Exceeding the Limits: Redefining Fat Activism and Female Embodied Subjectivity

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Abstract
Becky Francis' scholarship on the relationship between relativist and realist methodologies can be applied to an examination of fatness in a contemporary Western context. The values attached to fatness (disgust, shame, pride, esteem) are culturally and historically contingent; yet fatness is also tied to corporeal, material reality, affecting the way a body moves through space. Thus, as Francis challenges herself to find a theoretical framework that allows for both deconstruction and individual agency, a similar effort can be made in consideration of the fat body. Ultimately, by applying these two highly varied theoretical methodologies to the notion of fatness, we may allow for this highly debated physicality to be reconceptualized, redefined and reclaimed.

Judith Butler writes that human identity is dependent upon legibility; that society constructs boundaries and limits surrounding what is an intelligible body, thereby defining norms of self and 'personhood.' Bodies that exceed these boundaries create a crisis of definition and become unreadable by society at large. Fatness is one such hotly contested category within twenty-first century Western society, one that encompasses issues as widespread as sexuality, health, class, race and representation. Within this paper I examine the social and corporeal manifestations of the fat female body while considering the politics of size acceptance movements. Using Becky Francis' article "Relativism, Realism, and Feminism: an Analysis of Some Theoretical Tensions in Research on Gender Identity," I apply both realist (humanist) and relativist (post-structuralist) methodologies to contemporary fat politics and activism. I argue that the conjunctive use of both theoretical frameworks creates a holistic image of fat identity formation, one that produces a space for individual agency while allowing for ambiguity and deconstruction. Ultimately, I wish to problematize what it means to be a 'fat woman' in contemporary Western society, in an attempt to prompt this highly debated physicality into being reconceptualized, redefined and reclaimed.

However, at this juncture it is worth clarifying the parameters through which I will be defining this highly multivalent issue. It is not my goal to collapse all manifestations of fatness under one essentialist category. I am aware that different fat bodies exist in different gendered, racial, and socio-economic contexts, yet some restrictions need to be applied for the purposes of cohesive research. I will specifically be discussing the corporeality of female bodies and fatness as a social Western category. While medical discourses and perceptions of health and obesity are highly relevant to fat studies, I do not have the resources to include these scientific perspectives within my research. Nor do I have the capacity to discuss fatness as it relates to maleness and masculinity at this time. Concepts of social fatness and female embodied subjectivity will act as the infrastructure for my working definition of the fat body, yet I remain mindful that these spheres of thought act as only one fraction of a much broader issue.

In her article, “Relativism, Realism, and Feminism: an Analysis of Some Theoretical Tensions in Research on Gender Identity,” Becky Francis examines the relationship between relativist and realist frameworks acting within feminist scholarship. She recognizes the value of relativist (post-structuralist or post-modernist) scholarship’s challenge to the notion of a coherent self: by deconstructing categories of perceived ‘objective truth,’ authors such as Judith Butler are able to problematize the existing dichotomy between masculinity and femininity. Yet for Francis, the deconstructive aims of relativist scholarship ultimately do a disservice to feminist discourse and the emancipatory endeavour. By deconstructing any stable notions of morality and truth, relativism leaves no space for feminist activism to galvanize around cases of social injustice:

According to post-modern theory, truth and justice are relative concepts, seen and presented differently in different cultures and discourses. [...] This poses a challenge for many feminists, who support the ‘truth discourse’ that women are disadvantaged and discriminated against in the world at large, and the moral assumption that such oppression is wrong, and that we should work to end this oppression.

Through the article, Francis’ goal is to develop a theoretical framework that simultaneously allows for social deconstruction and individual agency. This “theory of the middle ground” would incorporate both an ideological (and rallying) consistency between members of an oppressed group, while considering a diversity of social, political and

3 Ibid., 46.
4 Ibid., 50.
cultural contexts. To Francis, the day-to-day level of gender is vital to this project, as social categorizations and discriminations affect our experiences of lived identity. Thus, Francis proposes the model of an 'interpretive community' in order to conceptualize the marrying of relativist and realist ideologies. As an interpretive community reads a text, meaning is made cohesive through collective understanding and interpretation, rather than being understood as inherent within the text itself. In this way, the community forms a social 'truth', without locating meaning elsewhere as unquestionable or immutable. This strategy is helpful for the feminist agenda, as it recognizes both the contingency of a text (be it literal or social) while allowing its meaning to be stabilized, to the advantage of political or emancipatory projects.

Both realist and relativist perspectives apply themselves to politics of fatness. In fact, fat activism and size acceptance movements frequently problematize the dichotomy between relativism and realism by borrowing from both methodologies in order to develop a political stance. For instance, a fundamental concept within fat scholarship is the notion that fatness is historically and culturally contingent. In her book *Revolting Bodies?: The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*, Kathleen LeBesco contrasts historical time periods in which fatness was revered (Ice Age Europe, Hellenistic Greece) and reviled (present day Western society) in order to expose this constructed nature. She writes that "[r]emoving the blinders of late twentieth-century America, one can see that fat is a fluid construct that has been used to serve dominant economic and cultural interests[…]." By claiming that fatness is historically contingent, fat activists assert the relativist: or postmodernist claim that social discourses of power are not immutable, but reliant on context and can therefore be deconstructed: if being 'fat' signifies something different in twenty-first century Western society than in Hellenistic Greece, than presumably the 'meaning' of fatness can be altered again. Similarly, just as Francis writes that post-modern discourse involves the disavowal of objective 'truth', the majority of fat activism works to refute common presumptions about the truth of fat bodies. As Marilyn Wann describes in the manifesto of her highly influential fat activist website, *FAT/SO?:* "Fat people are not, by definition, lazy or stupid. People who believe in such stereotypes, however, are." Samantha Murray reinforces this claim in her article, "(Un/Be)Coming Out? Rethinking Fat Politics," when she states:

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5 Ibid., 43.
6 Ibid., 50.
7 Ibid., 51.
9 Ibid., 17.
10 Francis, 40.
We read a fat body on the street, and believe we “know” its “truth”: just some of the characteristics we have come to assume define fatness are laziness, gluttony, poor personal hygiene, and a lack of fortitude.¹²

These ideas promote the relativist claim that the concept of ‘truth’ is constructed and enforced by discourses of power that shape the way our society understands the body.

Yet despite this dependence on some of the fundamental concepts of postmodernist discourse, fat activism also relies heavily on realist or humanist perspectives. The majority of size acceptance movements assert that reclaiming fat identity simply involves changing one’s mind about one’s body shape; that a shift in individual attitude can overturn the discourses of power that signify fat as undesirable. Wann’s FAT! SO? manifesto makes these ideas clear:

Just say the magic words: "Yes, I am a fatso!" With these words, you create revolution. You turn fat hatred back on itself. As a fatso, you possess the ultimate weapon against fatphobia, body prejudice, and size oppression: fat pride!¹³

Wann’s empowering stance (that the fat woman can overthrow the social discourses that shape her identity) is indebted to humanist understandings of individual agency and the notion of a coherent, rational self. This concept is a fundamental tenet to size acceptance movements: indicating that while relativist ideologies are helpful in deconstructing the social meaning of ‘fat,’ at the political core of fat activism is a belief in the power of the realist/humanist individual. Francis writes that while relativist ideologies of a fragmented self are popular for feminists working to deconstruct gender binaries, the humanist discourse of coherent individuality remains a driving force for most people within day-to-day experience: “[i]n our daily lives most, if not all of us, go about our activities feeling that we are unique individuals with our own particular personality.”¹⁴ Thus a reliance on the humanist model of rational individuality would be an apt choice for FAT!SO? and other size acceptance groups, as they work to politicize and redefine the daily experiences of fat women.

However, despite the personally empowering nature of Wann’s humanist rhetoric, the concept of ‘changing one’s mind’ about fatness

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¹⁴ Francis, 47.
needs to be considered at greater length. Writing about her own experiences with fat activist movements, Samantha Murray admits that she was seduced by the idea that she could reaffirm her identity simply through rational thought, yet she became discouraged when this method did not seem to work: "[a]s a fat girl, I still found myself choosing the table in the restaurant facing the wall, and cutting the size tags out of my new clothes. Eschewing ingrained body knowledges about the offensiveness of the fat female body was not as easy as changing my mind." By proclaiming that bodily experience can be altered by conscious mental choice, fat activist rhetoric enforces the notion that rational intellectualty is of higher value than bodily, corporeal experience. Yet the body is not simply fleshly matter to be overcome, it is the central vehicle through which identity is lived. As I mentioned previously, Francis writes that day-to-day experience is vital for the formation of a gendered identity, yet these experiences are rooted in corporeal movements, interactions and sensations that cannot be overlooked.

Likewise, conceptions of selfhood and subjectivity are socially inscribed through bodily interactions. In *Space, Time and Perversion: Essays on the Politics of Bodies*, Elizabeth Grosz writes that our culture produces bodies as ‘texts’: the body becomes understood as a subject through a series of cultural inscriptions (thinness, fatness, race, clothing, food, exercise, *et cetera*) which are instilled with social values and norms. The meanings inscribed across our bodies are understood as indicative of an inner ‘truth’ or ‘self’: “bodies are textualized, ‘read’ by others as expressive of a subject’s psychic interior.” These ideas are similar to Butler’s assertions, cited at the beginning of this essay, that selfhood and normalcy are enforced through the limits of bodily intelligibility. Thus, divorcing the ‘self’ from the body in an effort to change one’s perspectives about ‘fatness’ appears ineffective as it does not consider the deeply ingrained cultural channels through which bodies become inscribed with meaning: the self cannot be divorced from the body for the self is constructed across the body.

So where does this leave fat activism? These relativist assertions made by Butler, Grosz and Murray seem to wholly refute the humanist ideology integral to size acceptance movements. Yet it is not my intention to claim that fat activism is futile; instead, Francis’ middle ground between relativism and realism needs to be mapped out for a redefinition of fat identity. In her book, *The ‘Fat’ Female Body*, Murray

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16 Francis, 43.
18 Ibid.
19 Butler, "Doing Justice to Someone: Sex Reassignment and Allegories of Transsexuality," 58.
FOOTNOTES

proposes a method. Referencing Maurice Merleau-Ponty’s research on phenomenological experience, she enforces the relativist theory of the fragmentary self by discussing how human identity is fundamentally ambiguous. Yet for Murray, this inherent ambiguity is not an obstacle for political action, but a condition through which we can create a different form of selfhood; one that allows for agency and action without attempting to assert absolute autonomy from society: “[The experience of ambiguity] asks for us to reconceptualize our understanding of ourselves as body-subjects that are multiple, unfixed and always in progress.” This is similar to Francis’ discussion of the ‘interpretive community,’ wherein meaning is a malleable, contingent concept that is given cohesive form through collective interpretation. By accepting my ‘self’ as porous, transient, and fundamentally ambiguous, I can open up my subjectivity in order to understand how it relates to other bodies, spaces and discourses within my own experience (my lived selfhood). Francis expressed fear that the relativist agenda would deconstruct the individual to the point in which emancipatory agency was no longer possible, yet by highlighting the inherently ambiguous, relational nature of their corporeal identities, fat activists can reconstruct these identities by strengthening their relationships with each other. Instead of insisting on the individual, rational subject as the sole motivator for the redefinition of ‘fatness,’ this alternative, collective agency can politicize fat bodies while remaining aware of their corporeal, transient realities. Fat activism can then exceed the structural limitations of both relativist and realist theories, while synthesizing the strengths of each methodology within a new, reclaimed, political perspective.

Female ‘fat’ identity is a concept fraught with a high variety of influences, discourses and interpretations within contemporary Western culture. Any group wishing to reclaim or politicize fatness runs the risk of reducing this complex social category into one essentialist model. Through Becky Francis’ feminist ‘middle ground’ between relativism and realism and Samantha Murray’s perspectives on the ambiguity of embodiment, fat activists can build a powerful ideological foundation upon which to reclaim their bodies. The strength of this foundation will rest not in singularity but in ambiguity and diversity, ultimately making space for fat women to create their own empowering experiences.

21 Ibid.
Works Cited


