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*Feminism & Psychology* 2008 18: 260  
DOI: 10.1177/0959353507083096

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## Exploring the Politics of Women's In/Visible 'Large'<sup>1</sup> Bodies

Irmgard TISCHNER and Helen MALSON

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Body size is closely linked to the gendered issue of beauty or aesthetics. While slenderness is a prominent aspect of a culturally constructed beauty ideal for women (e.g. Bordo, 1993; Chernin, 1983; Malson, 1998), a 'big albeit lean body', according to Monaghan (2007: 587) is an 'intentionally developed and valued' signifier of masculinity. Referring to Stearns (1997), Monaghan calls this the 'gendered inequalities in aestheticized body norms' (p. 587). Body size nowadays, however, is not only a matter of beauty but has become associated with irresponsibility in respect of a person's physical health and the nation's financial health, and as such both men and women seem to be (albeit still unequal) targets in the current 'war on obesity'. According to the World Health Organization (2007), the prevalence of 'overweight' and 'obesity' is increasing globally and in the UK (see also Rennie and Jebb, 2005), with health professionals and the government warning of an 'obesity epidemic' and its alleged related health risks, as well as financial implications for the nation (Department of Health, 2004a). Media coverage on the subject abounds, with regular news items on the health risks and causes of 'obesity' as well as reports on preventative measures taken in the UK and abroad. 'Large' people were warned, for example, about the risk of becoming blind (BBC, 2006a) and the nation was informed that Britain was the 'fattest country in Europe' (BBC, 2006b). Most of these reports have a negative tone and point towards the individual as the target of remedial action.

The focus on the individual in this 'war' is evident in the general media as well as the medical and psychological literature which, within medicine, mostly concentrates on the health risks, causes and treatment of 'obesity' (e.g. Lawrence and Kopelman, 2004; Miles et al., 2001; World Health Organization, 2007) and, within psychology, the links between eating behaviour and mental health, psychological weight-loss interventions and attitudes towards 'large' individuals (e.g. Cramer and Steinwert, 1998; Heo et al., 2006; Puhl and Brownell, 2003; Shaw et al., 2005). Most explanations for the causes are located within, and treatments are aimed at, the individual and their lifestyle choices, with an emphasis on 'eat less!'

and 'move more!' – an approach that fails to take into account the fact that most diets fail in the long term (e.g. Foster and Kendall, 1994). They are based on the notion that physical health is only possible in a slim body that stays within certain medically defined body weight or body mass index (BMI) limits.

This literature does not go unchallenged by academics (e.g. Campos et al., 2006; Cogan and Ernsberger, 1999; Lyons and Miller, 1999; Miller, 1999) and pro-fat activists (e.g. Cooper, 1998) alike. In their view, the emphasis should be on lifestyle and health (e.g. Campos et al., 2006) rather than on weight. An emphasis on weight loss and the individual is deemed not only ineffective but also potentially harmful (e.g. Austin, 1999; Orbach, 2006). Cogan and Ernsberger (1999) argue that the weight-centred approach is based on the following faulty assumptions: that individuals are able to change their weight at will; that dieting is effective and improves health; and that fatness means disease while thinness equals health. They believe that striving to become thin can have serious negative consequences. They warn of the negative impact dieting and 'weight-cycling' (repeatedly losing and regaining body weight) can have on an individual's health and claim that putting weight at the centre of health may lead to further obesity-related stigma.

One of the main concerns of our research is the subjective experience of being 'large' in contemporary society where individuals are assigned full responsibility for their own health, which in turn is premised on the notion that thinness is desirable and achievable for everybody. In addition to being assigned this responsibility for their own health, 'large' individuals are now also, at least implicitly, given responsibility for the financial health of the National Health Service (NHS). With repeated reports on how much the treatment of conditions associated with 'obesity' cost (Department of Health, 2006), the link is easily made to the individual 'large' person representing a drain on the NHS budget, and thus on the nation's wealth. 'Large' individuals, admittedly, are not the only ones affected by this 'healthism', as smokers (especially in terms of second-hand smoking) and other social groups with less than medically sanctioned 'ideal lifestyles' have been targeted in similar ways (e.g. Department of Health, 2004b). However, smokers can put their cigarette down, while 'large' individuals always carry their bodies around with them (Monaghan, personal communication, 2007). As such, they are always visible and always-already constituted as 'health offenders' in a culture where mutual policing (and hence stigma and discrimination) seem justified in the name of the 'war on obesity'. This article focuses on the theme of in/visibility in respect to the experience of being 'large' in our society.

Eighteen women and three men, who self-identified as being 'large', or thought that others considered them 'large', were interviewed. The intention was to represent the voices of both genders on their experience of being 'large'; however, only three men could be recruited for the interview study. It was therefore decided to base this analysis on the interview data collected with the women only. Data gathered in the interviews with the three men will be analysed within a focus group study with men this summer. The pseudonyms used were selected

by the interviewees themselves. The interviews were based on an interview schedule containing seven open-ended questions on the participants' experience of being 'large', including such issues as language, the media, health, appearance and lifestyle. Participants were encouraged to add or omit as much or as little as they wanted at any stage during the interview. This article represents a preliminary analysis of the discursive construction of 'large' subjectivities, and focuses in particular on the in/visibility of 'large bodies'. A wide range of themes emerged, including 'surveillance', which we will focus on in the rest of the article.

The theme of being under constant surveillance was present in most interviews. Participants felt monitored when eating in public and noticed people inspecting their supermarket trolleys when they went food shopping:

I suppose (.) just sit there and eat all day (.) that's what people think / I:Hmm / so, which isn't true / I:Hmm / (.) which then gives you a complex when you go out, if you *do* go out to eat, it sort of, well me personally I sit there and I'm looking around, 'who's looking at me, who's looking at me' / I:Hmmm / uhm, I sort of avoid eating in front of people. (Scrupz)

It's like if you're uhm, I could take you shopping now and if we went up to uhm a a queue with all slim people in, and I come up with my trolley, they would actually see what I was buying / I: hmm / to prove to theirselves 'that's why she's fat' / I: mhm / and you know that that do, you know, nobody up to now said anything / I: mhm / uhm but you can tell that they're doing that look. (Blade)

Foucault (1977) uses Bentham's conception of the Panopticon as a model for how being under surveillance – or the ever-present potential of being watched – creates power inequalities and acts as a 'discipline-mechanism' (p. 209) of normalization. The concept of Bentham's Panopticon that Foucault draws on seems a particularly apt framework for interpreting these accounts: a prison constructed in a way that allows prison guards in a watchtower to watch the inmates in their cells constantly (but without being seen themselves), which creates a visibility and power asymmetry with the power lying with the invisible but monitoring prison guards. Scrupz's and Blade's perception of being monitored and watched in and by society re-articulates this construction of unequal power relations whereby the individual or group 'under surveillance' are construed and construe themselves as oppressed, marginalized and not fitting normative rules.

The theme of surveillance is not only about direct observation and not/fitting into normative rules, however, but also about not/fitting the environment: about the constant reminders of one's size through the physical environment. For example, Emily spoke about her experience of trying to get into a steam train carriage:

... and I couldn't [laughing] fit between the arm chairs<sup>2</sup> / I: hmm / and I'm thinking what am I supposed to do because people, as I went to walk in, people saw

(.) and I walked out again / I: hmm / and we looked, we went to another carriage where there was nobody (.) and (.) I, I went in where I could actually try and see if I could *squeeze* in without it being obvious to the other people. (Emily)

Samantha sums it up in saying: 'You know, the world is very firmly there to tell you that you don't fit'.

The women in the study constituted themselves as targets for observation and judgments, as being singled out and marginalized within society, and construed their lifestyle as controlled by it:

If, if *I* didn't feel other people looking at me and thinking 'yuk' (.) then I would go [swimming] / I: hmm / yes, it is that simple actually, isn't it? (Emily)

Being policed in this way was constructed by these participants as something negative. Their imposed, but resisted, subject position is constructed as that of a passive/judged object of gaze and as excluded from the norm within that gaze. In other places, however, women constructed themselves as playing an active role in this politics of visibility. In the quote below, Emily positions herself as the viewer of that excluding/normalizing gaze such that this politics of the gaze remains constant, but Emily is now active and included in the process of its regulatory deployment. In terms of Panoptican architecture, she is now in the watchtower as well as the cell:

*I know* people go into, wear swimming costumes on the beach when they are my size, but [laughing] they shouldn't. Uh, you see, I'm, I'm fat and I can look at other people and say 'oh, no, you shouldn't (.)', uhm, so it's not just thin people [laughing] who do that / I: hmm / it's fat people as well. (Emily)

While positioning herself as an active viewer in the above quote, Emily at the same time construes herself as intentionally hiding from the gaze of others. The theme of hiding, or avoiding being seen, can also be found in other quotes. Ali, for example, spoke about using colour to hide behind:

Traditionally you always see a larger person wearing black (.) they [laughing] wouldn't really go for a nice cerise dress or something / I: hmm / usually try and hide away behind a black. (Ali)

Similarly to the issues discussed above, the theme of hiding, and the politics and power relations constituted within it, is dynamic and shifting. While Ali is construing herself as actively avoiding being seen, this also appears as an imposed subject position, something that is being done to the large individual. For example:

I don't know it's probably a stroke of paranoia and also *maybe* it is happening, but I always feel that when I go in a restaurant, my partner who is also big that we get put nearer the back so we are not seen near the front of the restaurant to be eating food as two big people / I: hmm / and that seems to have happened quite a lot you know. (Jacqueline)

In a way reversing the politics of visibility and turning it into something positive, choosing to be seen in – for ‘large’ individuals – exceptional ways, and seeing other ‘large’ people achieving in areas that are often socially constructed as reserved for ‘slim’ people, were constructed as empowering and supportive. Eileen spoke about wearing shorts in public, and Charlotte talked about her dancing and orienteering friends:

I mean I personally haven’t got a problem with wearing things like shorts /I: mm/ um, but I’m, I’ve got big friends and I’ve got friends that wouldn’t wear sleeveless tops [. . .] and I’ve even had people stop me in the street and say ‘oh I’ve always wanted to wear shorts, I just wanted to say oh God you’ve just made my day /I: mm hmm/ seeing you in a pair of shorts’. (Eileen)

I guess I *do* carry these internalized notions of what a fat person can do /I: Hmm / and it’s important to me to be around people that that kind of buck those notions /I: Hmm / like (.) my friend [name] is a dancer she’s just an incredible dancer /I: Hmm / and you know, uh and not just like (.) a [laughing] crappy dancer, she’s like a da, a prop, a proper professional dancer and she’s fat and my friend [name] in Norway does orienteering and /I: hmm / you know, she runs around in the woods with a map and she’s my size, and you know I find that (.) just amazing and and kind of really nourishing to be around people like that. (Charlotte)

Being visible and watched by others takes on a different significance, as it is constructed by both Eileen and Charlotte in the above extracts as having a productive rather than constraining power. There is in these accounts a similar emphasis on the *visibility* of women’s large bodies but the power relations that are constituted in Eileen’s and Charlotte’s accounts are normalizing of bigger women’s bodies and enabling rather than excluding and disabling. While visibility appears here, as in previous quotes, as a highly significant field of regulation and subjectification, the (gendered) politics of these fields of visibility are very different.

Seeing and being seen, and avoiding either or both – in/visibility – were themes and issues that emerged in various places throughout the interview transcripts. Among these themes, ‘surveillance’ was a prominent one. On the one hand, being seen, monitored and judged as a ‘large’ person by society and through the physical environment was constructed as oppressive and lifestyle controlling. Parallels can be drawn to what Foucault (1977) describes as a principle of Panopticism where constant surveillance creates a culture where individuals, in continuous anticipation of being monitored and judged, turn their gaze onto themselves and self-monitor and self-discipline according to the prevailing order.

In the present research, this was not the only way the theme of surveillance emerged, however. A number of subject positions, linked to the in/visibility of ‘large’ bodies, were taken up or rejected. Participants constructed themselves as targets of stares and comments, and as such as being on the outskirts of society, and being controlled in terms of their lifestyles, as to what they should and should

not do. However, at the same time, they actively rejected the imposed subject positions of (for example) lazy gluttons who 'just sit there and eat all day' (Scrumptz). In other places, participants constructed themselves as part of the surveying or monitoring society – 'so it's not just thin people [laughing] who do that, it's fat people as well' (Emily) – and as such perhaps less marginalized.

Yet, as we have seen earlier, being seen and seeing other 'large' individuals was also constructed as positive and empowering, and seemed to offer the subject positions of a member of a (capable) community, being nourished and accepted (rather than stigmatized and downgraded), as well as an advocate for this community. In summary, the politics of visibility in terms of 'being large' seem to be highly dynamic and shifting, and a number of subject positions are frequently and interchangeably being taken up, imposed, accepted and rejected. Despite there being resistances to cultural constructions of 'the large individual' and notions of what 'they' should or should not do, however, the prominent theme of surveillance is that of oppression and control, and of the 'large' body being constructed as better hidden/not to be seen. Foucault's (1977) notion that 'visibility is a trap' still seems to ring true in many ways, for the community of 'large' women.

With beauty and slenderness (e.g. Bordo, 1993; Malson, 1998) as well as (asymmetric) visibility (Brighenti, 2007) being highly gendered issues, it was surprising that the women participants did not make any overt statements in respect to gender differences in the pressure to become thin. On reflection, this may have been an artefact of the researcher being a woman and the participants taking certain issues as said during the interviews. In contrast, although their data were excluded from the analysis for this article, it is probably worth mentioning that all three male participants made it clear that they were very aware of the fact that women were subjected to greater pressures in terms of body weight and size. Further analysis of the interview data, as well as data to be gathered through online focus groups with men, will further explore the issue of gender in the construction of 'large' bodies, as well as other themes in respect of the experience of being 'large' in contemporary society.

## NOTES

1. The adjective 'large' is used throughout this article instead of 'obese', 'overweight', 'fat' or any other descriptor, as the majority of the participants in this research seemed to deem this term acceptable. We were aware that there may be many people who will dislike the term 'large', and that the positive opinion in my group of participants was possibly created by using this term in my recruitment material. We may have only recruited individuals who were not offended by the word 'large'. Lacking a term that does not bear any negative connotations, however, we continued to use 'large' but express our unease by putting it in quotation marks.
2. The following transcription conventions are used within the quotations:

- (.) denotes a pause in speech;
- [ . . . ] denotes that text has been omitted from the quotation;
- [text] denotes an explanatory note or comment;
- // denotes an interjection;
- underline is used to show that the speaker is laughing;
- *italic* is used for words emphasized by the speaker;
- quotation marks are used when the speaker quotes thoughts or speech.

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