FATPHOBIA AS A FORM OF GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE: FAT WOMEN, PUBLIC SPACE AND BODY BELONGING WORK

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Abstract

In this article we propose bringing together theoretical frameworks from fat studies and research into street harassment, as a form of gendered violence, to provide a novel lens for thinking about fat women's experiences of public space. By focusing on the gendered politics of public space itself, we show how fears of fat-based and gender-based street harassment and abuse work together to create a complex sense of 'non-belonging' for fat women. Coupled with primary interview data gathered from twenty-one self-defined fat women, our approach brings together theoretical frameworks from fat studies and research into street harassment to provide a novel lens for thinking about fat women's experiences of public space. Specifically, we identify and explore points of confluence where experiences of fatphobia and street harassment mirror each other – exclusion from public space, intrusion as a means of policing non-belonging bodies, and what we call body belonging work as an active process of accomplishing belonging. We suggest that current policy attention to gender-based violence represents a timely moment to address the intersectional nature of women's experiences.

Key Words: Gender-based violence, Public Space, Belonging, Streat Harassment

Introduction

Despite growing body acceptance movements, fat remains a feminist issue (Simic, 2016). Women are particularly vulnerable to weight discrimination, bias, and stigma where the connection between thinness and ideal expressions of femininity embeds a 'cult' (Hesse-Beiber, 2008) and 'tyranny' (Chernin, 1994) of thinness in women's lives. Taylor and Hoskin (2023, 75) describe the co-constitution of fatphobia and femmephobia whereby fatness is located as 'incompatible with (and therefore excluded from) patriarchal femininity' and fat women are positioned as 'unruly and out of control'. While negative stereotypes of fat people also attach to men (Bell and McNaughton, 2007), normative feminine beauty standards of thin/slimness mean these stereotypes are especially pronounced for and internalized by women. As such, women exhibit higher body and weight dissatisfaction than men (Quittkat et al, 2019), and Kwan (2010, 155) talks about women's constant consciousness of their fatness compared to men for whom size is a 'less salient part of their cognitive repertoire'.

The cultural readings of fat women as having 'let herself go' highlight an additional transgression where boundness, smallness, and self-control are tied to maintaining normative feminine beauty and health standards, which in turn are tied to expectations of responsible neo-liberal citizenship (Harjunen, 2017). This multifaceted transgression locates fat women as 'hyper(in)visible', whereby they are paid excessive attention while also being erased from social life and discourse (Gailey 2014). Fahs and Swank (2017, 6), then, argue there is a persistent 'dread and terror' of fat women's bodies in the West, while Thone (1997) asks whether being a fat woman in a thin-centric world is a 'fate worse than death'.

Fat Women and Public Space

One avenue of feminist theorizing explores the impacts of fatphobia on women's negotiation of public space. Rinaldi et al. (2019, 48) suggest that fat hatred – what they term 'fatmisia' –

devalues fat bodies in public space where they are met with ‘fear, revulsion, disgust, and disdain’, unsolicited advice, negative gestures, hateful words, humiliation, and violence. These emotions and actions render public space ‘uncomfortable, unwelcoming, unsafe, and inaccessible’ (Rinaldi et al. 2019, 38), particularly when fatmisia interweaves with sexism, racism, ableism, homophobia, indigeneity etc. Echoing this, Murray (2017, 272) talks of traumatic, shaming experiences in clothes shops, restaurants, and at the beach, perceiving ‘every interaction, every space through [her] body’ which is treated in public as undisciplined, unbounded and problematic. Others describe the fraughtness of (Kost and Jamie, 2022), gyms (Harjunen, 2019), public transport (Bias, 2016), as well as toilet cubicles, changing rooms, seating, staircases, and turnstiles (Longhurst, 2005). As Bell and Valentine (1997, 26) contend, there are simply ‘places a fat body won't [physically] let you go’.

As well as excluding fat people, Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020) argue that public space is deeply gendered, and women are constantly made aware that they do not fully belong through street harassment – staring, catcalling, threats of rape and sexual violence. This exclusion of women is symbolic and performative (Day 2001), and physical where urban design fails to consider women’s experiences of safety and mobility, resulting in built spaces that women avoid which, in turn, become dominated by men (Valentine 1990).

While such gender-based street harassment is being taken increasingly seriously (Fileborn, 2022), similar experiences based on weight are largely ignored outside of specific research and advocacy communities. Indeed, Fileborn and O’Neill’s (2023, 125) recent review of global street harassment research draws attention to its intersections with ‘racist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist’ abuse but makes no mention at all of fatphobia. Yet, the exclusion of women and fat people echo each other; public space is symbolically coded and physically set up for the needs of male and slim/thin bodies. As such, the intersecting transgression of being a woman (in a male-coded world) and being fat (in a world designed

for smaller-bodied people) makes public space multifariously exclusionary. This sense of non-belonging is actively reproduced through the policing of non-conforming bodies in public space. Gender-based violence researchers have argued that women's non-belonging in public space is marked and policed by street harassment in the form of intrusive practices like catcalling, staring, and groping (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). These intrusions signal women's (and others') deviation from the 'master code human template' (Rinaldi et al. 2019, 45) for which public space is designed. For some women, this hyper-visibility (as per Gailey 2014) is compounded by race/ethnicity, ability, and other visible markers of 'difference' (Strings 2019).

For fat women, this underlying fear of intrusion (shared with all women) intersects with a fear of intrusions stemming from their fatness and the symbolic violence created by 'obesity epidemic' discourses (Gailey 2022). Harjunen (2019), for example, describes fat women's fear of comments and ridicule in exercise spaces while fat advocate Charlotte Cooper (1998, 24) notes that 'as fat women we are public property, as though our bodies were made to be commented upon'. Fat women's bodies are, then, policed through intersecting gender-based and fatphobic intrusions, and scholars and activists highlight the regularity of verbal and physical harassment aimed at fat people, particularly women. Kwan (2010, 149) talks, for example, about fat women being routinely 'accosted' by strangers, friends and family with comments regarding eating, exercising, and body size. Similarly, in their analysis of the TV show Dietland, Taylor and Gailey (2019) describe instances – both real and fictional – of abuse shouted from passing cars, an occurrence which Hindes and Fileborn (2023) argue is part of a wider masculinity power play. Further, Monaghan (2021) explores how symbolic violence is enacted in digital spaces, in targeted ways, that act to stigmatize and degrade fat women specifically. Brown and Rothblum (1989, 1), then, argue that 'fat oppression… like physical and sexual violence against women, is sexism in action'.

Yet Royce (2020, 206) argues that 'the intersection of anti-fat bias and violence against women, including sexual violence, has received scant attention from researchers and fat studies scholars alike'. She argues that despite the increased orthodoxy of intersectional approaches to gender-based violence recognizing the role of race, class sexuality and other identity markers, the role of anti-fat bias in shaping violence against women has been comparatively neglected (Royce 2009). Echoing this, Rodier (2022) demonstrates that fat women's experiences are tangentially located as exceptional in feminist textbook discussions of gendered violence.

In this article we begin addressing the lacuna Royce highlights by thinking about the links between fatphobia and street harassment which locates fat women as 'non-belonging' (May, 2016). While existing scholarship highlights public space as anti-fat, we aim here to also centralize its gendered nature. While fatphobia experienced by and aimed at women stems from an intersection of fatphobia and femmephobia (as per Taylor and Hoskin, 2023), we show that it also occurs within politicized, male-coded public space where women's participation is already contingent, ambiguous, and risky (Vera-Gray, 2016).

We do this by identifying confluence points where experiences of fatphobia and experiences of street harassment mirror each other to produce a sense of non-belonging which requires mitigation. Following May (2011), we understand (non-)belonging as a bridge between self and society. As such, (non-)belonging emerges at the intersections of spatial, political and affective dynamics wherein feeling 'at home' is shaped by systemic power relations (Antonsich 2010) which play out in situated, material contexts (Youkhana 2015). At the same time, (non-)belonging is also an 'active process' wherein individuals negotiate their own sense of belonging within wider structures and norms (like fatphobia) which permit or restrict belonging (May 2011, Kuurne and Vieno (2022). While May's framework is generally applied to ethnic, diasporic or religious belonging, it has also been used to explore other areas

where women's belonging is tenuous or requires work (e.g. Pavlidis and Fullagar 2016 on sport).

After we outline our methods, our findings section offers a dialogue between fat studies literature, gender-based violence scholarship and our own empirical findings to think about how the lived experiences of fat women in public spaces mirrors and intersects with theories and reports of street harassment.

Methods

Our research explored fat women's navigation of public space. We began with a place-based approach, recruiting women who identified as 'fat' from the Northeast of England, the region with the largest percentage of 'overweight or obese' adults in England (NHS, 2023) and chronic under-investment in public spaces, facilities and services for nearly two decades (Institute for Public Policy Research, 2017). While we take issue with public health framings of fatness in the Northeast, we wanted to understand how fat women navigated a particular set of under-funded public spaces. To do so, following ethics approval, we recruited nine participants from a weight-loss group in the region and conducted semi-structured interviews about their everyday experiences of mobility around local public spaces. Participants' responses in these interviews were less tied to the specificity of place than we had imagined and, instead, yielded broader findings about the political nature of public space and gender-based and fat-based exclusions from it.

To more deeply explore these unexpected findings, we expanded recruitment through Twitter and recruited twelve further participants. This expansion allowed us to test our initial findings around the politics of public space with a wider and more diverse group; our Twitter call attracted more women with professional job roles and from outside of the Northeast. We again used semi-structured interviews allowing participants to explore particularly salient

issues while ensuring consistency across the sample. The findings from our additional twelve interviews mirrored those from the original participants and took us to data saturation point, meaning further recruitment was not necessary.

Our recruitment was deliberately broad and intersectional to capture a range of perspectives and similarities in women's experiences rather than comparing across different groups. Our only inclusion criteria were adult women who defined themselves as 'fat' following Cooper's (2010, 1021) approach that 'fat is a fluid subject position … thus generally self-defined'. Our final sample of twenty-one participants comprised nineteen women from the UK, and two Canadian women.

Consent was gained from all participants at the start of their interviews and we revisited consent throughout the interviews. Throughout this paper we use pseudonyms to report participants' responses. Interviews were carried out in July and August 2019, lasted 15-45 minutes, and were audio-recorded and later transcribed. All but two interviews were conducted over the phone, as the most convenient option for most participants.

We analyzed data abductively using existing research on the fatphobic politics of public space. We did not seek to map the specific spaces where fatphobia occurred in participants' lives but to understand the shared manifestations and management of fatphobia across different spaces. Following Braun and Clarke (2006), we went through several analysis analysis to familiarize ourselves with the data, recognize patterns and systematically group the data by relevant themes. We carried out analysis both individually and collectively to ensure trustworthiness of the final analytical categories. In what follows, we draw out the most salient themes from our analysis where experiences of fatphobia and street harassment mirror and compound each other.

Findings

Our findings are structured in two sections. Firstly, we examine our participants' feelings of exclusion from and non-belonging in public space, and the ways this exclusion was upheld through constant fear of verbal instructions. Second, we draw attention to the ways participants mitigated and navigated this non-belonging through what we call "body belonging work". Our findings draw attention to the ways that fatphobia and gender-based street harassment mirror each other. In doing so, the following section is written as a dialogue between existing fat studies findings and scholarship, violence against women literature and our own empirical findings. As such, we oscillate between, and draw together, pre-existing conceptual frameworks and our own participants' voices.

Exclusion, Intrusion and Non-Belonging

Reflecting existing fat studies scholarship, participants almost ubiquitously perceived themselves to not fully belong in public space which was perceived to be both symbolically and physically anti-fat. Like those in Owen's (2012) work, our participants felt their fat bodies were stigmatized and devalued by entrenched fatphobic tropes and assumptions which located their bodies as troublesome and transgressive:

> *Amy: I think [society] tends to take [fat people] at face value: 'Well, I can see that you're fat, it is very visible, it must mean that you don't have self-control.'*

As a result of these perceived judgements and stigma, participants described feeling that they did not belong in public spaces, particularly spaces of consumption and where the body might be subject to increased scrutiny:

> *Melissa: Especially when I am in restaurants, I feel very self-conscious – in fact, to a point where I don't really want to go to anywhere that does a buffet because I don't*

want [laughs] people to think, "Oh, look at the size of her, and she's at a buffet. She's just having loads and loads of food."

Neave: […] just certain things or certain places, I wouldn't go. I probably wouldn't go onto a beach or to public swimming pools, definitely not.

These findings are echoed by critical feminist geographers, who likewise point to the significance of space in shaping participants' stigmatizing affective experiences (Colls & Evans, 2014). Participants described non-belonging not only as assumed circulations of judgement but also fear that fat hatred would manifest as intrusive verbal, or even physical, harassment practices. Tina, for example, described her fear of fatphobic comments in bars:

Tina: If I'm in bars with my friends, again, I don't like sitting on the high stools because I'm like, "Someone is going to make a comment." They never do. In my head, that's what I think.

As well as resonating with existing fat studies work (e.g. Owen 2012), participants' feelings of exclusion and fears of intrusion echo foundational tenets of street harassment literature where women's non-belonging in public space is marked and policed by street harassment (Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). Yet it is not enough to simply say that women face unwanted intrusions and so do fat people, fat women doubly so. One of our participants, Sarah, located fatphobic intrusions as a different burden for fat women:

Sarah: Obviously, all women, or most women experience some kind of street harassment, but I think there is a slight difference in that your body is being very much held up as kind of not desirable which is […] not the same as someone wolf-whistling.

This difference is rooted in the complex relationship between catcalling (and other intrusions) and normative beauty standards. While catcallers often justify their actions as 'complimentary' appreciation of female attractiveness (Walton and Pederson, 2021), intrusions experienced by fat women stem from the notion that they are disrupting these beauty norms (Royce 2009). In other words, women's presence in public space is only tolerated when they adhere to normative standards but, in adhering to these standards, women must expect to be catcalled (Fairchild, 2015). For fat women, contrastingly, verbal intrusions are based on their deviance from conventional beauty standards, serving to reinforce their non-belonging as absolute (Harjunen, 2019).

Yet, fat-based and gender-based intrusions are analogous in other ways, particularly their ubiquity. As well as being a regular experience (Vera-Gray and Fileborn, 2018), Taylor and Shrive (2021) show that gender-based intrusions begin early in girls' lives and are an 'ever present threat' for women. Similarly, weight-based intrusions begin at a young age (e.g. Dixey et al. 2001), and become a 'constant fear' in adult life (Stevens, 2018, 136). Echoing the experiences of North American and Finnish women in Gailey and Harjunen's (2019) analysis, Mary showed how such fear of intrusions leads to internalized fatphobia and self-policing:

> *Mary: Generally, I am quiet but I think a lot quieter because I don't want to draw attention to myself.*

In being constant, fat women's fear of judgement resembled the ubiquitous fear of gender-based stranger intrusion. But like street harassment, our participants reported that fatphobic verbal intrusions were relatively rare. Nonetheless, they also talked of an ever-present fear of intrusion from what Kwan (2010, 151), following Mead, calls a 'generalized

other', the collective fatphobia of society and space in times of a supposed 'obesity epidemic' (Gailey 2022). As other fat studies scholars (e.g. Gailey and Harjunen 2019, Owen 2012 Rinaldi et al. 2021), have pointed out, such fear manifests as internalized fatphobia and subsequent fear of judgement and comments, mirroring Emily's reflections:

> *Emily: I don't have any experience of anybody else saying anything or […] I can't recall looking at people and thinking they're judging me. It's just the fear I have that they might be [judging me].*

For Link et al. (2015), this feeling of a generalized other creates what they call a 'symbolic interaction stigma' where significant mental and emotional labour is given to the fear and anticipation of intrusion. This is echoed by Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020, 268) who argue that sexual harassment constitutes a 'spatial expression of patriarchy', which reinforces fear of intrusion. Women are then faced with evaluating 'the right amount of panic' (p.271) and responding to possible (known and unknown) threats to minimize potential intrusion or avoid being blamed if intrusion occurs. In both cases, gender- and fat-based intrusions, it is the fear of intrusive practices which signal nonbelonging and govern public space (see also Valentine 1990).

Body Belonging Work

Given the ubiquitous sense of non-belonging and fear of intrusions, fat women engage in what we call 'body belonging work'. This term is drawn from, and brings together, three frameworks which highlight the active and constant work undertaken to 'accomplish belonging' (Kuurne and Vieno, 2022, 281) in highly gendered and fatphobic public spaces. First, we take significant inspiration from Kwan's (2010) notion of 'body management', a mode of presenting a more socially desirable – less fat – body in response to heightened body

consciousness in an antifat world. She argues that fat people engage in body management tactics such as moving in particular ways, using props to disguise body shape, and changing behaviour to offset the nonprivilege embodied in fatness and navigate public space without drawing attention and stigma. In other words, body management is practiced to attain belonging in a particular thin-centric 'form of life' (Cole and Ferrarese, 2018).

While 'body management' is also associated with weight loss and its associated practices (Nurka, 2014), we build on conceptualizations involving more 'in the moment' navigations of public space. While body management encapsulates well the actions that individuals take to handle particularly difficult situations, our focus on gendered space itself as a political actor in producing fatphobia needs greater attention to wider structures of inequality, how these exclude certain groups, and how this exclusion is negotiated by them. As such, we combine 'body management' with a second framework – Kuurne and Vieno's (2022) 'belonging work'. Belonging work and body management somewhat pertain to similar phenomena; both encapsulate a set of process-oriented, situational, and relational actions that bring a sense of conformity to, or belonging in, a particular place or setting. Yet, belonging work more prominently centralizes the importance of the wider cultural terrain in shaping body management actions and their end-goal. As such, aligned with Kuurne and Vieno's (2022, 281) intention, combining these two concepts offers a way to make sense of fat women's corporeal labour to accomplish belonging, but also 'sensitizes us to the underlying structural inequalities that their efforts make visible'.

Moreover, using the notion of 'work' (following Kuurne and Vieno), rather than 'management' (following Kwan) speaks to the constant labour involved in navigating an exclusionary world, and also brings in our third theoretical influence, 'safety work' Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). This practice is described by Vera-Gray and Kelly (2020) as the habitual behaviors women practice to protect themselves from stranger intrusions and

successfully navigate public spaces. Safety work takes different forms, including changing movements, clothing and appearance, using sunglasses and headphones, changing seats in public transport — all strategies aimed at creating a separation between oneself, one's body, and the outside world, to ensure safe passage through it.

Our notion of 'body belonging work' highlights that while some people automatically belong and can move freely in public space, for others – in our case fat women – belonging must be worked at. Given the intersecting deviance of femininity and fatness (coupled with other markers of non-belonging), corporeal work is constant and ubiquitous for fat women, permeating everyday life and creating an additional burden to the safety work that women already do. Like Kwan's (2010) 'body management', a key facet of body belonging work is making the non-belonging body as inconspicuous as possible which, for Sarah and Melissa, echoing Kwan, meant manipulating movement and using props to emphasize smallness:

> *Sarah: I do often get that thing of when I'm kind of staying and feeling [like] not taking up too much space, I'll often make myself small. So, on a bus, for example, […] if I'm sat near the window, I'll kind of make myself […] go towards the window as much as possible.*

> *Melissa: I'm very careful in what I wear, so I wear a lot of black clothes that are quite slimming. So, I may not look as big as I actually am. Nobody really sees what's underneath and all the lumps and bumps.*

This type of bodily self-surveillance overlaps considerably with women's adaptations to avoid street harassment like altering appearance, being hyper-alert, and avoiding particular spaces. While decreasing visibility in public spaces is a tactic for avoiding street harassment for all women, (in)visibility is complicated by intersecting identities rendering some women,

such as fat women, more visible than others (Gailey 2014, Vera-Gray and Kelly, 2020). In other words, despite fat women's work to become unseen, their larger bodies make them permanently visible (Gailey, 2014), as Alisa described:

> *Alisa: It goes back and forth from trying to be invisible, wanting to be invisible and actually being invisible. The situations that I want to be invisible, perhaps at the swimming pool or at the restaurant, I can't be invisible.*

Yet, in the context of constant threats of street harassment for women, hypervisibility (Gailey 2014) itself can be a form of safety work. Fahs and Swank (2017) talk about the 'loss of the male gaze' for women who gain weight where a fat body may act as something of a shield against sexually-motivated intrusions, though Royce (2020) cautions that such discourses about fat women being 'unrapeable' ought to be read a harmful rape myth. Alisa encapsulated well this complex balancing of safety, (in)visibility, and (non-)belonging:
Alisa: I've had some horrible experiences with men, I much prefer to be invisible to me and I think when you make yourself fat, you are invisible to men.

On top of mitigation tactics, a more extreme form of body belonging work is withdrawal from public space, especially acute fatphobic spaces, altogether. Gender-based violence research highlights that women regularly forgo outdoor activities and avoid travelling at particular times to protect against street harassment (Uteng and Cresswell, 2008). Similarly, fat women's avoidance of certain settings, especially fatphobic public spaces, is well-documented in fat studies literature (e.g. Kwan, 2010; Owen, 2012). Such withdrawal not only puts fat women's mental and physical health at risk, but also entrenches the non-belonging of fat women's bodies in public space and reproduces fatphobic and misogynistic ideas about who belongs where.

Discussion

This article brings together theoretical frameworks from fat studies and street harassment research to offer a lens through which to better understand and address fatphobia in public as a form of gendered violence which positions fat women as non-belonging. We have done this through thematic convergence points where women's experiences of fatphobia mirror those of street harassment – exclusion from public space and active work to mitigate this exclusion, which we call 'body belonging work'. In doing so, we have taken steps towards addressing Royce's (2020) call for more analysis of the interconnections between sexual violence and fatness by drawing attention to the politicized nature of public space itself where gender-based harassment and fatphobia circulate in unison as key factors structuring fat women's everyday experiences.

We have drawn out the most salient themes in our data for our sample of mostly white, able-bodied women. But public space is intersectionally politicized. As such, we did not intend to be reductionist or to suggest that gender is the most important factor in the contestation and political life of public space. Rather, we intended to draw public space itself into the picture as a key and active actor in producing fatphobia by analyzing how and why public space is so fraught for fat women, a question that is often only tacitly addressed or reduced to the issue of design. Future research might consider how these experiences of non-belonging produced by the politics of public space itself are textured and compounded by other identity factors, such as pregnancy, race, or disability. There are too opportunities for methodological innovation. While semi-structured interviews are well-used in fat studies, they nonetheless are static and rely on recollection. Other methods such as walk-along interviews or (auto-)ethnography could yield more holistic representations of women's navigation of public space (Sheach Leith, 2016).

These limitations notwithstanding, we contend that our approach is timely as academic and wider discourse increasingly focuses on women's safety (Lewis et al. 2015). The well-documented intensification of violence against women and girls during and following Covid-19 has placed gender-based violence high on many political agendas (UN Women, 2020). While a welcome development, endemic fat-based violence, harassment and discrimination has not received the same political traction. Reframing fatphobia towards women as a form of everyday gendered violence highlights its ubiquity and may offer a way for fat women's voices and specific experiences to be included in anti-violence campaigns.

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