

ON FAT FEMALE EMBODIMENT: NARRATIVES OF “COMING OUT AS FAT”

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Abstract

In this paper, I propose an interpretation of the “coming out” narrative, focusing on the notion of “fat” and the “otherness” implicitly required in the process. On one hand, the “otherness” needed in the public act of “coming out” reinforces the idea that identity formation cannot be achieved as an act of solipsistic self-affirmation. This means that fat identity can be renegotiated and redefined. On the other, in saying “I am fat”, a woman is putting in place an act of rebellion against the compulsory thin-bodiedness. She has stopped perceiving her body as a project, as a “not-thin-yet” body, also dismantling the notion that her always-hypervisible fat body is something else than her mind. She is fat, does not merely have fat. Aided by the preliminary findings of my fieldwork, I illustrate how fat women who refer to themselves as “fat” have developed a better understanding and a better relationship with their fat, female body. This paper, by closely examining the potentialities of the “coming out as fat” process, sheds new light on the rarely acknowledged issue of empowerment in relation to fat embodiment.

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1. Introduction

Scholars have reviewed the conceptual framework of coming out, and debated whether it was applicable to a discredited identity, such as fatness. For example, Cooper (2016) and Wann (1998) have argued in favour of a reclaim of the term “fat”, and Saguy and Ward (2011), and Pausé (2012) have suggested that the phenomenon of “coming out” can soundly be used in relation to fat individuals. Other scholars, however, have expressed scepticism in relation to fat people “coming out as fat”, either affirming that the concept of fatness is too ambiguous to constitute an identity (Murray, 2008), or that there is no closet for fat people to hide, and therefore no place to come out from (Sedgwick, 1990).

In this paper, I use the narratives of three body positive and self-identifying fat individuals in order to address whether it is possible for fat people to “come out as fat”. In relation to the way in which participants describe and interact with their bodies, four findings can be identified: a) all interviewees consistently throughout our conversation manifested a positive attitude towards their bodies, showing a similar employment. The employment can be articulated in three different moments: an insecure, unhappy self; a positive and confident present self; and a plot twist represented by the discovery of the body positive movement; b) when asked to describe what is like to be fat, all participants chose a story in which they situated their fat embodiment in a public setting; c) they prefer not to use the word “fat” to describe themselves in front of other people, not because they want to deny their fatness, but because using the word “fat” is perceived as an inconvenience; d) the like to be around other fat people because they feel a sense of shared experiences. In the discussion, I will use the data from my fieldwork to address the question whether is possible to come out as fat and, if so, what is the meaning of such performative act.

2. Methods

The data presented in this paper are part of the researcher’s doctoral project on the impact of the body positive movement on fat, body positive individuals. Research participants were recruited from a body positive society through the publication of a post in their Facebook group. The research followed the British Sociological Association’s ethical guidelines and was approved by the University of York’s Research Ethics Committee. Interviews were digitally recorded, lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, and were conducted in the researcher’s office in the department of Sociology at the University of York. The interviews were thematically guided into four sections, each one contained between five and seven questions. However, the interview process remained flexible and not all questions were asked to every participant. At the start of each interview, participants were asked their preferred

pronouns and to choose a pseudonym, in order to guarantee anonymity. The extracts used in this paper are from three students aged between 19 and 21 who coincidentally identify as LGBTQ. I explored during my fieldwork whether identifying as LGBTQ was an important theme for my research and if being part of the LGBTQ movement had an influence on the respondents' understanding of "coming out". I couldn't identify any significant similarities between their "coming out as fat" and their coming out as LGBTQ stories. Moreover, their responses on the "coming out as fat" do not differ significantly from the ones I collected from non-LGBTQ participants. For this reason, the fact that the participants used in this paper identify as LGBTQ seems to be a coincidence that has no significant impact on their "coming out as fat" narratives.

3. Key Findings

3.1. Present self, past self and the discovery of the Body Positive movement

The first, perhaps not surprising, aspect that emerged from the interviews is that all participants consistently throughout our conversation expressed a positive relation with their body image. They were recruited in a body positive Facebook group and one of the two criteria in order to be eligible to take part in the study was to identify as body positive (the other criteria was to self-identify as "fat"). As one of the core beliefs of the body positive movement is that every body is a good body as it is, it was expected from the participants that there would be a degree of commitment in the body positive cause and, with that, a certain acceptance of one's body type.

All interviews had a similar emplotment. It is through emplotment that we understand both singular events narrated in the interview, and the morals, goals and, ultimately, the participants themselves (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000). To put it simply, without an overall plot there would be no narrative (Lawler, 2002; Lawler, 2008; Ricoeur, 1990). The interviews' emplotment could be articulated in three stages: The past self, the present self and, in between these two phases, the plot twist represented by the discovery of the body positive movement. The past self represents a period in the participant's life in which she struggled because of her fatness, and therefore fatness was perceived as a highly negative trait, source of mockery and suffering. All participants reported episodes of bullying in school. For instance, in Sophie's story we find experiences of what she defined as "the average bullying": *"Name calling and not having many people wanting to be friends with you, or... if you're partnered up, 'oh I don't want to be partnered up with Sophie' [imitating children voices as if they were mocking her]" (Sophie, she/her).*

"In primary school I got called Michelin man, I didn't know who he was so I googled him and it was horrific and I would start crying" (Sophie, she/her).

Completely opposite to the past self is the present self, who is portrayed with much brighter and lighter tones. Fatness becomes normalised: *"Before that, I would have referred to myself as fat but not as in... I would have been I'm fat and nobody will love me rather than I'm fat, I'm gonna get to work" (Sophie, she/her).*

The present self is presented as confident and positive, and at times almost proud of being fat: *"It'd be lovely to hear 'oh you look fabulous today' but sometimes I'm like, 'I know'. [They giggle]. Not in a way like, 'oh my gosh', but in a way of like 'I'm happy, I don't need that to be confirmed every day for me to believe it'" (Kate, they/them).*

The positive outlook interviewees expressed of their body was not only manifested through the words they used to describe themselves, but also through some changes in behaviour that happened in their lives. An example of these changes is represented by clothing style - all participants reported that they started wearing fitted clothes, in contrast to their past selves who would wear baggy clothes: *"Now I think I wear more fitted things, not ridiculously tight but I'm more confident in who I am and more self-expressive. I have tattoos now. I dyed my hair red. Before, my 10, 15 years old self, she was very reserved" (Sophie, she/her).* Makeup, or the lack thereof, can be used as another example of a more secure self after the discovery of the movement: *"I used to have to wear it every day. Before uni. Because I was like, I can't let people see me like this. I can't be seen. People are gonna be offended by my face. And now I'm just like 'get over it!' [they smile]" (Kate, they/them).*

What helps establish the divide between past and present self is the discovery of the body positive movement. All interviews followed a similar emplotment based on the "before/after" narrative, where the past self is presented as insecure and limited and the present self is much more accepting of her own fatness:

"I would come back from work and sit down on the floor with no clothes on and I'm perfectly okay with that. Cause I used to have, I forgot to mention that actually, I used to have a massive fear of being naked in front of myself or anyone else. And now I'm just like, stripping. The second I get in the door I'm just [they giggle] too hot! I'm going for a nap" (Kate, they/them).

[Talking about sex] "Before, when I was 16, 17 it was always like, I'd never take all my clothes off... I wasn't [she sighs] I wasn't very experimental. It was kind of like lay back and think of England, I wanted to get it done with [...]. Whereas now I'm much more confident, I'm much more happier and I enjoy myself and I think that's really important. But I do think, my main sort of gratitude to the movement is probably that. Cause I don't think I ever would have got there" (Sophie, she/her).

3.2. "Being fat in public"

The second relevant aspect that emerged from the interviews is that when asked to describe what is like to be fat, all participants chose an example that situated their fat embodiment in relation to other people. In other words, relevance was put on the "being fat in public" - opposite to "being fat in private", by which I mean experiencing

fatness on their own with no other people around them - and ultimately being fat in relation to other bodies who are not fat. For Sophie, being fat represents a constant state of alertness and defence. She used the example of walking up a flight of stairs. She lives in a part of campus situated on the top of a hill, reachable by a set of steep stairs. Before meeting up with her friends at the top, she would reserve a few minutes to regularise her breathing. Although Sophie identifies as fat and has an overall positive outlook on her body ("I am happy to genuinely call myself fat"), some contradictions start to emerge when she has to deal with the reality of her fatness, of which being short of breath could be considered an example. In another part of the interview, Sophie discussed how she likes going on long walks and how, despite that she found them challenging at times, it was an activity she enjoyed. This means that she must be familiar with the feeling of being out of breath. Yet, when the reality of fatness that being out of breath represents is presented to her in a public form, i.e. in front of other non-fat individuals, she would rather other people not see her like that.

[Being fat] "It's just lots of day to day things that you aren't aware of, that go through our heads because we're trying to sort of keep up. Not appearances, because I'm not trying to pretend I'm skinny but... pretend I'm just like a normal human and obviously, like I said, if I'm out of breath, they're gonna be like 'Jesus! She should go for a run!'" (Sophie, she/her).

On a similar note, Annie describes her experience of being fat as "taking up more space":

"If I'm sat on a bus, I will usually spill over... not spill over, like take over another... Like I am aware my arms are quite big so if someone does sit next to me, they might have to move up a little bit. If I'm sat next to a petite person I'm quite aware of that... Yeah I guess been aware that I take up more space sometimes. And that feels... not odd but... different sensations that someone else might not have" (Annie, she/her).

All participants, when asked to define what is like to be fat, positioned their stories in a public setting. Using stories in which they are surrounded by other bodies, participants chose to describe the experience of "having a fat body in public", as if their fat embodiment became more relevant in a public scenario. Eating in public is another example of this public/private divide. The morality of eating, particularly in relation to fat individuals, has been widely discussed (see Rich and Evans 2005; Throsby 2009; Evans 2006; Lupton 2013). Fat individuals internalize the perception others have of them to the point that even the simple act of going to a family meal creates an internal struggle:

"If I'm with members of my family that aren't my dad or my mum, because they're all very slim and... very completely different personality-wise as well, I think in my head from eating with them I am more thinking 'oh look at Sophie downing a plate of food!' Even if they are probably not" (Sophie, she/her).

Although Sophie had no problems describing herself as fat, she said that she won't be able to go for a meal on a first date. She would also refuse to go to a family meal because she would be worried of what her family members might think of her. Sophie's hesitation comes from the fear of "being fat in public" and being judged for doing things that are stereotypically expected from fat people, like voraciously eating a large meal. This happens even when the fearful thought is perceived as groundless, as in Sophie's story.

3.3. The inconvenience of calling yourself "fat"

Related to the private/public divide is also the third finding I would like to discuss in this paper, which concerns the words that participants use to describe themselves to other people. If all participants self-identified as fat and would use the "f-word" with a positive connotation to describe themselves in private - by which I mean using the word "fat" when speaking to themselves - some problems start to emerge when the same word is used in public, i.e. in front of other people. This distinction is exemplified in Sophie's and Kate's stories:

"If I am in conversation with friends, I would use 'plus size', 'bigger', 'chunky'... in my head, I think they are more delicate words for fat. But I would only use them in conversation with other people because the second you say 'I'm fat', or as a fat woman, people or friends want to interrupt and say 'no, no you're not', and you don't want to add however long... 'It's fine, I'm okay'. So with myself, in my own head, I'm happy to sort of look in the mirror and be like 'yeah I'm a fat woman'. So it's more about pleasing other people... it's more convenient than anything else" (Sophie, she/her).

"I usually say things like 'chubby' because it sounds cuter and it's ... 'chubby' you can say with a smile at the end because it has a y... A lot of people, if you say 'fat', they would immediately take it as a negative thing. And I think more for the sake of people's understanding that I'm content as I am, I'll go 'I'm chubby, I'm fabulous'" (Kate, they/them).

Using the word "fat" is perceived by the interviewees as an inconvenience:

"I am happy to genuinely call myself fat. The only problem I have with it is saying that in front of friends. When I am with friends, I normally use the term 'plus size' or 'bigger' because the second you say 'fat' there are so many negative connotations 'oh no you're beautiful' like and 'I'm both, thanks' [she giggles]. I'm joking. ... Personally in my head I am happy to say 'yes I am a fat woman' but I think in conversation with people day-to-day there hasn't been a change. I would still refer to myself with more delicate terms because people are afraid of the word 'fat'... and I don't want to be like... I think every conversation we have, like clothes, I don't want to be like 'I know I'm fat, don't...' I'll be tired of doing that all day, every day" (Sophie, she/her).

Kate and Sophie genuinely seemed to be body positive, and they showed an acceptance of their body consistently

throughout the interview through the use of anecdotes and positive adjectives. All participants repeatedly used the word “fat” to describe themselves, and they also mentioned several stories in which they used the same word with pride. However, from the examples mentioned above we also see some resistance in using the “f-word” when publicly discussing their fatness, with friends or strangers. Interestingly, this was not due to an unwillingness from the participants to admit their fatness. On the contrary, they did not want to put the other party in the position of being embarrassed. The resonance with Goffman’s words is striking:

“The stigmatized individual is asked to act so as to imply neither that his burden is heavy nor that bearing it has made him different from us; at the same time he must keep himself at that remove from us which ensures our painlessly being able to confirm this belief about him” (1963: 122).

In other words, the stigmatised individual should pay the courtesy to “normals” - to use Goffman’s terminology - of not bringing up their stigma and therefore make it easier for them to live with their hypocrisies. Kate and Sophie, by not using the word “fat” and opting for a gentler term such as “chubby”, are sparing the “normals” from being confronted with their understanding of fatness.

3.4. A glimpse of a fat community?

The fourth and final finding concerns how fat body positive individuals relate to similar body types. What emerges from the data is that the same participants who expressed a sense of uneasiness about their “being fat in public” feel a sense of belonging and shared experiences when it comes to other fat individuals: *“I like being around other fat people. And kinda being fat together cause you don’t have distresses and you can talk to other people about”* (Annie, she/her).

“Yeah, I guess people with a similar body type, I’m probably more incline to initially get along with and I know that sounds terrible, I think it’s because you know there is going to be a mutual understanding there. Even if you don’t have a conversation, you know there’s gonna be like mutual, similar experiences... about the daily little thoughts. The changes you have to make. So I think it changed that because I’m immediately more, ‘oh that person is like me, we’re gonna have a similar understanding on a big part of my life” (Sophie, she/her).

This final finding could shed some light on the ways in which the participants live their fat embodiment “in public” when they are surrounded by similar body types. If in the previous section we discussed how uncomfortable and inconvenient it feels to use the word “fat” to describe one’s body to individuals who aren’t fat, in this final finding we notice how participants have a sense of a “fat community” that could be defined as a group of people who share similar experiences in relation to their fatness. It is not clear whether this community actually exists, but what emerges from the interviews is that the participants feel as if it does. It is perceived by them as real.

4. Discussion

4.1. The emplotment of coming out stories

All participants use similar emplotments that can be articulated in three separate spheres: The past suffering self, the present confident self and the revelatory moment represented by the discovery of the body positive movement. The before/after emplotment style that participants adopt should not lead us to believe that there is such a thing as a past self and a present self. As Jarvinen points out, “there is no past to be captured, understood and described in its pure essence. There is only a past - or plurality of pasts - constructed from the point of view of an ever-changing present” (2004: 47). Nevertheless, this past/present dichotomy is extremely significant for our study because it helps the creation of a plot. Emplotment is a core element of narrative research, as it allows us to go beyond the chronological understanding of the singular events that are presented to us (Jovchelovitch and Bauer, 2000; Lawler, 2008). The creation of a plot makes us explore the meaning of the story itself, rather than just analysing each fragment of the story per se. To use Ricoeur’s words, emplotment “does not explain the events of the story, but rather the story itself” (1990: 164). Emplotment is always much more than a list of episodes in a narrator’s story: they are *meaningful* episodes. It is through emplotment that the narrator finds cohesion in her own life story, and it is through the use of this interpretive device that the narrator mediates and produces her identity (Lawler, 2002; Ricoeur, 1990). Even when conducting interviews, researchers who adopt a narrative method of enquiry are more interested in why a story was told in a specific way, rather than the chronological details of the story itself (Riessman, 1993).

The participants’ description of their past and present selves resonates with Plummer’s understanding of “coming out” narratives. He identifies three stages of the coming out process: suffering, “coming out” and “coming to terms”:

“The stories always tap initially into a secret world of suffering. They proceed to show the speaker moving out of this world of shadows, secrecy and silence - where feelings and pains had to be kept to self and where tremendous guilt, shame and hidden pathology was omnipresent - into a world which is more positive, public and supportive. There is a coming out, a shift in consciousness, a recovery through which a negative experience is turned into a positive identity and a private pain becomes part of a political or a therapeutic language” (Plummer, 1995:50).

For Plummer, suffering is what gives tension to the plot. This tension increases until it reaches its point break and an epiphany occurs. Individuals experience a sense of urgency in relation to their suffering: “[S]omething needs to be done”, to use Plummer’s (1995: 54) words. These types of stories end with a transformation that

eventually allows the individual to survive and surpass (Plummer, 1995). Plummer applies his notion of coming out narratives to LGBTQ individuals, but also to rape and recovery stories as the suffering-coming out-surviving dynamic can soundly exceed the realm of LGBTQ stories. For the same reason, I believe this type of narrative can occur in the case of fatness. As Katie, Sophie and Annie's stories reveal, even in the case of fat body positive individuals, the suffering, coming out and coming to terms narrative applies: In the initial stage represented by the past self, participants express high levels of suffering and distress; an epiphany occurs when the respondents discover the body positive movement; and finally in the present self, they show confidence and an overall improved relationship with their body. Plummer's understanding of "coming out" narratives is particularly useful because, without relegating this concept to LGBTQ individuals, he broadly distinguishes between four types of "coming out" that could also be applied to fatness: Personally (coming out to yourself), privately (coming out to specific others, like family members, friends and colleagues), publicly (coming out to an unspecified group of other, your previous hidden identity now becomes public knowledge) and politically (the coming out story is used as an inspirator of political change) (Plummer, 1995). In the rest of the paper, I discuss how the process of "coming out" can soundly apply to fatness.

4.2. Is there a closet for fat people?

In the traditional usage of the expression, an individual decides to "come out of the closet" when she feels ready to publicly declare her sexual orientation or gender identity:

"The image of coming out regularly interfaces the image of the closet, and its seemingly unambivalent public sating can be counterposed as a salvational epistemologic certainty against the very equivocal privacy afforded by the closet" (Sedwick, 1990: 71).

If we limit the process of "coming out" to the mere public display of an aspect of a person's characteristics that was before private, it does not seem that the narrative of coming out can soundly apply to fatness. In fact, fatness is always hypervisible, there is no closet in which a fat person can hide. In the case of fatness, there is no need for a fat person to "come out as fat" in order to be seen as "fat". In this respect, Sedgwick (1990) claims that it would not be possible for a fat person to "come out as fat" because there is no closet for them to come out from. But if this is the case, if fatness is always visible and undeniable, why would Sophie, Annie and Kate refuse to use the word "fat" to describe themselves to other people? If it is not shame that is stopping them - they all positively evaluate their fatness - why would they opt for the more nuanced term "chubby" or "plus size"? The answer relies on the shared understanding that both participants and their interlocutors attach to the word "fat" as a stigmatizing trait:

"When we narrate our lives, we take a step outside ourselves and organize the others' attitudes towards us as well as our attitude towards others into a biographical system. The individual narrator does not construct his/her life history single-handedly and directly, but only indirectly, from the standpoint of the generalized other" (Jarvinen, 2004: 52).

When asked to describe what is like to be fat, participants situated their fat embodiment in a public setting and a context in which they were surrounded by other people, like the bus in Annie's story or the meeting up of friends after going up a flight of stairs in Sophie's narrative. In both cases, the reality of their fat embodiment becomes visible and relevant when confronted with other individuals who do not have a similar body type. It is from the standpoint of the generalized other - as Jarvinen (2004) notes - that the participants start to describe what their fat embodiment entails. This creates in them feelings of concern (as in Sophie's story) and uneasiness towards one's body (as in Annie's story). In other words, although the emplotment the participants used was one of a recovery story and although the present self is portrayed as confident and accepting of its body type, here we find the first ambiguity in relation to the past/present trajectory we discussed in the findings.

In the case of stigmatized identities, it is useful to distinguish between enacted stigma and felt stigma (Scambler and Hopkins, 1986; Goffman, 1963). In the first case, the individual experiences forms of discriminations motivated by a supposed state of inferiority attributed to his condition. In the second case, the individual has internalized the fear of enacted stigma and starts associating feelings of shame with his condition. Scambler and Hopkins, using the example of epilepsy, argue that felt stigma is not the result of enacted stigma but, on the contrary, it precedes it. In their study, even epileptic individuals who had disclosed to their employers their condition were still "committed to a policy of covering" (1986:36). This means that even once a stigmatized identity is "out", the fear of being exposed through stigmata or stigmata cues remains untouched. From the perspective of fat individuals, even when their stigmatized identity is already "out" - as it always is in the case of fatness - the fear of being exposed through stigmata is always present. In the case of fatness, these stigmata could be seen in the act of being out of breath after going up a flight of stairs, as in Sophie's story, or spilling over a seat on the bus as in Annie's narrative. The central point to remember here is that "the stigmata are also recognised by the stigmatised" (Riddell and Watson, 2003:37). As Goffman would argue, stigmatised individuals share with "normals" the same sense of normality (1963). Sophie's words echo Goffman in her attempt to "pass" as normal: "I'm not trying to pretend I'm skinny but... pretend I'm just a normal human".

The difficulty in shutting down the generalized other's idea of ourselves and our stigma relies on the fact that "individual human agents fully become who and what they are through immersion in social practices and social relations. The isolated individual is a myth" (Crossley, 2004: 4). "Coming out" necessarily implies an audience of

people towards whom a fat person is making that affirmation: “[T]he coming-out story is a relational act” (Liang, 1994:414). The “otherness” of “coming out” in relation to fatness reinforces the idea that identity formation cannot be achieved as an act of solipsistic self-affirmation. It is in the need of others to help us redefine our stigmatized identity that we find the thrust to “come out as fat”. If we argue with Sedwick (1990) that there is no closet for a fat person to come out from, we also need to acknowledge that the narratives told by fat individuals strikingly resemble the ones told by LGBTQ people, as well as rape victims and recovery stories (Plummer, 1995). Maybe there is no closet, but there is a world outside the closet that fat individuals have to confront on a daily basis. And the outside world does not look dissimilar from the one narrated in LGBTQ stories of coming out. If it wasn’t for the “world outside the closet”, there would be no closet at all! The notion of “closet” is necessarily linked to the idea of a “world outside the closet”. This world represents the fear of seeing out stigmata being exposed and publicity is its key characteristic. Every time a fat person publicly discuss her fat identity, she is stripping away her felt stigma.

4.3. Coming out as fat

I argue that there is another possible interpretation of “coming out” that exceeds the realm of the “closet”. Rather than reclaiming visibility, a fat person “coming out as fat” reaffirms her desire to rediscuss her identity. McRuer (2006) encouraged disabled people to start using the word “crip” to define themselves as an act of rebellious self-affirmation. He exhorted them to “come out as crip”: “in proudly coming out as fat, one rejects cultural attitudes that fatness is unhealthy, immoral, ugly, or otherwise undesirable. One claims the right to define the meaning of one’s own body and to stake out new cultural meanings and practices around body size” (Saguy and Ward, 2011:14). In using the word “fat” to describe one’s identity, we initiate a conversation that helps reshaping the meaning of such a word, and therefore it helps in fighting the stereotypes attached to a certain stigma. “Anti-fat attitudes are shaped around the belief that fat people are ugly, sloppy, lazy, asexual, socially unattractive, sexually inactive, undisciplined, dishonest, less productive, and most of all, out of control” (Pausé, 2012: 45).

When a fat person says “I am fat”, she stops perceiving her body as a project, and starts considering a factuality. The act of declaring *to be* a fat body, in opposition *to have* a fat body, signifies that the fat person has stopped considering herself as a “not-thin-yet” body, and in doing so she rejects the compulsory thin-bodiedness. Fat has a static quality attached to it. Both Annie’s and Sophie’s stories are emblematic of how they describe themselves as “having” a fat body, rather than “being” a fat body: *“I like my body a bit more now, I think. I like the way it looks. And I like being in it a bit more. Sometimes I think I wish I was in a different body but that’s very scarce now and probably everyone has that emotion at some point” (Annie, she/her). “The thing for me is, I’m more than my body and also I am grateful that my body is here and it helps me day-to-day” (Sophie, she/her).*

“I remember I would be with primary school friends and I would be like ‘I’m the fat one’. ... [She sighs] It was sheer... not disassociation because obviously I knew I had my body, but it was just... I hated myself and I thought that my body was me” (Sophie, she/her).

In *The ‘Fat’ Female Body*, Murray (2008) argues against “coming out as fat”. In her view, fat women live their embodiment in “multiple, contradictory and eminently ambiguous” ways (Murray, 2008: 90). This prevents them from the act of “coming out”, which requires in Murray’s view, the capability of declaring an unambiguous identity. She derives this opinion from Sullivan’s definition of “coming out”: “[C]oming out has its benefits and its disadvantages, but either way, the call to come out presupposes that such an action is in itself transformative and that the identity that one publicly declares is unambiguous” (Sullivan, 2003: 31). The impossibility of “coming out as fat” for Murray relies on the idea that fat women cannot have an unambiguous identity, as each single fat woman lives her embodiment in a peculiar way. Moreover, she also claims that supporting the process of “outing” reinforces mind-body dualism:

“In simply ‘choosing’ a new and affirmative way of being-‘fat’-in-the-world, the fat activist is mobilising a humanist logic of the primacy of the individual, and the power of rationality in overcoming one’s lived reality. In this way, Wann privileges the mind over the body, and in a sense what the process of “outing” insists on is that there is a gap between the mind and the body, whereby the ‘fat’ subject may alter their lived experience simply through changing their mind” (Murray, 2008: 108).

I argue that not only there is no necessity of having an unambiguous identity in order to “come out as fat”, but also that this act does not imply a mind/body dichotomy, as Murray suggests. In fact, I believe it could be argued for the opposite. In “coming out as fat”, a woman rejects the idea that a fat body is merely a shell that houses her “true” self. She rejects the idea that there is a “truer” and “thinner” self, trapped inside her fat body. A fat woman who says “I am fat” is rejecting the idea that her body is something else than her mind. She *is* fat, does not merely *have* fat.

4.4.A multitude of coming out stories

Samuels introduced a very useful distinction between coming out *to* someone and coming out (2003). In the first case, an individual is coming out to a person or a group of people, and this refers to a specific moment in time, the so-called “coming out story”. The second case refers more broadly to the first time one came to terms with one’s own identity. Like Samuels, many scholars have considered “coming out” as a one-time occurrence (Sedwick, 1990; Zimman, 2009). Liang, for example, defines “coming out” as “the last straw” (1994: 141), the singular moment

clearly identifiable in a person's recollections about the time when she felt as if she could not hide her secreted identity anymore and let it all out. Even Plummer (1995), whose account includes four different types of coming out – personal, private, public, and political – still considers each type of coming out as a “first and only time” event, i.e. the first time a person came out to his parents, friends, colleagues etc., as if there was never the need to come out *again*.

We understand coming out – and particularly coming out as fat – as a declaration of intent: it is the public affirmation of the desire to rediscuss a person's own stigmatized identity. For this reason, every time a fat individual uses the word “fat” to describe herself, she is coming out as fat and this event could potentially happen several times, even with the same individuals. Rather than considering coming out as a one-time occurrence, we need to start reflecting on the plurality of coming out stories not only in the sense specified by Plummer (1995) – coming out for the first time to your family, friends, neighbours, etc. – but also coming out for the second time, and third and so on. Because our understanding of coming out is not bound to the revelatory act of revealing something that was previously hidden, we can imagine a series of scenarios in which coming out is repeated through time. The repetitive aspect of coming out becomes more clear if we observe the third of our findings, which consisted in the participants' reticence of using the word “fat” in public. While analysing the data, I found myself asking, as my participants would not use the word “fat” to describe themselves in public, are they *really* “out”? I now know I was asking the wrong question. As the majority of the literature on coming out stories has been approached from a LGBTQ perspective, all accounts included a “coming out story”. I was myself affected by this understanding of the coming out process. What I propose here is a more inclusive understanding of coming out that does not revolve around a singular event that is possible to locate in space and time, but a repetition of such event. Coming out is not a “crossing the bridge” scenario. As fat people, we need to make the decision to come out every time we meet someone new, someone who might not know about our battle to reclaim the word “fat” or fat identity in general. Moreover, we might even come out more than once to the same person or group of people because every time we decide to use the word “fat” to describe ourselves in public, we are coming out.

4.5.A sense of collective fat identity

Coming out stories are generally told in a supportive space, whether this might be during a dinner conversation or a support group (Liang, 1994). During the interviews, the respondents discussed with me at length a series of “first times”: The first time they realized they were fat, the first time they had a conversation with their friends about their fatness, the first time they used the word “fat” and attributed a positive connotation to it. They also told me stories of “second times”, like the repeated discussions they had with their family members about their positive body image. In telling me their stories, they were implicitly and explicitly coming out to me again. The interview setting I created was one of support: they could read on my body, as well as on my office walls adorned with fat art, that they were in a supportive environment. I used the word “fat” with candour to refer to myself, and our conversation was intertwined with personal anecdotes of my own fat experiences. I frequently found myself nodding and relating to the stories that the respondents were telling me because I have had resembling experiences. Although I did not know my participants and we differed in some significant aspects - size, age, sexual orientation, and cultural background - immediately, without even the need of talking, we knew that we shared similar experiences. In this perception of shared experiences relies the sense of collective fat identity: We all knew what it feels like to be scared of going to the doctors for the fear of being judged; we all knew what it feels like to be a fat person on the bus, or “the fat friend” in a group of peers. But also, we knew at what stage of our “coming to terms” with our fatness we were simply because we were using the word “fat”.

In relation to embodied health movements, Brown et al. define collective illness identity as

“[T]he cognitive, moral, and emotional connection an individual has with a broader community of illness sufferers and their allies. A collective illness identity requires the perception of a shared status or relation, rooted in some aspect of the illness experience that is distinct from, though it may form a part of, the personal illness identity” (2012: 22).

To apply this concept to fatness, my personal experiences and understanding of fatness might be different from those of the interviewees – for example, I am several sizes bigger than them – but at the same time we all fall into the category of “fat” and we have an a priori connection based upon our fat identity. This connection does not have to be experience directly, but it can also be imagined (Polletta and Jasper, 2001):

“Collective identity describes imagined as well as concrete communities, involves an act of perception and construction as well as the discovery of preexisting bonds, interests, and boundaries. It is fluid and relational, emerging out of interactions with a number of different audiences [...] rather than fixed. It channels words and actions, enabling some claims and deeds but delegitimizing others. It provides categories by which individuals divide up and make sense of the social world” (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 298).

According to Young (1990), a social group is more than just a number of people who share common features. It is a historical construction producing a strong sense of identity which is involuntarily and inevitably experienced by all the individuals. “A social group is defined not primarily by a set of shared attributes, but by a sense of identity” (Young, 1990: 44). This means that having similar attributes does not constitute per se a collective identity. What is required is the perception of a shared knowledge of what fatness entails. Sophie's words resonate with Young when

she says that she is more incline to get along with other fat individuals because “you know there is going to be a mutual understanding there. Even if you don’t have a conversation, you know there’s gonna be like mutual, similar experiences”. In this regard, Young says: “Members of a group have a specific affinity with one another because of their similar experience or way of life, which prompts them to associate with one another more than with those not identified with the group, or in a different way” (Young, 1990: 43).

5. Conclusion

What emerged from the preliminary findings of my study is that self-identifying fat, body positive individuals would rather not use the word “fat” to describe themselves in public; conversely, they would use the same word when talking to themselves and they would attach a positive connotation to it. Moreover, they genuinely seem to have a positive outlook on their bodies, as consistently confirmed throughout the interview; and finally, they like to be surrounded by other fat people because of the commonality of experiences they share with them.

In this paper, I applied the concept of “coming out” to fatness. The emplotment style used by my respondents is comparable to the one used by rape victims, LGBTQ individuals and recovery stories, in general. In fact, all these narratives are articulated around a plot that is based on the tension created by the suffering-coming out-coming to term paradigm. Our understanding of coming out is broad and inclusive, and in doing so it exceeds the realm of LGBTQ narratives. “Coming out” is a declaration of intent: It represents a person’s demand to publicly rediscuss her identity. Moving away from a traditional understanding of “coming out” as a “crossing the bridge” scenario, we believe that coming out should be considered not as a one-off event, but as a series of moments in a person’s life: We come out every time we publicly affirm that we want to rediscuss our stigmatized identity. In the last section of this paper, I made sense of the participants’ words concerning a sense of shared experiences fat individuals have by developing an account of collective fat identity. This topic, in particular, needs to be further developed as the literature on the subject is scarce. I believe the rest of my doctoral project could shed new light into the rarely acknowledge topic of a collective fat identity.

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