EVERYDAY POLITICS OF FAT

ABSTRACT
This paper explores the everyday politics and lived experiences of young people who identify as fat, obese or overweight. Situated within the emerging interdisciplinary fields of Fat Studies, critical weight studies and critical geographies of body size, this paper gives voice to young people who are often marginalised and frequently stigmatised. I draw attention to the embodied relationalities and intersectionalities evident with the young people’s narratives of body size as well as the structures of constraint that operate to reinforce the marginalisation they feel. I conclude by outlining the challenges that exist in transforming the everyday politics of fat.

Key words: Fat Studies; obesity, bodies, young people

INTRODUCTION
Negative and demeaning images, representations and discourses about people who are fat, obese or overweight are very easy to come by. Articles in lifestyle magazines in the UK are aplenty with stories and photographs about well-known television presenters and media icons struggling with their weight or with disparaging accounts of the negative influence of obesity on people’s lives. The same too is found on British terrestrial or broadcast and digital television programmes where documentaries and health and fashion programmes regularly focus on weight-loss schemes, fat camps, diet plans and exercise regimes. Whether it is You Are What You Eat, The Biggest Loser, Celebrity Fit Club or Supersize v Superskinny, the clear message being sent out to viewers is that being obese, fat or overweight is undesirable, unhealthy and harmful. Furthermore, Guthman and DuPuis (2006: 427) note ‘obesity shows up in the news with a stunning regularity.’ These programmes – and the images and dialogues contained within them – are part of a larger set of oppressive, exclusive and marginalising dominant discourses within many western societies where ‘the fat body is understood to be unhealthy, ugly and sexually unattractive’ (Bell and Valentine, 1997: 29). Furthermore, as Murray (2005: 266) observes ‘the assumptions made about fatness are that the fat person is slothful, lazy, weak-willed, unreliable, unclean, unhealthy, deviant and defiant’ (Murray, 2005: 266), agreeing with Young (1990: 124) who sees fat people occupying the position of having ‘ugly, fearful, or loathsome bodies’ (Young 1990: 124). Susie Orbach notes:
The designation of fat as worthy of scorn and dislike, and of fat people as outsiders who should not only dislike themselves but also be discriminated against, is growing (Orbach, 2009: 103).
Obese, fat or overweight people are marginalised within society and the distaste and disgust associated with such people is intensifying. Furthermore, government policy in the UK is focusing ever more on the monitoring and prevention of obesity (Evans, 2006, 2010, Foresight 2007) with such policies feeding through directly into the everyday lives of children and young people in different contexts (Curtis, 2008, Rawlins, 2008, 2009). Government policy and the ‘mass cultural production of the unhealthy and morally decrepit fat person undergirds an account of what kind of person is undeserving of rights protections’ (Kirkland, 2008: 399).
I locate this paper within emerging research about fat studies, critical weight studies and critical geographies of body size (Colls and Evans, 2009, Cooper, 2010, Hopkins, 2008, Monaghan, 2008, Rothblum and Solovay, 2009). These radical and alternative approaches to understanding the place of the fat body in society offer the opportunity to view research participants as real people who are of value rather than seeing them only as fat people who are a threat to the moral order of society, a risk to health services and a burden on the public purse. These debates are explored in the first section of this paper. After this, I focus upon the everyday lived experiences of the young people who participated in this research. In doing so, I attempt to understand more about the complexity of their lives as people who feel fat, obese or overweight. Here, there are two sets of issues that I explore. Initially, I focus on the space-time embodied relationalities and intersectionalities experienced by young people. In particular, I demonstrate that it is often who young people are with and the size of other people in their immediate social surroundings that influence how they feel about their size. These relationalities are also shaped by intersectionalities as it is not only young people’s body size – but also who else they are – that can have a powerful influence over their everyday experiences. Thus, I suggest that focussing on the body offers a useful lens into the personal lives, senses of identity and socio-spatial accounts of young people’s lives. Second, by interrogating the narratives of the research participants, I explore the structures of constraint evident within their lives in order to understand what the factors are that maintain their sense of difference and marginalisation. This section focuses upon intergenerational relations, media representations and the use of humour as constraining factors in young people’s senses of positive self-esteem about their body size. Finally, I conclude by focusing on the challenges faced in transforming oppressive, exclusionary and discriminatory discourses about the everyday politics of fat.

FAT STUDIES, CRITICAL WEIGHT STUDIES AND CRITICAL GEOGRAPHIES OF BODY SIZE

The emerging interest within critical and radical human geography about fatness and obesity undoubtedly emerges from geographers’ earlier and ongoing engagement with the body. Despite the volume of research about ‘the body’, it has proven difficult to define given the diverse ways in which it is approached, although it is arguably feminist geographers who have led the way in advancing such scholarship (e.g. Longhurst, 1995, 1997, Johnston, 2009). Elizabeth Grosz (1998: 43) clarifies

‘By body I understand a concrete, material, animate organization of flesh, organs, nerves, muscles, and skeletal structure which are given a unity, cohesiveness, and organization only through their psychical and social inscription as the surface and raw materials of an integrated and cohesive totality’ (Grosz, 1998: 43).

Others have distinguished between an essentialist or naturalistic approach to the body and social constructionist approaches (Dyck, 1999, Shilling, 1996), the latter seeing the body as being shaped, created and controlled by society and social interactions. Nast and Pile (1998: 3) suggest that the ‘politics of connection and disconnection, of rights over the body, of the body as a site of struggle’ are important foci for research, as does Simonsen (2000: 9) who discusses the body and its spatiality as a ‘cultural, political and theoretical battlefield.’ In terms of the relationship between bodies and space:
‘it would be better to think of the ways in which bodies and places are understood, how they are made and how they are interrelated, one to the other – because this is how we live our lives – through places, through the body (Nast and Pile, 1998: 1)

In this article, I focus upon the lived experiences of people who identify as fat, obese or overweight, thereby adopting a position that is critical of medicalised discourses about the body and supportive of approaches which take a critical perspective on the ways in which society and institutions construct particular bodies as more desirable than others. In order to do so, I situate this paper in emerging debates that adopt a perspective that is critical of dominant discourses about obesity.

In a special issue of this journal, Colls and Evans (2009: 1013) note that ‘there is a small but growing interdisciplinary body of work referred to as “critical obesity research” or “Fat Studies”’. Some research within this interdisciplinary body of scholarship has also been labelled as ‘critical weight studies’ (Monaghan 2010: 40) and ‘critical geographies of body size (Hopkins, 2008). What unites these different labels is a concern with ‘the politics of body size and fatness’ (Colls and Evans, 2009: 1012, see also for example, Cooper, 1998, Aphramor, 2009, Monaghan, 2008, Tomrley and Naylor, 2009). Solovay and Rothblum (2009: 2) observe the emergence of this field:

Fat Studies scholars found the opinions about fat suspicious and began conducting research to examine these claims. Building on this foundation, a few decades later the field of fat studies emerged. In the tradition of critical race studies, queer studies, and women’s studies, fat studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body.

As this statement makes clear, research that adopts a critical approach to fatness has much in common with radical scholarship in areas such as women’s studies and critical race studies as it seeks to challenge the status quo and rework negative associations about fatness. Colls and Evans (2009: 1016) usefully locate explorations of body size within critical geographies clarifying that such scholarship seeks to address ‘an oppressive social relation; one which is premised on assumptions about the capacities and capabilities of different bodies.’ Such ‘critical interventions offer alternative accounts of fatness that seek to challenge the “science” of obesity’ (Colls and Evans, 2009: 1013).

Scholars working within this field are regularly faced with issues relating to the ‘medicalization of difference’ (Young 1990: 129) or the ‘medicalisation of social life’ (Smith, 1993: 62) which results in the:

. . . drawing of boundaries around social groups on the basis of presumed health, illness and susceptibility to disease. Such boundaries are overlaid with attitudinal, behavioural and territorial markers, and may be used as criteria in determining the differential apportionment of goods and services (Smith, 1993: 62)

As Hopkins (2008: 2116) observes, such approaches to body size result in fat people being ‘provided with restricted access to resources, deemed unworthy of particular welfare entitlements or seen as not deserving of particular rights and freedom of expression’. Related to this, Monaghan et al (2010: 38) explores the issue of what they refer to as ‘obesity epidemic entrepreneurs’ (or ‘entrepreneurship’) which:

signifies a concern with the varied actors, interests, practices and manner of constructing medicalized fatness as a social issue of crisis’ (Monaghan et al 2010: 38) pointing to the ways in which specific organisations and companies have
sought to capitalise upon the panic and anxiety associated with ‘the obesity epidemic.

Likewise, Orbach (2009: 101) notes that she wants ‘to be sure that we see the social, psychological, class, visual, nutritional and commercial issues behind the so-called crisis’ (Orbach 2009: 101) rather than it only being regarded as a health-related and medical concern. A very important intervention in this area has been work that has sought to problematise the common-sense assumptions associated with medicalised discourses such as those associated with the Body Mass Index (Evans and Colls, 2009, Monaghan, 2007).

An important contribution of research within this field is to interrogate, critique and question the complex assumptions behind the very powerful discourses about the so-called ‘obesity epidemic’. Kirkland (2008: 398) states that ‘critical social scientists maintain that the public is being systematically misled by new reporting about obesity as well as by misinformation about the safety and efficacy of diets and weight loss pharmaceuticals.’ Indeed, in the International Journal of Obesity, Keith et al (2006) outline ten additional explanations for increasing levels of obesity beyond those traditionally focused upon. These explanations include sleep deprivation, decreased smoking, changes in distributions of ethnicity and age, amongst others. For scholars working within this field there exist a broad range of explanations for increasing levels of obesity beyond what Keith et al (2006: 1586) call ‘the Big Two’ (those being reduced physical activity and increased calorie intake).

The lack of attention given to the everyday lived experiences of people who identify as fat, obese or overweight has also been observed. Kirkland (2008: 399) notes that ‘despite all the attention, the voices of fat people themselves are rarely heard’ and Colls and Evans (2009: 1015) observe that ‘geographical and particularly critical geographical engagements with fatness have thus far been limited.’ Although very limited in scope, some research has pointed to the discrimination and exclusion experienced by people as a result of their body size. Thomas et al (2006) found that the majority of participants in their research had experienced some form of stigma and direct discrimination and for those who had not been openly marginalised, all were men. One of the most common responses was that other people had commented on individual’s weight when buying food or clothes. Moreover, Longhurst (forthcoming) has recently employed an autobiographical approach in order to explore the paradoxical experiences of weight loss.

In the tradition of scholarship within this field, my aims in this paper align with Colls and Evans (2009: 1016) when they note that:

...we aim to contribute to an emerging critical geography of fatness by considering examples of how dominant constructions of obesity and fatness are materialised and experienced across a range of spatial and temporal contexts.

As well as responding to the request that ‘it is time to write body shape geographically’ (Longhurst 2005a, 248), I also hope to give voice to the lived realities and concerns of the young people consulted in this research. I am interested in advancing an everyday politics of fat that directly interweaves structure and personal experience. I now introduce the study from which these findings have emerged.

THE STUDY
In this paper, I explore the experiences of young people – aged 18 through to 27 - who identify as fat, obese or overweight in order to understand how they negotiate the oppressive and marginalising discourses explored above and the factors that work to heighten or lessen the negativity associated with them. In order to do so, I draw upon a project that explored how young people feel different as a result of their body size. In particular, this project investigated how young people may feel marginalised and discriminated against as a result of their size, the places where they feel more or less comfortable as a result of this, and the strategies they adopt in managing these experiences and situations. Of the eighteen young people who participated in this project, thirteen identified as being fat, obese, overweight or as larger than other young people their own age and the experiences of these thirteen young people are the focus of this article. I use the terms fat, obese and overweight as these were the terms drawn upon by the participants, although it is important to recognise that each has its own association with specific medicalised or discriminatory practices.

All of the interviews were digitally taped with the permission of the participants and pseudonyms were chosen by the participants in order to protect their confidentiality. All those who took part in this project volunteered to participate in response to a poster and e-mail advert about the research hence the age range of the participants reflects those who chose to respond to the advert. Posters were displayed on notice boards in two universities in northern England, UK and in the Students Unions building of both universities. In both cases, an e-mail about the research was also sent through the Students Union employment contact. The research took place between 2005 and 2007 and at the time of participating, all interviewees were students studying at universities in northern England, UK. All of the interviews took place in a location selected by the participants and this tended to be in a coffee shop, university common-room or other quiet place chosen by the young person. Of the thirteen young people who identified as being fat, obese or overweight, ten were young women and three young men. The sample also includes young people who affiliate with the four of the five main world religions and all participants are from relatively middle-class backgrounds with at least one of their parents working in an established profession. All interviews were fully transcribed and coded using a set of key themes with each code then being analysed in further depth to clarify meanings and advance interpretation.

An important set of methodological considerations in this project related to the ways in which young people opted in to the project and their reasons for doing so. As the study is about young people who are feel different as a result of their size – and given its location in the traditions of fat studies and critical geographies of body size – it is unethical to ask potentially very intrusive questions about young people’s weight or clothes size. Where such references are made, this has been volunteered by the young people. The key point here is that this paper focuses upon young people who feel different rather than labelling them as different as a result of their weight, BMI, waist size or such like.

SPACE-TIME EMBODIED RELATIONALITIES AND INTERSECTIONALITIES

The narratives of the young people involved in this research make it clear that they are constantly negotiating complex space-time embodied relationalities and
intersectionalities. Their embodiment is fundamental to this set of processes as their
navigations of space-time are shaped by varying intensities of relationality and
intersectionality. May and Thrift (2001) discuss the timetables and rhythms, social
discipline and instruments and devices that are all part of the geographies of time.
Moreover, ‘a sense of time is thus shaped by and enacted through various systems of
social discipline’ (May and Thrift, 2001: 4). Furthermore, Jarvis (2005: 135) refers to the
different negotiations of space and time that are evident within the ‘infrastructure of
everyday life’. In this article, I refer to the space-time embodied experiences of the young
people involved in the research in order to explore in details the ways in which different
spaces – such as those associated with consumption, the home and social relations – and
different times – such as lunchtime or meal times more generally – shape and are shaped
by their intense feelings of difference as a result of their identification with being fat,
overweight or obese. In doing so, I explore the disciplining social relations that are
evident within the infrastructures of young people’s everyday lives in order to understand
the relationships between their body size and the negotiations of different spaces and
times.

At the same time however, these space-time embodied experiences are also
orchestrated by different relationalities and intersectionalities. Here, I refer to the
relations between different bodies across space and time, cautious of the fact that there
exists ‘an array of vectors of relationality’ (Hopkins and Noble, 2009: 815) rather than
relationality being simply about a set of even and balanced connections or
disconnections. Moreover, these relationalities wax and wane according to how they
shape and are shaped by space-time embodied intersectionalities. Rather than seeing
these intersectionalities as equal, comparable and correspondent, it is important to note
that ‘intersection is less about the alignment and crossing of … key social categories and
more about capturing the messiness of layered subjectivities and multi-dimensional
relations in particular localities’ (Hopkins and Noble, 2009: 815). Overall then, the aim
here is to map out and explore further these space-time embodied relationalities and
intersectionalities in order to offer an in-depth exploration of the everyday politics of fat.

**Embodied relationalities**

**Gillian:** Quite often in social situations I feel very self conscious for example, in a
large group of people, I start to feel lumpish and that affects me. I would
say that when I am with someone else I am always judging myself against
them. It’s become a natural instinctive response and anybody I meet I am
comparing myself in terms of size (26 years old)

**Simon:** …if I’m on my own, then I won’t really think about it but it’s like if I’m
with someone who is considered thin … they’re … attractive because
they’re thin … Like if you’re on a beach or you’re at the swimming pool,
you know, you’re just sunbathing generally, em … I tend not to sunbathe
cos that means taking your top off and things like that. I’ll tend to just
wear my full top (18 years old)

As these quotes from Gillian and Simon illustrate, their perceptions about their body size,
and their sense of self-consciousness about this, varies in intensity according to where
they are, who else they are with and who else is occupying the same places as they are.
Perceptions about body size are therefore location-specific and relational; these young
people have specific space-time embodied relationalities that influence the ideas and perceptions that they have about their body size.

Stephanie talked in depth about some of the anxieties associated with how she experienced and managed her space-time embodied relationalities. For Stephanie, it was both her height and size that she struggled with and this resulted in her everyday life being full of intense feelings of self-consciousness and anxiety coupled with a desire to withdraw from what she saw as the aggressively judgemental public gaze. She noted that she feels “so judged and ashamed of myself.” Her worries about her body size and image meant that she “never had the confidence to think I could have a romantic life with someone”. Furthermore, she would “find a corner quickly to eat so people don’t see me” at lunch breaks and found visiting the shops or supermarket challenging too: “I am really self-conscious about what my basket looks like when I shop and if I put too much in it I worry people will think “look at that fat girl””. Stephanie also looked back to when she was younger during the interview:

Stephanie: When I was 8 and they all weighed us at school and they did it in the classroom so everyone knew what weight we were because they would just yell it out and I remember I was 103 pounds at eight years old and I think that is significantly overweight ……Yes I always thought really hard about sleepovers and if I was going to a friend’s house and outings at school and sports day, I never did that and I made those decisions because I was bigger and I was afraid I would be laughed at… (27 years old)

The embodied relationalities that are part of Stephanie’s experience relate to her engagement with everyday spaces and times, from visiting the shops, eating lunch to engaging with other people in conversation. However, by looking back, Stephanie makes it clear that her embodied relationalities are also time and place specific and particular events in specific places often have marked consequences on her confidence with regards to her body size and image. She had lost fifty pounds and was hoping to lose a further twenty yet still considered herself overweight. She did feel that experience of weight-loss had made her realise how much her body size was “haunting me in my life”. Stephanie’s account therefore responds to Longhurst’s (2005: 247) observation that ‘one aspect of bodily subjectivity that has received very little attention is body size and shape, including height, stature, weight, firmess and fitness’ as her concerns are not only with her size but also about her height and stature.

An important theme that all participants raised in the interviews was about how they felt in spaces of consumption. This often focused on how they felt in restaurants and cafes and how they negotiated eating in public spaces at lunchtime or during breaks. Consider these quotes:

Aisha: On occasion I have felt uncomfortable in a restaurant because I have been with a massive group and the other girls are so thin and they only eat a little bit and I feel like if I eat more than them they will think (19 years old)

Star: I think it depends who you are with. I mean, if you’re going out in the evening and there are lots of scantily clad girls who look really nice then you do kind of think … I have to be really comfortable knowing who I am with. So walking round the university, I wouldn’t be eating something … (18 years old)
Sue: Say for example if I was on a lunch break, I couldn’t eat out into town on my own cos I’d feel conscious of people looking at me (20 years old)

Edwina: … it was like on my way home or something, I’d buy a chocolate bar or packet of sweets or something and then just put them in my room to eat in room and not downstairs (18 years old)

In terms of managing such situations, some responded by withdrawing from specific social settings. Sue, for example, said “I do isolate myself from certain social situations when I don’t feel good about myself.” Simon would avoid having extras – such as dessert – when out socialising with friends, and Edwina said that she would often “just say that I’ve gotta go somewhere, even though I didn’t have to be home at a certain time”. Others would carefully police the situation by restricting their intake, wearing specific clothes or through thinking very strategically about where the best place would be for them to sit. Many of the participants referred to carefully planning their journeys and examining the social landscape in order to attempt to manage their space-time embodied negotiations of different spaces and time. They were therefore sophisticated practitioners of what Kirkland (2008: 411) refers to as ‘scanning’:

Scanning is a technique for assessing, surveilling, and planning one’s movement through the world to avoid discomfort and humiliation. I mean to use the term scan both in its literal sense, to cast a glance over a situation or place quickly, but also more broadly to mean the kind of assessments and observations that one learns to make about how one will be received in new situations that then constitute expectations and behaviors in the ongoing present

Star explained that “I’ve got this whole thought process that, em … you know, you’ve gotta watch what you eat and be really careful about the way that you dress … you’re bigger.” When discussing eating out, she also explained that:

Star: If there’s a table with a table cloth, for example, you might go and sit there because you feel more concealed than if you’re … sitting somewhere like this…(18 years old)

Here, Star explained in much detail that she would always try to sit at a location and table that would conceal her body. She would never sit on a stool or window seat in a café where everyone could see her figure and would instead always sit at the back of a room, preferably at a table where the table legs and/or table-cloth concealed as much of her body as possible. This is a clear example of the sophisticated and carefully thought-out space-time strategies adopted by the young people consulted in this study.

Not surprisingly, the most frequent topic of conversation was often about shopping for clothes, clothes sizing and the emotions associated with this. The sentiments of these interviewees are illustrative of this:

Simon: I personally loathe going shopping, especially … especially with like other people (18 years old)

Sue: I always come out with some negative thoughts like, for example, if I buy a top of dress or anything, I’ll always think that, em … I could look better if I was a different size (20 years old)

Seema: …that’s always a problem because the size is not available … actually shopping for clothes is the only time that I realise really the size because everything else is fine … I need to do something because I dread going shopping (23 years old)
Gillian felt a strong sense of injustice and exclusion in relation to clothes shopping and clothes sizes. She said “I don’t feel that shops cater for somebody of my size” and in reference to her experiences of trying on clothes in a changing room, she noted:

Gillian: You feel really bad about yourself and you feel humiliated and start blaming yourself and I would say it’s quite a traumatic experience (26 years old)

She explained that she was a “16-18 on top and 18-20 on the bottom half” and felt “very conscious when I am shopping.” For research participants such as Gillian then, the experience of shopping for clothes is one that is often very emotional and occasionally traumatic. Colls (2004: 593, see also Colls, 2006) discussion of ‘cheating, coping and connecting’ is useful here as many participants adopted relational practices when shopping for clothes. These often focused on who else was shopping with them and how they managed exclusionary and uncomfortable experiences (such as that recollected by Gillian above). The perceptions of the participants also gel with Murray (2005: 265) who notes that ‘every time society reads my fat body, it lets me know that I am defective.’

Locations associated with drinking culture and leisure spaces also featured in the emotional landscapes of the participants’ narratives. Places such as nightclubs, swimming pools and the beach are all examples of places where these young people felt an intensified awareness of, and sensitivity about, their body size. Consider these quotes:

Sue: I think there are certain places like … for myself; I think it would be going out at night like to a club or something. I’d find that quite difficult … (20 years old)

Gillian: I don’t go swimming in swimming pools at all because it’s just humiliating … The worst place would probably be the swimming pool just because I’d have to wear a swimming costume and … I really can’t go, I really can’t go swimming … I don’t really go clubbing because I don’t like it but pubs, aeroplanes, trains, I am aware of it (26 years old)

Gertie: So when I go home in 3 weeks time I’ll be spending a lot of time on the beach and normally I’d just be out in my bikini but I think this time I’ll be wearing like a sarong or something (18 years old)

What is clear here is that those places where the body becomes an intensified site of attention are anxiety-provoking locations for these young people, and often these are sites that these research participants would prefer to avoid completely. These places may also change throughout the year as Sue notes: “I find summer quite difficult in the sense that everyone’s sort of revealing themselves.” What the participants also highlighted was that these intensified space-time embodied locations also interacted with the relationalities explained above. Their senses of marginalisation varied not only according to whether or not they were on the beach, at the swimming pool or in the club, but also according to who else was occupying such places and the size of these people relative to those participating in the research. As such, the young people experiences of their body size involved the complex negotiation of space-time embodied relationalities.

Alongside spaces of consumption, Anna mentioned lecture theatres at university as sites of self-consciousness and explained that she would never walk into a lecture late as she would feel like she was on public display. Gillian also referred to lifts and barriers:

Gillian: I would say lifts. It a life looks crowded I might very well take the stairs up and down. Lifts are somewhere where I feel particularly uncomfortable
and one of the things that makes me most uncomfortable is the
maximum weight/maximum persons because I always do the maths and I
am always very much more than the average person or it seems like that to
me… the other thing I feel self-conscious about is going through barriers
because they are again confined. I’ve never had a problem getting through
but it’s always in the back of my mind like going into the metro station
you have to go through this narrow passageway (26 years old)
The emotional landscapes negotiated by these young people varied in intensity. Some
experienced occasional but regular senses of exclusion and marginalisation whilst other
felt extremely anxious to the extent that they would be feel unwell or light-headed.
Gillian, for example, mentioned that she would feel “a sort of dread” and explained that
she has “had panic attacks”. The anxiety experienced by people conscious of their size is
often ignored completely in public policy despite the focus of such policy often being on
possible strategies for enabling overweight individuals to exercise (in public) more often
than they already do.

**Embodied intersectionalities**

Synchronised with young people’s space-time embodied relationalities were
complex intersectionalities that also shaped their experiences. The concept of
intersectionality is often traced back to Crenshaw (1993) in her analysis of the
complexities of gender and race in Black women’s experiences of employment. As
Pheonix and Pattynama (2006: 187) observe:

… it foregrounds a richer and more complex ontology than approaches that
attempt to reduce people to one category at a time … it indicates that fruitful
knowledge production must treat social positions as relational. Intersectionality is
thus useful as a handy catchall phrase that aims to make visible the multiple
positioning that constitutes everyday life and the power relations that are central
to it.

The use of intersectionality has been critiqued due to the assumption that it treats all
social identities and power relations as having similar intensities and operate in similar
ways (Pheonix and Pattynama, 2006). However, as clarified by Pheonix and Pattynama
(2006), I use the term here whilst recognising that all social identities, relations and
divisions have different organising principles, modes of inclusion and exclusion and that
some are more malleable than others. In addition, by including discussions about body
size in debates about intersectionality, this usefully extends debates about
intersectionality beyond identity politics to include other forms of social categorisation
and practices (Hopkins and Noble, 2009), such as those associated with body
size. Furthermore, some bodily differences are more visible than others and the extent of
such visibilities often varies over space and across time.

The narratives of the interviewees make it clear that not only is location – where
they are – important, so too are the other aspects of who they are as young people. By
this, I mean that it is not only their body size but also their other identities - such as their
gender, class, sexuality, age and so on - that intersect with each other in order to shape
their particular experiences. The most powerful intersectionalities evident within the
accounts of the interviewees related to the ways in which their perceptions about their
body size was influenced by their own and others expectations around gender and what
this meant was - and was not appropriate - in terms of body size. Interrelated with this were concerns about height, where fat is on the body (for example, on the stomach, thighs or elsewhere) as well as intersectionalities related to sexuality, religion and culture. For example, Anna made it clear that she did not only feel fat but felt that her tallness also contributed to her sense of feeling different. Furthermore, these intersected with her gendered identity in such a way that she felt her femininity was subordinate to that of other women because they were not as tall or as large as she was.

It was also clear that a number of young people felt that the issues they had with their body size was closely related to their sexual identity alongside their desire to find a partner. Simon felt pressurised within the gay community to conform to what he saw as the stereotype of gay men being very slim, a stereotype that young people also reified during the participatory diagramming exercises. As he explained:

Simon: …I think gay men would be like … I don’t want to look like a whale, you know, I do actually want to look attractive … I just think, em, that everything ties together and one of the big things is like sexuality and size (18 years old)

Simon made it clear that he feels that he would not feel so negatively about his body size if he was not gay, thereby making it clear that his concerns about his body size intersect with his sexual identity and shape his engagement with the gay community.

Connected with Simon’s account, Edwina talked in depth about how she felt that being overweight made her less attractive and less likely to get attention from potential partners. For Edwina, this was partly about gendered expectations and how she feels that being large results in women being associated more with masculinity. Edwina said “I’ve been overweight for most of my life and I’ve also been a tomboy as well” and then continued:

Edwina I don’t feel girly and then I don’t get attraction, em…sometimes, you know, you don’t get any eye contact from other people and it makes you feel a little down… (18 years old)

Edwina identified herself as bi-sexual and explained that, alongside gendered expectations, she felt under pressure to be smaller so that she would be more accepted by her peers and in particular, this was connected with her sexual and gendered identities.

Seema is an international student from India and her cultural and ethnic background were important factors in shaping her negative attitude towards her body size. She noted “it’s my particular ethnic group but the fact that girls are not really supposed to be this tall and this fat. That’s completely been fed into me by my home” and continued:

Seema: According to the traditional Indian girl image … I’m too tall for an Indian girl and I’m overweight. My parents have this massive thing of how would they get me married because I don’t look good enough according to them (23 years old)

Here, it is not only Seema’s size – in terms of being fat or overweight - that is an issue, but also her height, which adds to her feelings of difference. Intersecting with this is her ethnic identity and cultural background - and parental expectations around marriage and the family – which all come together to influence how she feels about her body.

For Aisha, who identified as a Muslim, her religion was a positive force in her personal identity and her relationship with her body:
Aisha: I feel that religion is a positive thing because I am a Muslim and it said that God made everyone in perfection so you don’t have the right to look at anyone any other way because God made every single person and life is a test so you shouldn’t really judge (19 years old)

So, although she expressed serious concerns and worries about her body size and the ways that she was judged as a result of this, her religious faith often ameliorated the negative consequences of this and helped her feel more positive about her size.

The accounts of the young people consulted in this research make it clear that their senses of feeling different as a result of their size is influenced by a complex configuration of space-time embodied relationalities and intersectionalities. Rather than feeling a persistent and intense sense of marginalisation and exclusion, these emotions varied across different times and spaces and varied according to who else was occupying specific places and who else the young people were beyond their age and body size. It is often in spaces of consumption – and whilst shopping, eating or participating in leisure – that feelings of difference were intensified. However, this is only one part of the story as the young people also referred to structures of constraint that operated to maintain their marginalisation.

STRUCTURES OF CONSTRAINT

In discussing their senses of feeling different and being excluded, the young people participating in this research regularly referred to social relations and interactions that reinforced their sense of being marginalised because of their body size. Here, I refer to these restricting social relations as structures of constraint. Here, I am referring to structures of discrimination and social control that work to maintain young people’s senses of being on the margins. This contrasts with the dominant discourse within work about the supposed ‘obesity epidemic’ which focuses on constraining structures that restrict access to, for example, healthy foods or places of exercise. Drawing upon interview data, I focus upon intergenerational relations, media representations and the use of humour as mechanisms whereby young people’s senses of isolation as overweight, fat or obese are maintained and reinforced. These structures of constraint are often subtle, sometimes persistent and always restrictive.

All of the participants in this research discussed family relationships as having a negative influence on how they feel about their body size and their senses of self. In particular, it was conversations or short verbal exchanges - between young adults and their mothers - that worked to heighten their senses of feeling large or overweight. The narratives of these young people therefore draw attention to the significance of intergenerational relations on young people’s lives (Hopkins and Pain, 2007, Rawlins, 2006, Vanderbeck, 2007). Although it could be argued that the young people’s mothers were engaging in acts of care towards their offspring, the narratives of the young people do not reflect this. Consider these quotes:

Anna: …my mum said that I had to lose weight, like a little bit … when I came back from uni for my first year, sort of in the summer, she said, “you look really good but you need to start going to the gym” (19 years old)

Gertie: My mum will definitely make me aware of what size I am … like she’ll always be saying … “are you sure you want to eat that, don’t you think
you’ve had enough today”. Like she’ll come … give me these little nags (18 years old)

Sandy: Sometimes my parents, my mother will say “you should do something; your tummy is getting big”. Well sometimes I feel like, you know, I’m overweight (24 years old)

Gillian: …my mother is the person who is constantly pressurising me to lose weight (26 years old)

Furthermore, Anna felt that the pressure she received from her mother to control her weight influenced how she interacted with close friends. In particular, she reflected on how she would occasionally reprimand her boyfriend for eating too much whilst also recognising that was not really an issue for her or her boyfriend and was instead a set of behaviours and attitudes that she had learnt from her mother. Anna also told me about a bad case of food poisoning she had which resulted in her being very ill and losing quite a lot of weight, thereby challenging dominant understandings about weight loss being healthy. Her mother’s response to this was to say “well think of this, think how much weight you’re gonna lose over this time”.

The remarks made by the young people’s mothers also resulted in them feeling a heightened sense of self-awareness about their everyday embodied practices and senses of self-identity. Gertie recalls feeling uncomfortable both at home and when wearing shorts as a result of comments made by her mother, and Sue often feels compelled to eat food alone:

Gertie: I feel more uncomfortable at home … with my mum … like if I wear shorts … she’s like, your legs are looking a bit wobbly, why don’t you go to the gym, why don’t you go swimming today (18 years old)

Sue: I tend to eat food on my own … I can’t even eat in front of my mum, to be honest because … she used to sort of … put me down … (20 years old)

As well as being pressured by their mothers, young people also singled out the media as being very problematic in terms of how it represented people with different body sizes and reinforced stereotypes about fatness and obesity. As Anna said, the media does “a lot of injustice”. The participants therefore agreed with Young (1990: 135) who noted that an ‘area where these aversions, fears, and devaluations are at work is the mass entertainment media – movies, television, magazines and their advertisements, and so forth.’ Consider these quotes:

Edwina: Definitely with the media. Definitely because, I think that’s where most prejudice has come from anyway (18 years old)

Aisha: I think the media has a lot to do with it. Every magazine has a woman plastered all over it who is never bigger than a size ten which is strange because the average UK size is much bigger than that (19 years old)

Stephanie: … there are no happy fat girls on TV. It’s always the princess who is thin and I know we are conditioned through media and we are supposed to be seeing through it but … (27 years old)

The participants feel strongly that the media only shows very thin people in a positive light and Stephanie feels that fat people are treated as more immature and less grown up than people who are thin. Klein and Shiffman (2005: 113) researched characters in cartoons and found that “thin is in and stout is out”, with thin characters being portrayed as young, attractive, happy and energetic compared to those who were heavier. Although
the media is often recognised as problematically representing obesity, Evans et al (2008) have noted that other factors in young people’s lives, such as popular culture and the values and practices of teachers intersect with media representations as it is not the media alone that causes obesity. Furthermore, as Evans et al (2008) also point out, young people have agency to interpret and respond to media discourse in creative ways. As Aisha notes below, participants felt that the mainstream media focuses on very thin people making them feel pressurised into losing weight. This was not only unfair according to the young people involved in this research, but was also a clear misrepresentation of the average size of women in the UK:

Aisha: I don’t like the ways society portrays this image of being a size 8 whereas the average British UK woman is average size 14 to 16 now (19 years old)

Rather than simply accept these representations and discourses, the participants regularly resisted these through everyday strategies such as refusing to purchase particular magazines or newspapers or through challenging the use of what they saw as negative imagery about body size. Stephanie felt very strongly that women of all different shapes and sizes should be shown in the mass media. She noted:

Stephanie: They (should) focus on the really underweight people, so they’re not like demonising it whereas they do like overweight people and maybe people larger than a size 12 feel like really overweight because they do like put down people say under a size 8 should feel equally as bad but they don’t (27 years old)

Stephanie’s point here is about health rather than body image or size as she continued to explain that it is often very thin people who are doing more damage to their health than people who are “normal” or “only a bit overweight”.

The use of humour by the friends and family of young people also worked to intensify their senses of being overweight and out of place. In particular, humour was often employed by friends and family as a structuring device to attempt to regulate the behaviour of young people and keep them in place. Gillian recalled a group of young people shouting across the street at her “you get two for the price of one” and how this increased her sense of self-consciousness in public spaces for many weeks. Also, consider these quotes:

Edwina …sometimes I am bothered by it [humour] because, you know, you’re working round all these stick thin people and you have to do much more exercise and stuff eh (18 years old)

Seema: It’s all friendly banter but it’s there…. but I do still have issues when I go shopping when my friends tease me (23 years old)

A number of the participants, like Seema, downplayed the significance of humour as a constraining device arguing that “it was only a joke”, “a bit of fun” or “friendly banter”. However, in analysing the narratives of the young people, it was also clear that remarks intended as humorous were very powerful structures of constraint in how they felt about their body size. Although the participants often referred to such experiences as drawing upon humour, arguably their accounts were also about being bullied and verbally abused.

Kehily and Nayak’s (1997: 70) work with young men in schools showed how ‘humour is frequently invoked to expose, police and create gender-sexual hierarchies within pupil cultures.’ They see humour as ‘an organising principle’ and a ‘regulatory technique’ (Kehily and Nayak, 1997: 84) in the formation of masculine identities.
Similarly, humour is being used here as a technique for organising and regulating the appropriateness of the body and its size and where fat bodies should and should not be allowed to go. Wear et al (2006) also found that obese patients were the most frequent focus of jokes and humour amongst medical students who justified such behaviour through their disdain for obese bodies and their association of obesity with a lack of control.

That being said, some participants also found the use of humour in response to experiences of exclusion and marginalisation to be a useful device in helping them to manage specific social situations. Thomas et al (2008) found that some of their research participants made fun of themselves in response to derogatory remarks about their size. Moreover, Kirkland (2008) refers to a process of what she calls ‘redirecting shame’ where humour may be employed:

Redirecting shame is what I call verbal responses to ill treatment. The technique is similar to moral instruction in that it is situational and interactive, but it is less “legal” in the sense of being less about teaching an antagonist the proper way to evaluate another person and more about showing off a new-found confidence in what NAAFA members called “snappy comebacks” (Kirkland, 2008: 410)

Edwina talked a lot about the use of humour in her interview and her perceptions about her size were intertwined with her sexual identity. She explained how a close friend helped her deal with her size and her sexuality:

Edwina … one of my best friends … she says thing like once “you’ve had fat, you’ll never go back” … and things like that … oh, that’s brilliant and I think she helped me a great deal with coming out with myself and just accepting who I am completely (18 years old)

Overall, alongside their space-time embodied relationalities and intersectionalities, other forces – structure of constraint - were working to maintain young people’s sense of marginalisation. Some of these were particularly close to home, such as intergenerational relations and the use of humour by family and peers. Others however, were broader and focused on negative imagery and discourses in a variety of media and mass communication. These structures interacted with each other in powerful ways to shape the experiences of the young people who participated in this research and worked to sustain their senses of exclusion. Although the participants often reacted to such structures, rather than being passive recipients in their own oppression, these forces were such that their tenacity was very difficult to completely overcome or to cast aside.

CONCLUSIONS

For young people who feel fat, overweight or obese, their everyday geographies constantly reinforce their difference and sustain their marginalisation. The persistent negotiation of an aggressively ‘sizist culture’ (Monaghan 2007: 70) and a society that is ‘fat-hating, fatphobic and discriminates against fat people’ (Cooper, 1998) results in intense feelings of anxiety, worry and concern for the young people consulted in this project. These persistent experiences of exclusion and marginalisation constantly remind young people of their body size and reinforce their membership of a highly stigmatised social grouping. As Young (1990: 134) eloquently notes:

Members of oppressed groups frequently experience … avoidance, aversion, expressions of nervousness, condescension, and stereotyping. For them such
behavior, indeed the whole encounter, often painfully fills their discursive consciousness. Such behaviour thrown them back into their group identity, making them feel noticed, marked, or conversely, invisible, not taken seriously, or worse, demeaned (Young 1990: 134).

Just as matters of inequality, injustice and exclusion associated with race, gender and sexuality have been increasingly mainstreamed into public policy thinking as well as academic geography, it is now time for the stigmatisation and marginalisation associated with body size to be given serious consideration both within policy and practice as well as within the discipline. Alongside the work of Longhurst (2005) and the excellent special issue by Colls and Evans (2009), I hope that this paper contributes in some way to encouraging social and political changes in relation to how people with different body sizes are treated within society. As Simonsen (2000: 7) observes by ‘taking difference, domination and subversion as starting points for understanding socio-spatial relations in contemporary culture’, we have the opportunity to make a series of useful interventions into politicising issues relating to fatness and obesity.

In this article, the narratives of the young people who participated in the research make it clear that their daily lives involve negotiating a complex series of space-time embodied relationalities and intersectionalities. As the participants explained, their experiences of spaces of consumption, shopping for clothes and participation in leisure and drinking places were often shaped by embodied relationalities as their feelings of marginalisation varied according to who else was occupying the same spaces as they were. Furthermore, these embodied relationalities also interacted with embodied intersectionalities – such as those associated with gender, sexuality, religion, cultural background and height – to influence young people’s varying intensities of marginalisation. The utility of understanding the participants experiences through the lenses of embodied relationalities and intersectionalities – as I noted earlier – has the potential to be applied to enhancing understandings of other minority groups and their everyday socio-spatial interactions and engagements. Working in parallel to these processes, I also discussed the structures of constraint that operate to keep the young participants in place and to maintain their senses of difference. In particular, intergenerational relations, the use of humour and media representations were identified by the young people as being structures that constrained them from having a more positive relationship with their body size. These complex processes and sets of political issues present many broader challenges for critical researchers and society as a whole, two of which I explore further by way of conclusion.

First – and arguably the most challenging issue – is about changing the politics of how fatness and obesity are viewed within policy circles and in practice. Evans (2006, 2010) has produced a very powerful set of critiques of the problematic moral and ethical assumptions contained within (anti)obesity policy in the UK. These policy discourses often have a direct impact on practice. As requested by scholars such as Thomas et al (2008) and Curtis (2008), much care is needed with regards to obesity prevention initiatives as a result of the damaging consequences these can have in further aggravating social inequalities. In addition to this – and as the young people who participated in this research make clear – it is important that the policy makers, the media and related agents of power are challenged for the ways in which they represent body size and stigmatise those who are deemed to have undesirable bodies. Changing such representations and
discourses could usefully help to change parental discourses about body size and education policies and practices in order to create a more inclusive and just society.

Second, there can often be a worrying tendency for academic research to replicate broader discourses and sets of social relations built on unequal and unjust practices, values and principles. The small group of critical human geographers whose engaged and sophisticated work I have drawn upon in this article (e.g. Colls, 2006, Evans, 2006, Longhurst, 2005, Rawlins, 2009) are the few within the discipline who are drawing attention to such inequalities. Increasing attention is currently being directed at the ‘obesity problem’ with much work focusing on issues relating to obesogenic environments and the ‘obesity epidemic’ (Lake et al 2010, Pearce and Witten, 2010). Although it is clear that this work has quite different intentions from the research I have explored in this article, I concur with Guthman and DuPuis (2006: 428) who note that ‘the terms ‘epidemic’ and ‘obesity’ are rhetorically loaded and must be subject to the same analytical scrutiny as the phenomena they supposedly describe’ (Guthman and DuPuis, 2006: 428). Surely it is crucial for geographers researching issues relating to fatness and obesity to reflect critically on the meanings and associations of these terms rather than taking them to be natural and given? Perhaps if our reflexivity as academics in researching fatness and obesity included engaging with Fat Studies, critical weight studies and critical geographies of body size, steps may be taken in the right direction to change the exclusionary politics of fat. This could usefully not only include how, where and why we research issues of obesity and body size but could be reflected in our teaching, our engagement with students, our interactions with other researchers and in our personal politics.

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