmes are often erased in the lesbian community because they are feminine and fat, and at the same time they're rejected as feminine because of their body size. Femininity is read as heterosexual, which means that all too often queer fat femmes, as well as queer fat men and those who are fat and gender nonbinary, are invisible in queer communities (White 2014). Koehle's (2022) rhetorical analysis of blogs written by fat trans people found that gender, fatness, and race could not be separated when the bloggers were discussing their ability to pass because femininity is inextricably linked to whiteness and thinness. The trans Black women had a difficult time imagining that they really could be women because of their size—both height and weight—and race. One of the bloggers wrote, "who's ever heard of a 6'2" 320 pound woman" and another writes about having to shop in men's department's due to lack of women's clothing that can accommodate tall fat women (Koehle 2022, 82–83). Many of these bloggers felt exiled from their gender because they couldn't meet the cisgender standards.

Research on gay men has found that their bodies are read as effeminate, which frequently results in stigmatization, subordination, and sometimes violence (Barron and Bradford 2007), as well as the predicament of hyper(in)visibility. Whitesel

(2014) found that gay fat men experienced significant stigmatization, especially when it came to attracting partners. This is consistent with previous research that has found that gay and bisexual men had significantly higher levels of anti-fat attitudes, dislike of fat people, and are more likely to be overly critical and fixated on their bodies (Robinson 2016). It's not uncommon on gay men's dating sites to see users post "no fats, no fems" on their profile, publicly marking that there is no room for fat or effeminate men in the gay dating scene. Fat gay men are marked as hypervisible as their bodies are noted publicly as not belonging (or are fetishized), while simultaneously they're hyperinvisible because they aren't welcome in the online dating community and their feelings and needs are disregarded.

White's (2021, 2019) theorizing on the intersection of trans and fat is probably the most thorough discussion about how trans-fat people create "gender trouble." Most of the research that addresses fat and trans treats them as discrete categories. For instance, trans/fat masculine men are sometimes misgendered because their bodies don't fit the narrow ideal of cis gendered men's bodies (Taylor 2018; White 2014). While fat transwomen sometimes experience misgendering because our society associates femaleness with slenderness, either way they all suffer the predicament of hyper(in)visibility, even though I haven't found the concept used in the trans and fat work. White (2021) asks us to entertain the possibility that fat doesn't cause gender to fail, but rather drives it into a liminal state "between" binary genders. Viewing it in this manner opens up the possibility for the subversion of the gender binary and enables us to think about what fat "does" rather than what it fails to do.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced and explained how the phenomenon of hyper(in) visibility can be utilized for discussing the intersection of fat and gender. As I've shown, this concept has broad applicability and succinctly illustrates how societal messages and interactions perpetuate the discrimination against fat people, especially because fat complicates and subverts gendered appearance-based norms. In addition, the phenomenon of hyper(in)visibility is incredibly harmful because it contributes to the internalization of fat hatred. Fat women, fat men, and queer and trans fat people all experience the phenomenon of hyper(in)visibility—a predicament that exists in our visually and appearance oriented culture. The increasing prevalence of surveillance technologies, social media, and dependence on virtual spaces means that we are looking at ourselves and each other more than ever. While those with privilege are not immune to the heteronormative pressures that mandate that women, queer people, and increasingly men conform to the narrow beauty strictures, they aren't scrutinized and made into a spectacle nor are they disregarded, which is precisely why the prefix "hyper" is necessary. Fat people often experience, simultaneously, deprivation of recognition and surplus attention in socially and medically significant settings.

Research on gender and fat has focused mainly on cisgender heterosexual women to date and ignored other human bodies that could experience the phenomenon of hyper(in)visibility. Research and theorizing regarding cisgender straight and gay men is increasing and there's been an uptick in research examining the intersection of fat and queer bodies in general, but there is very little research on the experiences of transgender fat people. In addition, future research must examine the way that other social categories, such as race, ethnicity, and social class intersect with gender, sexuality, and fat because we know that their gendered experiences will be different due to racism and classism.

In order to begin dismantling this system of oppression, we must shift our focus away from body weight and normative gender expectations surrounding body size and appearance and instead appreciate the diversity of human bodies. Moreover, as White (2021) asks, let's begin to theorize more about the ways that fat can potentially blur and subvert gendered binaries, as opposed to thinking of it only as something that creates a problem for gender.

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