More:

Fat Women in Israel- Genres and Issues in Identity Construction and Resistance to Social Oppression

Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

"DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY"

by

Maya Maor

Submitted to the Senate of Ben-Gurion University

of the Negev

11.3. 2013.

Beer-Sheva

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Approved by the advisor

Approved by the Dean of the Kreitman School of Advanced Graduate Studies

11/3/2013

Beer-Sheva

This work was carried out under the supervision of Dr. Henriette Dahan Kalev

In the Department of Gender Studies

Faculty: Humanities and Social Sciences

Research-Student's Affidavit when Submitting the Doctoral Thesis for Judgment

I, Maya Maor, whose signature appears below, hereby declare that:

X I have written this Thesis by myself, except for the help and guidance offered by my Thesis Advisors.

X The scientific materials included in this Thesis are products of my own research, culled from the period during which I was a research student.

___ This Thesis incorporates research materials produced in cooperation with others, excluding the technical help commonly received during experimental work. Therefore, I am attaching another affidavit stating the contributions made by myself and the other participants in this research, which has been approved by them and submitted with their approval.

Date: 11.3.2013 Student's name: Maya Maor Signature:_____

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I dedicate this thesis to
my husband, Roi, and to my mother, Shulamit
for their constant support and unconditional love.

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Abstract

The dissertation explores how the body image of women in Israel is constructed, and how the latter negotiates hegemonic messages about female appearance. This is the first work to describe and analyze, in the Israeli context, the complex ways global discourses around "obesity", health, gender and the body shape the identities of people perceived as "fat", and how these people actively respond to these messages. It addresses four major themes of identity construction, specified below.

Mother-daughter relationships as a significant analytic category in the social construction of fat female identity: Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the central role of mother-daughter relationships in the development of body image and identity among women. However, most works analyze the susceptibility of mothers and daughters to hegemonic cultural messages regarding the feminine body, and do not pay enough attention to the possibility of resistance in these relationships. This chapter examines the dual role of mother-daughter relationships. On the one hand, employing a social constructivist approach, I examine the central role these relationships' play in the construction of fat identity in a negative sense, i.e. how fatness becomes associated with stereotypes such as ugliness, laziness, etc. However, drawing on Patricia Mann's theory of micro-political agency, I also argue that exposure to competing social discourses allows mothers and daughters to examine, evaluate and utilize complexities and contradictions inherent to discourses regarding mother-daughter relationships and regarding the meaning of the fat female body. I conclude by arguing that mother-daughter relationships should be viewed as an analytic category in their own right in relation to the acquisition of fat identity; and at the same time, that the effect of these relationships cannot be pre-determined and encompass many possibilities.

Participation in Israeli lesbian/gay communities as a resource of empowerment for fat women: Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the central role of lesbian/queer communities in the U.S. fat acceptance movement, as well as the employment of lesbian/queer politics in the service of the movement. Most works tend to take this affiliation for granted, and assume that fatness is intrinsically connected to queerness. Adrianne Hill, however, argues in favor of exploring historically-specific connections between lesbian/queer communities and fat acceptance. After tracing the historically-

specific nuances of lesbian/queer counter-cultures in Israel and their role in women's narratives, I conclude that the employment of a mixture of disparate feminist-lesbian and queer discourse in a similar manner to the one used in the U.S. context was crucial in participants' ability to appreciate their fat bodies and those of other women. First, participants assign positive value to the fat body by linking it to fertility and motherhood. This draws on themes that are very powerful in Israeli culture, and it would be interesting to see if this association is also relevant for other societies. Second, one of the major differences is that queer/lesbian communities in Israel are not in contact with the Israeli fat acceptance movement. This means the combination of queer/lesbian discourses and practices can promote fat acceptance, even without contact with the fat acceptance community.

Comparative examination of the emergence and development of the Israeli fat acceptance movement, in the context of the local conditions and strong American cultural influences: This chapter uses the Israeli movement as a case study to examine tension regarding the building of collective identity faced by groups that operate against body-centered social oppression. Boundary work, i.e. deciding who belongs in the group and on behalf of whom the group makes claims, is important in all social movements; but the instability of bodily-based categories makes boundary work particularly complicated in movements where bodily attributes are key to identity formation. Many Anglo-American fat acceptance groups have attempted to draw boundaries on the basis of two 'ideal fat subjects': one with a stable, unitary 'resisting' consciousness and/or one based on excluding those who are not 'really' fat or fat 'enough'. The former excludes members who display ambiguity or ambivalence in relation to accepting their bodies, while the latter excludes members seen as not being fat enough to participate. In contrast, the Israeli fat acceptance community establishes its boundaries based on shared negative social reactions to body size. This increases its ability to tolerate ambiguity and contradictions among members and accept members who do not fit into fixed bodily identity categories. Simultaneously, this collective identity poses other problems, like reducing members to their identity as fat, and encouraging constant preoccupation with weight or social oppression based on body size.

The construction of life narratives: Contemporary scholarship does not pay enough

attention to stigma in relation to its temporal status; i.e. whether it is temporary and changeable or permanent. This chapter links the study of sociology of time, de-stigmatization strategies and narrative resistance through a case study of individuals who are stigmatized on the basis of an attribute perceived as temporary and changeable - fatness. Conducting a comparative analysis of before-and-after weight-loss articles in an Israeli online health magazine, I examine how these narratives marginalize fat people by presenting fatness as temporary and changeable. I then compare these narratives to life narratives produced by Israeli-Jewish women, who self-identify as fat. Participants subvert mainstream narratives in two ways: (1) assigning the fat body to the "After" category, thereby challenging the temporary and transient status of fatness; (2) subverting other discursive characteristics of before-and-after weight-loss narratives. As a result, participants produce valid knowledge and social criticism from a stable fat subject position.

Key words: Israel, fat acceptance, identity, fatness, stigma, boundary work, mother-daughter relationship, lesbian/queer communities, agency, before-and-after

Introduction

The research presented in this dissertation is a qualitative study of the social construction of fat identity in the Israeli context, i.e. how women in Israel learn that they are defined as fat and adopt a 'fat' identity. It is guided by post-structuralist theories that conceptualize identities, or subjectivities, as relational and produced in the context of socio-historical power relations on the one hand, but as endowed with the potential to exert agency and resistance to these power relations, on the other hand (LeBesco, 2004; Motzafi-Haller, 2007).

The specific focus of this work is the options available to individuals to resist the negative content that is assigned to fat identity by mainstream discourses and endow it with alternative, potentially positive content. I aim to understand how fat women are able re-invent fat identity, against the backdrop of discursive associations of the fat body with ugliness, ill health or personality deficits.

This motivation positions my study within a fast developing interdisciplinary field of scholarship called "Fat Studies". Similarly to other interdisciplinary fields, such as gender studies and post-colonial studies, the emergence of fat studies was preceded by the formation of activist organizations, beginning in the 1970s, which publicly advocate for fat individuals as a socially oppressed group (Ferrall 2011).[1] Fat studies researchers employ various disciplinary tools (such as anthropology, legal theory, sociology) to challenge contemporary perceptions of fatness. Some, for example, historicize current cultural attitudes toward fatness, showing that 'fatness' and fat individuals are represented in substantially divergent ways in different geographical and cultural zones and areas (Ferrall, 2011, Murray, 2008; Kent 2001; LeBesco 2004). Others document and analyze the experiences of marginalization and oppression of fat individuals, as well as the myriad strategies fat people utilize in resistance to that oppression, as groups and as individuals; these experiences can be researched through

[1] The oldest organization is NAAFA (National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance) was founded in the U.S. in 1969. Since then, a variety of fat rights organizations, collectives and groups have been operating in the U.S and other Western countries, such as England, Germany and Australia. In Israel there is only one fat acceptance community ("Shmenot veYafot" / "Big Beautiful Women"), formed in 2000, and some degree of fat acceptance at lesbian/queer communities (Maor, 2012a/b/).

a variety of methodologies, such as in-depth interviews (Cooper, 1998), explorations of media representations (Graves and Kwan, 2012) or participatory observation (Martin, 2002).

The "obesity epidemic" and the health of the public

The social treatment of fatness first and foremost as a medical problem (a disease, a disorder or a risk factor) became common in the 1950s[2]. Medical diagnosis became possible (and then was reinforced) by the construction of 'objective' measures, assessments and quantifications of degrees of fatness. The most common measure, the Body Mass Index (BMI), is an equation based on the relationship between height and weight. While it was devised by the Belgian statistician and anthropologist Adolphe Qutelet in the 19th century (Scott-Dixon, 2008), it was not widely employed until American insurance companies began using it in the 1950s to charge higher premiums from customers, on the basis of their body size (Sobal,1995). Since the 1950s, the BMI-based 'boundaries', used to indicate 'fatness' (categories such as 'overweight' and 'obese') continuously shifted to encompass individuals with lower weights (Wann, 2009).

Fat studies researchers and activists aim to understand the dominant reference to fatness as pathological and as a health problem in its broader social, cultural, political and economic context. They argue that the medical terminology and logic both conceal and reinforce social power relations that underlie any definitions of 'normal' or 'proper' body sizes, as well as the corresponding social stereotypes and prejudices surrounding fat bodies (Wann, 2009). Researchers argue, for instance, that different factors, such as economic status, mediate the alleged correlation between fatness and ill health; that health should be viewed as a holistic concept that includes more elements than a person's weight, such as general life style; and that the pressure to lose weight, and the measures that reinforce this pressure, are more damaging to health then fatness itself (Burgard 2009; Ernsberger 2009; Lyons 2009). One study compared two groups of fat women: one group was encouraged to diet and exercise, while the other was encouraged to eat a healthy diet, to listen to one's bodily cues, to engage in fun activities and to participate in a fat acceptance group. After one year,

[2] In fact, debates regarding the correct medical status of fatness fiercely divide the medical community today (Murray, 2008).

the health of the second group improved significantly, e.g. their blood pressure and cholesterol levels decreased (although they did not lose any weight). The participants of the first group lost weight but did not improve their health to a significant extent. Most of them eventually regained the weight they initially lost (Farrell, 2011).

Historians and cultural critics, such as Amy Farrell (2011), Hillel Schwartz (1986) and Peter Sterns (1997), argue that the social rejection of fatness and the pressure to lose weight were connected to underlying social trends that characterized late modernity in the West. They also argue that the social rejection of fatness ***preceded and then became intertwined with*** explicit medicalization of fatness.

Fat studies in the Israeli context

Despite the fact that fatness and obesity are considered a pressing medical and social problem in most Western countries, the social experiences of fat individuals - and their ability to define their bodies in alternative ways - have mostly been examined in the U.S. context. This may induce blindness to the cultural variance in the social attitudes to fat people and the strategies fat people employ in response (Cooper, 2009).

A small body of work has engaged with anti-fat bias in the Israeli context, establishing the high prevalence of negative stereotypes and stigmas regarding fat individuals. For example, a significant proportion of Israeli General Practitioners self-reported disparaging attitudes and bias against fat people (Fogelman et al., 2002). Interviews with individuals who have undergone bariatric surgeries reveal that fat individuals in Israel are often perceived as ugly, gluttonous, and lacking self discipline (Rubin, Shmilovitz & Weiss, 1994).

At the same time, the social attitudes toward fatness in Israel have yet to be examined from the perspective of identity construction of self-identified fat people. This dissertation focuses on how fat bias effects identity construction and how fat individuals can resist such bias and construct alternative, more positive identities. As an in-depth, field-work supported study of the experiences of embodiment and cultural resistance of fat women in Israel, this dissertation is the first academic work to explore how discourses, cultural products and interpersonal interactions shape the identities of people perceived as 'fat', and how these people actively respond to these

messages in the Israeli context.

Exploring the experiences of fat women

As a feminist researcher, I decided to focus primarily on the experiences of fat women, for reasons detailed at the methodological section below. At the same time, I explored materials that are also relevant to fat men, in order to enrich and complement the data gathered from the women interviewees.

I had interviewed a self-identified fat man, a founder and key figure in the Israeli fat acceptance community ("Shmenot veYafot" / "Big Beautiful Women"), in order to gather more insight into the experiences of my interviewees in that community. For similar reasons I also analyzed messages posted by both men and women in the online forum of the Israeli community (http://www.tapuz.co.il/forums2008/forumPage.aspx?forumId=399). In addition, in order to understand the cultural resources and repertoires available to fat women to construct their life narratives, I have also analyzed before-and-after-weight-loss representations in Israeli media.

Agency and social change in the "private sphere"

The present dissertation analyzes the experiences of the women interviewed through two different lenses. First, these experiences are examined in order to expand the geographical and cultural scope of fat studies to include the Israeli context. Second, they are analyzed as a case study for the ability of a "subaltern" group to resist its social marginalization through actions in arenas that diverge from those traditionally perceived as political. While political activity is usually theorized as an organized activity in the "public sphere" (e.g. participation in political parties), the present dissertation examines the political implications of activities that take place in other location and circumstances.

Familial relations, such as mother-daughter relationships, for example, take place in the "private sphere" through emotional attachments. The emotional character of these relationships does not erase - and sometimes may even intensify - the effect of wider social patterns of control, discipline, and behaviour shaping within which the relationship is embedded. Where there is social oppression, there is always also the potential for resistance. In line with post structural theories of agency and power, I

analyze mother-daughter relationships as a locus of social oppression, which also has potential for political resistance to this oppression. I analyze the other arenas examined in the context of this dissertation (detailed below) in a similar way. Firstly, I identify the socio-political forces that operate within each arena and contribute to marginalizing fat subjects and construction of fat identity as a limiting and negative category. Then I show how, within each arena, there is always potential and resources for resistance to the negative value assigned to the fat female body. I explore the instances and possibilities whereby these spheres also serve as resources for resistance and for the construction of an alternative, more positive, fat identity.

The four arenas

This dissertation focuses on four arenas: mother-daughter relationships, queer/lesbian communities, the Israeli fat acceptance community and life narratives. Each arena corresponds to a chapter in the dissertation. These four arenas are deeply intertwined, theoretically and empirically: participants in the interviews often spoke about their experiences within each of these spheres in relation to one or more of the others. For example, when participants recounted how they resisted the negative value assigned to the fat body within mother-daughter relationships, they often talked about the experiences they had within the Israeli fat acceptance community as what allowed them to practice this resistance.

Analytically, the four arenas can be distinguished on the basis of the cultural mechanisms of marginalization and resistance to this marginalization; as well as on the basis of the similarities and differences of the Israeli context to Anglo-American contexts as presented in research conducted in other countries. Each chapter of the dissertation discusses one arena, while explicitly relating to the connections and affinities with the other arenas.

Chapter 1: Mother-daughter relationships

The first arena this dissertation examines is the family, focusing on the mother-daughter dyad. Previous research indicates the centrality of this relationship in the construction of women's identities in general, and women's bodily identities in

particular (Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Borello, 2006). This insight was confirmed by participants' narratives throughout the interviews conducted for this study.

A review of the relevant literature establishes that most works examining the effect of mother–daughter relationships on bodily identities engage primarily with 'normal weight' women, excluding 'underweight' or 'overweight' women (Hahn-Smith & Smith, 2002; Ogden & Chanana, 1998). In contrast, this chapter of the dissertation seeks to answer Fikkan and Rothblum's (2011) call to "to devote as much attention to the lived experiences of fat women as they have to the "fear of fat" experienced by thin women".

The dissertation examines mother-daughter relationships as a locus for the understanding of identity construction of fat women in three ways. First, mother-daughter relationships are examined as an arena for the marginalization of fat women. The relationship's role in the construction of fat identity as negative and limiting identity (of daughters) is analyzed by employing theories of symbolic interaction (Blumer, 1986) and social constructivism (Kukla, 2000). According to these approaches, identities are constructed through social interactions – verbal and otherwise – that teach individuals how their bodies are perceived by others, as well as teach them the social significance of that perception (Sobal & Maurer, 1999).

Second, most existing work analyses the susceptibility of mothers and daughters to hegemonic cultural messages regarding the feminine body, and do not pay enough attention to the possibility of resistance in these relationships (Borello, 2006). The present dissertation also explores them as a potential site where daughters develop resistance to the negative value assigned to the fat female body.

To explicate the significance of the relationship as a theme within subjective processes of fat identity negotiation, I draw on Patricia Mann's theory of micro-political agency (Mann, 1994). Mann specifically deals with agency in the context of inter-personal/emotional relationships, including familial ones. She argues that exposure to competing gender-related discourse destabilizes traditional, rigid gender roles and identities. At the same time, the need to maintain emotional bonds is not eliminated. Agency is applied by creating new and creative familial/interpersonal arrangements to maintain emotional bonds under changing social conditions.

Mann's theory is especially appropriate when illustrating how mothers and daughters exert agency from within their familial roles and obligations to each other, and not as isolated individuals. Employing Mann's framework, I argue that exposure to competing social discourses allows mothers and daughters to examine, evaluate and utilize complexities and contradictions inherent to discourse regarding mother–daughter relationships and regarding the meaning of the fat female body.

Chapter 2: Queer/Lesbian communities

In the two chapters following the discussion of the family arena, I analyze two case studies of the ability of fat women to resist their cultural marginalization in a community setting: queer/lesbian communities and the Israeli fat acceptance community. I employ different perspectives in analyzing the two communities. The lesbian/queer communities are analyzed as "counterpublics" (Warner, 2002) - communities that are based on the creation and maintenance of common counter-discourses, independently of the existence of a concrete group in a concrete time/place. The Israeli fat acceptance community, on the other hand, is analyzed according to the more traditional definition of a community as a collective that cooperates in a concrete time/place setting under the ideology of a social movement. Therefore, despite the fact that both arenas are case studies for the ability of fat women to resist the negative value assigned to the fat female body in settings of a community, they will be analyzed in different chapters.

Some interviewees indicated that their most influential and constitutive experiences, in relation to their ability to attribute alternative and more positive content to fat identity, arose in the context of participation in local queer/lesbian circles. Since there has been no study of fat acceptance in local lesbian/queer communities, I turned to the literature in other national and cultural contexts. I noticed that while contemporary scholarship has emphasized the central role of lesbian- and queer-identified women in the fat acceptance movement in the U.S (LeBesco, 2004; Hill, 2009, p.ii; Saguy & Ward, 2011), it also tended to take this affiliation for granted, and assume that fatness is intrinsically connected to queerness. Hill, however, argues in favor of exploring and explicating historically-specific connections between lesbian/queer communities and fat acceptance (Hill, 2009, p. 4).

This chapter of the dissertation explores the affinities between queer and lesbian communities and fat acceptance in the Israeli context. Adopting Hill's contextualizing approach, I do not assume a-priori that all queer/lesbian circles in Israeli promote fat acceptance, or that those who do promote fat acceptance do it in similar ways. Instead, I analyze narratives of participants who stated that their affiliation with queer and lesbian communities in Israel was a central factor in their ability to practice self-acceptance, in order to understand how participation in specific communities was a resource. The chapter also pays attention to historically specific nuances of the Israeli context and that context's role in the women's narratives.

This chapter addresses the intersection of two central topics in contemporary feminist scholarship: issues of embodiment and sexuality.

First, it provides insights regarding some of the possibilities open to individuals already stigmatized on the basis of their body to rehabilitate their identity and endow it with more positive value. It also explores the advantages and limitations of such identities for individuals who resist their double cultural marginalization: as lesbians / queers and as fat women.

Second, the chapter offers a conceptualization of cultural resistance as ambivalent, contradictory and fluid. It reflects on how the participants of the study, while often vocally articulating their resistance to hegemonic views of fat bodies, still felt shame, guilt or doubt regarding their own bodies. This chapter shows how elements of resistance and of compliance with hegemonic messages are not necessarily contraindicative. Sometimes, these elements reside side by side and nourish each other. This is an important contribution to the scholarly understanding of dynamics of activist communities, where ambivalence among group members is often viewed as a sign of self-betrayal or political hypocrisy.

Connections to the previous arena: mother-daughter relationships

The dissertation explores the complex relations between affiliations with queer/lesbian communities and the development of resistance to the negative value assigned to the fat female body in the context of mother-daughter relationships. Specifically, it explores how specific discourses and practices produced within queer/lesbian communities hinder or facilitate the development of such resistance.

As mentioned, most respondents in the study, at some point or another, engaged in some sort of negotiation of the value of their bodies, or of fat bodies in general, with their mothers. In the most common pattern, a daughter confronts her mother, telling her that critical remarks are offensive and damaging to the daughter's bodily autonomy and self-esteem. Often, the daughter sets boundaries, demanding that her mother stop criticizing her body.

In the context of Mann's theory of micro-political agency, exposure to competing social discourses opens up a space for the exertion of agency, particularly within interpersonal relationships, such as family ties (Mann, 1994). One of the places that exposed participants to such competing discourses was the lesbian/queer communities in which they took part.

For example, one discourse that is mobilized in these communities positions the fat female body as a 'natural' and 'neutral' body, free of patriarchal and capitalist constraints, such as practicing diets or consuming dietetic products. According to this discourse, assuming control over one's body means relinquishing oppressive social practices that are directed to the female body (Murray, 2008). Some participants used this discourse to reject anti-fat values endorsed by their mothers, e.g. the belief that a slender body attests to self-control and is a marker of proper femininity.

These dynamics were essential elements in participants' ability to practice resistance through mother-daughter relationships. Exposure to competing discourses enables mothers and daughters to examine, evaluate and exploit complexities and contradictions in the ideological framework of mother-daughter relationships and in the ideological framework that regulates the meanings of fat female bodies. It thereby enables the production of alternative knowledge regarding the fat female body.

Chapter 3: The Israeli fat acceptance community

A significant number of participants stated that their participation or acquaintance with the Israeli fat acceptance community had helped them to resist the negative values assigned to fat bodies. This role is compared to the American fat acceptance movement's resistance to the cultural rejection of fat individuals in the West (Sobal 1999). In the U.S., the movement comprises various organizations, groups and

communities that share the goal of promoting fat acceptance in the general population and providing support and empowerment to fat individuals. The Israeli fat acceptance community, while pursuing a similar agenda, is far more limited in scope and influence, although it has had some public successes and has a significant effect on members' lives and views.

This chapter is the first to study the Israeli fat acceptance community as a social movement. The study is based on four corpuses of data: interviews with two of the community's key figures; interviews with members of the community; interviews with self-identified fat women who criticize and reject the community; and content analysis of posts and debates in the community's online forum.

The Israeli fat acceptance community is analyzed as a case study for understanding the dilemmas and conflicts that characterize social movements that view bodily attributes (such as skin color, disability or body size) as key to forming their identity. For such movements, the issue of boundaries can be particularly complex. Some bodily attributes may appear to be easily recognized and defined, whereas, in fact, the distinction is neither clear-cut nor permanent (e.g. a fat person can lose weight, skin color is often ambiguous). Movements tackling these issues must still determine who belongs in the group and on behalf of whom the group makes claims / who the group represents (Fominaya, 2010; Hohle, 2010).

I argue that the Israeli fat acceptance community establishes its boundaries on the basis of an 'ideal subject' who has experienced negative social reactions to her or his body size. Some of the difficulties that arise in the Anglo-American fat acceptance movement are resolved by this shift in focus from one's current weight or self-acceptance towards shared experiences of oppression. It increases the ability of the Israeli movement to tolerate ambiguity and contradictions among members[3] and to accept members who do not fit into fixed bodily identity categories.

At the same time, positioning negative social experiences at the center of the group debates and collective identity poses other problems, such as reducing members to their identity as fat, and encouraging constant preoccupation with one's weight or experiences of social oppression on the basis of body size. This leads some potential

[3] Tolerance of ambiguity was originally conceptualized by Budner as a personality trait (1962). However, the present article will refer to tolerance of ambiguity as a group trait.

members to question the group's ability to facilitate empowerment and fat acceptance. Although shared experiences of fat oppression endow the group's collective identity with content, they also set limits and restrict its substance.

Connections to previous arenas examined in the course of the study: Mother-daughter relationships and queer/lesbian communities

Mother-daughter relationships

Similarly to the connection with Lesbian/Queer communities, some interviewees talked about their participation in the Israeli fat acceptance community in relation to their ability to negotiate the value of the fat female body in the context of mother-daughter relationships. Specifically, acquaintance with other fat rights activists or empowered fat women, in the setting of the local fat acceptance community, served as resources in the development of resistance in the context of familial relationships.

For example, Ronit's mother was remembered as the sole source for her tagging her weight as 'abnormal' during childhood and adolescence. Taking part in the Israeli fat acceptance community allowed Ronit to challenge the hegemonic assumption that fatness is abnormal:

> Ronit: … my mother, throughout my childhood, used to say: you need to lose weight…No one ever harassed me at school or … anywhere else, except my mother… I lived my whole childhood and teenage years believing I am fat and extremely fat, not just a little fat.

The acquaintance with other fat women, within the Israeli fat acceptance community, has helped her to negate what her mother instilled in her during adolescence and to develop a sense of normalcy:

> Ronit: … as I told you, throughout my adolescence I thought I was fat, and I was sure that I was really, really fat. And then, when I got to the forum, I suddenly realized that I'm not the fattest person in the universe. There are people just as fat as me, there are people who are fatter than me, I am not some kind of 'freak of nature' who doesn't have a chance at anything in life…I felt…relieved…

Lesbian/queer communities

While there are many similarities between the ways that fat acceptance is mobilized in

lesbian/queer circles in Israel and in the U.S. context, they differ in an important respect: the affiliation/connection with the fat acceptance movement. In contrast to lesbian/queer communities in the U.S. context, the participants in lesbian/queer communities analyzed in the second chapter were largely unaware of the local fat acceptance community.

At the same time, while key members of the Israeli fat acceptance community personally welcome the participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) individuals, there are few specific references to LGBTs in the community's forum or public activities. The forum's official description often promotes a hetero-normative world-view as it specifically addresses "fat women and the men who love them".

This means that whereas in the United States the link between queer and lesbian activism has been collectively established over three decades ago, in Israel, fat women employing lesbian and queer discourses have to make the connection on their own. This dissertation explores the political implications of the absence of alliance between the queer/lesbian community and the fat acceptance community in Israel (in fact, they are generally ignorant of each other's existence). Because there is an absence of alliances, only fat acceptance practices that are directly driven from specifically lesbian/queer values are promoted within the queer/lesbian community (excluding fat acceptance values and practices that are not directly driven, or even are in conflict with these values). As a result, fat women in the queer/lesbian community who do not fully identify with lesbian/queer values will not necessarily gain empowerment. From the point of view of the fat acceptance community, many of the community's publications promote a hetero-normative world-view, and the community rarely addresses the realities of fat LGBT individuals.

Chapter Four: Life narratives

The fourth and final chapter of the dissertation examines life narratives. This chapter analyzes social change and agency within personal narratives and the ways in which fat women resist the negative value assigned to their body while narrating their life story.

During the interviewing process, I noticed that several participants tended to structure

their narrative according to categories of "before" and "after". In response to this pattern, I turned to the literature regarding Before-and-After-Weight-Loss-Narratives (BAWLN), and gathered newspaper articles in Israeli online portal Y-net that feature such narratives.

On the basis of a comparative analysis of these articles, I examine how, in the Israeli context, BAWLN marginalize fat people by presenting fatness as temporary and changeable. I then compare these mainstream narratives to life narratives produced by five Israeli women, who self-identify as fat. This comparison uncovers the schemas used for subverting BAWLN.

This dissertation has uncovered at least two ways in which BAWLN are subverted: First, while in mainstream narratives the fat body is always assigned to the "Before" category (Kent 2001; Levy-Navarro 2009), subversive narratives assign the fat body to "After", thereby challenging the temporary and transient status of fatness. Second, participants subvert other discursive characteristics of BAWLN: they emphasize a social context over an isolated protagonist; they prefer methodical caution over a prescriptive tone; their narratives leave room for ambiguity rather than evoking certainty and authority; and they achieve their transition to "After" with the help of alternative communities and not the help of professionals. The second category may characterize other forms of narratives as well as BAWLN, whereas the first directly manipulates the “Before and After” mechanism.

Analyzing and exploring these subversive narratives offers several significant theoretical contributions. Firstly, only a few scholars have tackled the role of narratives in the creation of stigma and in de-stigmatization strategies. The small body of work that developed the concept of "narrative resistance" has not connected it to the literature on de-stigmatization strategies. As a result, it has neglected strategies that actively challenge stigma, instead of rehabilitating individual identity by distancing oneself from the stigmatized group. In addition, previous work has only examined how stigmatized groups "borrow" counter-hegemonic narratives that have proven successful in another group's struggle (Meyer and Whittier 1994; Saguy and Ward 2011). This chapter expands the understanding of narrative resistance by exploring the theoretical mechanism through which stigmatized individuals are able to re-appropriate hegemonic narratives in the service of struggles for social change.

Secondly, stigma has been examined in light of a wide range of factors, including cross-cultural settings, the nature of the stigmatizing attribute and its visibility (Saguy and Ward 2011). However, most work does not examine stigma in relation to its temporal status; i.e. whether the attribute that is stigmatized is considered temporary and changeable or permanent and innate. By analyzing a case study of individuals who are stigmatized on the basis of an attribute perceived as temporary and changeable – fatness - through the lenses of sociology of time, I show how challenging the perception of fatness as temporary and transient serves as a strategy that has the potential to "undo" the stigma associated with fatness.

Connections to previous arenas examined in the course of the study: Mother-daughter relationships and queer/lesbian communities

Mother-daughter relationships

While mainstream representations tended to present 'fat' bodies as inherently and self-evidently laden with negative value, participants who construct resisting alternative narratives tended to form an "exposition" where they elaborated how they learned the negative value of the 'fat' body through various social interactions. The mother-daughter relationship appeared as a central factor in this part of the narrative, and in some cases, it also played a role in other phases of the alternative narratives. For example, one participant emphasised the role of her relationship with her daughter in the phase of her life narrative when she explains why she decided to stop investing time and energy in being thin. This dissertation will explore the place of mother-daughter relationships as a theme in different phases or stages of participants' life narratives.

Queer/lesbian communities

Unlike mainstream representations and narratives of fatness, alternative life narratives produced by participants in the study rest on a rejection of one of society's core beliefs, involving a radical change in one's thinking. This change necessitates gradual, slow, socio-psychological processes that are not limited to the discursive level. For example, one such process is the growth in interviewees' ability to attribute positive qualities to 'fat' female bodies. Participation in lesbian/queer circles was described by some participants as being a significant resource in their ability to reject mainstream

narratives of fatness. This chapter explores the ways in which participation in queer/lesbian circles enabled participants to construct alternative life narratives, as well as the ways in which participation in queer/lesbian circles was represented within these narratives.

The Israeli fat acceptance community

In a similar manner to participation in queer/lesbian communities, participation in the Israeli fat acceptance community triggered gradual, slow, socio-psychological processes that that enabled the production of alternative life narratives. This chapter will explore the ways in which participation in the Israeli fat acceptance community enabled participants to construct alternative life narratives, as well as the ways in which participation in the community was represented within these narratives.

Three chapters of this dissertation are based on articles that were published in peer-reviewed journals. The fourth chapter has been submitted for publication. Each chapter/article includes the relevant literature review.

The methodology of the study

This research is a qualitative study, which is based mostly on interviews but also on content analysis of newspaper article and online forum postings. This methodology is deeply influenced by the ideas of two intertwined bodies of knowledge: fat studies and feminist sociological methodologies. These two corpuses share at least two values: positionality and reciprocity (Huisman, 2008). “Reciprocity” refers to the ongoing effort to position participants as conscious actors whose interpretation of reality is as valid as the researcher. "Positionality" refers to the ongoing commitment to analyze the presence and effects of power relations both in relation to the researched phenomenon, and between the researcher and participants (Watts, 2006).

There are many - sometimes conflicting - feminist theories of epistemology, methodology and methods (DeVault, 1996). From these two general values, I chose to rely on several, specific theoretical concepts, outlined below.

Main theoretical tools

Grounded theory

Grounded theory refers to a group of methods, conceptualizations and procedures that

are designed to describe and explain phenomena as grounded in specific social conditions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). This approach relies on the philosophical foundations of two paradigms: symbolic interaction and pragmatism. These approaches enable grounded theory to conceptualize a given phenomenon as continuous and as constantly changing according to changing social conditions. Grounded theory also rejects determinism - the resultant explanation is never final; it also rejects indeterminism- the researcher cannot just describe, but must also explain the researched phenomenon.

Standpoint theory

During the 1980s and 1990s, as a response to discussions of the possibility and means by which feminist researchers could produce scientific work and epistemology that would be congruent or reflect feminist values, several feminist social scientists articulated different versions of "standpoint theories" (DeVault,1996).

Sandra Harding (1996), for instance, focused on what she termed "strong objectivity". According to "strong objectivity", scientific generalizations are only valid as long as they explicitly take into account the historical, social and ideological background in which the motivation and conditions of doing research are grounded, and only in their context is the research produced valid (Harding, 1996). This "situated knowledge" will be more (and not less) objective than research that is disguised as universal, independent from social values and allegedly unrestricted to a specific historical context (Harding, 1996).

According to Harding's version of standpoint theory, starting from the lives of those positioned at the margins of the social structure is beneficial to feminist research. Because individuals positioned at the margins of the social structure often experience first hand the oppressive power of hegemonic conceptions and assumptions, they are in the best position to question them. In the case of the study this dissertation is based on, I used the lives of fat women, positioned at the margins of body size based social structure, as a starting point to question dominant cultural beliefs regarding fat women.

The research sample

This study focused on fat women who resist the negative value assigned to the fat female body. This choice brings up several methodological questions and dilemmas, which will be analyzed according to the theoretical tools described above.

Why focus on women?

The project this dissertation is based on engaged mostly with experiences of fat women. The decision to do this was based on the results of numerous studies that showed that fat women are faced with graver social sanctions than fat men (Scot-Dixon, 2008). In addition, standards of acceptable body size are more flexible when men are concerned. In Western contemporary societies, fatness is culturally associated with femininity, probably because of the Western association of femininity with the body (Bordo, 1993; Grosz, 1995; Braziel, 2001).

In response, some scholars choose to treat fat men and women in the same category, in order to challenge the cultural association between femininity and fat (e.g. LeBesco, 2004). Others prefer to focus on fat women in particular, in order to emphasize the gendered aspects of the social attitudes toward women (e.g. Snider, 2012). I preferred to utilize the second approach in this study - as a feminist researcher, I chose to focus my dissertation on the unique experiences of women.

Operationalization: who is "a fat woman"?

On the basis of fat studies literature, I realized, even before beginning the research, that most self-identified fat people experienced instances of having fat identity externally imposed on them, and that these instances were often painful and embarrassing. Seeking potential interviewees on the basis of certain weight/height proportions would mean externally imposing a medical definition of fatness. This risked replicating painful experiences, and implicitly determining the meaning of fat identity in advance.

As a result of these considerations, I chose to employ self-definition as an operationalization strategy. The recruitment letter I prepared invited women who self-identified as fat, and who are interested in challenging stereotypes regarding fatness, to participate in the study (the reasoning behind this second criterion – focusing on

resistance - will be discussed below).

It soon became clear that my choice not to employ weight/height proportion as measurement of fat identity had been a right one. Many interviewees who I had eventually interviewed told me that as part of their resistance to hegemonic messages regarding fat, they refuse to adopt conventional medical tags, or even weigh themselves altogether. Rachel[4] and Adi, for example, describe their complicated relation to what are now standard weigh-ins at the doctor's office:

> Rachel: I went to the doctor a year ago regarding headaches… She asked me how much I weigh and I said that I haven't a clue and she looked at me as if I had said…[something shocking]… and then she weighed me and I didn't look at what she wrote.
>
> Adi: At some point I learned to stand up for myself [...] I don't agree to go on the scale. For several years now I do not allow others to measure my weight. If I wanted to know I would measure myself … to see if I lost or gained weight… I think that getting on the scale is idiotic. What difference does the number on the scale make? You see it on yourself, you feel it on yourself… This is much more important and it brings me much closer to myself- to the body.

Weigh-ins often bring up associations of humiliation and embarrassment:

> Romi: I don't like scales, I don't let them in my life at all. I hate them [...] for example, they measure my weight at the hospital. I tried to avoid it but they needed the data for my file. It offended me.
>
> Adi: Why weigh a person anyway? […] This focus makes a person feel worse… It is a matter of competition, numbers, it's all about grades.

These participants challenge the dominant assumption that fat identity is based on an objective measurement of height and weight and aspire to construct fat identity on an alternate, counter-hegemonic basis. Had I operationalized fat identity according to weight/height proportions, I would have missed out on at least one form of resistance to anti-fat messages. Furthermore, the painful experiences associated with inquiries regarding one's weight made me treat a participant's weight cautiously during the interview. I usually refrained from asking participants how much they weigh,

although some participants told me on their own initiative.

Employing self-definition as operationalization of fat identity brings problems of its own. 'Fat' is an unstable, relational category (Hopkins, 2011) that varies significantly in relation to social, cultural and geographical contexts. It is also a temporally unstable category, as people can lose or gain weight (do self-definitions as fat share similar meaning under different circumstances?). Moreover, the contemporary Western fat-phobic cultural climate makes most women feel "too" fat, regardless of the way they are perceived by others.

I wanted participants to define their identities for themselves, so that alternative forms and experiences could emerge. At the same time, I was also interested in the experiences of fat women as a distinct group placed at the margins of social stratification on the basis of body size.

I decided to validate self-definition by reported instances of being identified as fat by others, as recounted during the interviews. The vast majority of self-identified fat participants indeed reported various instances of being identified as fat, such as verbal remarks in relation to one's body size, teasing, or instances of not being able to comfortably fit into physical environment (e.g. sit comfortably behind a desk).

Terminology: why use the term "fat"?

When researching members of marginalized groups whose identity labels are often used derogatively in mainstream society, questions of terminology can be significant. Which terms would increase the potential for a positive, alternative interpretation of identity, and which would reinforce existing interpretations?

Many fat-rights researchers and activists, in the U.K, US, Australia, Canada and Europe reject common euphemisms used to refer to fat people, such as 'heavy boned', and medical terms, such as 'overweight'. They argue that their usage reinforces negative associations and taboos (Wann, 2009; Cooper, 1998). Instead, they prefer to use the term fat, subversively reclaiming the term in a voluntary act of self-definition, to denote a neutral, possible positive adjective, or a conscious political identity[5]. This

[4] All names are pseudonyms.

[5] The term fat is also subversively reclaimed by the Israeli fat acceptance movement, who chose to name the internet forum around which the community gathered "fat and beautiful women", as will be discussed in the third article.

was my choice as well.

Why research fat women who resist the negative value assigned to the fat female body?

Contemporary scholarship sometimes reinforces negative perceptions of fat women by identifying them as a "subject whose desire to be `normal` determines her identity" (LeBesco, 2004:16). As a result, there is a relative scarcity of studies of fat individuals who resist or 'proactively respond' to the 'stigma of obesity' (Thomas et al., 2011).

Mutzafi-Heller (2007) argues that research can empower socially disadvantaged groups by challenging dominant discursive categories, opening up a space where "women can define themselves and their lives independently" of dominant discourses (2007, p. 99). She offers an alternative definition of a group as based on "a shared history and political agenda" (2007, p. 101). This move enables the redefinition of a discursive category, and its subversion into an active identity and a basis to social resistance.

The choice I made to define the research subjects as fat women who resist social attitudes toward their bodies allows me to define them as a group with "a shared history and political agenda". Participants' resistance is based on recognizing the same experiences of social oppression (a shared history), and this resistance forms the basis for a shared political agenda.

Employing fat category as a theoretical stopping point

The life experiences and identities of fat women vary according to the degree in which they deviate from the thin ideal. The more a woman strays from the ideal valorised in her culture/subculture, the more her bodily difference becomes salient and the more she is prone to receive negative sanctions, from both aesthetic and medical perspectives. The organization of physical environments and facilities also has a disproportional impact on bigger sized women, who are more likely to experience obstacles in everyday activities such as fitting into a cinema seat or a school desk.

As I wrote above, since body size is a sensitive issue, I did not inquire about the weight/height proportions of my participants. Consequently, I could not register

differences of participants' body sizes, and consequent experiences and identities.

At the same time, participants described differences in experiences and identities according to their (perceived) body size. For instance, smaller sized fat women could adopt fat identity as a voluntary act of rebellion against mainstream body related norms:

> Iris: I think that I am full figured but I think that in a certain way I feel like calling myself fat. Because [calling yourself] full figured is a kind of an apology. You know what? I don't want to [apologize]. […] I have a tummy and I love it. Take it or leave it.

In contrast, Lital emphasized that she is considered a large woman even among fat women. She said that she is fat and had always been fat "from every possible angle". For her, fat identity is not voluntarily adopted, but externally imposed:

> Lital: I was born fat, I was born 4.200 kg and I wasn't thin for one day in my life… a fat woman remains a fat woman. Even when I was perfectly fit, exercising 3 times a week, I weighed 95 kg. I was perfectly fit but I was still fat, there is no way around it… Even if I lost 20 kg I would be fat… Even if I lost a half of my weight I would still be considered fat according to the charts.

My choice not to register variations in body size among participants was part of my decision to employ the category of a fat woman as a theoretical stopping point, following Susan Bordo and Nancy Hartsock (Nicholson,1990).

This approach was developed as a response to 1990s post-modernist critique and challenges of canonical scientific methods and procedures, which argued that employing meta-categories in scientific research erases or obscures differences between individuals and groups inside categories. While they accepted this criticism, Hartsock and Bordo feared that without employing categories, researchers will lose the ability to produce meaningful generalizations, which are indispensable in linking research and social change.

Therefore, Hartsock and Bordo suggested continuing to employ categories, while also recognizing that their use is instrumental and is needed to define the boundaries of a specific research project, rather than they describe an "objective", external reality. Because the study this dissertation is based on is the first empirical research of fat

women in Israel, I chose to employ fat women as a theoretical stopping point, in order to produce necessary generalizations of fat women. Future empirical studies should further deconstruct this category, and attend to differences such as ethnicity, and variations in body size.

The interviews

In-depth interviews

The majority of empirical materials gathered for this study were collected via in-depth interviews. This form of interview is more similar to a conversation than to a formal and structured interview (Legard, Keegan & Ward, 2003). The interviewee is invited to share her life story, opinions and the meaning she attaches to her life with the interviewer.

The open structure of in-depth interviews allows both interviewer and interviewee to verbalize together about issues and themes that arise during the exchange. Therefore, it is most suited to be used to explore complex processes such as identity construction (Edwards, 2007). The "life narratives" constructed during the interviews included the general and specific meanings participants attributed to both their actual body size and their perceived body size throughout their life.

As mentioned above, I employed the life narratives of participants to start a critical discussion of the mechanisms through which fat women in Israel are stigmatized, and the options available to them to resist this stigmatization. According to Sandra Harding (1996), an individual's social position both produces and limits her ability to produce knowledge. Since fat women are positioned at the margins of social stratification related to body size, I made use of their viewpoint to formulate critical questions regarding dominant discourses around fatness and gender.

Similarly to other qualitative methodologies, after documenting participants' interpretations of their lives, I added my meaning to their words. The goal of research was not "to speak in the name of" fat women, but rather to use their perspective to explicate the relevant social power mechanisms, and potential ways of resistance.

At the same time, documenting fat women's own interpretations of their life as a valid source of knowledge has liberating political implications of its own. In Western, contemporary societies, voices of fat people themselves are silenced and ridiculed in

most media (Kent, 2001). In this context, many participants felt that being listened to and having their voices documented was empowering:

> Alice: I think that the mere fact that you give [your interviewees] voice is really important. Because these are voices that are not heard, unless you [lost all the weight]… I think that it is really important to listen to these voices… to treat them as legitimate…

Participatory interview

In addition to being in-depth, the interviews conducted within the scope of this research were also participatory. Participatory interviewing is a research strategy designed to challenge the hierarchical relationship between interviewer and interviewee as constructed by the method of formal interview (Finch, 1984; Oakley, 1981). According to this model, the interview is an interactive process between interviewer and interviewee. The researcher/interviewer presents her subjective identity during the interview; is willing to answer interviewees' questions, and sometimes shares experiences and provides empathy (Cotterill, 1992). This strategy is designed to mitigate the split between researcher and researched, research object and subject (Cotterill, 1992; Rice, 2009).

According to traditional paradigms in the social sciences, an interview is a formal, value-free process, designed to collect information regarding opinions and knowledge the interviewee held prior to the interview. Because this model assumes that collecting opinions and knowledge that existed prior to the interview is possible, the main threat to validity of the knowledge gathered is external bias, for example, asking biased questions (Gubarium, 1995). Traditional guidelines would argue, therefore, that the interviewer must use only neutral terms and avoid expressing her own opinions.

Postmodern thinkers have criticized the positivist assumptions this model relies on. They argue that even the conventions of formal interviewing rely on specific values. Furthermore, since knowledge is always contextual, and scientific production of knowledge is a form of social activity, the interviewer and interviewee produce knowledge together. Thus, the interview is never just an instrumental procedure

designed to collect information that the interviewee held a-priori. Following these critiques, proponents of the participatory interview have shifted the framing of interviewer-interviewee relationship from potential bias to a potential source to validate the knowledge gathered (Gubarium, 1995).

Ethical dilemmas in the context of the interviewer-interviewee relationship

The production of intimacy and friendship between interviewer and interviewee is one of the characteristics of the participatory interview (Oakley, 1981; Cotterill, 1992). This may make the interview seem like conversation between friends. At the same time, some researchers question the authenticity of friendship in this context, and some claim relationships formed during interviews are not friendships and should not be friendships (Cotterill, 1992).

Cotterill (1992) differentiates between the interviewer and a friend in several respects. The research relationship is time and space bounded; its goal is instrumental and not emotional. The interviewer is not an integral part of the interviewee's life and therefore exerts little social control over her (Cotterill, 1992). Some interviewees may feel that it is easier for them to talk to the interviewer because she is a stranger.

In order to clarify the interviewer-interviewee relationship, Cotterill distinguishes between friendships and friendly relationships. She invites us to see the role of the interviewer in the participatory interview as a "friendly stranger". The reciprocal and open character of the interview, as well as the interviewer's empathy, allows certain gains for the interviewee as well: she also gains knowledge. Most of the interviewees in the present research felt that they too gained from the interview, and were glad to have the chance to talk about a sensitive and charged issue with another woman.

For example, Iris demonstrates how elements of reciprocity, strangeness and production of gains for the interviewee interact. After we were getting ready to leave the café where the interview took place, she said:

> Iris: I feel like I have plenty more to say on this topic. I actually would like to thank you… somewhere it is always there and at the same time not there [the issue of fat identity]. Sometimes I talk with friends about it, but it is most fun to talk about it with someone that you don't know.

As another example~~,~~ I often offered to send my interviewees relevant articles after the interview. Some interviewees read more about the topic, and some even asked me before I had the chance to offer. I hoped that reading "fat studies" texts will empower participants and give them more room to think in a critical way about fat-negative messages. Sending these articles was my way of trying to "give back" to participants (DeVault, 1996), in the context of the limited resources at my hand.

The interview process

At the beginning of each interview, confidentiality and use of pseudonyms was guaranteed to the potential interviewee. The nature of the study, as well as my motivation to understand resistance to fat-negative messages, were also explained. I told each participant that because the matter that we are going to discuss is sensitive, if for any reason a question that I ask makes her uncomfortable, she should tell me. I also said that I thank her for her time, and if, for any reason, she wishes to stop the interview, she should tell me.

At the beginning of each interview, I asked each participant to share experiences and thoughts which she thinks are relevant to the topic of body image and fat identity, as freely as she can. I asked her to try and organize her narrative in a chronological order, if it was convenient for her. Sometimes, after participants finished sharing ~~what~~ their experiences, I would ask follow-up questions, based on previous interviews and the relevant literature.

Feminist researchers argue that contact with the field brings up various emotional and ethical issues that cannot be foreseen in advance (Cotterill, 1992). While I was well aware of the sociological convention of the interviewer as a "clean slate", as I entered the field I felt that I could not ask women to disclose intimate body-related experiences with me if I am not willing to do the same. I told participants that during the interview, or following it, I would gladly answer any question they have.

As mentioned above, according to the principles of the "participatory interview" (DeVault, 1996; Cotterill, 1992), the interview is an interactive process, in the context of which the researcher also presents and shares her subjective experiences. In cases in which participants inquired, I briefly shared my own experiences related to my

body and body image, such as my experiences as a fat child. I also expressed empathy whenever I felt it was needed. At the same time, I refrained from imposing my own impressions and opinions on participants, and I did not automatically volunteer them.

Ending the interview

Some researchers argue that the atmosphere of friendship created during the participatory interview may lead to the exploitation of the interviewee:

> …Close friends do not usually arrive with a tape-recorder, listen carefully and sympathetically to what you have to say and then disappear…Yet… researchers do disappear from their respondents' lives, generally… (Cotterill, 1992, p. 599)

As I am aware of the difficult feelings that can arise as a result of the abrupt disconnection of the relationship, and out of a sense of interest (in some of the cases), I always made an effort not to "disappear" from my interviewees' lives after the interview. At the end if the interview I made it clear that I can be reached by phone or e-mail regarding any question or thought. Some interviewees indeed sent me their thought in an e-mail after the interview, or stayed in touch. Tali, for example, feels that the interview has opened a channel of communication between us, one that is not bound to the interview context:

> Tali: I feel free, if I approach you tomorrow and ask you something about your past [relationship to my body], because something will bother me regarding my daughter, I can approach you and ask you about it… an open channel was created, it's not that you were only the interviewer.

Analysis of interviews

I analyzed the interviews according to the principles of "grounded theory" as developed by Corbin and Strauss (1990). Interviews' transcripts were scanned for repeating themes and patterns. Analysis focused on the following parameters: the social conditions in which the described phenomenon is grounded, possible variations in the manifestations of the phenomenon, and possible and actual implications of the research phenomena on the involved actors (Corbin and Strauss, 1990).

In addition, according to grounded theory approach, I treated the social phenomenon at hand as continuous and made out of different phases. I attempted to deconstruct the researched phenomenon into developmental phases, and to explicate changes in

interactions or response patterns in relation to changing circumstances and conditions. I also attempted to connect the analytical categories to wider social conditions (such as gendered division of labor within the family), broader political and cultural values, and the formation of various social movements.

I conducted repeated comparisons between transcripts of different interviews to prevent bias. However, as stated above, the research this dissertation is based upon is a qualitative study, conducted on the basis of a non-representative sample. While fat-negative messages are widespread and common, explicit resistance to these messages is far more rare. As my goal is to describe as many potential possibilities of resistance to fat-negative messages, I attempted to offer as many typologies of resistance strategies, even if they appeared only in one interview.

Collecting additional materials

In addition to in-depth interviews with fat women who identify as resisting the negative value assigned to the fat female body, this research is also based on the following materials: interviews with the two founders of the Israeli fat acceptance community, analysis of the Israeli fat acceptance community's internet forum's posts and written materials, and analysis of BAWLN appearing in a leading Israeli internet portal. In the following four chapters (published as separate articles), the details of analysis of these materials are elaborated.

Chapter 1: Fat women: The role of the mother–daughter relationship revisited

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Synopsis

Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the central role of mother–daughter relationships in the development of women's bodily identities. However, most works analyze 'normal weight' women and exclude 'overweight' women. In addition, most works explore the susceptibility of mothers and daughters to hegemonic messages regarding the feminine body, and do not pay enough attention to the possibility of resistance in these relationships. At the same time, fat studies scholarship on the acquisition of 'fat identity' does not sufficiently analyze the role of mother–daughter relationships in the formation of these specific bodily identities. Interviews with 22 Jewish-Israeli self-identified fat women are analyzed to demonstrate that the mother–daughter relationship is a prominent subjective factor in the construction of fat identity laden with negative meanings. The paper also shows that mother–daughter relationships can potentially shape processes of negotiation regarding the fat female body, and can even play a role in the construction of alternative, more positive fat identities.

Introduction

Contemporary scholarship on women and body image emphasizes the central role of mother–daughter relationships in the development of body image and identity among women (Borello, 2006; Chodorow, 1989; Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Ogle & Damhorst, 2003). However, most works examining the effect of mother–daughter relationships on bodily identities engage primarily with 'normal weight' women, excluding 'underweight' or 'overweight' women (Hahn-Smith & Smith, 2002; Ogden & Chanana, 1998). The present study seeks to answer Fikkan and Rothblum's

(2011) call to "to devote as much attention to the lived experiences of fat women as they have to the "fear of fat" experienced by thin women". In addition, most works analyze the susceptibility of mothers and daughters to hegemonic cultural messages regarding the feminine body, and do not pay enough attention to the possibility of resistance in these relationships (Borello, 2006).

At the same time, the interdisciplinary academic field called 'fat studies' has prominently documented and explored fatindividuals' experiences of oppression and exclusion, including the contextualization of current debates over 'fatness' and 'obesity' (Kent, 2001; LeBesco, 2004; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Rice, 2007; Wann, 2009). As shown below, despite this field's special focus on women, scholarship has not sufficiently analyzed the role of mother–daughter relationships in the formation of fat identity.

The purpose of the present study is to demonstrate that mother–daughter relationships merit specific scholarly attention as a central analytical category with unique characteristics in relation to the acquisition of fat identity. On the basis of interviews with 22 self-identified fat women, I examine the role that that they assign to mother–daughter relationships in subjective processes of fat identity construction. I look at how participants perceive their mothers' role in the construction of fat identity in a negative sense, i.e. how fatness becomes associated with stereotypes such as ugliness, laziness, etc. I also trace the role of this relationship, based on the recollections of mothers and daughters, in their ability to negotiate communication regarding the fat female body and promote self-acceptance.

To show how women acquire fat identity, I examine narratives of how these women came to identify themselves as fat through a social constructivist approach (Kukla, 2000).

According to social constructivism, identities are constructed through social interactions – verbal and otherwise – that teach individuals how their bodies are perceived by others and the social significance of that perception (Sobal & Maurer, 1999).

To explicate the significance of the mother–daughter relationship as a theme within subjective processes of fat identity negotiation, I draw on Patricia Mann's theory

of micro- political agency (Mann, 1994). Mann specifically deals with agency in the context of inter-personal/emotional relation- ships, including familial ones. She argues that exposure to competing gender-related discourse destabilizes traditional, rigid gender roles and identities. At the same time, the need to maintain emotional bonds is not eliminated. Agency is applied by creating new and creative familial/interpersonal arrangements to maintain emotional bonds under changing social conditions. Mann's theory is especially appropriate when illustrating how mothers and daughters exert agency from within their familial roles and obligations to each other, and not as isolated individuals. Employing Mann's framework, I argue that exposure to competing social dis- courses allows mothers and daughters to examine, evaluate and utilize complexities and contradictions inherent to discourse regarding mother–daughter relationships and regarding the meaning of the fat female body.

Literature review

An inter-disciplinary academic field called fat studies has developed in recent decades. As in other interdisciplinary fields, such as gender studies and post-colonial studies, the emergence of the field was preceded by the formation of activist organizations, beginning in the 1970s. These groups were the first to publicly advocate for fat individuals as a socially-oppressed group (Ferrall, 2011; Wann, 2009). Fat studies researchers show that in contemporary Western societies, fat bodies are fiercely rejected as unhealthy, unaesthetic and indicative of various character flaws and physical and mental diseases or disorders (Ferrall, 2011; Kent, 2001; LeBesco, 2004; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Rice, 2007). Fat studies scholars respond to this by historicizing current cultural attitudes toward fatness, and showing that 'fatness' and fat individuals are represented in significantly diverse ways in different geographical and cultural zones and areas (Ferrall, 2011; Fraser, 2009; Kent, 2001; Murray, 2008).

Fat studies researchers document and explore fat individuals' experiences of oppression and exclusion. They show that fat individuals often face discrimination and exclusion in many areas of life, such as the labor market or interpersonal relationships (Degher & Hughes, 1999; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011; Puhl & Heuer, 2009). These negative stereotypes and exclusionary practices affect the

construction of personal identity (Degher & Hughes, 1999). Negative, often painful and embarrassing, messages about fat individuals are wide- spread and cumulative – encountered by many, from early childhood onwards, and through various socialization agents (Cooper, 1998; Joanisse & Synnott, 1999; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Rice, 2007). At the same time, fat individuals creatively resist these messages, engaging in different forms of fat acceptance and fat activism (Cooper, 1998; Joanisse & Synnott, 1999; Kirkland, 2008).

The graver negative stereotypes and stronger negative social sanctions that fat women face (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011; Puhl & Heuer, 2009) encourage a special focus on the explora- tion of fat women's realities in fat-studies scholarship. For instance, the research anthology "Bodies Out of Bound — Fatness and Transgression" (Braziel & LeBesco, 2001) includes 15 articles, 9 of which deal exclusively with fat women, while "The Fat Studies Reader" (Rothblum & Solovay , 2009) includes 40 articles, of which 17 focus exclusively on fat women (and only two articles deal exclusively with men). Charlotte Cooper's book "Fat and Proud" (1998) includes only fat women as interviewees, and Samantha Murray's (2008) book entitled "The 'Fat' Female Body" engages mostly with fat women. In this con- text, analyzing the role of mother–daughter relationships seems natural, as these relationships play a pivotal role in women's development of body image and bodily identities, from early childhood and with lasting effects (Borello, 2006; Chodorow, 1989; Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Ogle & Damhorst, 2003).

In light of these factors, and considering the variety of contexts for the construction of fat identity that are examined by contemporary fat studies researchers, the scarcity of scholarly work regarding the impact of mother–daughter relationships on fat identity is striking. For instance, one of the research anthologies mentioned above (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001) does not include a single article dealing with mother–daughter relationships. Another book, devoted to the politics of fat identity (LeBesco, 2004), also avoids this issue. Finally, "The Fat Studies Reader" (2009) includes 40 articles, of which only one analyzes the history of "mother blaming" in the context of obesity among children, boys and girls alike. The few works that do analyze interactions between mothers and daughters in the acquisition of fat identity (for instance, Dickins, Thomas, King, Lewis, & Holland, 2011; Rice,

2007) do not analyze them as a unique category, but include them among other socialization agents.

In contrast, pioneering feminist works on women and the fat body by Susie Orbach (1984) and Kim Chernin (1985) survey the role of mother–daughter relationships extensively. According to them, exposure to competing gender dis- courses, in particular the discourse of second-wave feminism, had a destabilizing effect on mother–daughter relationships. Due to the "eye-opening" influence of second-wave feminist discourse that exposed the hardships and contradictions of traditional gender roles (Chernin, 1985), daughters can no longer fully identify with the gender roles and values that their mothers represented and lived by (Chernin, 1985; Orbach, 1984). The destabilizing effects of this development created friction and failure within mother–daughter relationships, leading women to experience psychological conflicts. These conflicts, in combination with the central and charged status of food and eating for women in patriarchal societies, caused daughters to 'overeat' and become fat (Chernin, 1985; Orbach, 1984).

Despite the innovations this writing introduced when it was first published, current fat studies researchers question its adequacy in properly analyzing fat women's realities. First, by conflating the terms 'fat' and 'compulsive eating' (as Orbach did) or the terms 'fat' with 'eating disorders' (as Chernin did) throughout their works, Orbach and Chernin medicalized the fat feminine body and thus depoliticized the issue of the social relation to fatness (Cooper, 1998).

Also, due to the lack of a precise definition, it remained unclear whether Chernin and Orbach addressed women who suffer fat oppression, or whether the conclusions of their writings are only valid for thin or average women who sometimes "feel fat" (Cooper, 1998).

More generally, LeBesco and Braziel (2001) point to several problems immanent in this psychological analysis of the fat body. By seeking a causal agent for fatness among women, Chernin and Orbach adhere to the social construction of the fat body as a problem to be solved. When they identify failures in mother–daughter relationships as that causal agent, Orbach and Chernin comply with the cultural tendency to equate the fat body with conflict and disorder, and equate the fat body with "the traumatized body" (LeBesco & Braziel, 2001: 4).

The present study incorporates some of Chernin and Orbach's insights regarding mother–daughter relationships, such as the centrality of the mother–daughter relationship to understanding the identity of fat women, and their claim that mother–daughter relationships in contemporary Western societies are regulated by competing discourses. However, in order to avoid the problematic aspects of their work, the present study does not seek to explain the existence of fat women by turning to mother–daughter relationships as a causal agent.

Israel: hegemonic anti-fat messages and small pockets of resistance

The present study relates to the experiences of Israeli- Jewish women, and its data is bound to the Israeli context. There are substantial similarities between the cultural and social climate regarding fatness in Israel and in other Western countries, including the U.S. This is probably due to the global circulation of social attitudes toward fat in Western countries and the "westernized" cultural sphere (Harjunen, 2009). An extensive body of knowledge refers to this influence as the "Americanization of Israeli Society" (First & Avraham, 2007: 57). Negative stereotypes and stigmas of fat individuals are prevalent in Israel. For example, a significant proportion of Israeli General Practitioners self-reported disparaging attitudes and bias against fat people (Fogelman et al., 2002). Interviews with individuals who have under- gone bariatric surgeries reveal that fat individuals in Israel are often perceived as ugly, gluttonous, and lacking self discipline (Rubin, Shmilovitz & Weiss, 1994). Bariatric surgery is also prevalent in Israel and is on the rise: according to the Israel Surgical Association, the number of bariatric surgeries performed in Israel rose from 1500 in 2006 to 3600 in 2009 (Yas'ur Beit-Or, 2010). Recently, the Israeli Ministry of Health published guidelines for performing bariatric surgeries on minors (Israeli Ministry of health, 2009).

The Israeli media treatment of fat individuals often reflects that of America. Israeli television broadcasts a version of the U.S. reality show 'The Biggest Loser'. Likewise, two anti-fat scientific articles that were widely publicized in the U.S. ('blaming' fat individuals for causing global warming and for infecting their closest friends and families with 'obesity' (Puhl & Heuer, 2009)) were translated into

Hebrew and published in leading Israeli newspapers. Fat people in Israel are represented through the 'before and after weight loss' narrative in many cultural venues, including advertisements for weight loss products, newspaper reports and magazine articles (Maor, 2011a), similarly to the Anglo-American con- text (Ferrall, 2011; Kent, 2001; Levy-Navarro, 2009; Mendoza, 2009).

These negative social attitudes do not go unchallenged, although resistance is relatively new and smaller in scope than in the Anglo-American context. While numerous fat acceptance community organizations/collectives have operated in the U.S. since the 1970s, there is only one community dedicated to promoting fat acceptance in Israel. The community, established in 2002, is comprised of dozens of active online and offline participants and hundreds of passive readers of the community's Internet forum (Maor, 2011b). The decision to name the community's internet forum 'Fat, Beautiful Women', after the American idiom 'big, beautiful women', reflects the significant American influence on the Israeli movement (Maor, 2011b).

Lesbian and queer activists have played a central role in the development of the U.S. fat acceptance movement (Hill, 2009). Despite the lack of dominance of lesbian and queer activists in the Israeli community, and although not all lesbian communities in Israel promote fat acceptance, some lesbian/queer communities offer their members another venue for challenging the negative value dominantly assigned to the fat female body, and endowing it with alternative, more positive value (Maor, forthcoming). Within these communities, participants employ a mixture of feminist-lesbian and queer discourses in a similar, albeit non-identical manner to the one used in the U.S. context. In contrast to the American context, these communities are not in contact with the Israeli fat acceptance movement (Maor, 2012). In addition, there are some indications that lesbian/queer communities may mobilize discourses of motherhood and fertility in order to attribute more positive meaning to the fat female body, in accordance with the pro-natalist Israeli orientation (Maor, forthcoming).

The communities/mobilizations described above appeared in the narratives of many participants of the present study as resources for collective and individual resistance

to the dominant negative frame of reference to fatness. Their role will be explicated later in the article.

Methods

The study on which this article is based is intended to explore the ways in which fat women in Israel challenge dominant discourses surrounding their bodies, and the resources they draw on. The larger study was based on 25 interviews, conducted between the years 2009 and 2010, with Israeli- Jewish women who identify themselves as fat, and who resist the negative value assigned to their bodies. This larger re- search project focused on the construction of fat women as simultaneously practicing agency and resistance while also being influenced by anti-fat social messages. Therefore, the concept guiding the sample (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) was 'resistance to anti-fat messages'. To engage participants representative of this concept, the letter of recruitment called for "women who identify themselves as fat and as resisting social anti-fat messages" to participate in the study.

Why study fat women who resist the social attitudes toward the fat body?

The relative scarcity of positive fat messages (especially in Israel) makes it all the more important, politically and scientifically, to highlight the potential that does exist, and is often drowned out by the oppressive messages of mainstream media (i.e. Maor, 2011a). The value of the present study lies precisely in highlighting what is often hidden and obscured.

Contemporary scholarship sometimes reinforces this tendency by identifying the fat woman as a "subject whose desire to be 'normal' determines her identity" (LeBesco, 2004: 16), and lacks studies of fat individuals who resist or 'proactively respond' to the 'stigma of obesity' (Dickins et al., 2011). Mutzafi-Heller (2007) argues that research can empower socially disadvantaged groups by challenging dominant discursive categories, opening up a space where "women can define themselves and their lives independently" of dominant dis- courses (2007: 99). She offers an alternative definition of a group as based on "a shared history and political agenda" (2007: 101). This move enables the redefinition of a discursive

category, and its subversion into an active identity and a basis to social resistance. The choice I made to define the research subjects as fat women who resist social attitudes toward their bodies allows me to define them as a group with "a shared history and political agenda". Participants' resistance is based on recognizing the same experiences of social oppression (a shared history), and this resistance forms the basis for a shared political agenda.

Defining who is 'fat'

Defining who is considered fat is a problematic issue. On the one hand, using medical measurements such as the body mass index (BMI) is experienced as oppressive by many individuals, as it reinforces oppressive medical values (Cooper, 1998). In fact, some participants discussed in the current article refuse to weigh themselves as a demonstration of their resistance to medical oppression. On the other hand, in a fat-phobic society, most women feel 'too fat' regardless of their size. The definition used in this study is a subjective self-definition, validated by the participants' reports of anti-fat social sanctions. Participants who stated during the interviews that they sometimes feel fat and sometimes do not, or who did not report any social sanctions regarding their weight, were excluded from the study.

The interviews

The study included in-depth interviews, a method that is especially suited to the exploration of complex processes, such as identity acquisition and resistance (Edwards, 2007). Interviews were semi-structured, and each began by asking the participant to describe her attitude towards her body in general, and to her definition as 'fat', from early childhood to the present.

Interviews analysis

Interviews' transcripts where analyzed according to open, axial and selective coding (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Beginning with the first interviews, I noticed that when participants recall their experiences related to fat identity, they talk about their relationships with their mothers and their daughters at great length. I also noticed that in many cases, these interactions were described more often than interactions with other socialization agents. These findings were striking, as mother–daughter

relationships were not mentioned in the recruitment letters, and were not brought up by the interviewers.

According to the principles of 'grounded theory', analysis data should begin as soon as the first materials are collected (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). A reassessment, and, if needed, a revision of the categorical analysis should be conducted at each of the research phases (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). In response to the centrality of the mother–daughter relationship in 22 out of the 25 interviews,[6] I turned to the literature regarding mother–daughter relationship and fat identity. As I discovered a 'vacuum' in contemporary scholarship, I decided to revise the focus of the research and conceptualize mother– daughter relationship as the organizing theme of the study. Analysis of the various ways in which fat women resist the negative value assigned to their bodies remained at the core of the research, but was examined in the context of this relationship. Understanding how fat identity becomes laden with negative meanings through the mother–daughter relationship is pivotal to understanding how subversion of such identity is possible.

Results and discussion

Interviewees' profiles, including three excluded from the sample, are presented in Table 1.

Legend table one: Participants characteristics

RES: participants for whom mother daughter relationship is central in acquisition of fat identity as a **restrictive** social structure.

NEG: participants for whom mother daughter relationship is central in **negotiating** the meaning and value of fat identity.

POS: participants for whom mother daughter relationship is central in constructing an alternative, more **positive** fat identity. All participants included in this category were themselves mothers to daughters.

Pseudonym	Demographics	Significance of mother daughter relationship

[6] The three participants for whom the mother–daughter relationship did not appear to be central, were all defined as fat only in adulthood.

	Age	Education	Family status	Sexual orient.	Defined as fat as a child	RES	NEG	POS
Adi	22	Undergraduate student	Married to a woman	Lesbian	+	+	+	
Galia	23	Undergraduate student	Single	Hetero	+	+	+	
Romi	28	Graduate student	Divorced	Hetero	+	+	+	
Michaela	32	B.A degree	Living with a partner	Hetero	+	+	+	
Alice	25	B.A degree	Single	Hetero	+	+	+	
Yafit	31	B.A. Degree	Single	Hetero	+	+		
Dana	24	B.A. Degree	Single	Hetero	+	+		
Sivan	41	M.A. degree	Married	Hetero	+	+		+
Tali	43	Graduate student	Married	Hetero	+	+	+	+
Iris	26	Graduate student	Living with a partner	Hetero	+	+		
Liel	22	Undergraduate student	Single	Hetero	+	+	+	
Vered	25	Graduate student	Married	Hetero	+	+		
Ronit	27	B.A. degree	Married	Hetero	+	+	+	
Korin	31	B.A. degree	Single	Lesbian		+	+	
Natalie	32	High school diploma	Single	Hetero	+	+	+	
Alex	52	Graduate student	Married	Hetero	+	+	+	+
Osnat	32	Graduate student	Single	Lesbian	+	+	+	
Amalya	32	Graduate student	Married	Hetero	+	+	+	
Bar	33	B.A. degree	Divorced	Hetero	+	+		
Lital	26	Graduate student	Married	Hetero	+	+	+	
Inbar	25	Graduate student	Single	Hetero		+	+	
Atalya	19	High school diploma	Single	Hetero	+	+		
Liron	44	P.HD.	Married	Hetero				
Keren	58	M.A degree	Single	Hetero				
Nurit	40	B.A. degree	Single	bi-sexual				

Acquiring fat identity

The centrality of mothers

The relationship with interviewees' mothers was a very prominent and central theme in participants' recollections of how they were defined as 'fat', and how they came to understand that 'fat' has a negative meaning. First, references to interactions with their mothers featured substantially in the interviewees' references to their body size

throughout the interviews. Second, most interviewees explicitly pointed out the formative role of their mothers in constructing their identities. Tali, for example, mentioned both her mother and society in general as taking part in the construction of her fat identity. The positioning of the mother as an equivalent force to society in general illustrates the former's central role. Later on in the interview, interactions with Tali's mother were mentioned more than any interactions with other socialization agents.

In many cases, interactions with the mother are described as the first through which the participants learned that they are 'fat'. For example, Amalya: "… my problematic relationship with my body starts from home… receiving non-stop comments from my mother…" Some participants even stated that their mothers were the only people who made comments regarding their weight as children and adolescents. Ronit, for instance, stressed that she was never "harassed by anyone" at kindergarten, school or "anywhere else", except for her mother.

Situating the centrality of mothers

In contemporary Western societies, mothers tend to assume primary responsibility for the routine daily care of their children. Even when mothers engage in paid labor, fathers usually do not increase their own contribution to their children. Fathers' involvement tends to focus on 'fun' and play activities, while daily care tasks remain the mothers' responsibility (Videon, 2005).

One of the areas that are (constructed as) under a mother's control is care for her children's appearance and health. Fatness is presented as a menace to both. Indeed, 'blaming the mother' for children's fatness is common in many cultural venues (Boero, 2009; Hahn-Smith & Smith, 2002). A recent study even suggests that mothers in particular, in contrast to parents in general, are placed under the 'medical gaze' and "are held responsible for the future (fat free) health of their offspring from the womb to the tomb" (McNaughton, 2011: 180). In turn, mothers also internalize this blame (Jackson, Wilkes, & McDonald, 2007). As mothers are aware of the fact that thin- ness is socially regarded as much more important to women, they tend to worry about the weight of their daughters and intervene in their food regimes more than they do for their sons (Lowes & Tiggemann, 2003).

Most participants in the present study were raised in two- parent heterosexual households (the few who did not grew up in single mother households). Only a few interviewees indicated that their fathers played a central role in their lives, along- side the mothers. It seems that the centrality of the mothers to the weight issue stems for their general involvement and responsibility in their daughters' lives, as participants them- selves noted:

> Tali: "Especially now that I have daughters, and as my daughters grow older, it's not just about… fatness, it's [related] in general to child rearing. As the years go by, as I under- stand how complicated it is… especially for women… I bow down to my mother, no matter how many mistakes she made. The mere fact that she was there, and raised us, and took care of us… and my father didn't know what kind of socks I wore… So I take my hat off to her, woman to woman…"

The few who did recall their fathers playing a significant part in their lives also recalled them that their fathers contributed to their 'fat' identity acquisition. Among those participants, the parents were described as playing an equal part and acting in concert.

Acquiring an 'unfit' identity

The perceived primacy of the relationship with the mother in the formation of fat identity also highlights the extent to which individuals construct "fat identity" on the basis of social messages, verbal and others, through which they learn how their body is perceived by others (Rice, 2007; Sobal & Maurer, 1999). Some respondents even specifically described a period in early childhood when they were unaware of the social significance assigned to their bodies — an (imagined or real) "pre-constructed" phase. In this stage, according to

their recollection, they were aware that their bodies were different but unaware of the negative social significance assigned to their bodies. They remember becoming conscious of the negative meaning of their 'difference' for the first time, through comments made by their mothers:

> Michaela: "I actually remember growing curves, breasts and all, and I would stand there admiring my body; [I thought that] I had a body identical to Barbie's, just a little bit fatter. I really remember the dissonance between what I saw and

> what my mother told me: lose just a little bit more weight from playing tennis and then you will be beautiful…like she is comforting me for something that I'm really not [aware of]…"

Nonetheless, the two participants' descriptions were the exception. In most cases, being defined as fat already conveyed or implied the socially negative meanings attributed to the fat female body. For most respondents, there was no distinction between being defined as fat and learning that being fat has adverse or negative social meanings. This concurrence was experienced through two types of social interactions.

In the first and most frequent pattern, participants were defined as fat for the first time when they were urged to go on diet. If they were not fat, there was no need for a diet; if being fat was not bad, there would be no need for a diet, either. Often, participants recalled realizing that they were fat for the first time when they were taken by their mothers to dieticians or weight-loss groups at an early age (such as, 7,10, 12, 16), Liel: "[if] a girl needs to lose two kilos, is that a reason to take her to a dietician? This attitude makes you feel fat". Even participants who were not taken to dieticians interpreted encouragement to go on diets and lose weight, voiced by their mothers, as indications of their fatness. Ronit: "As a child, when I'm told that I need to lose a couple of kilos that means that right now I am fat".

In the second pattern, participants were defined as fat in the same interaction in which fat was presented as depreciating their beauty. For example, Amalya: "being fat was a further excuse to dismiss me… [my mother told me] that being fat isn't pretty. That it does not look good when a fat woman performs on stage".

Given the increasing medicalization of fatness (Burgard, 2009), it is surprising that only very few participants mentioned interactions related to 'health'. Even in those cases, daughters questioned their mothers' sincerity and thought that they were actually more worried about their appearance.

Some participants believed that their mothers misinterpreted their bodies as fat because they had developed sexually earlier than other girls of their age, and had breasts, rounder bodies or were taller than average. These characteristics made them look "big", which their mothers interpreted as fatness. In contemporary Western

societies, the mother– daughter bond is the most significant source of communications and guidance regarding puberty (Lee, 2008), a process that is often marked by ambivalence, fear, and frustration for daughters, and by difficulty and change for their parents (Thelus, Bondy, Wilkinson, & Forman, 2009). As puberty signifies the transition from childhood to womanhood, some mothers may feel that they are "not ready" for their daugh- ters to grow up (Costos, Ackerman, & Paradis, 2002). Early maturation may exacerbate this feeling, especially as some mothers with young daughters are less ready to discuss puberty with the latter than mothers to older daughters are (Thelus et al., 2009).

Interaction with the mother was described as significant beyond the initial acquisition of fat identity. It was manifested, for example, when jointly shopping for clothes — an emotionally charged activity related to feminine identity (Colls, 2004). During early childhood especially, and to a less- er extent during adolescence and adulthood, most participants shopped for clothes with their mothers. Participants felt unable to enjoy clothes shopping because their mothers constantly criticized their body size and their choice of clothes. For instance, Ronit described being convinced by her mother that due to her body size, she was not able to choose clothes that would fit her by herself. As a result, Ronit was marked as "different" by her peers, because the clothes her mother chose for her were unfashionable and in- appropriate for Ronit's age.

The notion of using clothes to conceal the fat body was received differently within the context of different mother– daughter relationships. Some participants were offended and felt oppressed by their mother's attempts to conceal their body with loose clothes, bigger than their size. Others saw this as an opportunity to ward off unwanted maternal attention, and intentionally chose to conceal their bodies by wearing big clothes.

The role of the mother's body

Adrianne Rich (1986) has argued that since mothers are the primary caregivers of children, and since mothers and daughters share the same gender, the latter often use their intimacy and acquaintance with their mothers' bodies to learn about the significance of their bodies, and what it will be like when they grow up. Accordingly, one participant (the only one who was not defined as fat during

childhood) recounted learning that the fat feminine body was an indication of a flawed self and body through direct observation of her mother's body and her relationship to it:

> Korin: "I remember [that] as a really young child… she [used to] stand naked in front of the mirror before getting dressed and was disgusted at herself and her body because she had put on weight. This was an everyday childhood experience with my mom… and then, ah… I remember that at a certain point, you know everything that mom did, I did too, I said together with her, not about my body, but about hers, yes, yuk, it is really very disgusting… (my emphasis)."

Many participants saw their mothers as recipients of hegemonic discourses which stigmatize fatness. Liel, for example, stated that both her and her mother's identity are deeply affected by social discourse valorizing thin female bodies:

> Liel: "It is really difficult for me that on the one hand, these are social pressures… and on the other hand, now these are my ambitions too [to look like the dominant feminine beauty ideal]. They [social pressures] became my mother's desire and mine. So, where do I stand in relation to this?"The mother's own body size was perceived by daughters as a significant factor, affecting how the mothers communicated hegemonic discourses to their daughters and contributing to the general preoccupation with the daughter's body. According to the daughters' perception, mothers were more preoccupied with their daughters' bodies because they saw their own bodies as fat. The literature indeed suggests that mothers who are preoccupied with their own weight are also more occupied with their daughters' weight (Francis & Birch, 2005; Hahn-Smith & Smith, 2002):
>
> Amalya: "Today I can say that a lot of [my mother's attitude] is really the issues of my mother and her body…"
>
> Adi: "My first memories of being identified as fat took place at home… there is always … this phenomenon… that the mother passes on to the daughter. The mother weighs herself, sees that she gained some weight, gets irritated and projects her feelings onto her daughter."

Ronit: “My mom is thin, but she is one of those women who spends her entire life struggling… I presume that after years of struggling against yourself and going against your desires… [my fat body] bothered her more that it bothered me… I have no other explanation as I never suffered socially or in any other respect because of my body…”

Negotiating the fat feminine body in the context of the mother–daughter relationship

Even in cases where women remember their mothers as highly judgmental regarding their bodies, daughters perceived the relationship with the mother as a significant arena for negotiating the meanings of the fat female body. Most respondents (15) in the study, at some point or another, engaged in some sort of negotiation of the value of their bodies, or of fat bodies in general, with their mothers. In the most common pattern, a daughter confronts her mother, telling her that critical remarks are offensive and damaging to the daughter's bodily autonomy and self esteem. Often, the daughter sets boundaries, demanding that her mother to stop criticizing her body:

> Liel: “[I told my mom] that I do feel good about my body and that I do accept it, and other people accept my body too… So why are you interfering? It would be like you had a colorful rainbow and I threw black oil at it… [I told her]: I do not want to hear your comments… and then she [her mother] said that she knows that I do not want to hear it but it is important… [I told her] Mom, I have a mirror, we even have several mirrors in our house and…it is mine, it is my body, for better or for worse. Shut up!”
>
> Tali: “I set limits on my mother … I used to tell her: That's the way things are, I do not want to hear any more criticism… let it go…”

While some participants initially confronted their mothers during adolescence, two respondents were able to confront their mothers only as they grew older and left their mothers' homes. The geographical distance allowed them to make their presence conditional on a more respectful attitude toward their bodies:

> Ronit: “Once we went to visit my mother, and she started to really harass me…It was after a long time that she hadn't seen me and it seemed to her that I had

put on weight even though I hadn't; she really "climbed into" me so I just got up and left. And she realized that she had to set limits on herself and that I will not just sit there and listen to it."

Two more patterns of negotiation emerged. Some participants challenged or disturbed hegemonic discourses regarding fatness in conversations with their mothers. In these cases, daughters' introduction of alternative arguments was not confrontational, and daughters did not feel the need to set boundaries. Michaela's story is typical of this negotiation. As a child, her mother often told her that clothes would fit her better if she lost weight. Framing her body weight as a problem to be solved by weight loss is reminiscent of hegemonic discourses. At some point, Michaela responded by framing experiences in the clothes shop in terms of broader system failings rather than in terms of personal failings:

Michaela: "It's not me who does not fit into the clothes, it's the clothes that do not fit me, I told [my mother and myself]. I didn't feel that I'm the one that is not alright… When I went with my mom to buy clothes and she told me, you see, if you [weighed] a bit less, it would fit you, then I [say]: No! These clothes are not designed for me. Who is to blame that it does not look good?"

Michaela felt empowered by introducing the politicized counter-hegemonic discourse in conversing with her mother. She even felt that it helped her to confront other people who made comments.

Michaela: "I could give myself a little bit more freedom. It's like I've got all the answers when people make comments regarding my weight".

The third pattern is a negotiation with the internalized figure of the mother. As mentioned above, Korin learned that the fat feminine body is perceived as an indication of a flawed self and body through direct observation of her mother's body and her relation to it. By her late teens, Korin began a process of challenging values of normative female appearances, in particular the rejection of the fat female body. She described how she attempted to 'unlearn' the practice of tucking in her sweater or a shirt in order to hide the stomach area and the habit of holding in her stomach at all times, both habits which emerged from mimicking her mother's behavior. In the course of this processes, she described a series of internal conversations with the

internalized figure of her mother. Her mother represented the voice of rationalization of these practices, presenting them as stemming from health concerns, while Korin assumes the role of the one who challenges the assumptions of hegemonic discourse and unearths its anti- fat bias.

Theorizing the mother–daughter relationship as a site of negoti- ation of fat-related values

Following Mann, I argue that the respondents' negotiations with their mothers allowed them to maintain their emotional ties with their mothers, but on new terms. Under these terms, the mother would stop expressing fat oppressive attitudes toward the daughter's body and respect the daughter's bodily autonomy (in the case of confrontation), would be aware of alternative opinions regarding fatness (in the cases of introducing alternative discourse), or the internalized figure of the mother would exert less influence.

In cases where the relationship with the mother was bad, negotiation allowed the daughter to continue with the relationship under her own conditions. When the daughter experienced her relationship with her mother as good, and open in other domains (other than her body), she was motivated to negotiate her mother's messages in order to prevent dam- age or even to improve the quality of the relationship. In cases where the quality of the relationship was experienced as poor, but nonetheless emotionally significant, negotiation was motivated by the desire to prevent the dissolution of the relationship. Some interviewees, for instance, recalled that after they confronted their mothers and set boundaries, the tone and frequency of their mother' negative comments toward their bodies diminished. Even though interactions with their mothers regarding their bodies remained tense, most felt relieved as comments became less frequent and offensive, and they stated that their relationship with their mother improved significantly:

> Ronit: "Today my relationship with my mother is all right… I even enjoy visiting her because it is time limited and I can choose to leave if I am not comfortable…If she makes a comment [regarding my weight], it is really gentle and if she senses that I get irritated she will back down…"

In some cases, negotiations were less successful. Liel: "The issue of my body and my diet is something that really distanced me from my mother… I chose not to tell her many things because I know that she will 'drill' me [regarding them]".

In my interviews, the daughter's alienation from the mother's broader values was closely linked to her negotiation with the mother's fat oppressive attitude. This is

line with Chernin and Orbach's theory regarding the destabilizing effect of competing discourses on mother–daughter relation- ships, but my research links this effect to resistance and negotiation, rather than fatness itself. The destabilization of the mothers' authority may have enabled the daughters to produce and express their resistance to the mother's body- and fatness-related values. These conflicts disrupt the dynamic described above, where the mother conveys her negative meaning of the fat feminine body to the daughter. The destabilization of the mother's authority, and consequently the rejection of her values, appeared to be closely linked to all three modes of negotiation.

Moreover, exposure to competing discourses regarding the meanings of the fat body, promoted by fat-acceptance and feminist movements since the 1980s (Rice, 2007), fueled the daughters' resistance to the mothers' fat oppressive attitudes, and endowed this resistance with specific content.

Such discourses, for example, contend that fat bodies can be fit and healthy ones (Schuster & Tealer, 2009), or that the social valorization of thinness is related to patriarchal oppression (Wolf, 1991).

Following Mann's analysis, one might expect that exposure to fat-acceptance discourses would weaken the negative elements of fat identity among participants and enable them to develop resistance. The findings of the present study cannot determine a causal or chronological unidirectional link between the exposure to competing discourses and the negotiations with the mother. Two situations are equally possible: daughters may have been exposed to competing discourses and then were able to negotiate with their mothers, or they may have negotiated with their mothers, and consequently sought competing discourses.

In either case, the link between competing discourses and negotiations with the mother can be observed by looking closely at the story of individual interviewees. This analysis reveals a pattern: each participant tended to be most affected by, and attach the greatest importance to, critical discourses which challenged themes she connected with her own mother. In other words, if the mother was perceived of stressing a certain negative stereotype of fatness, the daughter was much more likely to embrace critical discourses which addressed that specific stereotype, rather than other issues related to fatness.

For example, Korin was a member of Israeli queer/lesbian circles that promote certain sorts of fat acceptance, mentioned above (Maor, 2012). One discourse that is mobilized in these communities positions the fat female body as a 'natural' and 'neutral' body, free of patriarchal and capitalist constraints, such as practicing diets or consuming dietetic products (Maor, 2012). According to this discourse, assuming control over one's body means relinquishing oppressive social practices that are directed to the female body. Korin uses this discourse to reject her mother's value that a slender body attests to self-control and is a marker of 'proper' femininity.

As shown above, Korin understood her mother's behavior as an indication that she is disgusted at herself and at her body because she gained weight. This echoes dominant discourses in the West, according to which the fat body indicates a flawed self that lacks self-discipline and self-control (Ferrall, 2011). As Korin matures and becomes a member of a queer/lesbian circle, she turns the meaning attached by her mother to 'self-control' around completely. Instead of being 'in control' of her appetite, Korin's empowerment stems from being 'in control' of society's and others' invasion of and interference with her eating habits:

> Korin: "I love to cook so much… I love sensuality and cooking for me is sensuality … food represents something truly positive, fun and liberated to me, and sensual and loving… it feels to me like being in control, not in the [.] bad and neutralizing sense, but in the sense that I do not let external forces control me and tell me that I cannot eat (my emphasis)."

Ronit's mother was remembered as the sole source for tagging her weight as 'abnormal' during childhood and adolescence. Taking part in the Israeli fat acceptance community allowed Ronit to challenge the hegemonic assumption that fatness is abnormal:

> Ronit: "… My mother, throughout my childhood, used to say: you need to lose weight…No-one ever harassed me at school or … anywhere else, except my mother… I lived my whole childhood and teenage years believing I am fat and extremely fat, not just a little fat".

The acquaintance with other fat women, within the Israeli fat acceptance community, has helped her to negate what her mother instilled in her during adolescence and to develop a sense of normalcy:

> Ronit: "… As I told you, throughout my adolescence I thought I was fat, and I was sure that I was really, really fat. And then, when I got to the forum, I suddenly realized that I'm not the fattest person in the universe. There are people just as fat as me, there are people who are fatter than me, I am not some kind of 'freak of nature' who has just not got a chance at anything in life…I felt…relieved…"

In the narratives of Tali, Alice, Ronit and Liel, their mothers' assertion that their fat bodies were depreciating from their beauty was a dominant theme: Tali: "[My mother's] mantra was always: You are so beautiful, you just need to lose some weight"; or Ronit: "[My mother told me] You just need to lose some weight, and then you will be perfect". These participants discussed at length, how, later in their lives, they were able to mobilize feminist criticisms of the cultural rejection of fatness, learned in gender studies courses, to challenge the primary role of beauty in their lives or value as persons. Feminist analysis, such as the one presented in "The Beauty Myth" (Wolf, 1991), allowed them to politicize the social valorization of female thinness, and in turn, to construct an identity, sexual or otherwise, that is not dependent on hegemonic standards of beauty:

> Ronit: "At that point I was beginning to identify as feminist… Feeling that my weight is not my worth."

> Tali: "Next to my bed, I was just beginning to study gen- der studies… the 'Beauty Myth' was lying there… all of sudden, in the middle of reading… I said to myself, well, he is not attracted to me…What does it say about my sexuality? Nothing! I didn't get it at age 26. As far as I was concerned at age 26, to be sexy meant five guys from the university would want to sleep with me."

Conceptualizing promotion of self-acceptance in the context of the mother–daughter relationship

Of the 22 participants, three were mothers themselves.[7] These three, in addition, all had daughters. This group of women, though very small, affords an interesting opportunity to evaluate the role of the mother– daughter relationship in the formation of fat identity. They show us the mother's perspective on this relationship, and most importantly, allow for a rare glimpse of mother–daughter relationships that are centered on fat acceptance rather than fat oppression.

Not all respondents defined their daughters as fat. One participant has two daughters, one of whom is considered "chubby". Another has three daughters, one of whom may be defined as fat. The last participant has two daughters who are not fat. However, all three mothers viewed instilling self-acceptance and fat acceptance in their daughters as a primary responsibility.

When asked regarding their motivation for promoting self- and fat acceptance among their daughters, all three participants discussed at length their relationships with their own mothers. Two participants discussed at length how, in their opinion, experiencing anti-fat attitudes and rejection in the context of their relationship with their mothers drove them to give their daughters positive reinforcement regarding their bodies, and provide tools to deal with the slender- ness ideology, which they felt had been lacking in their relationship with their own mothers. This indicates that women can actively choose to transfer different body-related messages to their daughters than the ones they inherited from their mothers.

Each participant tended to emphasize their daughters, and to attach the greatest importance to values and practices which challenged the perceived practices of their own mothers. For example, Tali emphasized the trauma of her conviction that she was being deprived of her mother's physical affection because of her fat body. When she talked about her attempts to instill her daughter with self acceptance and positive body image, she has emphasized providing her daughters plenty of physical and verbal affection, conveying to them a strong sense of acceptance regardless of body size. Tali: "I constantly kiss her body [of her daughter that is

[7] Another participant was the mother of a pre-pubertal boy and a girl, to whom she did not address during the interviews.

considered “chubby”]… and I am not just doing it because I feel obligated to do so…”.

In addition, Tali is very careful not to express attitudes that reflect concerns regarding her own body, and worries about weight, in front of her daughter:

> Tali: “Even when I was constantly dieting and had two young daughters, I never ever let them know” [that she was dieting or bothered about her size]. I knew that I had a responsibility toward my daughters… I couldn't tell them: God, how much I ate, I ate like a pig, I’m disgusting and revolting, I can think these thoughts in my head but god forbid I would say this in front of my daughters.”

Galit remembered her mother constantly remarking on her eating habits and her weight, and forbidding her from eating certain foods that she especially liked. During the interview, Galit emphasized her attempts to instill in her daughter an attitude that emphasized healthy eating and taking pleasure in food:

> Galit: “I avoid making comments regarding food…I tried to make it a non-issue… I direct talk about food to the issue of the quality of the food… the aspect of food that is being discussed [at home] is not whether it is fattening or not, but, instead [the message I convey is] your body is important and what you eat and what you don’t [is important]. We don’t buy Coca Cola or processed foods…but, while it’s true that it's fattening, the reasons we don’t buy it are different [health reasons]… I will never cook dietetic food, I have a fierce objection to buying low-fat cheese. I want us to eat foods that we would take pleasure in …that is probably a reaction [to fat-phobic culture]… respect your body”.

These participants shared a wish to protect their daughters from harassment and other negative experiences they experienced while growing up and living as fat women:

> Galit: “I will never tell them [her daughters] sentences like: Stop eating. That is something that probably was said to me a lot… stop eating, you eat too much, or, it’s fattening — don’t eat that. These things… were said to me… I won’t say these sentences because I know what it feels like…”

Living in contemporary Western society, participants are exposed to hegemonic discourses reinforcing the notion that mothers are responsible for their daughters' socialization to accepted gender roles, and especially to gender practices that are related to the body, such as dieting (Hahn- Smith & Smith, 2002). Mothers are also often blamed for their children's fatness (Boero, 2009; Hahn-Smith & Smith, 2002).

While imbued in these discourses, all three participants expressed a strong feminist identity, and described an acute awareness of the fat-phobic atmosphere surrounding their daughters:

> Galit: "We are all caught in the social gaze in the meanings of what's it like to be a fat woman… in the common belief that to be fat is to be someone who is not in control of her life… not able to cope, to control herself… being aware of this … really affected me, regarding my daughters, I try to be so careful… they have a feminist mother, they have consciousness, but still, they tell me what their friends' mothers tell their daughters: You are fat, don't eat that… They are exposed to these messages as observers…"

Participants were still embedded within more traditional discourses regarding motherhood, assigning the majority of responsibility for childcare to mothers. However, participants transformed the meaning of socialization that would best prepare their daughters to live in patriarchal societies. They believed that by promoting self- and fat acceptance in their daughters, they would better prepare them to survive in patriarchal society. Following Mann, the promotion of self-acceptance through the mother–daughter relationship served as a practice of micro-political agency, fulfilling their emotional responsibility to their daughters in alternative ways.

This agency, according to Mann, has political implications. Two participants described the effect of their approach on their daughters' attitude toward the fat feminine body:

> Tali: "One of my daughters is "chubby"… and she is completely devoid of any inferiority complex regarding her body… and why do I mention it? Because it depends so much on the messages she gets from me…"

The third participant who was also a mother presents a case that further reinforces this point. Sivan's mother encouraged her to develop a positive body image as a child. This helped her to maintain resistance as a fat woman in a fat-phobic society:

> Sivan: "My mother never [treated my fat body as a problem], and I believe that this was one of the reasons that I managed, at least up to [a certain age], I think that it [her positive attitude] was one of the reasons that in comparison with other people my size, I have a perfectly good body-image…"

From their position as 'conflicted actors' (Genz & Brabon, 2009) Galit and Tali have managed to actively choose not to reproduce the mothering style they experienced. Sivan, on the other hand, had recourse to the empowering messages she associated with her mother, in order to transfer similar messages to her daughter.

Sivan was inspired by her mother's non-critical attitude toward her body and in general:

> "My mother was an amazing woman…she gave me strength… She is very non-judgmental… everything I did or was seemed amazing to her… from time to time, when I'm being a bit judgmental with my daughters I immediately think of her and think to myself: Be supportive… say a good word."

To promote bodily self-acceptance, Sivan taught her own daughter to be critical toward the culture they live in, and especially towards gender norms and practices that are directed at the female body:

> Sivan: "First of all I've been a feminist, as my mother says, since I was 3 [laughs]… I have feminist ideas deep in my mind… I always discuss commercials with my daughters… ignoring TV is not an option, TV is here to stay and it carries its messages…So the only thing I can do is teach women, in this case, my daughters, to practice critical thinking, you know, watching a commercial and trying to see what meanings it conveys, what is enticing about it…Once I told my daughter that in order to make a human-sized Barbie doll, one would have to remove several of its ribs… and then she looked at her

Barbie dolls and told me: Do you see that the dolls constantly walk on their tips of their toes because they are designed to fit high heeled shoes? That made me happy."

The statements cited above can only indicate how the mothers perceive their actions. The narrative of Sivan, who recalled her mother as central in the formation of her positive body image through her childhood, can illuminate the consequences of maternal promotion of fat acceptance, from the daughter's perspective:

Sivan: "If you were to ask me, I would honestly say that I would like to lose some weight… but you know, as far as my fantasy goes I would never want to be really skinny…I don't like it, it seems sickly to me…and I passed it on to my older daughter… sometimes she sees a skinny woman and tells me that she is too skinny. That, if you ask me, is definitely resistance.

Conclusions

The present study relies on retrospective recollections, narrated from the daughter's viewpoint, with only a few mothers talking of their relationships with their own daughters. Future studies may examine the reciprocal element of these relationships further, i.e., how daughters who resist the negative stereotypes of the fat feminine body affect their mothers' attitudes and behaviors. Exploring mothers' perspectives is necessary for understanding the complexity of their position, as they often experience guilt and worry about the future (Jackson et al., 2007). As mothers and daughters occupy different familial roles and belong to different generations (Bojczyk, Lehan, McWey, Melsom, & Kaufman, 2011), relying only on one perspective of the relationship may result in a limited picture.

Nonetheless, because they are intertwined in a close relationship, mothers and daughters' perspectives intersect on at least some points (Bojczyk et al., 2011). In addition, subjective identity is commonly conceptualized in social science as "the meanings that individuals attach to themselves" (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010: 266), or as "constructions and not exact representations of reality" (Schachter, 2010: 2). Identity emerges as a combined product of individuals' actual, objective life experiences on the one hand, and subjective constructions through

which individuals give meaning to their entire lives (past, present and future) at specific points in time (Ronai & Cross, 1998). In this sense, the presented narratives are "self- consciously political [and] not nostalgically recuperative" (Zanker & Gard, 2008: 51). They should be viewed not as a 'historical truth' but rather as stories which have an impact in the present (Zanker & Gard, 2008).

The participants of the study identify themselves as "resistors", and this may have caused them to over-emphasize or underestimate certain aspects of their relationships with their mothers. This potential distortion is inevitable as the focus of the study is resistance, but there is no reason to believe that it caused participants to over-emphasize the overall importance of this relationship.

The present study is intended to demonstrate potentialities, and not the actual condition of some representative mother– daughter populations. It indicates that mother–daughter relationships should be viewed as an analytic category in its own right in relation to the acquisition of fat identity; and at the same time, that the effect of this relationship cannot be pre- determined and encompasses plural potentialities. Furthermore, the findings regarding mother–daughter relationships that are centered on fat acceptance rather than fat oppression call for an indeterminist conceptualization of multi-generational maternal transferences of fat-related values.

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Chapter 2: The Body that Does Not Diminish Itself: Fat Acceptance in Israel's Lesbian Queer Communities

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This article follows Charlotte Cooper's call to widen fat studies scholarship to contexts outside the United States, and Adrianne Hill's call to locate historically specific connections between lesbian communities and promotion of fat acceptance. Three in-depth interviews were conducted with Jewish-Israeli fat women. Through the development of their ability to appreciate their fat body and the fat bodies of other women, participants employed a mixture of disparate feminist-lesbian and queer discourses, in a similar, albeit not identical manner to the one used in the U.S. context. One of the major differences is that queer/lesbian communities in Israel are not in contact with the Israeli fat acceptance movement.

Introduction

Contemporary fat studies scholarship emphasizes the central role of lesbian and queer women in the U.S. fat acceptance movement, as well as the employment of lesbian/queer politics in the service of the movement (LeBesco, 2004; Hill, 2009; Saguy & Ward, 2011). Most works tend to take this affiliation for granted, and assume that fatness is intrinsically connected to queerness. Hill (2009), however, argues in favor of exploring historically specific connections between lesbian/queer communities and fat acceptance. In addition, most scholarship analyzing fat oppression, and even more so fat acceptance movements, are restricted to the U.S context (Cooper, 2009). The "Americanization" of fat studies is problematic as "fat rights initiatives outside the United States ... at worst, are exoticized, belittled, or unnoticed" (Cooper, 2009, p. 330).

Specifically, there is a scarcity of research examining the experiences of fat individuals in Israel, although anti-fat attitudes are as prevalent there as they are in other Western countries (Fogelman et al., 2002). So far there is no study of the ways in which fat women in Israel challenge dominant discourses

surrounding their bodies, and of the resources they draw on, including the affinities between queer/lesbian communities and fat acceptance.

Adopting Hill's contextualizing approach, I will analyze the narratives of three women who identify as fat, and who stated that their affiliation with queer and lesbian communities in Israel was a central factor in their ability to practice self-acceptance and to assign a positive value to their fat bodies.

This analysis will demonstrate how the interviewees creatively employ a mixture of radical lesbian and queer values and politics in order to subvert their identity as fat woman, perceived as unfit or spoiled, into a potentially empowering one. Despite the striking similarity with the U.S. context in the centrality of these discourses, one main divergence should be noted: the Israeli fat acceptance community and Israel's queer-lesbian communities are disconnected and basically unaware of each other's activities (Maor, 2011). This finding indicates that the utility of combining queer and lesbian discourses to promote fat acceptance persists through different cultural contexts and histories.

The Israeli case can enrich the scholarship of fat studies with two main insights. First, participants assign positive value to the fat body by linking it to fertility and motherhood. This draws on themes that are very powerful in Israeli culture, and it would be interesting to see if this association is also relevant for other societies. Second, Israel demonstrates that the combination of queer/lesbian discourses and practices can promote fat acceptance, even without contact with the fat acceptance community.

Literature Review

In contemporary Western societies, fat bodies are fiercely rejected as unhealthy, unaesthetic and indicative of various character flaws and physical and mental diseases or disorders (LeBesco, 2004; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Rice, 2007; Wann, 2009). Fat individuals often face discrimination and exclusion in many areas of life (Degher & Hughs, 1999; Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Although the study of the social oppression of fat men is scarce and more research is needed (Bell & McNaughton, 2007; see more recently Pyle & Loewy, 2009), a meta-analysis has shown that fat

women are exposed to stronger social sanctions than fat men in many areas such as employment and interpersonal relationships (Puhl & Heuer, 2009).

Comparison between the situations of fat individuals, on the one hand, and the situations of gay/queer individuals, on the other, proves to be an especially fruitful line of research, both regarding their social oppression as well as their activism and resistance (Saguy & Ward, 2011). Not only is slenderness considered the standard for normality, but scientific communities view fatness as a problem in need of a remedy. This is reminiscent of the way non-heterosexuality is viewed (LeBesco, 2004). In addition, both fatness and non-heterosexuality "share a reputation for sexual deviance, as stigmatization of gay and fat individuals tends to focus a great deal around the area of sexuality" (LeBesco, 2004, pp. 86–87). Despite the obvious visibility of the fat body, some scholars suggest that fat and gay individuals also share a politics of "coming out of the closet" (Saguy & Ward, 2011).

This comparison may explain why certain queer and lesbian communities encourage fat acceptance, although this cannot be said to be the prevailing norm in all lesbian communities (for a discussion of fat acceptance among communities of gay men, see Pyle & Loewy, 2009). Queer and lesbian women have played a central role in fat activism,[8] since the inception of the fat liberation movement in the 1970s (Hill, 2009). These women enrich fat activism with the identity-subverting practices learned in queer communities (Hill, 2009).

Some fat studies scholars "have failed to fully interrogate the connections between the fat and queer women's movements ... because many have assumed that fatness is intrinsically connected to queerness, prior to any activist's attempts to theorize such a connection" (Hill, 2009, p. 4). Hill challenges this position, arguing in favor of exploring historically specific connections and affiliations between these two communities In Israel, the prevalence of anti-fat messages is similar to attitudes in other Western countries. For example, Israeli medical practitioners tend to report negative stereotypes and anti-fat bias regarding fat patients (Fogelman et al.,

[8] The present study utilizes the term fat activism to refer to actions taken in order to challenge anti-fat views of the general public and/or providing support and empowerment to fat individuals (Sobal, 1999), and the term fat acceptance to refer to attitudes (in contrast with direct actions taken) reflecting a positive understanding of fat bodies.

2002). Israelis who had undergone bariatric surgery report that as fat individuals they were considered gluttonous, ugly and lacking in self-restraint and discipline (Rubin, Shmiluvitz, & Weiss, 1994).[9]

Methodology

This article is part of a larger study aimed at understanding the social oppression of fat women in Israel and their ability to resist their oppression. There- fore, the concept guiding my sampling was "resistance to anti-fat messages" (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, p. 8). To engage participants who are representative of this concept, the letter of recruitment called for "women who identify as fat and as resisting social anti-fat messages." The letter was distributed through a variety of mailing lists of undergraduate and graduate students, the Israeli fat acceptance Internet forum and lesbian Internet forums.

Twenty eight interviews were conducted with Israeli-Jewish women who identify as fat, and who resist the negative value assigned to their bodies. Of these, the three interviews analyzed in this article are with those women who identified their affiliations with queer/lesbian communities as the main factor enabling them to assign positive value to their bodies.

The study included in-depth interviews, which are especially suited to the exploration of complex processes, such as acquiring identity and engaging in resistance (Edwards, 2007). Interviews were conducted according to the method of the participatory interview (Finch, 1984). Constructing inter- views as interactive processes that include reciprocal exchange of data is meant to transcend the split between the researcher and researched, subject and object (Finch, 1984). At the beginning of each interview, I asked the participants whether they wished to hear about what led me to conduct the research. If the interviewee was interested, I briefly shared with her my experiences of being a fat child and a fat young woman.

[9] The similarity between anti-fat attitudes in various western countries is connected to the global circulation of dominant discourses regarding the fat body (Harjunen, 2009). Israeli television, for example, broadcasts a version of the U.S. reality show "The Biggest Loser." Likewise, two anti-fat "scientific" articles that were widely publicized in the United States ("blaming" fat individuals for causing global warming and for infecting their closest friends and families with "obesity"; Puhl & Heuer, 2009) were translated into Hebrew and published in leading Israeli newspapers.

If she was not interested, I moved on to the next phase of the interview and asked her to describe the earliest memory she found relevant to the issue of fatness, and to continue in chronological order. For a discussion of the ethical and methodological issues surrounding the participatory interview, see Maor (2010).

Defining who is considered fat is a problematic issue. On the one hand, using medical measurements such as the body mass index (BMI) is experienced as oppressive by many individuals, as it reinforces oppressive medical values (Cooper, 1998). In fact, all three participants discussed in the current article refuse to weigh themselves as a demonstration of their resistance to medical oppression. On the other hand, in a fat-phobic society, most women feel "too fat" regardless of their size. The definition used in this study is a subjective self-definition, validated by the participants' reports of anti-fat social sanctions.[10]

Participants' Profiles

All participants received pseudonyms. All are Jewish-Israelis, secular, and live in the center of Israel. Korin (age 31) identifies as a queer lesbian, feminist, left wing, and has a B.A. in the social sciences. Nurit (age 40) identifies as queer bisexual, a feminist, an activist in nongovernmental organizations, left wing, and has a B.A. degree. Adi (age 22) identifies as a feminist lesbian and is currently an undergraduate student in gender studies.

Results and Discussion

Fat Acceptance

Interviewees describe how their membership in feminist or queer lesbian communities enabled them to assign positive value to their fat bodies. They indicate that the specific communities to which they belong are characterized by a greater tendency to accept and appreciate women's styles of appearance that do not conform to dominant cultural norms:

[10] Participants who stated during the interviews that they sometimes feel fat and sometimes do not, or who did not report any negative social sanctions regarding their weight, were excluded from the study.

> Korin: I think that there isn't a doubt that lesbians, as a whole, are more attracted to fat women. ... It's easier being a fat lesbian than a straight fat woman.
>
> Adi: ... [I] also think of fat as something truly positive. First of all, I find it physically attractive. As a concept, I find it attractive, it's nice, it really stems from the spirit of the community I hang out with ...

As mentioned earlier, fat-positive attitudes are not universal in lesbian/queer communities. This may well be the case in the Israeli context, as all three participants emphasize that fat acceptance characterizes the specific lesbian communities to which they belong, whereas other lesbian communities have different norms:

> Korin: ... again, I'm talking about [fat acceptance] ... in my own very specific community, that is a community that [. .] is a **lesbian-feminist- queer-leftist** community. Obviously, in the lesbian-mainstream community, it's like, wow, [characterized] by the most strict way of thinking and the most straight-mainstream [thinking] there is [regarding the body of fat women].[my emphasis]

Hill (2009) argues that fat lesbian/queer activism in the Anglo-American context draws on two distinct theoretical currents: lesbian radical feminism and queer politics. Such a dual identification may seem contradictory.[11] Queer politics are often understood to be "against both assimilationist politics and separatist identity definitions" (Sedgwick in Walters, 1996, p. 834), whereas radical lesbianism is often seen as exactly such a separatist identity group.

Nonetheless, Hill believes that both currents are crucial for fat acceptance groups. Radical lesbian feminism supplies fat activists with the important notion of "the personal is political" that "enables women to reconfigure their marginalized identities as both personally empowering and intrinsic challenges to the status quo" (Hill, 2009, p. 5). However, lesbian feminist theories have not sufficiently emphasized the corporeal experiences of lesbians. Consequentially, they offer fat women no "means to reconceptualize a new, positive relationship with their bodies, or with the bodies of other fat women" (Hill, 2009, p. 10). Queer discourse and politics, on the other hand, are characterized by non-assimilatory attitudes. They also

highlight the a priori corporeal or bodily implication of the subject. This inspires fat activists to assign positive and empowering value to the identity of fat women (Hill, 2009).

In the present study, interviewees identify both with radical lesbianism and with queer discourse.[12] As Hill describes, identification with queer discourse encourage them to address the ways in which the body is constituted by and constitutes subjectivity (which is always already implicated in the body). Non-assimilatory queer politics enables them to assign a positive value to discourse produced from the position of the body of a fat woman. They view it as producing discourse from a position that is politically marginal, and therefore subversive.

The identification with radical or feminist lesbianism, on the other hand, have a different role in their activism than the one assigned by Hill from the Anglo-American context. Radical lesbianism challenges the implicit reference of queer discourse to a "universal (male) subject, or at least a universal gay male subject ... " (Hill, 2009, p. 846). This allows the interviewees in the present study to reveal and politicize the gender-specific cultural nature of fat oppression. They utilize it to assign their fat body with positive meaning specifically as a lesbian body, perceiving it as subverting normative femininity in a patriarchal context.[13] Despite this specific difference, overall there is a striking similarity with the U.S context, both in the centrality of these discourses and in the way they are employed.

The Israeli fat acceptance community was established in 2002 by a group of individuals who were exposed to the ideas of U.S. fat acceptance movements online. The community is centered on a Hebrew Internet forum, "fat and beautiful women."

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[11] Walters has taken this argument to its extreme, speculating that "queer theory's unspoken Other is feminism, or even lesbianism, or lesbian-feminism" (1996, p. 842).

[12] The term queer has many, sometimes conflicting, meanings. I will use the term to denote politics that center around a "gesture of rebellion against the pressure to be invisible or apologetically abnormal ... an in-your-face rejection of the proper response to heteronormativity ... " (Walters, 1996, p. 833).

[13] This insight was established after the interviews were conducted, in the process of analyzing their content. However, in an Internet chat conducted with one participant in the process of writing this article, I described to her briefly the differences between "radical lesbian" and queer approaches. In response, she stated her identification with both approaches, although a bit more with radical lesbianism. She argued that, in the Israeli context, the two approaches are combined and indistinct.

The existence of the forum, as well as the constancy of key figures, comprises a community in a traditional sense. At any one period the community comprises between 20–30 participants in gatherings outside the Internet and political activism, 50–70 regular active participants in the forum, and hundreds of passive readers (Maor, 2011).

Despite explicit U.S. influences, the Israeli community differs in several significant aspects including its lack of engagement with gay and lesbian communities. Adi, Korin, and Nurit were largely unaware of the local fat acceptance community. At the same time, while key members of the Israeli fat acceptance community personally welcome the participation of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGTB) individuals, there are few specific references to LGBTs in the community's forum or public activities. The forum's official description often promotes a hetero-normative world view as it specifically addresses "fat women and the men who love them" (Maor, 2011). Whereas in the United States the link between queer and lesbian activism has been collectively established over three decades ago, in Israel, fat women employing lesbian and queer discourses have to make the connection on their own.

The first Pride parade only took place in Israel in June 1993, 24 years after Stonewall (Gross & Ziv, 2003). Lesbian feminist groups were first organized in Israel in the 1980s, and queer discourse was first introduced in the early 2000s, a decade later than in the United States.

Historically, until the introduction of queer discourse, the "mainstream" gay community in Israel was characterized by an assimilative, and supposedly politically "neutral," gay rights discourse. This approach is based on the republican principle of equal rights in return for contribution to the collective "good" (Ziv, 2008). The queer activist group "Kvisa Shkhora," organized around summer 2001 (Ziv, 2008), was the first to introduce queer discourse into the Israeli context. It attempted to understand how the oppression of different groups is underwritten by shared power relations, as part of the emphasis of queer politics on identification with all politically marginal "oth- ers" (Ziv, 2008). Although Kvisa Shkhora fell apart several years after its founding, the newly introduced queer discourse continued to circulate and develop in Israel, in more irregular forms.

Queer discourse inspires the interviewees to view the struggle against fat oppression as connected to other social struggles in Israel:

> Adi: ... being a part of the lesbian community, automatically brings up [issues such as the oppression of] women, discrimination [against other groups] ...
>
> Korin: Yes ... Everyone in the queer community talks about all kinds of social oppression, about being non-normative. It is a discourse, like women talk about diets, shopping and husbands, we talk about that. So, yea, fatness is also a topic ...

In accordance with this discourse, Nurit ties the lesbian community's preoccupation with women's appearance to various political struggles, including the struggle against the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza:

> Nurit: ... I think it is strongly interrelated. ... I see it as [part of a] radical way of thinking in general. The struggle against the occupation [of Pales- tine] ... feminism or a struggle against homophobia or a struggle against... the beauty terror [a reference to the "beauty myth"] ... they are all on the same continuum.

Queer discourse in the United States is historically interwoven with the gay reaction to the AIDS crisis (Hill, 2009), while queer discourse in Israel has a completely different genesis. From the start, activists were preoccupied with the issue of the occupation, as indicated by the quote above. Interviewees tie together the oppression of women ("feminism"), of LGBT populations ("struggle against homophobia"), and of the Palestinians. The identification with "marginal" groups is significant to the interviewees' self-acceptance and fat acceptance. It expresses the queer ideology of assigning positive value to marginality and discourse from a marginal position. As fat women and members of the LGBT community, the interviewees themselves embody the "marginal other."

Another characteristic of queer discourse in the Israeli context is the rejection of the assimilative approach that emphasizes gay "normalization" and a republican conception of contribution to the "collective good" as the basis for demanding equal rights (Ziv, 2008, p. 294). Participants connect fat acceptance with rejecting normalcy, especially medical normalcy. In this context, fat acceptance is regarded as part of the wider rejection of "normalization."

Feminist lesbian discourses have a longer history in Israel. During the 1970s, Jewish activists from the United States who immigrated to Israel inspired the establishment of various ad hoc lesbian organizations whose members also identified as feminist. CLAF (Hebrew initials for Lesbian Feminist Community) was founded in 1987, organized as a non-profit in 1995, and dissolved around 2006. Its activity included social gatherings, conferences, magazine publication, and political activism. Like Kvisa Shehora, CLAF tied lesbians' oppression to the oppression of other groups, mainly the Palestinians. Unlike Kvisa Shehora, the movement promoted a separatist concept of lesbians' interests, oppression and identities, as significantly distinct from other LGBT who are not women. At least in the early years of the movement, many of the activities aspired to create safe, separate zones for feminist lesbians. Radical feminist ideology and cultural criticism were prominent in the movement (Shalom, 2005).

As mentioned earlier, participants identify with lesbian feminism rather than adopting a queer identity, which is often interpreted as transcending gender, in the sense that it does "not differentiate between gay men and lesbians" (Ziv, 2008, p. 315). All participants identify as women, and see fat acceptance as significantly connected to oppressive gender norms that specifically address women and not men.

Participants also adhere to a "radical lesbian" notion of lesbianism as an "act of rebellion against patriarchy ... gender as the primary axis for identification" (Gross & Ziv, 2003, p. 2). This notion refer to both their political activity and the significance of their fat body:

> Korin: ... there are a lot of queers that are, like, very un-feminist and that is why I find it hard not to distinguish between feminism and queerness. It is obvious that not every feminist is a queer and not every queer is a feminist but uh [...], to me all [...] like, both lesbianism and queerness and body choices [the choice to have a fat body] and political leftism and all stem from feminism ... what is my primary [identification]? At the beginning I was a feminist and a political lesbian, and not lesbian in practice, in [sexual] desires ...

Participants belong to common social networks and describe common discourses and mechanisms that allow them to assign positive value to their fat bodies. However, they do not belong to a single, unitary lesbian organization. It may,

therefore, be more appropriate to talk of their alternative community as a "counterpublic." This concept refers to a community that is not based on a priori mutual interests. Instead, a counterpublic is made of "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs" (Fraser in Warner, 2002, p. 85).

A counterpublic not only defines the identity of its recipients by ad- dressing them, it also shapes their world view, commitments and interests (Ziv, 2008). According to one interviewee, the lesbian counterpublic shapes the value assigned to the fat body, and even more than that—it changes the definition of who is fat:

> Korin: ... I think that [the definition of who is fat] depends on whether you are referring to a lesbian or a straight way of thinking. Because an average-sized woman would be considered, according to a straight way of thinking, to be [...] at the very least full figured.

Political Marginality as a Value

One of the features of queer politics is struggling against social oppression not on the basis of similarity with what is considered the normative majority, but on the basis of identification with the "other" in relation to the social structure. As such, one of the main features of queer discourse is the "attempt to speak ... in 'the name of the divergence and deviation,' declaring that 'marginality' is a positive value" (Ziv, 2008, p. 294).

Interviewees adopt this feature of queer discourse, and combine it with a radical feminist analysis, according to which the patriarchal oppression of women relied on specific mechanisms of control over their bodies, and not over men's bodies. This combination allows them to assign positive value to their fat bodies, as an instance of speaking from a position of "marginality." In accordance with radical lesbianism, interviewees are well aware that the spectrum of acceptable body forms offered to women is limited and restrictive under male-dominated societies. Every deviation from the thin ideal is seen as depreciating the body's beauty. In this context, the fat body of a woman is assigned a marginal position. The identification of the community

with the marginal "other"—in this instance, fat women—enable them to endow this body with positive qualities:

> Nurit: ... What is queer consciousness saying? [T]hat there isn't ... a norm and a deviation, in which the norm is good and the deviation is bad ... the uniqueness is [the recognition] of diversity as a [positive] value ... meaning that every shape is good, ideally, we are supposed to accept it. [I]t is also a fantasy ... [the acceptance of diversity] does not fully materialize [even in the lesbian community] and there are women who are preoccupied with all of these dilemmas, but there is a much greater enabling [of diversity].

This type of politics is actualized in spaces that enable the proud production and exhibition of a body, such as the fat body, that strays from the dominant ideal. This expands the spectrum of legitimate bodily forms. One such place, the "Rugatka" nightclub, is an alternative club established and maintained by the Israeli queer community. The display of diverse bodies is an empowering experience for some women:

> Nurit: This is really an experience which I hadn't known [outside the queer-lesbian community]. You enter the dance floor [of a disco club] ... and suddenly you see all sorts of shapes [of bodies], of different kinds of ways that they [the women in the club] hold their bodies, [different kinds] of ways in which they move around in space ... you feel empowered, you feel the possibility and privilege of being as you are.

Gay hangout places in central areas in Israel are considered to be significant venues for social support for gay individuals. However, since the mid-1980s, clubs and other locations aimed at the gay public have been appropriated by Israeli mainstream liberalism, and used to depict the country as an is- land of cosmopolitan tolerance in the Middle East (Luzzato & Gvion, 2007). Queer or radical lesbian hangouts, such as the Rugatka, reflect a backlash of re-radicalization and re-politicization inside gay culture. One of the most significant elements of this radicalization is the presentation of bodies that do not conform to bodily ideals, as Nurit's words demonstrate.

Assigning a positive value to marginality allow interviewees to view their fat body as a significant choice, which is only possible, as a true choice, within the lesbian community. At the same time, employing the word "choice" in the context of the fat body is politically charged in the context of contemporary, heated debates regarding the cause of fatness (LeBesco, 2004). Arguing that being fat is a choice also challenges dominant constructions of fatness as the result of a character failure or an addiction, but never as a voluntary and affirmative choice (Murray, 2008). It is important to note that the participants do not argue that they are "naturally thin" and choose to fatten themselves out of ideological motives. Membership in lesbian com- munities enable them to choose to stop constant diet attempts that caused them pain and frustration.

Korin simultaneously experiment with her sexuality and with her body size, occupying two positions of "marginality" at the same time, as she move from possessing a femme identity to a butch one. The "butch" identity is a type of lesbian identity, which is sometimes characterized by a heavy or large body. However possessing a large body is not a necessary part of the butch identity, as "[t]here are at least as many ways to be butch as there are ways for men to be masculine; actually, there are more ways to be butch, because when women appropriate masculine styles the element of travesty produces new significance and meaning .. ." (Rubin in Inness, 1998, p. 236).

Korin experiences her transformation to a butch, in a fatter body, as a significant and empowering choice:

> Korin: ... As I said [. .] [at the beginning of my affiliation with the queer community] I was totally a "femme," and it was really fun to go through a process [becoming a butch and gaining weight] that might actually mean giving my body back to myself , even though it is still [according to] queer social norms ... it feels like I created myself the way I chose to ...

The embrace of bodily diversity, and the fat body, are related to another fea- ture of feminist lesbianism: Lesbian existence allows the expansion of choice (Rich, 1980). According to Rich, because "enforced heterosexuality" (p. 659) applies harsh sanctions on women who deviate from the norm, "choice" in heterosexuality has little significant meaning. Relationships between women have the potential to

produce social change by enabling a choice between different modes of being and living. Korin describes her engagement in the queer community as enabling her to experiment with both fatness and sexuality.

Korin also describes how the ability to choose a different appearance, and a fatter body, resulted in her ability to experience more diverse kinds of sexuality. This further reinforces Rich's claim that relationships between women enlarge the real range of choices (in the case of Korin, options of acceptable body size and appearance), and supply women with the "collective power to determine the meaning and place of sexuality in their lives" (Rich, 1980, p. 659).

Erotic Relations

Feminist lesbianism stresses the political implications of "the physical passion of women for women ... the erotic sensuality" (Rich, 1980, p. 653). Accord- ing to this ideology, sexual or erotic relationships with other women have significant effects on women's bodily identities and body image (Barron, 1998).

Being sexually attracted to fat women, and enjoying erotic relationships with them, is a factor that enables interviewees to attribute positive value to their own fat bodies:

> Korin: I was never attracted to thin women ... I always noticed friends that were fat or full figured and thought that they were sexy ...

Sexual attraction to fat women stems from the spirit of Korin's community:

> Korin: Recently there was an evening of alternative porno films, and I didn't connect to the films for all sorts of reasons but I did like that there was a representation of fat women, a very heavy representation, and a sexy one ...

Adi mentions receiving positive feedback regarding her body from a lover, reassuring her that it is sexually attractive:

> Adi: [M]y lover is amazing ... she keeps encouraging me [saying]: you're gorgeous and you look gorgeous ... she wouldn't want me to lose half a kilo.

Physically loving other fat women may induce fat acceptance, as the woman realizes, through her attraction to a lover, that her own fat body is attractive as well:

> Korin: I don't know if the look I choose for myself today [as a butch, with a fat body], which I very much like, but I liked myself as a femme too [with a thinner body], if that's something that I really like in myself or if it is what I like in other women [I'm attracted to] so I recreate it in myself.

Some participants employ dominant discourses when speaking of erotic relationships and fat bodies of women:

> Korin: My taste ... is without doubt big women. ... A tummy is so sexy, totally. ... It is so "feminine" and round ... what is fat really? It is "femininity."

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When Korin equates fat with femininity, this reflects the tendency of Western philosophy to create a hierarchical dichotomy between the superior male mind and the inferior female body. Consequentially the fat body is seen as "excessively feminine" (Braziel, 2001, p. 232, original emphasis). This dis- missal of the fat body can be subverted for feminist purposes, as "[f]emale fat, representing the triumph of femininity over masculinity and of the body over the mind, 'catalyzes insubordination to the binaristic thought of Western, patriarchal knowledges and discourses'" (Hill, 2009, p. 56). By adoring other women's flesh, Korin is able to connect herself to the female power embodied in the fat bodies of women.

Adi embraces and subverts another dominant discourse, which identifies female abundance in flesh with fertility and nurturing. The attribution of positive value to motherhood and fertility is characteristic of the Israeli context, as Israel is a pro-natalist country (Sperling, 2010):

> Adi: For many years, [my body size] was quite an issue. Sexuality in general. I felt very sexually castrated. Actually ... I think that in fact in the last year I feel that I'm sexual. All my life until now ... I didn't feel sexual. Also, all my sexual characteristics were very repressed and covered in layers of clothes. ... I really discovered my femininity and my sexuality actually through the need to become a mother. Actually through motherhood, nurturing ... I became more "feminine" ... [now] I actually like being fat and fuller and more "feminine" ...

Korin and Adi, by refusing to participate in the heterosexual matrix, subvert the meaning of dominant discourses and use them for recognizing them- selves and experiencing their fat bodies, as well as their lovers, in empow- ering way.

The Natural and Neutral Body

Interviewees see the fat body as a reclamation of the natural body:

> Korin: I am [instinctively] attracted to butch or dyke or trans women... not the ultimate femme women ... [The women I am attracted to are also] fat ... in mainstream society it will be considered that ... I'm attracted to masculine women, who let themselves go, to me it means being attracted to the essence of femininity, the ultimate [essence] ... precisely the appearance [of a woman] without make-up and dresses, and without diets [...] [T]he appearance [of the body], that does not try to diminish itself, with [all] its fat!

When I asked Korin what she meant by "the essence of femininity," especially in light of her identification as a queer lesbian, she replied:

> Korin: When I said essence, I thought to myself ... , be careful, but that is what represents femininity to me. [Women usually] restrict themselves, practice diets, give birth, walk on heels, so they will have to make smaller footsteps, and sit crossing legs so as to look thinner and that really reduces them.

This seeming contradiction is emblematic of the creative interplay between queer and feminist lesbian elements in the context of the discourse of the "natural" body. Korin explicitly evoked the notions of the "naturalistic ideology" as related to fat acceptance:

> Korin: [Dealing with] fatness and body hair ... is related to when we surrender to [social] dictates and when not ... no woman is at her natural weight because

> they don't let us ... the same goes for body hair: I think we have no idea to what extent women are naturally hairy ...

Korin's words echo what Crowder (1998) refers to as the lesbian version of naturalistic ideology. Crowder differentiates between a "mainstream" naturalistic ideology "that wants to eliminate those social interventions [regarding the body] deemed harmful but places strong values on traits it considers 'natural' to women" (p. 59), then the lesbian one that reflects a desire to unburden women's physical bodies from most societal interventions, including those that are considered "natural" to women, according to hegemonic cultural norms (Crowder, 1998).

According to Crowder, fat acceptance in lesbian communities owes a great deal to this ideology, as fat oppression is considered to be a mechanism of heteronormative oppression. There are two alternatives to counter this mechanism. One is to eliminate prejudices related to appearance so that "fatness or thinness become meaningless" (p. 60). The other is to valorize larger bodies. Crowder implicitly praises the "neutral" approach, hinting that valorization of fat is simply the mirror image of the tyranny of slenderness. However, Hill points out that in a cultural climate of fat hatred, declaring that beauty lies outside the body is simply not enough to allow empowerment for fat women. Only explicit valorization and assertion of fat bodies' beauty and grace can lead to significant fat acceptance (Hill, 2009).

Inspired by queer politics, participants refuse to erase the materiality and eroticism of the fat body of women. In doing so, they reject the feminist lesbian heritage that depicts eroticism in "strangely incorporeal terms" (Hill, 2009, p. 8).

They also emphasize that publicly and proudly displaying their bodies carries significant political implications, reclaiming the previously derided fat body. However, queer politics are employed, in this context, in the ser- vice of feminist lesbian values. By appealing to the "natural body," participants attempt to re-appropriate what is forbidden of women and regarded and guarded as masculine. This positive reacquisition of the large body by women is not seen as a "mere" social construct, only prompted by ideological considerations. Rather, the embrace of the fat body possesses inherent empowering effects, as it signifies a "return" to the body, "untamed" or re- leased from its patriarchal prison. In contrast to queer

discourse, one can infer from this position a humanist valuation of the "natural" body.

Interviewees view the fat body as a "natural" and liberated body, which fulfills its human potential. Rejecting thinness is part of an approach that opposes bodily practices which serve the patriarchal imprisonment of the subjectivity of women:

> Nurit: ... in relation to makeup and in relation to the body [...] we keep getting the message. ... What we are is not good enough. We need to conceal, we need to police ... that I need to put myself into a kind of a prison!

Treating the fat body of a woman as a body that has returned to its "natural" state should be regarded with caution, as it reinforces the humanist tradition equating "natural" with "good." Such ideas are often used against op- pressed groups, for example, arguing that being gay is not "natural" (Kahn & Fingerhut, 2011). In this case, the use of the word "natural" is more accurately interpreted as a strategic appropriation of the term to validate a marginalized position, rather than as an attempt to reify it and reject all others.

Carving up Space

Interviewees describe fat women as "carving up" room for themselves in space, in an active and self-affirming way. This discourse stands in contrast to the demeaning concept of "taking up" space, which denotes such women as a passive nuisance.

Korin describes the alluring appeal of the butch who "carves her own space" as a central component of a formative experience. This experience marked her transition from "ideological/political lesbianism" to engaging in erotic relationships with women:

> Korin: At the age of 23 ... I remember seeing ... She was also a fat woman, very butch, she was [...] the first "hard core" butch that I had met until then [...] and I remember that [...] I sat there, exhilarated, both by her "butchness", which I find as very sexy, and by the fact that she was a really big woman, and she moves around in space without apologizing! Like, carving up her own space! Yes!

This woman "carves up" her own space, both concretely, through her fat (and therefore substantial) body, and by moving her body and hands freely and broadly. The possibility, produced within the queer-lesbian community, for a woman to embody a substantial presence, and still be viewed positively as a leader in the community, is thrilling for Korin.

Korin is exposed to an alternative discourse, which was embodied in the butch's performance. As Butler (2004) claims, performance is comprised of certain practices and discourses that regulate and give meaning to these practices. The woman's fat body and wide gestures do not have a "liberating" function on their own. Without a supportive interpretation by her community, the woman's performance might have had an oppressive effect. In this case, the meaning assigned to carving up space is identical to the one in the Anglo-American contexts. Indeed, in mainstream Anglo-American cultures and in some lesbian sub-cultures, the butch suffers from significant opprobrium (Crowder, 1998). This maltreatment may be related to the destabilizing effects of that performance on the normative gender status quo. The butch "most flagrantly rebels against the restrictions placed on the female body. Beyond her clothing and hairstyle, she often makes a deliberate effort to eliminate any suggestion of 'femininity' from her movements, gestures and use of space" (Crowder, 1998, p. 55).

In a supportive environment, women occupying non-butch lesbian identities can also "cultivate movements ... that unlike the circumvented movements of most women occupy the full volume of space around the body" (Crowder, 1998, p. 59). Nurit describes how she misses the "strong" presence of her girlfriend (who is not a butch).

The re-claiming or re-occupying of space forms another instance of creatively employing queer politics to re-signify feminist lesbian values. Some scholars interpret the social demand that women diminish and restrict them- selves as a patriarchal attempt to keep women in an inferior position. For instance, one of Wolf's (1991) main arguments is that the "beauty myth" (which centers on the glorification of the extremely thin "feminine" body) is a "backlash" to the legal feminist accomplishments in the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Fantasy of "Pure" Resistance

Living in the West entails constantly being bombarded with anti-fat messages. Even fat activists often have ambivalent feelings, sometimes still harboring the desire to lose weight (Cooper, 1998). The participants in the present study report similar instances of mixed feelings. For example, Nurit feel gratitude towards the queer community, which enables her to relinquish life-long diets and to eat freely. At the same time, gaining weight also inspires feelings of shame and doubt.

The community's public display and respect for a diversity of bodies also evoke mixed feelings. When describing how she felt on the dance floor, in the presence of women with bodies that might be ridiculed in more mainstream settings, Nurit uses the word "shocking" in both a positive and a negative sense:

> Nurit: [I felt] both [negative] and [positive feelings] ... on the one hand, [the diversity of appearances] enables [empowerment], and on the other hand ... like a saying I heard that it is lucky that there are lesbians in the world because it enables ugly women to find partners too. It is a horrifying sentence and really difficult and really offensive ... [but] because there is internalization, you say [to yourself], OK I'm in this club, and the women [in it] are supposedly not beautiful ... the embarrassment caused by these women just taints [their whole environment], but on the other hand you feel empowered, you feel a possibility and a privilege to be the way you are! [my emphasis]

Ambivalent attitudes toward hegemonic norms can be widely dispersed, even in alternative communities:

> Nurit: ... most of my lesbian friends want to lose weight, although they have full figures, which is already better ...

Alternative communities, as a collective, often display deep intolerance to- ward such ambivalence. In some fat acceptance communities, "activists who want to lose weight are regarded as people who have sold out, or under- mined the arguments for self-love and self-acceptance ... " (Cooper, 1998, pp. 55–56). When activists or scholars argue that individuals have absolute control over the value they assign to their identity, this can also be oppressive (Murray, 2005). Many activists feel that they are the only ones who are not able to practice complete self-acceptance. As a result, they are caught "in a new web of shame and guilt" (Cooper, 1998, p. 56).

Nurit, for example, described guilt over the inability to achieve complete self-acceptance.

This intolerance toward ambivalence and doubt stems from what I call "the fantasy of pure resistance." When a subject is embedded within an oppressive social context, a consciousness of pure resistance or pure self- acceptance is neither possible nor necessary (Murray, 2005). Subjectivity is multivocal, plural, contradictory, and constantly changing, for those who practice fat acceptance, as much as for everyone else (Murray, 2005). The ambivalent nature of resistance is not a deformity or a deficiency, but rather emblematic of the inner dynamics by which resistance manifests itself over time. Accordingly, acts of subversion and resistance need not be considered antagonistic or mutually exclusive with acts of social conformity. The interplay between elements of conformity and resistance is continuously taking place.

Conclusion

Under dominant regimes of discourse, the thin body fulfills medical scientific prescriptions (supposedly free of values). For alternative communities, in contrast, it is the fat bodies of women that are laden with radical feminist meanings and values, and perceived as empowering. At the same time, simplistic interpretations of fat bodies of women as a symbol of feminist values should be rejected on political grounds, as well as theoretical ones. Various scholars describe how viewing the body as a symbol for the mind reinforces an oppressive philosophical heritage (Braziel & LeBesco, 2001). The performative approach argues that the body and mind are mutually constitutive, and that identity or subjective experience itself is produced during bodily practices (Ziv, 2008).

In this article, interviewees' fat bodies, and their subversive radical lesbian meanings and practices, are described as inter-determined, in continuous interaction. Radical lesbian analysis is used to locate fat bodies of women, as well as lesbian identities, as politicized corporeal experiences that challenge patriarchal power relations. Then, queer strategies— mainly the political advantage of speaking from the margins and proud, public display of bodies—are used to

actualize and implement these radical lesbian insights. This combination recreates the fat body as a materialization of subjectivity of women that challenges patriarchy. This challenge alters core social values and broadens the spectrum of choice (the fat body as a position of marginality), draws on other women's strength (erotic relations), opposes patriarchal restrains (reclaiming the natural body) and expands the limited space assigned to women ("carving up space").

The identity of a fat woman, perceived as unfit or spoiled, can be subverted. It can become a powerful identity, using a creative interplay between queer strategies and radical lesbian values. The subversion of fat identity in the Israeli context is similar to what was done in the United States, despite the fact that the material history through which these discourses circulate is significantly different and shorter. This similarity may be another feature of the significant influence U.S. culture has on the Israeli one. An extensive body of knowledge refers to this influence as the "Americanization of Israeli Society" (First & Avraham, 2007, p. 57).

However, the simultaneous employment of queer and feminist-lesbian values and practice is not identical to that of the U.S. activists. At times, participants employ normative discourses, such as linking a woman's fat body to fertility or to the "essence of femininity," which are not mentioned in the literature regarding the intersection of queer and fat activism in other countries (Hill, 2009; Saguy & Ward, 2011). This may reflect the exceptionally high value attached to motherhood in Israeli society (Sperling, 2010).

The present study highlights the need to examine how, under different cultural contexts, elements of both queer and feminist-lesbian ideologies are combined and used in concert. This examination adds to existing literature regarding the differences between queer and radical lesbian approaches, their advantages and shortcomings (e.g. Rudy, 2001; Walters, 1996).

In addition, the article shows that even in the absence of alliances be- tween the Israeli fat acceptance community and lesbian/queer communities, fat acceptance is still promoted within some lesbian/queer communities. This may mean that queer/lesbian values and practices are inherently fat positive in some cases. However, this may also mean that fat acceptance is not promoted as an issue in its

own right, but only as long as it fits specific queer/feminist lesbian ideals. This could have limiting implications, as the ability of women who do not fully identify with these values to enjoy fat acceptance may be harmed. For instance, a strong theme that emerges is the linkage between fatness and women's rejection of stereotypically "feminine" appearance. Femmes, for whom such rejection is not that straightforward, may not enjoy fat acceptance in these communities in the same way. As Korin say: "[fat] will add to the sex appeal of butches, for femmes- it will not diminish their sex appeal."

Due to the small number of interviewees, it is possible that important issues regarding lesbian fat acceptance are not analyzed in the study. For instance Hill (2009) argues that butch–femme identity politics are experiencing "a surge of popularity" in affinity to fat acceptance among lesbian communities (p. 3). However, in the present study, interviewees mention only butch identity in relation to the fat body, and therefore, the discussion of fat acceptance among, and in relation to, femmes is neglected. The omission of this discussion should be viewed as a result of the small number of participants.

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Chapter 3: 'Do I Still Belong Here?' The Body's Boundary Work in the Israeli Fat Acceptance Movement

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Abstract

Boundary work is important in all social movements, but the instability of bodily-based categories makes boundary work particularly complicated in movements where bodily attributes are key to identity formation. Many Anglo-American fat acceptance groups have attempted to draw boundaries on the basis of two 'ideal fat subjects': one with a stable, unitary 'resisting' consciousness and/or one based on excluding those who are not 'really' fat or fat 'enough.' The former excludes members who display ambiguity or ambivalence in relation to accepting their bodies, while the latter excludes members seen as not fat enough to participate. In contrast, the Israeli fat acceptance community establishes its boundaries based on shared negative social reactions to body size. This increases its ability to tolerate ambiguity and contradictions among members, and to accept members who do not fit into fixed bodily identity categories. Simultaneously, this collective identity poses other problems, like reducing members to their identity as fat and encouraging constant preoccupation with weight or social oppression based on body size.

To understand social movements, it is critical to understand how their boundaries are constructed: how group identity is defined; who belongs and who is excluded. When it comes to social movements which view bodily attributes (such as skin color, disability or body size) as key to forming their identity, the issue of boundaries can be particularly complex. Some bodily attributes may appear to be easily recognized and defined, whereas, in fact, the boundaries between bodily-based categories are neither clear-cut nor permanent (e.g. a fat person can lose weight, skin color is often ambiguous). Movements tackling these issues must still determine who belongs in the

group and on behalf of whom the group makes claims/represents (Fominaya, 2010; Hohle, 2010).

Fatness is an especially unstable bodily category: culturally, geographically and temporally. As a result, the issue of boundaries has traditionally been important for the fat acceptance movement. The movement emerged in 1969, when NAAFA (the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance) was founded in the USA, in response to growing stigmatization, exclusion and discrimination of fat people in contemporary western societies (Kirkland, 2008). The movement comprises communities, organizations, and groups devoted to fighting legal, cultural and social forms of discrimination and prejudice on the basis of body size (Sobal, 1999).

Scholars have looked extensively at political difficulties and contention within the fat acceptance community (e.g. Murray, 2005, 2008; McMichael, 2010; Meleo-Erwin, 2011; Colls, 2012; Cooper & Murray, 2012). At least some of these tensions can be interpreted as boundary work, namely determining who belongs and who is excluded. To deal with the inherent instability of the category of fat, many fat acceptance groups in the Anglo- American context have attempted to draw the movement's boundaries on the basis of two 'ideal subjects' (which are not necessarily mutually exclusive): (1) a fat subject with a stable and unitary 'resisting' consciousness, i.e. a fat subject that univocally rejects dominant views of fat and is able to fully accept her or his body; (2) a 'real' fat subject, constructed on the basis of excluding those who are not 'really' fat or not fat 'enough.' The first approach excludes members who display ambiguity or ambivalence in relation to accepting their bodies, while the second approach excludes members judged to be not 'really' fat or not fat enough to participate.

In this article, I argue that the Israeli fat acceptance community establishes its boundaries on the basis of a different kind of 'ideal subject': a subject who has experienced negative social reactions to her or his body size. Some of the difficulties that arise in the Anglo-American fat acceptance movement are resolved by this shift in focus from one's current weight or self-acceptance toward shared experiences of oppression. It increases the ability of the Israeli movement to tolerate ambiguity and

contradictions among members,[14] and to accept members who do not fit into fixed bodily identity categories.

At the same time, positioning negative social experiences at the center of the group debates and collective identity poses other problems, such as reducing members to their identity as fat, and encouraging constant preoccupation with one's weight or experiences of social oppression on the basis of body size. This leads some potential members to question the group's ability to facilitate empowerment and fat acceptance. Although shared experiences of fat oppression endow the group's collective identity with content, they also set limits and restrict its substance.

While the prevalence of anti-fat views in Israel has been demonstrated (e.g. Fogelman et al., 2002), the present study is the first of its kind to examine the Israeli fat acceptance community. It expands the geographical scope of studies examining the fat acceptance movement, which have been largely focused on US-based groups and activities (Cooper, 2009; Cooper & Murray, 2012). This is problematic as 'fat rights initiatives outside the United States [.. .] at worst, are exoticized, belittled, or unnoticed' (Cooper, 2009, p. 330). Documentation of the unique story of the emergence and development of the Israeli fat acceptance movement is essential for expanding the current pool of fat acceptance narratives that 'can be made known, archived, made into further resources for people to adopt' (Cooper & Murray, 2012, p. 134).

In addition, the Israeli fat acceptance community demonstrates how fat acceptance ideas, ideology, and practices are translated from one national/cultural context to another. NAAFA, the oldest and most developed US-based fat acceptance organization, has international branches under its ISAA (International Size Acceptance Association) arm in Canada, France, the UK, and Norway (Saguy & Riley, 2005). While there is no official Israeli branch, the founders and key members of the local community are heavily influenced by the messages, actions and written materials of the US movement, to which they were exposed on the Internet.

Literature Review

[14] Tolerance of ambiguity was originally conceptualized by Budner (1962) as a personality trait.

Despite the body's central role in contemporary sociological theories, theorists have only begun to systematically analyze the body's role in social movements in the last decade (Sasson-Levy & Rapoport, 2003; Sutton, 2007a, 2007b; Hohle, 2009, 2010). Following the 'cultural turn' in social movement studies, theorists have expanded their scope beyond models of rational action and formal politics, and have examined the production of alternative cultures and lifestyles (Melucci, 1985; Taylor & Whittier, 1995). Understanding the body's significance allows theorists to add another dimension to the analysis of social movements, showing how these movements challenge both dominant culture and hegemonic regimes of presenting and culturing the body, and produce alternative modes of inhabiting bodies (Hohle, 2009, 2010). Researchers have examined how different bodies, embodied experiences, and embodied identities shape and influence the emergence of social movements and the production of effective political protest. They have also tried to understand how movements re-shape their members' bodies to attain political goals (Sasson-Levy & Rapoport, 2003; Sutton, 2007a, 2007b; Hohle, 2009, 2010).

The present article deals with another set of questions regarding the role of the body in the context of social movements. Since bodily-based identities are both unstable and ambiguous, groups that resist oppression on the basis of physical or bodily attributes need to actively negotiate the movement's boundaries. They must define their 'subjects,' i.e. who belongs or is entitled to membership. Hohle refers to this phenomenon as the 'cultural and political difficulties of representation':

> How do we deal with problems that affect the individual from problems that affect a population, and how does this difference translate into political action? [...] AIDS marks the body's surface in terms of [...] physical deterioration, which plays an important part of what it means to be a person living with AIDS. However, social groups [...] are marginalized by the association of AIDS with a 'polluted' lifestyle, effecting [sic] individuals who do not have AIDS. AIDS advocacy is also fought on behalf of many people who do not have AIDS [yet, but may catch it in the future]. Thus, the physical presence and embodied process involved making an identity does not deal with the cultural and political difficulties of representation. (2010, p. 43)

However, the present article will refer to tolerance of ambiguity as a group trait.

These dilemmas are very relevant for fat acceptance movements. Numerous studies have shown that in contemporary western societies, fat bodies are fiercely rejected as unhealthy, unaesthetic, and indicative of various character flaws and physical and mental diseases or disorders (Kent, 2001; LeBesco, 2004; Brownell et al., 2005; Rice, 2007; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Wann, 2009). Fat people often face discrimination and exclusion in many areas of life (Degher & Hughes, 1999; Puhl & Heuer, 2009). Nonetheless, some fat people have engaged in successful and creative resistance to these messages, adopting different forms of fat acceptance and fat activism (Cooper, 1998; Ferrall, 2011).

The rise of fat acceptance movements is one of the most striking expressions of this resistance. The coalescence of individual activists into a movement fosters and spreads a broad sense of collective consciousness, which helps to inspire and recruit new members and activists (Sobal, 1999). This collection of organizations, groups and individuals— associated with the lesbian, gay, transgender and bi-sexual (LGTB) community, feminism, and other ideologies—may be considered a movement because of their shared consciousness and their joint aim of detecting, exposing and dismantling instances of fat hatred. Such movements deploy a variety of strategies (e.g. forming support groups or launching legal actions) to simultaneously empower fat individuals and create broader social change (Sobal, 1999).

The present article tackles three related questions: does the fat acceptance movement speak on behalf of only fat people, does it speak for all fat people, and who counts as fat? First, fat phobia draws on and reinforces a narrow and uniform bodily ideal that serves existing gendered, racial and class hierarchies (Shaw, 2006; Ferrall, 2011). Non-fat people are also affected and oppressed by the thin ideal. Studies show, for example, that most women are dissatisfied with their weight regardless of their body size (Wolf, 1991). Should the fat acceptance movement conceive oppression of fat people as the extreme manifestation of social oppression on the basis of body size and advocate for other groups, or should it view fat oppression as a distinct phenomenon and advocate only for people labeled as fat?

Second, because of the bombardment of anti-fat messages, even fat activists often have ambivalent feelings, sometimes still harboring the desire to lose weight (Cooper, 1998; Murray, 2008). Should fat activists who harbor or openly express the desire to

lose weight be viewed as undermining the movement's message, or should they be accepted on the grounds that such desires are inevitable, or, alternatively, that the fat acceptance movement ought to be a home for all fat people? Does a fat activist, who has lost weight and is no longer socially defined as fat, still belong to the group?[15]

Third, fat is an unstable, relational category (Hopkins, 2011), which varies significantly in relation to social, cultural and geographical contexts. A person can lose weight, which makes fat a temporally unstable category, and there is also significant variance in the experiences of people of different sizes who are labeled as fat. Some US fat activists distinguish between 'inbetweenies,' who are relatively 'small' fat people who enjoy privileges such as 'passing' as thin or 'on their way to being' thin, and 'death fats,' who suffer the worst of the sanctions society places on fat people (McMichael, 2010). On the basis of which criteria should the fat acceptance group define who is considered fat?

The fat acceptance movement has dealt with these challenges by constructing two ideal subjects: the 'resisting' fat subject and/or the 'real' fat subject.

The first, 'resisting' type, was especially important for the fat acceptance movement in the USA (Murray, 2008; McMichael, 2010; Meleo-Erwin, 2011), New Zealand (Longhurst, 2011) and Britain (Cooper, 1998; Colls, 2012). In this context, members who are not able to fully accept their fat bodies, either by wanting to lose weight or by actually losing weight, are regarded as a threat to the integrity of the movement's political messages of self-acceptance (Cooper & Murray, 2012). These members become caught 'in a new web of shame and guilt' (Cooper, 1998, p. 56).

The second type of subject, the 'real' fat subject, is important for all fat acceptance groups. It indicates these groups' preoccupation with identifying who is fat enough to participate in the movement. LeBesco (2004, p. 106) quotes an Internet post relating to 'internal dissent over appropriate minimum weight' to participate in activities of an online fat acceptance group. Similar tensions arise when smaller fat people ('inbetweenies') are regarded as 'too small' to qualify as representative of the fat

[15] Another tension arises in relation to the fat acceptance movement's treatment of health issues. In general, many fat activists respond to the medicalization of fatness by claiming that fat people can be as healthy as thin or average-sized people. Consequently, some fat people who cannot or do not lead a 'healthy lifestyle' may feel excluded from the movement (Meleo-Erwin, 2012). In addition, some

acceptance movement (McMichael, 2010). These debates carry the risk of creating internal hierarchies inside the movement and distancing potential allies.

The Israeli Context

According to an official report of the Israeli parliament's Research Unit, over 30% of Israeli adults are defined as 'overweight' and 15% are considered 'obese.' In line with global trends, people from lower socio-economic rungs are 'fatter' than more affluent groups (Rabinowitch, 2009). Health authorities express alarm regarding the rise of 'obesity' and 'overweight.' Accordingly, Israel is starting to catch up with the USA in the development of anti-fat policies (Tirosh, 2012). In November 2011, four years after a state comptroller's report argued that the reduction of fatness should be a national target, the Israeli government approved an NIS 200 million ($55 million) program 'to promote a healthy lifestyle' that almost exclusively focuses on weight reduction, e.g. by forbidding selling foods with high amounts of trans fat, or regulating food commercials during prime time (Maor, 2011). The media coverage of this program revealed a striking similarity to US public discourse, referring to fatness with militaristic terminology ('war' or 'battle'), or terminology associated with contagious diseases ('epidemic') to describe it (Maor, 2011).

One of the most extreme medical 'treatments' of fatness, bariatric surgery—which typically involves gastric binding, or the removal of part of the stomach, to reduce stomach size—has become increasingly popular in Israel. According to the Israel Surgical Association, the number of bariatric surgeries performed in Israel rose from 1500 in 2006 to 3600 in 2009 (Yas'ur Beit-Or, 2010). Recently, the Israeli Ministry of Health (2009) published guidelines for performing bariatric surgery on minors.

In the cultural sphere, many fat-phobic US cultural products have been adapted and popularized in Israel, including the reality show 'The Biggest Loser' and accounts of weight-loss narratives published in health magazines. Two anti-fat scientific articles that were widely publicized in the USA ('blaming' fat individuals for causing global warming and for infecting their closest friends and families with 'obesity') were translated into Hebrew and published in leading Israeli newspapers (Maor, 2012a).

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larger fat people feel that they cross the limit of what counts as 'reasonable' fatness within the

This public atmosphere shapes how fat people view themselves and how they are seen by others. Negative stereotypes regarding fat people, including laziness, stupidity, and ugliness, are widely prevalent among fat people who underwent bariatric surgery (Rubin et al., 1994) and health professionals (Fogelman et al., 2002).

Methodology

This article is based on a study that explores the ways in which fat women in Israel challenge dominant discourse surrounding their bodies and the resources they draw upon. Many of the women interviewed for the study described how membership in the Israeli fat acceptance community was an essential resource enabling them to resist cultural anti-fat messages. This led me to undertake an in-depth examination of this community, which began with the establishment of an Internet forum devoted to the subject in 2002.

Data for this analysis was derived from four different sources:

(1) Interviews with two of the founders and key figures in the online community.

(2) Interviews with five members of the community, two of whom are actively involved in offline events and gatherings.

(3) Content analysis of posts and debates in the community's Internet forum. The Internet forum is in the public domain and is therefore accessible to all Hebrew speakers. In such cases, it is considered ethical to use posted materials for research purposes. The nicknames used were replaced by pseudonyms, to protect the forum members' privacy. 'Shmenot veyafot' (Fat and Beautiful Women in Hebrew) is a public Internet forum, available at: http://www.tapuz.co.il/forums2008/forumPage.aspx?forumId%399.

(4) Interviews with five self-identified fat[16] women who took a critical view of the community and preferred not to join it. This last source was pivotal for understanding the community's boundaries.

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movement (McMichael, 2010).

[16] Defining who is fat by means of medical measurements, such as the body mass index (BMI), is experienced as oppressive by many individuals, as it reinforces oppressive medical values (Cooper, 1998). Hence, participants were recruited according to subjective self-definition, validated by the participants' reports of anti-fat social sanctions. Participants who stated during the interviews that they

Pseudonyms are used for all interviewees, with the exception of the two key figures who agreed to be identified by name: Lior Rotem-Gordon (26 years old), a marketing specialist who was a forum administrator for six years, and Ofer Eitan (31 years old), a computer expert who was an administrator for over eight years. All those who feature with pseudonyms were female, heterosexual, and Jewish. Levels of educational achievement varied from high school diploma holders (3) to university graduates with a BA (6) or an MA (1). The interviewees' ages ranged from 19 to 45, with all but two ranging from 23 to 33. All interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, and face-to-face, in a location preferred by the interviewees (usually a café). All interviews took place in Israel, between October 2009 and October 2011, with two more interviews in October 2012. They lasted one to three hours and were sometimes spread out over two meetings. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

As there is no official record of the members of the community, statistical sampling of the movement is not possible. Like other prominent studies of social movements (Kirkland, 2008), the present article relies on a purposive sample, and I do not make any claims for representativeness or comprehensiveness of individual members. However, the community/movement is more than merely the sum of its members. The spirit of the community also manifests in the permanent links in the Internet forum that serve official descriptions of the community, and the ideological and practical decisions that the community achieves over time. The present article intends to offer an interpretation of a potential model of collective identity the Israeli community has established. Overall, 12 in-depth interviews were conducted until 'data saturation' was reached, a number within the range of what most studies consider sufficient for saturation (Guest et al., 2006). To increase validity, a preliminary draft of the article was sent to the two key figures of the community for additional commentary and to ensure accurate representation of participants' statements.

sometimes feel fat and sometimes do not, or who did not report any negative social sanctions connected to their weight, were excluded from the study.

Results and Discussion

The inception of the Israeli fat acceptance community can be traced to the foundation of an Internet forum devoted to this issue, on a leading Israeli Internet portal in March 2002. According to Eitan's estimate, at any given period the community comprises between 20 and 30 individuals who participate in offline gatherings, between 50 and 70 regular, active participants in the forum, and hundreds of passive readers of the forum.

The community is especially prominent because of the dearth of 'fat acceptance' researchers and professionals (Saguy & Riley, 2005) who play an important role in the US fat acceptance movement. In Israel, there is only one prominent 'fat acceptance' professional, Ayelet Kelter (Mcs.R), a clinical dietician, who participated in a program of the fat acceptance organization HEAS (Health At Every Size) in the USA and has also published a book and articles in the Israeli media.

Between Virtual and Material Space

The Israeli movement is highly dependent on virtual space, as the Internet forum is the community's closest approximation of an 'official' organization. Virtual space is also used by the community to promote public awareness of fat acceptance issues. Because the forum is hosted on a major Internet portal, messages and discussion threads from the forum appear from time to time on the portal's home page. This increases exposure to fat pride topics and topics related to fat oppression, and is one of the ways the community recruits new members.

Despite the centrality of virtual space for the Israeli movement, it also operates as a platform for many offline political activities and social gatherings outside virtual space. These activities offer members' opportunities to materialize and embody fat acceptance values that were developed and conceived of in the online forum.

This materialization of fat acceptance values frequently takes place during social gatherings, which, at the peak of activity, were held every three weeks. These meetings, which include both community members and friends who identify with the movement's values, are held in different parts of the country to allow all members to participate. The venues also vary, from cafés, restaurants and karaoke bars to visits to

the beach or swimming pools. On occasion, gatherings last several days where the community rents cabins for a shared weekend retreat.

Between Political Activism and Personal Empowerment

The Israeli movement's goals are characterized by a duality. Like the American movement (Sobal, 1999; Kirkland, 2008), it simultaneously seeks to promote broad social change and to support and empower its own members, as a sub-group of society at large. In reality, political activism and individual empowerment are not mutually exclusive goals. Many members reported being greatly empowered on a personal level when performing political actions.

Beyond enhancing a sense of fraternity between members (Hohle, 2009, 2010) and publicly affirming the fat body (Saguy & Ward, 2011), the community's offline gatherings offered a chance to enjoy many mundane activities that are taken for granted by thin people, but are problematic for fat people because of fat oppression (Hopkins, 2011). The possibility of re-experiencing and performing the activities in the supportive presence of community members provides a chance for the application of newer, more positive forms of knowledge onto the 'fat' body. Once a series of more positive experiences accumulates, members are able to live life at its fullest without postponing gratification until they have lost weight:

> Natalie: For many years, I clung to the idea that I needed to lose weight in order to be happy; that I needed to lose weight in order to meet a partner; that I needed to lose weight in order to lead a full life, to enjoy life, to love myself and be happy. But in recent years, I found out that this is bullshit, that I can be happy and live a full life 40 kg overweight. And this point is precisely the essence of the forum. (Interview, Tel Aviv, November 2009)

The choice to download photos to the community's Internet forum, and by doing so, gradually and selectively expose one's body to a supportive audience, is a source of self- empowerment that is only possible in virtual space. Many new members attach a picture to the first message they post in the forum—usually of their face and body. Other members of the community can then become a source of support and positive reinforcement regarding one's body. The following quote, posted by a new member, is illustrative:

> Limor[17]: 'Hello, my name is ☺ [...] and I hate my body /. I was always a full-figured girl, chubby [...] big [...] anyway [...] I thought that it would be nice to attach a photo, just so you have a clue' (message posted in the Internet forum, May 2009).

In most cases, the women receive supportive and positive reactions to such posts, for example:

> Oren: 'I'm not a regular in the forum. I accidently came in today. I must tell you that although I can understand the way you feel, you look just gorgeous. You have a well-proportioned, sexy body and a beautiful face' (message posted in the Internet forum, May 2009).

The scope and variety of actions organized by the Israeli movement are more limited than those of the American movement. The relatively small number of members limits the potential effectiveness of practices and activities that are more common in the USA and require mass participation, such as boycotts or the production of glossy magazines (Sobal, 1999).

The Israeli community has engaged in various forms of political activism such as letter- writing campaigns, producing a fashion show for fat women, and distributing a calendar displaying fat women, all aimed at drawing public attention to issues such as discrimination against individuals perceived as fat. The Israeli movement has succeeded, for example, in persuading a popular Israeli writer to change the fat-phobic content of a book she authored. For the events of the international 'anti-diet' day in 2006, 2007 and 2008, the movement initiated an action to promote awareness and to change the general public's fat-related attitudes by setting up stands in the center of Tel Aviv. While issues of occupational and legal discrimination are frequently raised in the Internet forum, the Israeli movement has not been involved in legal protection like the US-based fat acceptance movement has (Saguy & Riley, 2005).

Negotiating the Boundaries of the Movement

[17] Although it is ethical to research public Internet forums, posters in the Internet forum received pseudonyms to maximize their privacy.

The ideas and norms that characterize mainstream attitudes toward fat bodies are one of the major forces that shape the identity of fat subjects. Israeli community members are usually united in recognizing that experiences of fat oppression shape the lives of fat people, and define the boundaries of their group on the basis of these experiences, refusing to exclude potential members on the basis of their current body size or ability to fully accept their body. This attitude is reflected in the group's ideological and practical debates. One such debate is related to the gender orientation of the community, an issue that has been constantly discussed since the group was established. On the one hand, the community attempts to appeal to fat women in particular, as most members (including key ones) are convinced that fat women suffer greater and more extreme negative social sanctions than men. On the other hand, participants recognize that fat men also suffer from discrimination, and that thus far there is only one fat acceptance community in Israel, which ought to be a home for all.

This tension can be discerned in the description of the forum as it appears on the website.[18] The forum is depicted as addressing fat women particularly, and men are only addressed to the extent that their partners are fat women, and not necessarily in relation to their being 'fat' themselves:

> How many times have you, the fat and beautiful [woman], walked down the street with piercing glances directed at you, signaling, shouting, 'Hey, what a fat woman, what a huge [woman], how does she dare walk around like that?' Or how many times have you {male} walked, unconcerned, down the street with your big {female} partner and heard people whispering, 'How does he hang around with this fat woman?' This forum is for you, for us—big women and the men who love them. (Permanent message posted under 'About the forum', n.d.)

At the same time, another description carries a gender-neutral tone:

> The forum is intended for women and men, fat women and fat men, and for the people who love them, yet not only for them, but for all those who feel the need to change the situation whereby [only] a uniform, social beauty-ideal of slenderness

[18] In the context of the Israeli movement, in which the forum serves as the most official venue and provides a platform for the movement's most continuous activity, its messages serve as the closest thing to an official publication.

> [exists] and to abolish discrimination against fat people in Israeli society and in the whole world. (Permanent message posted under 'About the forum', n.d.)

Unlike English, Hebrew is a gendered language, in which the masculine form is used as the general form to address groups that include both men and women. According to the official language use rules formulated by the Academy of the Hebrew Language, feminine plural gender forms should only be used to address an exclusively female audience. This rule is largely accepted by all Hebrew speakers. The decision to phrase the forum's name in feminine grammatical form was intended to challenge the linguistic convention that when addressing an audience with a female majority the language should be in plural masculine form. Eitan states that, '[e]very once in a while someone raises the question [why is the forum's name in feminine and not in the general, masculine form]. I tell them that there is nothing wrong with that [...] we [...] [identify] with feminism' (interview, Tel-Aviv, January 2010).

The community's focus on fat women is also apparent in the name chosen for the Internet forum, a direct Hebrew translation of a specific idiom associated with the American fat acceptance movement: 'Big, Beautiful Women.'

The gender debate[19] clarifies the mechanism through which the group defines fat identity and its boundaries on the basis of experiences of social oppression. The graver social sanctions on 'fat' women are the explicit rationale behind the decision to focus on women (despite the ambition to represent all fat people), according to Rotem-Gordon: '[T]his is a question that is constantly raised. Why "fat" (shmenot) and "beautiful" (yafot) in feminine form [...] because the main problem [...] is that the majority of the social [negative] attitudes [toward] physical appearance are directed at women [...]' (interview, Tel Aviv, April 2010).

A second debate, which is relevant to forming the community's boundaries around experiences of oppression, concerns the tension between the ideology of acceptance at every size and the valorization of fat. The community's clear choice of acceptance over valorization signals its commitment to an identity based on shared experiences rather than on actual or current body size.

[19] Besides awareness of the gendered aspects of fat oppression, other topics of importance to Israeli feminism, such as motherhood, military service, and political representation of women, were not raised in the community's Internet forum or during personal interviews.

When facing a climate of anti-fat messages, fat activists may choose to struggle to eliminate prejudices related to appearance, so that 'fatness or thinness becomes meaningless' (Crowder, 1998, p. 60). They can also choose to valorize larger bodies (Crowder, 1998).

The promotion of self-acceptance at every size means struggling against all forms of social oppression that are based on bodily differences. This struggle signals the aspiration to empower any person who does not fit the beauty ideal. Such an approach is also resistant to the hazard of creating an anti-thin atmosphere as a mirror image of current mainstream attitudes toward the fat body. This ideology is also persistent with socially progressive conceptions used by other social movements, such as gay rights movements that promote recognition of 'the importance of authenticity, value of diversity, critique of pressures to conform' (Saguy & Ward, 2011, p. 55).

The valorization of fat bodies, on the other hand, carries the risk of creating a tight-knit, hermetically defined group of fat people, undermining the opportunity to establish alliances with other groups. Nonetheless, several authors point out that in a cultural climate of rejection, declaring that beauty that lies outside the body is simply not enough. Only explicit valorization and assertion of the beauty and grace of fat bodies can lead to significant fat acceptance (e.g. Hill, 2009).

In its early stages, the Israeli community was characterized by an ideology of valorization of 'fat.' As the group evolved, members increasingly felt uncomfortable with what they perceived as an anti-slim atmosphere, an unintentional by-product of this attitude:

> Eitan: At one time, the dynamic was very [.. .] it was extremely anti-slenderness. Instead [of being anti-fat] we were actually anti-slim [.. .] It was very pro-fat but very anti-slim .. . It was a little bit awkward to be slim, just like you felt anxious being fat [in other places], it was the feeling that this is our club and that slim people are not welcome. That was the atmosphere [.. .] After a few months, step-by-step, the atmosphere was increasingly diverted to the direction of accepting everybody of every size. (Interview, Tel Aviv, January 2010)

The ideological shift was registered in the official description of the forum, which was written around this time, and invoked an ideology of acceptance regardless of body size:

> No, self-acceptance is not a code name for encouragement to get fat. Self-acceptance encourages people to live life to its fullest, to fulfill themselves and their goals in life, without waiting until they lose weight. Many of us have waited for years until 'the day comes and I will lose weight.' Some of us have avoided going to the beach, or going out on a date, or even going on a job interview we really wanted, all out of fear that we would be rejected on the grounds of our being overweight [...]. (Permanent message posted under 'The spirit and ideas of the forum', n.d.)

This description demonstrates the extent to which the collective identity of the movement is defined by shared experiences of living in a size-biased society. Such a definition reflects an inclusive orientation, indicating that the community accepts both individuals who were fat and lost weight, and individuals who are not necessarily defined as fat (mostly women) but nonetheless experience social oppression based on their body size. This results in a definition of a collective fat identity, which challenges mainstream conceptions of this identity as derivative of a person's kilos or 'pounds of flesh':

> Rotem-Gordon: Sometimes a reporter does not really understand this, and then, for instance, he might ask 'so how much do you weigh?' Now, this is totally not the issue because you have what is called a 'fat mentality.' If I only weigh 70 kg but feel like the fattest person there is, and I get comments [about my weight] and people harass me and it really, really bothers me, then it [i.e. actual size] is not relevant. (Interview, Tel Aviv, April 2010)

The Positive Effects of the Community's Collective Identity

As mentioned, constructing the boundaries of the fat acceptance movement around a 'unitary resisting subject' often entails a lack of tolerance for ambivalence and ambiguity, and exclusion of members who have lost weight; and defining boundaries on the basis of a 'real' fat subject may lead to exclusion of members deemed 'not fat enough.'

The Israeli community's choice to frame its boundaries on the basis of shared social experiences reduces both types of tension. From time to time, members worry that if they lose weight they will also lose their place in the community. However, they are usually reassured by other members, and by key figures, that they will still belong. For example, in regards to frequently posted posts that ask 'I lost weight, do I still belong here?' Eitan affirms: 'She still belongs here.' : And someone who was thin from the beginning?] She also belongs. Weight is not necessarily the most important thing. It is .. . the affiliation' (interview, Tel Aviv, January 2010; emphasis added).

A post from the Internet forum supports this line of argument:

> Orna: Those who already know me recognize my self-acceptance. So what happened? Why did I suddenly remember that I wanted, again, to lose [weight] [...] I feel as though I am leaving the community—the community of the fat and the brave. I may yet return to this community, but to speak about a smile, acceptance and happiness from [a position] of 60 kg does not quite excite me; it is much braver to speak of these [things] from the position of my [current] weight. (Message posted on the Internet forum, May 2009).

Rotem-Gordon replies, with the authority of her role as forum administrator:

> I know these feelings so well. When I began to lose weight and saw that the weight loss was ongoing, I got really scared. I was worried that I would lose my interest in the forum or that the forum [the community] would lose interest in me. I worried that it would no longer be legitimate to speak about self-acceptance. And perhaps [I experienced] even a sense of self-betrayal. As time passed by, I realized that nothing had changed. (Message posted on the Internet forum, May 2009)

She then continues to articulate a conception of fat identity based on past experiences of oppression:

> Rotem-Gordon: Even when my weight went down, I felt everything I felt before [having lost weight], perhaps even with greater intensity .. . I believe that regardless of my actual weight I will always be fat [.. .] I will always look differently at fat individuals on the street, I will always feel that this [the forum] is my home. I wish you plenty of luck in your choice [to lose weight] and I promise

> you that you will always have a place in my heart and in the forum, even if you lose weight. (Message posted on the Internet forum, May 2009)

Rotem-Gordon's reference, quoted above, to the fact that she 'will always look differently at fat individuals on the street' indicates that the group's notion of collective identity may be an instance of 'epistemic privilege,' as described in feminist theories (e.g. Harding, 1996). Shared experiences of social oppression generate a form of collective identity that is endowed with specific, positive content, not because of biological essentialism but because of a shared viewpoint. The shared marginal position of individuals whose identity was shaped by common social experiences has the potential, in turn, to generate unique and valid knowledge, which is more accurate than knowledge based on the experiences of those who occupy a central position in society (Harding, 1996).

By applying 'standpoint theory' to the subject matter of this article, one can see that the shared marginal position in relation to the tyranny of slenderness can lead to epistemic privilege. Individuals who suffer social oppression on the basis of their body size are more likely to understand others who are oppressed:

> Natalie: Fat women can understand things that others cannot. (Interview, Tel Aviv, November 2009)

> Rotem-Gordon: Yes, I lost weight, but the fact is that I also regained the weight and having lost weight does not mean that I forget what I was and ... I think that even if I were thin today, I could not regard [being fat] as something bad or as a sign of neglect .. . I really understand where they [fat people] come from. (Interview, Tel Aviv, April 2010)

This indicates that the group's adoption of epistemic privilege is directly connected to their members' acceptance of ambiguity and contradictions. The joint perspective reconciles the wish to exit the fat category (at least to some extent) and the desire to celebrate fat identity 'as a site of culture and knowledge' (Kirkland, 2008): two ambitions which are often assumed to be contradictory.

The epistemic privilege of 'fat' identity not only limits to understanding the experiences of other 'fat' people, but also facilitates an analysis of relevant cultural phenomena:

> Rotem-Gordon: [It is important] not to develop hatred toward [...] the weight you once had [...] I see 'The Biggest Loser' and they bring the participants cardboard figures of how they looked before the weight loss, and they start crying and saying: 'How did I do that to myself, how did I let myself go [...].' Now, a day after the show, most likely, as happens to the majority of contestants, you will gain that weight back. (Interview, Tel Aviv, April 2010)

While Rebecca, for example, had a rich social life before her involvement in the community, it was only in the context of her participation that she found others who were able to identify with her from the position of a 'fat' person in a fat-phobic society. By promoting the idea of fat identity as an epistemic privilege, Israeli movement members are able to validate the knowledge they acquired from their personal experiences.

Members of the US-based fat acceptance movement also rely on their personal experiences as a valid source of knowledge to respond to ad hominem arguments that fat activists 'simply making excuses for their weight' (Saguy & Riley, 2005, p. 906). However, US activists can also rely on more professional knowledge created by an elaborate web of 'fat acceptance' activists and health professionals.

Limitations of the Group's Collective Identity

Talya and Rina prefer not to take part in the community on the basis that it is not inclusive enough. They argue that there are no significant differences between social sanctions directed against various bodies that deviate from the norm, and refuse to limit their identification to people who have experienced 'fat oppression.' For instance, when asked,

'Do you feel that your fat friends can understand things that cannot be understood by friends who are not fat?' Talya replied:

> No, I have all kinds of friends. I have thin friends who can understand what I am going through because they are too thin. I have a friend who [...] is a very petite and very skinny girl [...] In the course of the interview, Talya explained that her friend has a medical problem that causes extreme slenderness] and she suffers like me [...] she cannot find clothes, she is occupied with food all day long, people dish out comments at her on the street, everyone tells her that she is sick [.. .] So

what, because she is thin she supposedly has no problems? She is screwed over by the other side of the spectrum [.. .] people ask her on the street if she is anorexic [.. .] Is that not a bit of a personal question? (Interview, Tel Aviv, November 2009)

Another vein of criticism was that membership entails a reduction of one's identity to being fat. Anya and Rina, who prefer not to take part in the community, articulated this as follows:

Anya: I do not celebrate being fat. I am fat, that is a part of me and that is it. It is part of my identity, like being a woman, being a feminist, being a friend, a daughter, a sister [.. .] a social worker, volunteering at the crisis center [for victims of sexual assault] [.. .] feeding stray cats and raising cats as pets, or all kinds of other stuff. And alongside all of my other identities I am also fat, but it is not what defines me. (Interview, Tel Aviv, October 2009)

Rina: I do not seek social ties with girls on the basis of 'Hey, you are fat, will you be my friend'? [.. .] I don't have [.. .] the need to search for fat friends to feel fat together [.. .] I never had the desire of 'Hey, you're fat, me—I'm fat, let's get together,' never .. . I look for common interests [not related] to external [appearance] [.. .] musical preference, political views, same college major, same work place, same unit in the military. (Interview, Tel Aviv, December 2009)

Precisely because mainstream society reduces them to mere body size, these women refuse to spend time with others on this basis and thus validate the reduction of their identity: 'Obese people are fat first, and only secondarily are seen as possessing ancillary characteristics' (Degher & Hughes, 1999, p. 12).

Anya: I think that I refuse .. . to accept this [i.e. being fat] as what defines me precisely because of the social oppression. Because, before being seen as a woman or as a social worker or as all sorts of other things, first of all I am seen as fat, but [...] it is true that I am fat but I am not just fat, I have a bunch of other things. (Interview, Tel Aviv, October 2009)

The mere concept of a fat acceptance movement opens itself up to the same kind of criticism. Grouping on the basis of weight, sharing weight-related experiences, and practicing fat activism entails the positioning of the fat body, or of one's status as fat, at center stage, even if on this occasion it is not done in the service of social

oppression but rather in the service of social liberation. It seems that true freedom from preoccupation with body size is still reserved for those who possess a supposedly transparent one: the slender body, which is not constructed as a social problem. Just as a man can experience himself as the unmarked case of 'a person' without specifying his gender, and white people can experience themselves as colorless, so too, the ability to experience or not experience one's body as a significant factor in one's life (for example, as an obstacle) may be a privilege reserved for thin people. However, the Israeli group's choice to place such emphasis on experiences of social oppression may aggravate this problem. Members engage in constant conversations about stigma-related experiences to justify their belonging to the group. As social sanctions regarding the fat body are perceived as a major force in the shaping of fat identity, they are likely to remain at the center of debates for purposes of emotional processing.

In addition, many of the group's activities focus on stigma change it. Even if being preoccupied with fatness arises out of recognition of fat oppression, this may ultimately be a limiting experience for the community members, due to the reduction of the multi- layered and multi-faceted subjectivity of the individual to a reduced subjectivity whose most dominant aspect is the fat body. Preoccupation with weight and weight-related oppressing experiences also led some participants who preferred not to take part in the community to question the authenticity of the group's ability to encourage self-acceptance or empowerment.

If collective identity had been defined on the basis of a 'real' fat subject as characterized by current, actual weight, then being fat could theoretically only constitute an issue in respect to entry into the group. From that point onward, intra-group conversations and activities could be centered on a variety of topics, and not necessarily on stigma. Alternatively, if the community's boundaries were constructed around a 'resisting subject,' the content, conversations, and posts could address discourses of 'self- acceptance' and 'self-love,' and members would not feel 'stuck' in experiences of social oppression. Another path which may avoid reduction to fat identity is offered by fat acceptance groups that tackle other forms of asymmetrical power relations, such as sexual identity or class, i.e. 'Hybrid queer fat activist spaces

that are fun and which engage with other stuff beyond just fat' (Cooper & Murray, 2012, p. 134).

Conclusion

Despite the lack of direct cooperation with the US-based fat acceptance movement, the Israeli community is profoundly affected by its American counterpart. This influence is explicitly acknowledged by the community's members, and reflected in the forum's name, in the importation of various activities practiced in the US community and in the dual commitment to social change and individual empowerment that characterizes both movements.

During the four decades in which the US movement has existed, it has had several leaders or 'crusaders' who dedicated themselves to fat acceptance as a full-time job. In contrast, the few leaders of the Israeli movement hold other jobs and practice fat acceptance in their spare time. They have also not succeeded in raising money from commercial groups to sponsor their activities. Under these circumstances, the Internet forum emerged as the primary continuous activity of the community, since maintaining it does not necessitate keeping employees on a payroll.

The movement's reliance on the Internet can exclude certain groups. For example, in different parts of Israel, especially in economically impoverished areas or in religious communities, many individuals do not have access to the Internet. This means that, like the American movement, the majority of members in the Israeli community belong to the middle-upper class (Sobal, 1999; Kirkland, 2008). In fact, all the community members interviewed for this article were middle-upper class. In addition, the vast majority of participants in the Israeli community are Jewish and secular. Future studies should examine what resources are available for the development of fat acceptance among other groups in Israel.

During personal interviews, community members welcomed the participation of LGTBs, but no specific mention or references to gays exists in the Internet forum's 'About' page. Moreover, these materials frequently promote a hetero-normative world view by specifically addressing 'fat women and the men who love them.' Conversely, during interviews for another study (Maor, 2012b), self-identified fat women who

stated that membership in queer-lesbian communities allowed them to assign positive value to their bodies were ignorant of the existence of the fat acceptance community. The lack of alliances between the two communities, despite the similar goal of social acceptance, may be a weakening factor for the Israeli community. This becomes particularly evident when viewed against the experience of the fat acceptance movement in the USA, where interrelations between queer-lesbian communities who endorse fat acceptance have diffused and proliferated, contributing significantly to the movement's development since its inception (Hill, 2009).

Despite the community's young age and its relatively small membership, it has had impressive success in reaching Israel's general public, especially on the cultural level. As mentioned, several popular and mainstream media actors in Israel have approached the community and asked members to represent its spirit and goals, and pejorative references to fat women were removed from a children's book by a popular author. By introducing a fat women's calendar and fashion show, community members initiated preliminary steps toward introducing fat images of beauty as an alternative to thin beauty ideals.

Yet, the community's most important achievement may be the model of inclusive collective identity that it has developed. On the down side, this model may aggravate a vulnerability which is common to all fat acceptance movements that hold anti-essentialist definitions of identity: that members will be limited by a constant preoccupation with their body size. At the same time, it is important to refute the conservative claim that groups which challenge social oppression also crystallize such oppression; fat acceptance communities are not the cause of mainstream preoccupation with the 'fat' body, nor are they the cause of their members' preoccupation with it; they are reactions to this preoccupation. The tensions they deal with therefore offer insights into the broader questions of resistance and activism of other oppressed groups.

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Chapter 4: Stories that matter: Subverting the before-and-after weight-loss narrative

Contemporary scholarship does not pay enough attention to stigma in relation to its temporal status; i.e. temporary and changeable or permanent. The present article links the study of sociology of time, de-stigmatization strategies and narrative resistance through a case study of individuals who are stigmatized on the basis of an attribute perceived as temporary and changeable - fatness. Conducting a comparative analysis of before-and-after weight-loss articles appearing in an Israeli online health magazine, I examine how these narratives marginalize fat people by presenting fatness as temporary and changeable. I then compare these narratives to life narratives produced by Israeli-Jewish women, who self-identify as fat. Participants subvert mainstream narratives in two ways: (1) assigning the fat body to "After", thereby challenging the temporary and transient status of fatness; (2) subverting other discursive characteristics of Before-and-After Weight-Loss. As a result, participants produce valid knowledge and social criticism from a stable *fat* subject position.

Introduction

On the basis of a comparative analysis of BAWLN (before-and-after-weight-loss-narratives) articles appearing in an Israeli online health magazine, I examine how BAWLN marginalized fat people in the Israeli context by presenting fatness as temporary and changeable. I then compare these mainstream narratives to life narratives produced by five Israeli-Jewish women, who self-identify as fat. This comparison uncovers the schemas used for subverting BAWLN.

BAWLN are subverted in two ways. First, while in mainstream narratives the fat body is always assigned to the "Before" category (Kent 2001; Levy-Navarro 2009), subversive narratives assign the fat body to "After", thereby challenging the temporary and transient status of fatness. Second, participants subvert other discursive characteristics of BAWLN: they emphasize a social context over an isolated protagonist; they prefer methodical caution over a prescriptive tone; their narratives leave room for ambiguity rather than evoking certainty and authority; and they

achieve their transition to "After" with the help of alternative communities and not the help of professionals.

Based on a sample of 5 in-depth interviews, the present article does not make any claims to representativeness and cannot determine the prevalence of the subversion techniques described. At the same time, analyzing and exploring these subversive narratives offers several significant theoretical contributions.

Firstly, only a few scholars have tackled the role of narratives in the creation of stigma and in de-stigmatization strategies. The few works that have developed the concept of "narrative resistance" have not connected it to the literature on de-stigmatization strategies. As a result, they have neglected strategies that actively challenge stigma, instead of rehabilitating individual identity by distancing oneself from the stigmatized group. In addition, previous works have only examined how stigmatized groups "borrow" counter-hegemonic narratives that have proven successful in another group's struggle (Meyer and Whittier 1994; Saguy and Ward 2011). The present article expands the understanding of narrative resistance by exploring the theoretical mechanism through which stigmatized individuals are able to re-appropriate hegemonic narratives in the service of struggles for social change.

Secondly, stigma has been examined in light of a wide range of factors, including cross-cultural settings, the nature of the stigmatizing attribute and its visibility (Saguy and Ward 2011). However, most works do not examine stigma in relation to its temporal status; i.e. whether the attribute that is stigmatized is considered temporary and changeable or permanent and innate. By analyzing a case study of individuals who are stigmatized on the basis of an attribute perceived as temporary and changeable – fatness - through the lenses of sociology of time, I show how challenging the temporary and transient status of fatness serves as a strategy that has the potential to "undo" the stigma associated with fatness.

Finally, the article contributes to the interdisciplinary field of fat studies. Some of the works in this field challenge the alleged causal relationship between fat and poor health (e.g. Burgard 2009; Muennig, 2008), while others engage with social and cultural aspects of fatness (e.g. Murray, 2008 Kent 2001; LeBesco 2004), arguing that the significant discrimination and exclusion fat people are subjected to in many life areas (Degher and Hughs 1999; Puhl and Heure 2009), cannot be explained or

justified on the basis of health alone. The present study expands the understating how fat people are able to re-appropriate hegemonic BAWLN, which are used to repress fat people and pressure them to become thin.

The article also expands the geographical scope of fat studies. While the prevalence of anti-fat messages in Israel is similar to those of other Western counties, including the U.S (e.g. Fogelman et al., 2002; Stone & Werner, 2012), Israel is characterized by a relative scarcity of organized fat acceptance groups and communities. In this context, understanding the ability of fat individuals to creatively resist fat stigma by practicing an everyday activity of storytelling is especially important.

Literature review

Since the publication of the classic work "Stigma: notes on the management of a spoiled identity" (Goffman 1963), the concept of stigma has received significant attention from scholars of all social sciences (Yang et al. 2007). From a sociological vantage point, stigma is conceptualized as social processes that produce macro-level and micro-level cognitive labeling and categorizing of groups, relying on an unequal distribution of power in society (Kleinman and Hall-Clifford 2009). In turn, stigma reinforces these social hierarchies by limiting and negatively affecting stigmatized individuals and groups, damaging their sense of self worth, their actual life chances and opportunities, and even their physical and mental health (Sykes and Mcphail 2008; Dickins et al. 2011).

The temporal construction of stigma

Stigmatization works differently and its effects vary across different stigmatized groups and among members of each group. The differences that have received the most attention in recent scholarship are those related to different cultural settings, to the source of stigma (i.e. unemployment, mental illness, physical illness), and recently, to the visibility of stigma (i.e. whether the stigmatizing condition is apparent or not) (Link and Phelan 2001; Saguy and Ward 2011).

Sociologists of time have pointed out how seemingly natural and universal collective time tables, defined period and temporal distinctions, are in fact man made, and are used to instill meaning, to inform and to govern many areas of life, such as family

life, aging and old age, and the labor marker (Lahad, 2012). Furthermore, a significant proportion of these works examine how notions of time are inextricably woven into different matrixes of social power relations, for example, in the concept of "waiting" (Crapanzano, 1985; Schwartz, 1975; Auyero, 2010).

Given the strong emphasis on power relations, the temporal construction of stigma - whether the stigmatizing attribute is perceived as temporary and changeable or permanent and inborn - has received surprisingly little attention. Stigmatized attributes such as gender, race or disability are usually (but not always) perceived to be permanent and/or inborn. However, there are some bodily traits which produce stigma but are nonetheless considered temporary, yet are considered negative at any age. These traits include certain types of illness, as well as fatness – which will be the focus of the present article.

The temporal distinction between permanence and transience is important in producing a series of dichotomies, such as immigrant/local, Third World/First World, educated/ uneducated, or, singlehood/family life. These dichotomies are reminiscent of other binary pairs identified by second-wave feminist scholars, e.g. male/female and body/mind (Grosz 1994). Within each pair, the valued and devalued terms are co-dependent in respect to meaning. For example, the First World acquires its meaning in relation to the devalued Third World, just as the mind is defined in relation to the devalued body.

However, the dichotomies that are produced by the distinction between permanence and transience have an additional characteristic. In this type of dichotomy, the devalued pole or mode of being is perceived as temporary and changeable. Unlike gender or skin color, which are perceived as innate qualities, in a world that values slenderness, being fat is considered a failure caused by individual faults. If these faults are corrected, the fat individual can become a thin person.

The fact that these devalued states are seen as transitory does not diminish the oppression of non-normative groups. The assumption of changeability means that these groups are seen as responsible for their situation, because they fail to change. Fat people are the last group that can still be legitimately harassed without violating the mores of political correctness (Puhl and Heuer 2009).

The construction of fat as temporary and changeable

The fat body's temporal and changeable status is, in fact, a key element in its contemporary visual and narrative representations in the West. There are many examples which illustrate the fascination with visual displays of manipulation leading to an extreme change in a person's body size (Kendrick 2008; Mendoza 2009). The visual presentation of the same protagonist as fat and as thin implies that body size is transitory; presenting the "thin" protagonist as successful, attractive and popular and the "fat" protagonist as ugly, miserable and an outsider implies that the fat body should be replaced by the thin body.

These assumptions are also present in published stories of individual BAWLN, which are very popular and appear in advertisements for weight-loss products and various magazines and newspapers (Kent 2001). BAWLN are another case of the proliferation of "reality" media representation that "supposedly presents unscripted situations, documents actual events, and features “ordinary people” rather than professional actors" (Graves and Kwan 2012).

The popularity and prominence of this narrative frame led many researchers to explore its role in perpetuating fat stigma. Levi-Navarro (2009) argues that the positions of "Before" and "After" are not empty vessels ready to be filled with any content. Certain groups or modes of being are privileged and assigned the position of "After", while others are devalued and assigned to "Before" (2009). Fat people are never culturally allowed to occupy the "After" position, and eternally remain outside its realm, being considered as inconsequential according to this logic of history (Levi-Navarro 2009). Consequently, the fat subject is constructed as liminal, an incomplete subject eternally in the process of "becoming" thin (Kent 2001; Kendrick 2008), and the assumption that weight loss, and exiting the "fat" category, is possible, is perpetuated (Kendrick 2008).

Destigmatization strategies and narrative resistance

Like members of other stigmatized groups, fat people are not just passive recipients of oppressive messages. Many fat individuals successfully and creatively resist their stigmatization, engaging in different forms of organized fat-acceptance groups and fat activism (Cooper 1998; Joanisse and Synnott 1999; Graves and Kwan 2012).

Sociologists refer to the strategies individuals employ in their everyday lives to minimize or counteract the effects of stigma as de-stigmatization strategies (Sykes and Mcphail 2008; Lamont 2009; Link and Phelan; Yang et al. 2007). De-stigmatization strategies are quite varied, and can include both confrontation and deflating conflict, educating ignorant others, or avoiding specific situations (Sykes and Mcphail 2008; Lamont 2009).

One of the possible de-stigmatization strategies is the construction of life stories which reject stigma. The literature on this type of strategy is very limited in scope and under-theorized. Frank, for example, has studied how people handle the negative images associated with illness through storytelling (2010), but without connecting it to de-stigmatization strategies. Drawing on research regarding aging, Ronai and Cross (1998) have developed the concept of "narrative resistance". Like Frank, they do not frame this form of resistance as de-stigmatization, or connect it to the literature on stigma. Instead, they use terms such as "labels", "categories" and "deviant identity", which they implicitly treat as a form of stigmatized identity, but without using that term.

Despite the lack of explicit theorizing, the concept of "narrative resistance" seems very relevant to scholarship on stigma and de-stigmatization, which has not sufficiently addressed the role of narrative. Cordell and Cross argue that individuals use "at-hand categories and typifications to retrospectively construct 'life'" in a meaningful and coherent narrative (Ronai and Cross 1998: 105). Members of groups perceived "unfavorably" by society possess only a limited ability to construct their "life narrative", due to the nature and content of the categories at their disposal, which Cordel and Ronai label "discursive constraints" (Cordell and Ronai 1999: 31). Limiting the discourse that members of groups may apply to the self allows society to control "a person or group of people… [by affecting] their behavior and how they think of themselves" (Cordell and Ronai 1999: 31). People can resist discursive constraints "by practicing narrative resistance and transforming negative labels into more positive terms" (Ronai and Cross 1998: 100).

So far, the few sociological works analyzing narrative resistance have defined it as the rehabilitation of personal identity through "demarcating… distancing or exempting" individual identity from the deviance associated with the group labeled as deviant

(e.g. Snow and Anderson, 1987; Ronai 1998; Cordell and Ronai 1999; Gimlin 2007). By treating narrative resistance as a de-stigmatization strategy, this article will attempt to extend the concept's scope to include strategies that actively challenge stigma itself, and not just distance the self from the stigmatized group.

Challenging stigma through narrative can be difficult when the storytelling tools that society offers tend to be highly stereotypical and stigmatizing themselves. Studies have shown that members of stigmatized groups often overcome this challenge, by making use of schemas or narratives that were found to be successful in other struggles for social change: a phenomenon referred to as "transposibility of schemas" or "social movement spillover" (Whittier 1994; Lamont 2009; Saguy and Ward 2011).

Saguy and Ward (2011) examine one example of this phenomenon which is particularly relevant for the present article. They show how fat activists borrow the "coming out" narrative, previously employed by gay people. In borrowing this narrative, they preserve some of its elements and revise others. "Coming out" does not mean revealing their fat identity, the way it does for gay people; instead, they "come out" by affirming their fat identity as a neutral or a positive one.

Potentially, individuals can tap an even greater cultural power by re-appropriating the hegemonic narratives themselves. Dominant cultural schemas or discourses, i.e. "cultural repertoires" or "symbolic resources", are significant building blocks of de-stigmatization strategies (Lamont 2009). The same can be true for narratives: as shown above, BAWLN comprise a dominant cultural repertoire in relation to fat people. However, BAWLN have yet to be explored as a building block for de-stigmatization strategies or resistance to stigma. *The present study intends to explore BAWLN – and specifically, its re-appropriation and subversion - as a potential resource for resisting fat stigma.*

The present study

As mentioned above, the present study cannot determine the prevalence of subversive re-appropriation of BAWLN in any population. Nonetheless, it seeks to understand the mechanism of subversive re-appropriation as a narrative resistance strategy. Which premises of the narrative do they preserve? Which do they revise? What are

the personal and political gains they achieve at the process? Are these women able to challenge the perceived transitory and changeable status of the fat body, which is a prominent theme in BAWLN?

The present study relates to the experiences of Israeli-Jewish women, and its data is bound to the Israeli context. However, there are substantial similarities between the cultural and social climate regarding fatness in Israel and in other Western countries, including the U.S (e.g. Stone and Werner, 2012). This is probably due to the global circulation of social attitudes toward fat in western countries and the "westernized" cultural sphere (Maor, 2012a). An extensive body of knowledge refers to this influence as the "Americanization of Israeli Society" (First and Avraham 2007: 57).

So far, there has been no study of the ways in which fat women in Israel challenge dominant discourses surrounding their bodies, and of the resources they draw on. The present study is part of a larger project studying the ways in which fat women in Israel challenge dominant discourses surrounding their bodies, and the resources they draw on, including the affinities between queer and lesbian communities and fat acceptance.

Methodology

BAWLN is frequently employed in relation to fatness and fat individuals in a variety of discursive genres in Israel, including weight-loss advertisements and reality TV shows. Nonetheless, these representations often get a skeptical reception, because they are seen as commercially produced. BAWLN, however, are also found in the "health" sections of mainstream Israeli newspapers and Internet portals. This placement, usually alongside new reports about current scientific research and medical advice columns, produces an especially potent combination of objective, scientific truth and personal, experiential stories.

For the purpose of analysis, articles were collected from "Mint", a health and lifestyle magazine that is published on Israel's leading Internet portal (Lahad, 2012). Thirty articles, published between 2009-2012, were selected from the online archive of the magazine, until saturation was reached. The articles were analyzed using qualitative content-analysis-based approach to explore relevant themes to before and after

transitions, weight loss and body size. The focus was on understanding them as potential cultural repertoires for the building of identities and narratives of fat women. Some interviewees explicitly described BAWLN articles as effecting their identity construction:

> Lisa: …[weight loss] stories in the media never go, like…"first I looked at myself in the mirror…then I loved every bit of my body and then I lost weight"… It always goes like this: "I looked at the mirror… and I hated myself and I felt that I cannot stand to look at myself anymore, I covered my mirror…" .

Interviews

The larger project, the present study is part of, was conducted between the years 2009-2012. It was based on interviews with Israeli-Jewish women who self-identify as fat, and who resist the negative value assigned to their bodies. The choice to study the experiences of fat women relies on previous research indicating that fat women are exposed to graver social sanctions than fat men in many areas such as employment and interpersonal relationships (Puhl and Heuer 2009; Sykes and Mcphail 2008; Finka and Rothblum 2011; Saguy and Ward 2011), and that fatness is culturally associated with femininity (Scott-Dixon 2008). The project focused on the construction of fat women as simultaneously practicing agency and resistance while also being influenced by anti-fat social messages. To engage participants who represent this concept, the letter of recruitment called for women who consider themselves fat and who are interested in debunking myths and prejudices against fat women.

The relative scarcity of positive fat messages (especially in Israel) makes it all the more important, politically and scientifically, to highlight the potential for resistance that does exist, and is often drowned out by the oppressive messages of mainstream media (Maor, 2012a). The value of the present study lies precisely in highlighting what is often hidden and obscured.

During the interviewing process of the larger study, I noticed that when five participants narrated their life story in relation to their body, they tended to structure their narrative according to categories of "Before" and "After" transitions. In response to this pattern, I turned to the literature regarding BAWLN, and gathered the

newspaper articles mentioned above.

Many scholars have pointed out the problematic aspects of using so-called "objective weight/height" measures to determine who is fat in the scientific research (Cooper 1998; Sykes and Mcphail 2008). The definition this study employs is a subjective self-definition, validated by the participants' reports of anti-fat social sanctions. Participants who stated during the interviews that sometimes they feel fat and sometimes they do not, or who did not report any social sanctions regarding their weight, were excluded from the study.

Each interview began by asking the participant to describe her attitude towards her body from early childhood to the present. All interviews were in-depth, semi-structured, and face-to-face, in a location preferred by the interviewees (usually a café), and lasted one to three hours, sometimes spread out over two meetings. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Results and discussion

BAWLN articles in Israeli magazines

BAWLN articles in Israeli magazines display several characteristics. Titles or headlines are invariably phrased in the past tense, denoting the fat body's temporary status. In addition, they perpetuate the stigmatization of fat people through a diverse range of stereotypes, such as the notion that fatness invariably results from excessive eating habits or even an addiction to food ("I used to spend all day eating" [Zilberman 2010a] and "I ate like a pig" [Zilberman 2010b]), or the idea that fatness is symptomatic of psychological or moral weakness ("My fat served as a defence" [Zilberman 2010c] or "I used to look for comfort in the plate" [Cohen-Tirkel 2011a]).

After the headline, descriptions of the person's past fatness are allocated to the first and the shortest paragraph of the article, conveying the simultaneous messages that the fat body belongs to what comes "Before", and that this epoch should be followed by longer periods of what comes "After". This imperative is reflected in the textual progression: discrete, cordoned-off paragraphs deal with "Why I became fat", the reasons the person decided to lose weight, a description of the transition, and a view of the (slim) future.

Assigning the fat body as "after"

Participants challenged BAWLN by assigning the fat body to "After", employing two forms of re-appropriation.

The first form of subversion was employed by three interviewees, all of whom were secular Jews living in the center of the country. Corinne (age 31;) identifies as left-wing, lesbian feminist, and holds a B.A. in the social sciences; Nurit (age 40) identifies as a bisexual feminist, an activist in non-governmental organizations, a left winger, and holds a B.A.; Tali (age 43) identifies as heterosexual and is married; she is a mother of two daughters, and is in the process of completing a graduate degree.

Similarly to BAWLN, these three interviewees narrate their life experiences regarding body size as having progressed from the position of "Before" to "After". However, they reverse the traditional schema: slimness is associated with "Before", whereas fatness is associated with "After".

They narrate ***"Before"*** as a relatively long period (a decade or more) in which they were socially recognized as thin. *Being thin, however, did not come easily.* Participants constantly did a variety of diets, took diet pills, and had obsessive thoughts about food, eating and weight:

> Nurit: "All the time I was focused…on this diet, [these diet] books…trying once again some other diet, a diet I had read about, a cabbage diet, another diet[.] … controlling what I eat on a daily basis, feeling that I "ate too much", feeling really guilty… for many years."

In turn, these behaviors led to intense psychological and physical pain, such as shame, self-loathing and digestive problems. The exertion of constant control left them feeling drained, insecure and miserable:

> Tali : "… it was my [entire] existence… for almost 30 years, I used to get up in the morning and the first, first thing I would be thinking about was: is that what I ate yesterday? Wow! *I was so bad* [whispering] … today I have to make up for it. And only then would I begin to think about other things".

While these efforts were aimed at avoiding weight gain rather than at losing weight, they were narrated by participants as attempts to ward of fat stigma in advance. In a society where fatness is extremely stigmatized, the prospect of gaining weight is

alarming for many people, women in particular.

Next, participants described a phase of *transition* leading from "Before" to "After", in congruence with the reversed BAWLN structure. The "transition" can be described as an intermediary phase in another sense: participants used this part of the story to endow with meaning what had already been shared in the interview ("Before"), and to provide rationales for what would be told later ("After"). This phase included participation in alternative social and activist communities, such as lesbian communities or gender studies classes. This participation triggered gradual socio-psychological processes which led to a radical change in the interviewees' way of thinking.

"After" the transition, participants described their present identities as fat women, and the advantages they found in embracing this identity. Despite their increasing deviation from the thin ideal, participants experienced a greater degree of self-acceptance and a deeper connection to their bodies and identities.

> Tali: "Today I feel the best I ever have regarding my body and I'm the fattest I have ever been… I was brought up for 30 years to think of it as a paradox…I don't experience it as a paradox but as a marvelous sensation". They regarded themselves as triumphing over fat stigma.

It is important to note that the participants do not argue that they are "naturally thin" and choose to fatten themselves out of ideological motives. Rather, they choose to stop constant attempts to diet that caused them pain and frustration.

Participants using the second form of BAWLN subversion included Natalie (age 32), a single heterosexual woman who works as a secretary, and Lisa (19), a heterosexual woman serving in the Israel Defense Force. They began their narrative in a manner resembling hegemonic narratives, from a position of being fat and unhappy as a result. Similarly to hegemonic narratives, participants described the angst and suffering brought about by their body size in the *"Before"* phase.

Their *transition* also echoed hegemonic narratives, as it was accompanied by significant weight loss. However, they also recounted having joined the Israeli fat-acceptance community at roughly the same time. Similarly to the first group, participation in the alternative community triggered a radical change in their

perspectives. They came to believe that a sense of well-being and satisfaction in life is not dependent upon one's weight or body size. They too saw themselves as having triumphed fat stigma.

Their major subversion of the hegemonic narrative occurred "After" this transition. Rather than staying slim, the women described themselves returning to their "Before" weight (Natalie), or as still being considered fat (Lisa). However, they now enjoy a rich and full life, and do not feel disabled by their weight, similar to a state described as follows by U.S. fat activists as "no longer pass as on-the-way-to-thin… engage in activities usually thought proper only for thin people, giving up futile diets, and rebuilding her self-esteem" (LeBesco 2004: 95).

Subverting Discursive Characteristics

Social context

In BAWLN, the protagonist is presented as an isolated individual. The absence of social context perpetuates fat stigma both ontologically (as the cause of fatness is presented as a personal failure), and epistemologically (as the negative value attributed to fatness is presented as necessary and innate). The protagonist's fatness stemmed from his or her moral failure or ignorance (e.g. “My nutrition included only sugars and fats” (Zilberman 2010d), "I never practiced any physical activity and I used to eat a lot” (Cohen -Tirkel 2010a)) or the failure of her (dysfunctional) family: "In my home, food was used as a means to provide love…" (Zilberman 2010d). Bullying, harassment or unjust treatment of fat people, or the absence of suitable facilities to accommodate people of all sizes, are presented as problems that can be addressed only on the individual level, by losing weight: "I got bullied so I lost weight: this is how I lost ten kilograms as the age of seven" (Zilberman 2009a).

In contrast, interviewees subverted BAWLN by placing great emphasis on social context. Nurit, for example, emphasized the media's bombardment of anti-fat messages: "The message of the…advertisements and magazines…[is] that in order to be loved you need to be thin." Unlike hegemonic narratives, interviewees framed the social sanctions aimed at their bodies not as self-evident and necessary, but as failure by others to accept them as they are, and as unjust behavior. Their suffering is attributed not to their fatness but to other people's attitudes towards fat. Natalie: "I

really suffered because of… people who did not accept me and laughed at me and it really affected my entire life."

Methodical caution

Traditional BAWLN stories are grouped together under the title "My diet", conveying a prescriptive message by directly addressing the reader with an expectation that she (or he) would seek to lose weight. The articles invariably culminate in tips the narrator provides to readers to enable them to duplicate her "success".

All of the participants of the present study, in contrast, were careful not to depict their stories as suitable for everyone. Strikingly, at the end of her narrative, Lisa argued that presenting others with "recipes for success" is something she wished to avoid:

> … it is hard for me to give [others] advice because I feel that … I cannot provide a recipe… I cannot provide a guarantee for success… it is a process that is so private that I am afraid to detract from it. I do not want to make it a success story… it is a very difficult process and I am not sure that I have already completed it.

Leaving room for ambiguity and doubt

Mainstream BAWLN are all about certainty. Fatness is disparaged, thinness is valorized. There's no in-between. Fatness is described only in terms of immense suffering, whether functional (e.g. "fatness is very distressing, aesthetically, from the perspective of daily functioning" Zilberman 2010b), physiological ("I was heavy, I had trouble breathing when climbing the stairs, I really felt the overload on my heart" [Cohen-Tirkel 2010a]) or psychological ("I was fat and miserable…My [emotional] pain was so intense that I felt I had to do anything possible to lose weight. I hit rock bottom…" [Zilberman 2010d]).

The state of being recognized by others as thin is glorified: "Today I enjoy numerous compliments and am happy trying on clothes…my partner of eight years is immensely proud of me" (Zilberman 2010i); "I feel vigorous, liberated, in control of food, I am nice to everyone around me – and I get compliments from every direction!" (Zilberman 2009b).

Unlike BAWLN, participants' narratives were ambivalent. For example:

> [Q: Do you pay a price for choosing… not to produce a thin body?] Nurit: it is interesting, it is ambivalent… yes, I think that… things still bother me…but I find myself sometimes, well…a lot more beautiful than I have ever felt.

Participants were also honest about perceiving themselves as having fewer romantic opportunities as fatter women. They admitted that they continue to have bad moments regarding their bodies. Being able to accept that you will never fully accept yourself is a prominent theme:

> Nurit: I believe that I have come to terms with not being able to accept myself…. They put it into our heads, that in spite of everything, we can fully accept ourselves; and if I do not fully accept myself then I'm screwed, again.

Participants' narratives were also "impure": despite the decision to stop dieting, past knowledge and habits do not just vanish. Tali: "Today I can still recite…in the middle of the night… how many calories there are in a cup of coffee". Lisa and Natalie still wished to lose weight, mostly for health reasons. “Natalie: I do not accept myself 100 percent. I do accept myself much more than I ever have …”

Alternative communities versus professionals help

As mentioned above, mainstream BAWLN present the transition from fatness to thinness as a journey embarked upon by an individual. At the same time, the success of the journey is made possible by a series of trained professionals such as dieticians, diet gurus, counselors, personal trainers, bariatric surgeons or plastic surgeons.

In most of the subversive narratives, professionals are not mentioned. Instead, participants engage with various alternative communities. Two participants were members of a fat acceptance group, two were affiliated with lesbian/queer communities, and one referred to the discussions spontaneously formed in a gender studies class as a feminist community. They allow us to understand how participation in somewhat fluid communities - and not institutionalized organizations (Martin 2002) - aids the construction of alternative narratives.

In the frameworks of these communities, participants became acquainted with alternative discourses regarding the fat body. One such discourse interprets the social glorification of the extremely thin feminine body as a backlash against the legal feminist accomplishments of the beginning of the 20th century (Wolf 1991):

> Nurit: I joined a feminist group, along with several friends… … I became more and more familiar with… ideas…[of] radical thought… … challenging [patriarchal] norms and then I read *The Beauty Myth* and said [to myself]: Wow, it was written about me!

The significance of alternative communities was not merely that they led to "a group production of the symbolic resources for individual presentations of self" (Martin 2002; Gimlin 2007: 411). Alternative communities also provided "safe places" for change to evolve, such as in social gatherings, where a diversity of bodies, including those deviating from the thin ideal, could be celebrated (Maor 2012b):

> Natalie: I went to a gathering with an acquaintance who had brought me to the [fat acceptance] forum and I saw fat women dancing, sitting and eating together, laughing and having fun… not caring who looks around and who is out there. I think that then I saw for the first time that fat women can really have fun! Without inhibition and without fearing who is looking at them.

Participation in the Israeli fat-acceptance community enabled Natalie and Lisa to sever the link between body size and the value judgment inherent in hegemonic narratives. Specifically, they emphasized that self-confidence and self-acceptance were what made the difference between misery and a full and satisfying life. Natalie: "I was still fat but somewhere in my perception things have really changed. Suddenly I started to get to know men; before that I didn't know what a romantic partner was… I realized that I am attractive."

Lisa describes a similar insight:

> I used to blame everything on my weight and say [to myself]… when I lose weight, things will be different, everything will work out…I used to daydream about being thin. …I do not want to fall back to the place in which I love myself only if I'm thin, or where the meaning of success is losing [weight]… because I'm a lot of other things beyond my weight.

Theorizing the mechanisms of re-appropriation

BAWLN rest on the general framework of the "Before-and-After narrative", a very prominent narrative form in contemporary Western societies. This narrative resonates with the idea of modernity, or "history", denoting a unidirectional and linear

progression from the past – the category of "Before" - into the much-desired future - the category of "After" (Levi-Navarro 2009: 17). It also resonates with the Western moral imperative of self-improvement, as the transition from "Before" to "After" is an individualistic one (Kendrick 2008). In many ways, this structure is the foundation of contemporary western conventions of storytelling (Ronai and Cross 1999; Callero, 2003).

Interviewees altered, reversed or omitted one of these assumptions, and still tapped the force of this form to construct their life narrative, "queering the relationship temporal logic" (Levi-Navarro 2009). They preserved the most powerful element that is relevant for their narratives: the structure - before=bad, after=good - remains unchanged in their stories; but the fat body's temporal status changes to permanence and stability. Instead of dissociating fatness from their subjectivity, a path to diminishing fat stigma offered by mainstream BAWLN, they embrace it, incorporating "fat subject position(s) into a person's overall embodied subjectivity" (Sykes and McPhail 2008: 70).

At the same time, by preserving the "Before- After" narrative frame, participants also preserve the liberal moral imperative of self-improvement. This imperative reflects a conservative emphasis on individual responsibility at the expense of social change. In addition, participants preserve a clear distinction between the categories of fatness and thinness; each participant was either fat or thin in each part of the story: never in-between. In reality, however, these categories are more ambiguous and fluid. A person can be defined as fat in a specific sub-culture and as thin in another. A person may also be unaware that she is being defined as fat (Sykes and Mcphail 2008).

Material Bodies

Material bodies affected interviewees' stories. Participants who were fat from childhood cannot narrate their life story as a transition from thinness to fatness. Nor can they narrate their choice to stop producing the thin body as a voluntary choice. On the other hand, the relation between bodies and narratives is not deterministic; even when participants' body size remained the same, they still experienced profound change in their mental/social relation to others and to the world.

One such process is the growth in interviewees' ability to attribute positive qualities to

fat female bodies. By interpreting fat bodies as revolting against patriarchy, participants could imagine themselves as proudly and powerfully carving out their own place in space, as refusing to diminish themselves (Maor 2012b):

> Nurit: And then, really, in a single day, I decided not to [continue with weight loss or maintenance efforts], and I arrived at the decision, truly, due to [my participation] in gender studies…It was during a class…we were talking about Susan Bordo…[about the fact] that we keep hearing these messages….[that] what we are is not good enough.…I think that I really care about my spirit – so I said [to myself] …That's it””.

Re-conceptualizing control

As members of stigmatized groups are perpetually assigned the position of "Before", their ability to produce knowledge that is culturally perceived as valid is damaged (Levi-Navarro 2009). By challenging their "Before" position, interviewees re-affirmed the possibility of producing valid speech from a "fat" point of view. Now, they are able to clearly articulate knowledge that can be produced only from the "margins" of the social structure (Harding 1996: 240), telling stories that "only someone who has been insistently made into a "before" could tell …" (Levi-Navarro 2009: 19).

The production of knowledge from a fat point of view allowed participants to re-evaluate specific dominant values in society, such as the meaning of control. This revaluation reveals how change in narratives can affect participants' social relationships and lived experience.

According to Israeli BAWLN, similarly to the Anglo-American context (Martin 2002) fatness is indicative of softness of the will (Braziel 2001) and of the inability to exert control and hyper-emotionality (Murray 2008; Sykes and Mcphail 2008; Zanker and Gard 2008): "The main reason for my fatness was uncontrollable eating habits that stem more from emotions than from pure hunger" (Cohen-Tirkel 2011b); "One of my major weaknesses is my big love for sweets. When I used to eat chocolate, ice-cream, or cakes, it was really hard for me to stop" (Cohen –Tirkel 2010a). Sometimes lack of control is attributed to addiction (Muray 2008): "Once I get started, I cannot stop myself… Every time my sugar level dropped I acted aggressively toward everyone

around me. I felt that food controlled me" (Zilberman 2009b).

To resume control, mainstream narratives emphasize the need to discipline the (fat) body. This discipline include practices of calculation and measurement, such as those promoted by Weight Watchers and Overeaters Anonymous (Martine 2002): "I need to weigh everything that I put into my mouth…I take a small digital scale with me everywhere I go, even to restaurants. I keep working according to my instructions sheet… everything that is not on the sheet is off limits …" (Cohen –Tirkel 2010a).

In contrast, subversive narratives presented control as overcoming fat stigma, and the societal pressures and interference in women's eating habits this stigma entailed:

> Corinne: "I love to cook so much… food represents to me something truly positive, fun and liberated, and sensual and loving…it feels to me like being in control, not in the…bad and neutralizing sense, but in the sense that I do not let external forces control me and tell me that I cannot eat".

Conclusion

The present study offers a new conceptualization of narrative resistance, in which individuals do not attempt to distance themselves from the stigmatized attribute, but rather challenge stigma itself. The presented case study relied on the re-appropriation of hegemonic BAWLN, which in the context of contemporary Western societies, like other "obesity"-related discourses, do not only represent societal concerns regarding the 'obesity epidemic', they also "incite and sustain an abject fascination with fatness", in the Foucaultian sense (Sykes and Mcphail 2008: 80). Such discourses are as prevalent in the Israeli context as they are in the U.S. context. Exploring participants' unique mechanism of re-appropriation of dominant narratives elucidated how they are able to resist mainstream media fat bias.

Second, the present study expands existing literature of sociotemporal constructions and stigma, which has not studied how temporal statuses can be subverted as a destigmatization strategy. Challenging the belief in the necessarily temporary and changeable status of fatness is a crucial step in mobilizing fat activism, as the "belief in weight loss prevents many more people from joining the cause, as this keeps alive the hope that exiting the fat category is possible" (Saguy and Ward 2011: 19). While

studies show an extremely high failure rates of diets, others show that even enduring weight loss do not easily or necessarily lead to decrease in fat stigma (Granberg, 2011; Janet D. Latner, Ebneter, and O'Brien, 2012). Therefore, it is especially important to theorize ways to exit fat stigma without losing weight.

The present study relies on a limited sample, which is not aimed at being representatives. Fist, the narratives were produced by self-identified resistors, and should be viewed as "self-consciously political not nostalgically recuperative" (Zanker and Gard 2008: 51). Second, participants do not form a representative sample of Israeli society, as they were educated, middle class, Jewish and affiliated with alternative communities. While I am cognizant of debates in the social sciences regarding the validity of studying individual personal narratives (Zanker & Gard), I rely on methodological approaches that sees merit in giving voice to personal narratives that "contest the dominant performance narratives", as "tools for re-remembering the past and rethinking the present, rather than as statements about how the world is or should be", regardless of their prevalence or representativeness (Zanker & Gard). Presenting resisting narrative regarding fat identities is especially important in light of the one sided, extremely negative, media tone.

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Discussion and Conclusions

The research presented in preceding chapters aims to provide insights and spark conversations regarding issues that have occupied sociologists and gender studies scholars in recent years. Specifically, it draws on and contributes to the bodies of knowledge in: 1) fat studies; 2) social movement studies; 3) theories of resistance to social oppression; 4) the sociology of the family; 5) the sociology of stigma, destigmatization strategies, and resistance in everyday life; 6) medical sociology.

Fat Studies: Mother-daughter relationships, Beyond the U.S. Context

This dissertation adds to contemporary debates within fat studies: an emergent multidisciplinary field of scholarship dedicated to understanding the marginalization of fatness and fat individuals in contemporary Western societies (Degher & Hughs, 1999; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011; Puhl & Heure, 2009; ooper, 1998; Joanisse & Synnott, 1999; Puhl & Heur, 2009). It contributes to the field in two major respects: adding analysis of mother-daughter relationships as a central arena for the acquisition of fat identity, and expansion of fat studies discussions and debates beyond the U.S. context. While some fat studies scholars challenge the alleged causal relationship between fat and poor health (e.g. Burgard 2009; Muennig, 2008), I decided to engage with the social and cultural aspects of fatness alone, on the basis of my premise that whatever the relations between fatness and health be, the significant discrimination and exclusion of fat people in many areas of life (Puhl and Heure 2009) cannot be explained or justified on the basis of health alone.

Fat studies researchers have prominently documented and explored fat individuals' experiences of oppression and exclusion, including the contextualization of current debates over 'fatness' and 'obesity' (Kent, 2001; LeBesco, 2004; Puhl & Heure, 2009; Rice, 2007; Wann, 2009). A dominant area of research within this scholarship is dedicated to analysis of the construction of fat identity. How do people learn that they are perceived as fat? How do they learn the negative value attributed to fat identity in contemporary, Western societies? Can fat identity be subverted and assigned a positive, alternate, counter-hegemonic value?

While studies have examined the construction of fat identity within many contexts, such as peers and romantic partners (Cooper, 1998; Joanisse & Synnott, 1999; Puhl & Heur, 2009; Rice, 2007), most excluded or only treated in passing mother-daughter relationships as an arena for the construction of fat identity. This absence is surprising as contemporary scholarship on women and body image emphasizes the central role of these relationships in the development of body image and identity among women (Borello, 2006; Chodorow, 1989; Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Ogle & Damhorst, 2003).

The first chapter of this dissertation contributes to these discussions by treating mother-daughter relationships as a significant analytic category with unique characteristics in relation to the acquisition of fat identity. I also ground its unique characteristics, such as its chronological primacy in acquisition of fat identity, or the significant role of the mother's body in her relation to her daughter's, in the social conditions and gender roles associated with the institution of motherhood in contemporary, Western societies.

This chapter also raises questions that merit additional discussion. The majority of interviewees were daughters, and only a minority were mothers. Future studies could employ a different methodology and examine the reciprocal element of mother-daughter relationships further, i.e., how daughters affect their mothers' attitudes and behaviors, and how pairs of mothers and daughters would describe their experiences relating to fat identity. This is important because mothers and daughters occupy different familial roles and belong to different generations (Bojczyk et al. 2011).

This dissertation also expands fat studies' geographical and cultural scope beyond the U.S. context. Thus far, researchers in the field only studied the Anglo-American context, and to a lesser degree, Australia or Europe. The "Americanization" of fat studies is problematic as "fat rights initiatives outside the United States… at worst, are exoticized, belittled, or unnoticed" (Cooper, 2009, p. 330). Specifically, there has been a scarcity of research examining the experiences of fat individuals in Israel, although anti-fat attitudes are as prevalent here as they are in other Western countries (e.g. Fogelman et al. 2002). While a few studies have examined such anti-fat attitudes, none has explored how fat individuals in Israel creatively resist their oppression and engage in different forms of fat acceptance and fat activism.

There are many parallels between the social and cultural attitudes toward fat individuals in Israel and those in the U.S. Many U.S.-produced cultural products (such as reality TV "Biggest looser", or newspaper articles) and policies are exported to the Israeli context. At the same time, subtle cultural nuances, including cultural and material differences that are not directly connected to the issue of fat, lead to divergences in the way fat individuals and groups in Israel respond and organize in response to U.S. produced fat-related cultural products (as compared to the strategies of Anglo-American groups and individuals).

This dissertation analyzes the Israeli context on two levels: (1) as a case study for understanding how transnational and global discourses regarding health, weight and appearance shape identities and coping strategies of women identified as "fat" in a specific national/cultural context; (2) as a means to "talk back" to fat studies in the Anglo-American context and shed a different light on their findings.

This double movement is most clearly seen in the second and third chapters. The second chapter examines how lesbian/queer communities in Israel can serve as a resource for fat acceptance. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the central role of lesbian and queer women in the U.S fat acceptance movement, as well as the centrality lesbian/queer politics have in the service of the movement (LeBesco, 2004; Hill, 2009; Saguy & Ward, 2011). Most texts tend to take this affiliation for granted, and assume that fatness is intrinsically connected to queerness. Hill (2009), however, argues in favor of exploring historically-specific connections between lesbian/queer communities and fat acceptance.

This chapter demonstrates the merits of Hill's approach. I found that in a similar manner to the Anglo-American context, the employment of a mixture of disparate feminist-lesbian and queer discourses was crucial to participants' ability to appreciate their fat bodies and those of other women. At the same time, I also found differences between the Anglo-American and Israeli contexts. One major difference is that while the affiliations between lesbian/queer communities in the Anglo-American context are well-established and institutionalized, there is an absence of alliances between the Israeli fat acceptance community and Israeli lesbian/queer communities. In Israel, each woman who makes these political connections needs to make them on her own.

These findings contribute a general insight to fat studies, especially in its intersection with LGBT scholarship. They reinforce the hypothesis that some queer/lesbian values and practices are inherently fat positive; so that even without explicit political affiliations to the fat rights movement, women can interpret queer/lesbian values in ways that will enable associating the fat female body in alternative, more positive ways. At the same time, the Israeli case study also teaches us that when individuals spontaneously utilize lesbian/queer discourse in order to re-interpret fat identity, they may be able to promote fat rights issues, but only as long as it fits specific queer/feminist lesbian ideals.

This chapter also raises more questions regarding the connection between LGBT activism, fat studies and feminism. Lesbian/queer interviewees who participated in the study identified as "Butch" or adopted other unconventional gendered appearance. One of the primary links they drew between fat acceptance and lesbian/queer values is the rejection of normative femininity. All interviewees who participated in the present study rejected normative femininity. Future studies could examine the ability of Israeli lesbian/queer communities to practice fat acceptance in cases that do not neatly fit this ideology. What happens when lesbians who do adopt normative feminine appearance, such as "femmes", call for recognition of fat rights within lesbian communities that do not have explicit or conscious affiliations with fat acceptance communities, such as those in Israel? Will they be able to make other forms of spontaneous links between fat rights and lesbian values?

The third chapter is also characterized by examination the Israeli fat acceptance community through both local and global lenses. A dominant area of research within fat studies is dedicated to the study of the fat acceptance movement, which is seen as pivotal in the formation of resistance to the cultural rejection of fat individuals in the West (Sobal 1999). However, there are no studies of the fat acceptance movements beyond the Anglo-American context. The third chapter begins by surveying both the details of the local organization of the community and the local community's divergences from fat acceptance movements in other cultures.

The Israeli fat acceptance community, very much like those of Canada, Australia and The U.K. (Sobal 1999: 243) is profoundly affected by the fat acceptance movement in the United States. This influence is reflected in the community’s online forum's name

(“Fat and Beautiful [Women]”), in the importation of various activities practiced by the U.S. community and in the duality between promotion of social change and individual empowerment that characterizes both movements. The U.S. influence is directly acknowledged by members of the Israeli movement.

However, there are significant differences between the two movements.

During the four decades in which the U.S. movement has existed, it has known several leaders or “crusaders” who dedicated themselves to fat acceptance as a full time job. In contrast, the smaller number leaders of the Israeli movement hold other full time jobs and practice fat acceptance in their spare time. They also have not succeeded in raising money from commercial groups to sponsor their activity. Under these circumstances, the online forum emerged as the primary continuous activity of the community, since maintaining it does not necessitate keeping employees on a payroll.

The centrality of the online forum in the Israeli community has additional implications. On the one hand, Virtual media have many advantages for promoting social and individual empowerment and change (Orgad, 2005), including some that are specific to fat individuals as a group stigmatized on the basis of bodily traits. One such advantage, for example, is the ability to control the way corporeality is represented through attaching pictures. At the same time, it is precisely the disembodiment of the internet that restricts its usefulness in ultimately fighting fat oppression that is inflicted on the body (McAllister 2009).

However, the movement's heavy reliance on the internet also obstructs the participation of certain individuals. For example, in different parts of Israel, especially in economically impoverished areas or in religious communities, many individuals do not have access to the internet. This means that, like the American movement, the majority of members in the Israeli fat acceptance community belong to the middle-upper class (Sobal 1999:243). In fact, all of the community members interviewed for this article were middle-upper class.

Despite the community's young age and the relatively small number of its members, it has had impressive success in reaching Israel's general public, especially on the cultural level. The fact that several popular and mainstream media actors in Israel

have approached the community and asked members to represent the community's spirit and goals is not trivial. Neither should the achievement of changing pejorative oppressive references to fat women in a book by a prominent children's author be overlooked. By introducing a fat women's calendar and fashion show, community members initiated preliminary steps toward introducing fat images of beauty as an alternative to thin beauty ideals. At the same time, the most significant contribution of the community has been the empowerment it offers its members.

Social Movement Studies: Boundary Work and the Role of the Body

After surveying the local organization of the Israeli fat acceptance community, I analyze this community as a case study to generate more general insights that contribute to the understanding of two inter-related corpuses: boundary work within social movements that organize against bodily-based oppression; and the role of the body within social movements.

Despite the body's central role in contemporary sociological theories, theorists have only begun to systematically analyze the body's role in social movements in the last decade (Hohle, 2009, 2010; Sason-Levi & Rapaport, 2003; Sutton, 2007a, 2007b). So far, the body has been mainly researched via its role in the emergence of social movements and the production of effective political protest, as well as the re-shaping of members' bodies to attain political goals (Hohle, 2010; 2009; Sason-Levi & Rapaport, 2003; Sutton, 2007a, 2007b). The third chapter of this dissertation expands the range of research questions regarding the role of the body in social movements to include the issue of boundary work. I inquire about the fat body's role in the boundary work of the Israeli fat acceptance movement: does this role present differently in Israel than it does in Anglo-American based communities, and what conclusions might be drawn regarding boundary work in social movements in general.

I show that the Israeli fat acceptance community refuses to define an 'ideal fat subject', and instead, promotes an anti-essentialist identity politics according to which anyone who identifies with the fat acceptance movement's goals belongs to the movement. Anglo-American based movements, on the other hand, tend to draw their

boundaries around two forms of ideal subject: the "real" fat subject, and the "fully resisting" fat subject.

The comparison between the two models contributes to scholarship that examines boundary works within groups and social movements in general. It indicates that adopting an anti-essentialist, open model for boundary work may increase the group/movement's ability to tolerate ambiguity and contradictions among members and accept members who do not fit into fixed bodily identity categories. Simultaneously, this model of boundary work poses other problems, like reducing members to their identity as fat, and encouraging constant preoccupation with weight or social oppression based on body size.

Theorizing cultural resistance as ambiguous, fluid and contradictory

As mentioned above, many fat acceptance communities based in the Anglo-American context draw their boundaries around an ideal "resisting" subject that is able to fully reject hegemonic perceptions and values. This tendency also exists within other social movements and communities that struggle for social change. Samantha Murray (2008) argues that the tendency to assume that complete resistance is possible stems from a humanist model of cultural resistance. According to such ideology, the subject has the capacity to reject common prejudices, as an individual, thereby establishing completely new and positive relationship to one's embodiment or subjectivity. This model assumes a unified subject and an uncomplicated relationship between subjectivity and agency, psych and society. As a result of this model, the lived reality of ambiguity, contradiction and doubts of many social activists is denied or silenced.

Throughout each chapter of this dissertation, I offer a conceptualization of cultural resistance as ambivalent, contradictory and fluid. In each arena of identity construction, I reflect on how participants, while often vocally articulating their resistance to hegemonic views of fat bodies, still felt shame, guilt or doubt regarding their own bodies. On this basis, I argue that elements of resistance and compliance with hegemonic messages are not necessarily contraindicative. Women who narrated their life stories according to subversive BAWLN did not present themselves at the "After" as completely self-accepting and happy. They admitted to having moments

and days of doubts and they mentioned prices paid for their decision not to lose weight. These moments, however, only strengthen their stories, making them fuller and real, especially in comparison to the utopian tone of hegemonic BAWLN. Similarly, alongside their fat acceptance ideology, women in lesbian/queer communities also reported instances of mixed feelings toward their body, and the body of other members of their communities.

Sometimes, these elements of resistance and conformity not only reside side by side, but also nourish each other. In the context of mother-daughter relationships, for example, experiencing negative and painful messages regarding the fat female body from their own mothers was sometimes a powerful motivating force in the decision of mothers to promote fat and self-acceptance among their daughters. A major point of strength of the Israeli fat acceptance community in comparison to Anglo-American based ones is its ability to accept members who lost weight or who wish to lose weight, a desire that is commonly perceived as internalization of anti-fat sentiment.

This is an important contribution to the scholarly understanding of dynamics of activist communities, where ambivalence among group members is often viewed as a sign of self-betrayal or political hypocrisy.

The sociology of the family: resistance and social change through inter-personal relationship

Contemporary scholarship emphasizes the central role of mother-daughter relationships in the development of body image and identity among women (Clarke & Griffin, 2007; Borello, 2006). However, most texts analyze the susceptibility of mothers and daughters to hegemonic cultural messages regarding the female body, and do not pay enough attention to the potential of these relationships as a resource for promoting well-being, self-acceptance and health (Borello, 2006). In my research, I explore how the mother-daughter relationship can serve as a channel for increasing self-confidence, promoting a positive body image and protecting against eating disorders.

The study also provides a contribution to sociological debates regarding the conditions and implications of micro-political agency, as it shows how individuals are

able to facilitate social change through interpersonal communication and agency in everyday settings; the mothers and daughters in the study exert agency from the position of emotional and familial obligations between mothers and daughters, and not from the position of detached individuals. Typically residing outside the realm of the public sphere, these areas of emotional relationships have traditionally been excluded from research of social and political change (Mann, 1994).

This also raises the questions of how individuals are able to facilitate social change through interpersonal communication in other forms of relationships within families of different structures. Future studies may examine additional forms of interpersonal communication: between other family members, non-traditional families, romantic relationships, and friendships, and examine how they might encourage and/or hinder social change.

The sociology of stigma, destigmatization strategies, and resistance in everyday life, and the sociology of time

Contemporary literature examines the experiences and effects of social stigma via a range of variables, such as the source of stigma, its duration, and its visibility (Link and Phelan 2001; Lamont 2009; Saguy and Ward 2011). At the same time, sociologists of time have examined the social construction of time and temporality via a number of social arenas, such as family life, aging and old age, and the labor market (Lahad, 2012). The fourth chapter of this dissertation contributes to both of these fields of study by juxtaposing the sociology of stigma and the sociology of time, through the study of fat stigma.

This chapter also addresses the political implications of popular culture's representations of bodies, and how they affect the embodiment of socially marginalized groups, particularly those marginalized on the basis of a bodily attribute. I show how dominant discursive structures that are used to marginalize these groups in popular culture can be subversively re-appropriated by those marginalized, to 'talk back' to hegemony and reclaim their subjectivity in empowering ways. This chapter contributes to the scholarship regarding the ways individuals can promote social

change and personal empowerment through subversive re-appropriation of popular culture products, that usually serve to reinforce hegemony.

This chapter also expands the scholarship on narrative resistance (e.g. Ronai & Cross 1998) by exploring the theoretical mechanism through which stigmatized individuals are able to re-appropriate hegemonic narratives in the service of struggles for social change.

Medical sociology – through the gaze of feminist theory

Throughout the work on the project that has culminated in this dissertation, I have used feminist theory to critically engage with the methodologies, empirical findings and theories of medical sociology. I studied the implications of the medicalization of fatness and fat people, which necessitated the development of tools to "objectively" measure fatness, erroneously conflating statistical and physiological normality, and leading to medical interventions, with complications often more distressing then the original "medical problem".

My study focused on women, and engaged with the gendered meanings of fatness and the greater social sanctions imposed on fat women in comparison to fat men (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2011; Puhl & Heur, 2009). I explored various ways in which women identified as fat can improve their body image and well-being, regardless of body size.

By focusing on women's embodied identities, this dissertation contributes to the expanding scholarship that contests deeply held beliefs about women's bodies. In Western societies, the struggle for gender equality has made great strides. But the body and bodily identity is one of the major areas in which progress has been most limited: it is the next frontier, where even many proponents of equality are reluctant to challenge conservative notions of gender-based bodily differences.

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קהילות לסביות/קוויריות לקהילה למען זכויות שמנים ממוסדים מזה עשורים רבים, בהקשר הישראלי אין זיקות או שיתוף פעולה בין קהילות לסביות/קוויריות לקהילה למען זכויות שמנים. לכן, על נשים בישראל לייצר את הקישור בין פוליטיקה לסבית/קווירית לבין פוליטיקה זכויות שמנים כאינדיוידואליות, בעצמן.

ניתוח היווצרותה והתפתחותה של הקהילה הישראלית למען זכויות שמנים: בפרק זה, אני משתמשת בתנועה הישראלית למען זכויות שמנים כמקרה מבחן לחקר מתחים שעומדים בפני תנועות חברתיות שמתאחדות על מנת להתנגד לדיכוי מבוסס זהויות גופניות. כינון גבולות התנועה החברתית, כלומר, משא ומתן לגבי קהל היעד של התנועה ובשם מי מנסחת התנועה את תביעותיה, הוא תהליך משמעותי בקרב תנועות חברתיות באופן כללי. משום שזהויות מעוגנות-גוף הן יחסיות ובלתי יציבות, בתנועות חברתיות שמתאגדות על בסיס זהויות מעוגנות-גוף תהליך כינון הגבולות הוא משמעותי במיוחד. תנועות למען זכויות שמנים בהקשר האנגלו-אמריקאי נוטות לכונן את גבולותיהן סביב שני טיפוסים אידיאליים: הסובייקט השמן המתנגד באופן מוחלט וחד-משמעי לדעות קדומות לגבי משקל והשמנה, והסובייקט השמן "באמת", לעומת אלה שאינם "באמת" שמנים. בניגוד לכך, התנועה הישראלית למען זכויות שמנים מכוננת את גבולותיה סביב חוויות משותפות של סנקציות חברתיות שליליות סביב משקל גוף. כינון גבולות זה מגביר את יכולת הקהילה לסבול עמימות וסתירות בקרב חברים בקהילה שאינם בהכרח מתאימים לקטגוריות זהות קבועות מראש. בו זמנית, כינון זהות זה עשוי לייצר בעיות נוספות עבור הקהילה, כגון, עיסוק יתר או "תקיעות" בעיסוק בחוויות חברתיות שליליות על בסיס משקל.

סיפורי חיים: גוף הידע העכשווי העוסק בסטיגמה אינו עוסק דיה בהבניה החברתית הטמפורלית של סטיגמה; כלומר, האם מקור הסטיגמה נתפס כזמני וניתן לשינוי, או כקבוע. פרק זה בעבודת הדוקטורט מחבר בין הסוציולוגיה של הזמן, הסוציולוגיה של אסטרטגיות התמודדות עם סטיגמה, והסוציולוגיה של התנגדות נרטיבית, דרך ניתוח מקרה מבחן של מאפיין מעורר סטיגמה שמובנה חברתית כזמני וכניתן לשינוי- הגוף השמן. ניתוח השוואתי של סיפורי "לפני ואחרי ירידה במשקל" שפורסמו במגזין בריאות אינטרנטי בישראל מסייע לי להראות כיצד פירסומים אלה תורמים להדרתם התרבותית של אנשים שמנים על ידי הצגת השמנה, או הגוף השמן, כזמניים וכניתנים לשינוי. לאחר מכן, אני מנתחת סיפורי חיים שסופרו על ידי נשים יהודיות-ישראליות שמזדהות כנשים שמנות. אני מראה כיצד נשים אלה מנכסות את קטגוריות ה"לפני ואחרי ירידה במשקל" כדי לספר סיפור חיים שמאפשר להן לייחס ערך אלטרנטיבי וחיובי יותר לגוף הנשי השמן. הן עושות זאת בשתי צורות עיקריות: א. מציבות את הגוף השמן בקטגוריית ה"אחרי" (במקום בקטגוריית ה"לפני")- על ידי כך מאתגרות את ההנחה שהגוף השמן הוא זמני וניתן לשינוי, ב. משנות מאפיינים נרטיביים אחרים של סיפורי "לפני ואחרי ירידה במשקל" הגמוניים. כך, נשים אלה מייצרות ידע אלטרנטיבי לגבי הגוף הנשי השמן, המאתגר הנחות ודעות קדומות לגבי שמנים והשמנה בחברות מערביות בנות-זמנינו.

מילות מפתח: ישראל, התנועה למען זכויות שמנים, זהות, השמנה, סטיגמה, כינון גבולות (תנועות חברתיות), יחסי אימהות-בנות, קהילות לסביות/קוויריות, סוכנות, סיפורי "לפני ואחרי"

תקציר

עבודת דוקטורט זו בוחנת את כינון דימוי הגוף וזהויות מבוססות משקל גוף של נשים בישראל, וכיצד נשים יכולות לאתגר מסרים הגמוניים לגבי הופעה נשית. זוהי העבודה הראשונה המתארת ומנתחת כיצד שיחים גלובליים בנוגע ל"מגיפת ההשמנה", בריאות, מגדר והגוף מעצבים את זהותם של אנשים הנתפסים כ"שמנים" בישראל, וכיצד אנשים מגיבים למסרים אלה. במהלך עבודת הדוקטורט מצאתי ארבע זירות מרכזיות לכינון זהות ולהתנגדות למסרים הגמוניים לגבי הגוף השמן:

יחסי אימהות-בנות כזירה משמעותית בכינון הזהות של נשים שמנות: גוף הידע העכשווי מדגיש את חשיבותם של יחסי אימהות-בנות בכינון זהויות גופניות ודימוי גוף בקרב נשים. בה עת, מרבית המחקרים בחנו יחסים אלה כזירה להעברת מסרים הגמוניים לגבי הופעה נשית, ולא הקדישו מספיק תשומת לב לחקר הדרכים בהן יחסי אימהות-בנות עשויים לשמש כזירה להתנגדות ומשא-ומתן לגבי מסרים הגמוניים אלה. הפרק הראשון של עבודת הדוקטורט בוחן יחסי אימהות-בנות כזירה בעלת פוטנציאל הן להעברת מסרים הגמוניים לגבי הגוף הנשי השמן, והן להתנגדות ומשא ומתן אודות מסרים אלו. מצד אחד, השתמשתי בגישה תיאורטית של הבנייה חברתית כדי לבחון את תפקידם של יחסי אימהות-בנות בכינון זהות של "אישה שמנה" כזהות בעלת תוכן שלילי, המקושרת עם סטריאוטיפים כגון, כיעור ועצלנות. בה בעת, השתמשתי בתיאוריה של "סוכנות מיקרו-פוליטית", כדי להראות כיצד חשיפה לשיחים חברתיים מתחרים (הן בנושא הופעה חיצונית, הן בנושא הגוף השמן והן בנושא תפקידי מגדר ויחסי אימהות-בנות) מאפשרת לאימהות ולבנות לשאת ולתת, במסגרת מערכת היחסים ביניהן, לגבי משמעותו של הגוף הנשי השמן. לבסוף, אני טוענת כי יחסי אימהות-בנות הם קטגוריה אנליטית משמעותית העומדת בפני עצמה ביחס לכינון הזהות של נשים שמנות. כמו כן, השפעת יחסי אימהות-בנות כינון הזהות ודימוי הגוף של נשים אינה קבועה מראש ועשויה להוביל לתסריטים שונים.

חברות בקהילות לסביות/קוויריות כמקור העצמה לנשים שמנות: גוף הידע העכשווי מראה כי קהילות לסביות/קוויריות מילאו תפקיד מרכזי בהקמה והתפתחותה של התנועה למען זכויות שמנים בארצות הברית. מרבית החוקרים והחוקרות שבחנו תופעה זו הניחו שהקשר בין פוליטיקה לסבית/קווירית לתנועה למען זכויות שמנים הוא מובן מאליו והכרחי. החוקרת אדריאן היל, לעומת זאת, קוראת לבחון את הקשרים הספציפיים להקשרים תרבותים/גיאוגרפיים שונים בהם מתקיים החיבור בין קהילות פוליטיקה לסבית/קווירית ולבין התנועה למען זכויות שמנים. על ידי ניתוח סיפורי החיים של נשים שמנות שטוענות כי חברות בקהילות לסביות/קוויריות היו גורם משמעותי ביכולתן ליחס ערך חיובי לגוף הנשי השמן, אני בוחנת את הקשרים בין פוליטיקה לסבית/קווירית לפוליטיקה למען זכויות שמנים בהקשר הישראלי. אני טוענת כי נשים בקהילות לסביות/קוויריות משתמשות בתמהיל של שיחים לסביים-פמיניסטיים ושיחים קוויריים על מנת להעניק ערך חיובי לגוף הנשי השמן בדרך דומה לזו שעושות נשים בהקשר האנגלו-אמריקאי. בה בעת, ישנם מספר הבדלים משמעותיים בין המקרה הישראלי למקרה האנגלו-אמריקאי. ראשית, בישראל, נשים עושות שימוש בשיח של אימהות ופיריון כדי ליחס ערך חיובי לגוף הנשי השמן. שנית, בעוד שבהקשר האמריקאי, הקשרים והזיקות בין

העבודה נעשתה בהדרכת ד״ר הנרייט דהאן כלב

בתוכנית ללימודי מגדר, המחלקה ללימודים רב-תחומיים

בפקולטה מדעי הרוח והחברה

יוֹתֵר: נשים שמנות בישראל- סוגות וסוגיות בכינון זהות ובהתנגדות לדיכוי חברתי

מחקר לשם מילוי חלקי של הדרישות לקבלת תואר "דוקטור לפילוסופיה"

מאת

מאיה מאור

הוגש לסינאט אוניברסיטת בן גוריון בנגב

אישור המנחה __ _____ ***05 מרץ 2013***

אישור דיקן בית הספר ללימודי מחקר מתקדמים ע"ש קרייטמן

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תאריך עברי **תאריך לועזי**

באר שבע

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תאריך עברי : א' אדר התשע"ג תאריך לועזי :11.3.2013

באר שבע