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Thick Description, Fat Talk: An Ethnography of Embodied Interactions Between Women in a “Plus Sized” Clothing Store

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Does This Interaction Make Me Look Fat?
Fat Talk as Emotional Labor in a Plus Size Clothing Store

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Abstract:

The current investigation builds upon previous research identifying a social norm for women to engage in “fat talk”, a term which refers to ritualized verbal exchange during which women express body dissatisfaction to each other. Previous work conceptualizes “fat talk” as a normative interaction that reinforces social bonds between women, yet this research has drawn upon interactions occurring in either experimental conditions or amongst primarily white, middle-class adolescent women of average weight. To more completely understand the meaning and social functions of “fat talk”, this investigation draws upon over 200 hours of ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation of “fat talk” in a “plus size” women’s clothing store. Results indicate that “fat talk” often reinforces cohesion among women of *similar* body types, but that attempts at “fat talk” between women of *different* body types tended to prompt exclusive boundary-making behaviors. Furthermore, “fat talk” between sales staff and customers, and between employees and their employers, functioned as expressions of deference, reaffirming subordinate statuses. These findings are discussed as they relate to inequality between women.

Key words: emotional labor, fat talk, symbolic boundaries, gender, inequality

Mainstream American society holds strong aesthetic and moralized preferences for thinness (Bordo 1993; Stearns 1997; Popenoe 2005) causing fat individuals, particularly women, to experience frequent discrimination and stigma. Due to intense pressures to conform to an increasingly thin ideal (Rubenstein and Caballero 2000), thinking and talking about fatness has become a pervasive element in many women's daily lives. Recent psychological research further suggests that - thanks to gendered expectations for female modesty - there is a norm for American women to self-degrade when talking about their bodies. For example, college-aged subjects in Britton et al.'s (2006) experimental study predicted that women who verbally degrade their bodies would be more well-liked by their peers than those who praised their bodies.

Mimi Nichter's (2000) ethnography of adolescent girls describes how young women engage in an interactional pattern she terms "Fat Talk," as a means by which to solidify social ties and affirm modesty. Nichter defines fat talk as *informal dialogue in which girls express body dissatisfaction to each other*. By claiming, "I'm so fat!" girls disclose vulnerabilities while inviting group approval. Thus, when peers provide positive feedback (usually by proclaiming "I'm so fat too!"), they communicate social support and help increase one another's self-esteem.

Despite a few hints that fat talk is sometimes used to *exclude* women (such as when friends grow annoyed with a girl and intentionally ignore her body comments), Nichter and others (see Britton et al 2006 and Craig et al 2006) focus on the *cohesive* rather than boundary-making elements of fat talk interactions. Yet, virtually all instances of fat talk observed by Nichter were between girls who were members of the same (all-white) peer group, a context in which social cohesion itself might be the norm. Nichter (2000) also notes that fat talk seems to occur between girls who claim to *feel* overweight but are actually of average weight.

By focusing on the forms of fat talk that "successfully" occur among white girls who are members of the same peer group and of average weight, Nichter neglects the important question of: *How, in what contexts, and with what meanings, might fat talk occur between women who (1)*

are at different ends of the weight spectrum (2) who are not social peers? To build upon previous research, this project investigates fat talk as it occurs in everyday interactions between women who differ in power along two different axes: size and employment status.

Data Collection:

To answer these questions, I draw from ethnographic data collected over 10 months, in which I completed 200+ hours of fieldwork as a paid sales associate at “Plus Clothes,” a plus-size women’s clothing store in Los Angeles¹. As an average-sized woman², I anticipated that my presence might disrupt some of the unspoken assumptions that women hold about working or shopping at a “plus sized” store. I hoped that this position would allow me to observe how women at Plus Clothes enact boundaries around body size, and also understand the meanings infused into the site itself. I recorded field notes during my breaks (one 15-minute break per 6-hour shift), using a palm-pilot and portable keyboard, elaborating upon these notes after my shift.

Analysis of Data

Field notes were reviewed for instances of fat talk across two different dimensions: (1) fat talk between women of different sizes and (2) fat talk between women who, based on their employment status, had unequal power at the site. I further coded interactions for, (1) whether the initiator of fat talk expressed disparaging versus positive comments about his/her body, and (2) whether the initiator was *responded to* in a manner that communicated cohesion or a form of exclusive boundary-making. To contextualize any findings, I also took note of how employees and customers revealed personal meanings tied to the site itself.

Findings: Meaning of the Site

Both customers and plus sized employees regard Plus Clothes with unique meanings which are tied to experiences, fears, or anticipation of fat stigma. As a location in which fatness

¹ I refer to my site as “Plus Clothes” and use pseudonyms when referring to research subjects.

² I am 5’5” and usually wear a size 8 in pants and size M in shirts.

is (supposedly) normalized, rather than grotesque, for many fat customers and employees, Plus Clothes represents the possibility of *feeling* and *being treated as* normal. Several customers and employees explicitly expressed gratitude about shopping or working at Plus Clothes. Kim, a multi-racial plus-sized employee in her mid thirties idyllically described to me how working at Plus Clothes “doesn’t even feel like work” to her, because it’s the only place where she can “relax and be myself. It’s like I’m just spending time with friends.” Customers, too, often described Plus Clothes as the “only store” in which they felt comfortable shopping.

Yet, the mainstream belief that “fatness is bad” was never far below the surface of interactions at the store. Despite the presence of plus-sized women as the majority, and despite efforts on the part of corporate marketing to glamorize the beauty of “real” bodies³, several things clearly signaled that the stigma of fatness had not been truly redefined. The most obvious example of the omnipresence of a “fatness is bad” stigma at Plus Clothes was the presence of a scale in the employee bathroom, which had been placed there for an employee weight-loss contest. Although the employee who explained the contest to me described it as “fun!,” I argue that this contest implicitly signals anti-fat size-ism (see also, Konrad, Prasad, and Pringle 2006).

Further, customers often expressed explicit frustration, sadness, and disappointment about “needing” to shop at Plus Clothes. While ringing up a customer and engaging in some pleasant small talk, the woman looked at her shopping bag and exclaimed: “Oh, I remember when Plus Clothes didn’t print their logo on the bags. Now I always have to remember to turn the bag around so nobody knows where I have to shop!” Unsure of how to respond, I remarked that a lot of people might not even know that Plus Clothes was a store for larger sizes. In response, she said, “Yeah, but *I* know, and I’ll always feel disappointed in myself for not losing the weight.” This customer not only communicates her shame for “having” to shop at Plus

³ Marketing campaigns such as sales and promotions often centered around phrases about “real women” and “real beauty”.

Clothes, but also reveals how certain boundaries have been placed around the store itself: despite having a positive shopping experience while *inside* Plus Clothes, once leaving the store, she hides her shopping bag to more easily “pass” as just another normal shopper at the mall⁴.

Employee’s and customer’s clear desire to feel “normal” while *at* Plus Clothes stands in stark contrast to the reality of a work-sponsored weight-loss contest and expressions of shame for having to shop at Plus Clothes in the first place. These seemingly contradictory messages mark the employees and customers at Plus Clothes as having great ambivalence as to whether fatness itself is deplorable or normal, acceptable, even beautiful. This ambivalence creates an ongoing tension between simultaneous desires for acceptance and weight-loss. Furthermore, a sense of loyalty and gratitude towards Plus Clothes, combined with fat women’s disadvantaged position in society, introduces potential for both employees and customers to be manipulated by corporate policies. For example, Christine, one of the store managers who is not plus-sized, once commented to me that Plus Clothes is “lucky these women can’t shop anywhere else. We just name the price and they have to buy it!” Similarly, if employees feel that their weight would cause them to be stigmatized in other workplaces they may be more willing to accept exploitative conditions (i.e., low pay, poor hours, inadequate breaks) at Plus Clothes.

Talking out of Size – Fat Talk between fat and thin women

Fat talk between women of different sizes consistently communicated anti-fat body-depreciation and tended to produce exclusive boundary-making behaviors. In every interaction in which *I* acted as the initiator of fat talk, the interaction took the shape of exclusive boundary-making. These interactions represent a particular type of fat-talk disconnect that I term “talking out of size”. “Talking-out-of-size,” happens when one actor oversteps her bounds by speaking in

⁴ Goffman (1963) points out that stigmatized individuals who attempt to pass as “normals” in their daily lives often encounter “unanticipated needs to disclose discrediting information”. To the extent that some customers hope to “pass” as being *not fat* (perhaps considering themselves “only big boned” or “just a bit chubby”), the activity of shopping in Plus Clothes represents a shameful public marker of being fat.

a way that seems inappropriately self-degrading *or* immodest due to her size *in relation to the other conversant*. The other conversant signals this overstepping of bounds by reprimanding or humorlessly correcting the initiator. At my field site “talking-out-of-size” always occurred in direction of the thinner actor expressing inappropriate body dissatisfaction, although it is conceivable that the opposite relationship might exist in other contexts⁵. For example:

While describing the fit of a particular pair of jeans to a white customer in her early 30s, I explained how the pants were great for “women like me, who always get a ‘muffin top’ you know, where the waistband cuts into your waist and you kind of spill over your pants like the top of a muffin.” The customer looked at me and said, without cracking a smile: “I don’t think you have any place to be complaining about muffin top.”

Later on that day, one of my managers, Mary, pulled me aside and suggested that, to avoid uncomfortable situations, I should lie to customers and tell them that I “used to be fat”⁶.

While working at Plus Clothes I *did* occasionally encounter customers, and sometimes employees, who explicitly expressed surprise, humor, or indignation at the fact that I worked there. This was the exception rather than the rule. The majority of the time my relative thinness was not explicitly mentioned, and, indeed, any time a customer or coworker jokingly exclaimed that I was “too skinny” to work at Plus Clothes, there was always a coworker immediately by my side reassuring me that I “shouldn’t take it personally.” Yet, despite of my coworkers’ earnest efforts to downplay them, these occasions clearly illuminate the existence of an unspoken – but well understood – boundary, designating Plus Clothes as a space reserved for plus sized women.

Fat Talk as Emotional Labor

⁵ For example, one might find the opposite relationship in cultures that value fatness.

⁶ I was often the only “thin” person at my field site, so most instances of fat talk between thin and fat women occurred between customers and me. However, I did observe several similar interactions between the only other “thin” employee and her customers. These instances corroborate the patterns I experienced, with the exception that the other employee had previously been very overweight and often explained this to customers in order to connect with them.

My observations as an employee at this site helped to reveal how fat talk acts as a form of *emotional labor*⁷, unique to female service workers who serve other women in the context of beauty and appearance work. Fat talk becomes emotional labor at Plus Clothes in that sales associates are compelled to respond cohesively and supportively any time that fat talk is initiated by either customers or managers. While customers felt justified in chastising me for “talking out of size”, I (and other employees) frequently found myself in the position of creatively negotiating fat talk interactions with customers in ways that were flattering and reassuring. The constant expectation for fat-talk reassurance was so pervasive for sales associates that the phrase “Does this outfit make me look FAT?!” was an ongoing inside joke between co-workers.

Plus-sized employees found fat talk interactions with customers to be particularly degrading and frustrating when customers assumed that employees wanted to, or were trying to, lose weight. Sometimes customers would enter the store in high spirits due to recent weight-loss, expecting (and always receiving) to be praised for their accomplishment. For example, Brenda, a white, middle-aged woman who was notorious as a “weight-cycler”, came into the store one day and announced that she had just lost twenty pounds and was going to “spend a lot of money” to replace her “entire wardrobe”. Over the next two hours, Kim, a sales associate, closely assisted this customer, fetching clothes and accepting unsolicited diet advice, while animatedly responding to Brenda’s concern that the weight loss “didn’t show.” At the end of this extended interaction, Brenda happily left the store with several hundred dollars worth of clothes, Plus Clothes benefited from the large sale, but Kim was simply drained. In this way, what Nichter might have described as “successful” (cohesive, self-esteem affirming) fat talk can also be interpreted as a one-sided expression of deference and subordination.

⁷ Emotional labor, coined by Arlie Hochschild (2003), involves managing emotions so that they are consistent with organizational or occupational display rules, regardless of whether they are discrepant with internal feelings.

Fat talk as emotional labor also appeared when *managers* initiate self-depreciative fat talk with subordinate employees. These instances of fat talk interaction are especially interesting given that, while most sales associates are plus-sized, *none* of the most-senior store managers are⁸. Unlike instances when a thinner sales associate “talks out of size,” thin managers who initiate fat talk with their subordinates are responded to with reassurance and flattery. In other words, managers’ privileged positions at the store allow them to “talk out of size” without reprimand. Managers were more likely than sales associates to initiated fat talk by announcing plans to diet, complaining about feeling “fat”, and by expressing remorse for eating “bad” foods. Indeed, at no point during my time in the field did I ever witness a sales associate initiating fat talk with her supervisor. Again, the emotional labor of fat talk places a disproportionate burden on subordinate employees to “feign” rather than “feel”; the social cohesion signified through these interactions serves as a symbol of deference rather than equality.

Conclusions

Plus sized women relate to Plus Clothes not only as a place to buy or sell clothing, but also as a situated opportunity to construct and experience normalcy. Yet, the pervasiveness of fat-stigma permeates the borders of this site such that any sense of normalcy is extremely tenuous. Boundary-work through fat-talk is one means by which women at Plus Clothes are able manage ambivalence about fatness; by alternately erecting and obscuring boundaries between fat and thin, they work to construct positive identities and alternative social environments. While prior theories of fat talk conceptualize it as an inherently cohesive process, the case of fat talk interactions at “Plus Clothes” helps illustrate (1) how fat talk can create and reinforce boundaries between women at opposite ends of the weight spectrum, and (2) how, as emotional labor, even seemingly cohesive acts of fat talk can be reflections of deference and subordinate status.

⁸ Unlike sales associates who are generally hired to work in the store from “walk-in” job seekers and customers, managers are typically recruited from other stores. This causes managers to be more often “thin”, while subordinate employees are usually plus-sized.

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