



Big Handsome Men, Bears and Others: Virtual Constructions of 'Fat Male Embodiment'

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I don't know if anyone else is watching the new Road Rules [US TV programme], where they're in the South Pacific. I caught some of it tonight and their challenge was that the two guys had to put on a Chippendales-type dance show at this drag bar, while the girls had to get at least fifty people to show up to it. One of the guys was a BHM [Big Handsome Man] and their show was SO GOOD! Both of the guys wore thongs about the size of your average piece of Kleenex, and they were pretty good dancers. The crowd absolutely loved them, and so did the judges. Not because they thought it was funny to see a big guy dancing around like that, but because they really thought they were good. And in two out of the three categories, the BHM guy got a higher score than the skinny guy!!!! Big guys rule!!!! (Posted on a fat acceptance Internet discussion board by a Female Fat Admirer or FFA)

Fatness and the Management of Spoiled Masculine Identities

The appropriateness of fatness has long been bounded and regulated in Western culture, even when fat bodies are sexed as male. Note, for instance, William Banting's 1863 *A Letter on Corpulence* (cf. Huff, 2001), Falstaff's proclaimed frailty, Shakespeare's *Henry IV* and cultural commentary on the medical category 'morbid [*sic*] obesity' since Hippocrates (Gilman, 2004: 11). Of course, this does

not translate to a naturalized and universal condemnation of fatness. Forms of fat embodiment have long had historical and cross-cultural currency. Mennell (1991: 147), for example, notes that ‘healthy stoutness’ and ‘the magnificent amplitude of the human frame’ constituted the cultural model in medieval and early modern Europe. The anthropology of the body tells a similar story, especially in relation to female fecundity (Brain, 1979). However, in contemporary Anglophone culture, such bodily capital is often ‘discredited’, that is, it is a stigma which, unlike ‘discreditable’ stigma, is immediately evident during face-to-face interaction (Goffman, 1968: 14).

Once good, fat bodies putatively belong to the bad and/or the ugly according to the definitional workings of ‘somatic society’ – an increasingly global society where ‘major political and personal problems are both problematized in the body and expressed through it’ (Turner, 1996: 1). This degradation, which is currently being extended to Asia and Pacific regions (where body mass, in contrast to the UK and the USA, is positively correlated with socio-economic status), is certified and accentuated by the Western disease-focused biomedical model (International Diabetes Institute, 2000). According to the World Health Organization (WHO, 1998), ‘overweight’ and ‘obesity’ are reaching ‘epidemic’ proportions in both developed and developing nations. Compounding the stigma of fatness, such pathologizing typifications are increasingly taken for granted in the English-speaking world. Even so, alternative definitions exist in various communicative contexts. Using qualitative data generated in Anglophone cyberspace, this article explores more positive typifications of fat male embodiment – social constructions which could be described as ‘virtual’ given their digital expression and ‘connotation[s] of “not quite”, adequate for practical purposes even if not strictly the real thing’ (Hine, 2000: 65). Extending Goffman’s (1968) arguments about stigma, such typifications are also ‘virtual’ in another sense, representing expectations which may figure in the management of spoiled identities.

First, I should explain and qualify some of my terms. In researching ‘fat male embodiment’ I do not seek to understand the social world through a ‘biological demarcation’ (Connell, 1995: 44). My approach is anchored in the corporeality of bodies, but it is also social and thus relational; sexed/gendered bodies-in-association-with-others. I thus step beyond objectifying biomedical discourses (without abandoning the materiality of the body), and expand social studies, which largely define fat as a feminist or female-centric issue (Orbach, 1997). At a generic and conceptual level, I prefer ‘male embodiment’ to ‘men’s bodies’ because it includes the corporeality and sociality of sexed body-subjects throughout the gendered life course. (Adolescent) boys often enact masculinities, but the

meanings attributed to their biologically and socially immature male bodies exclude them from hegemonic definitions of ‘manhood’ in contemporary Western culture. Centrally, I am interested in the social meanings and practices constituting male bodies clinically categorized as overweight or obese. The bodies discussed here, however, are not passive medicalized ‘dopes’ (Garfinkel, 1967). Rather, they are *embodied* social actors who actively re-signify ‘fatness’ with supportive/admiring others. The idea of embodiment is particularly useful because it addresses the ambiguity of human corporeality, the indivisibility of object and subject, nature and culture, self and other as well as other dualities (Williams and Bendelow, 1998). Embodiment is a social process, and, as discussed by Witz (2000), one that is often gendered in classic social thought, with men typically being accorded the capacity to transcend their immediate corporeal selves. Finally, I use the word ‘fat’ but such usage is reflexive and qualified. This is a potentially problematic label if imposed from without as a bodily descriptor and identity: fat is not a four-letter word, but it is often intended, and received, as a term of abuse. This is compounded by what I call *bodyism* – the cultural belief that the whole body, perhaps more so than the face (Synnott, 1989), reflects individual character. The ‘f’ word is therefore less than ideal. Certainly, some ‘people of size’ co-opt ‘fat’ in the same way that some gay people reclaim ‘queer’ (LeBesco, 2004: 138). ‘Fat’ and ‘fatness’ are also convenient social constructs commonly used by social scientists (e.g. Sobal and Maurer, 1999). However, more ambiguous terms, such as ‘big’, may be more situationally appropriate for those labelled ‘fat’ by others. Embodiment comprises contestation, complexity and (functional) ambiguity.

In Western culture, coercive ideals of slenderness and ‘the body beautiful’ (or, more accurately, the body acceptable) have long been a pernicious dimension of female corporeality (Bordo, 1993). However, while male bodies are not generally objects-for-others in the same way female bodies typically are, men and boys are increasingly being subjected to normalizing body discourses and practices (Grogan and Richards, 2002). Recent critical commentary on ‘obesity’ immediately stresses the problems faced by women, but adds that men are also increasingly showing signs of damage in the war against fat (Campos, 2004: xvii–xviii; also, note the rise in eating disorders among boys at the same time that obesity is rising). There are many overlapping reasons for this convergence between the sexes. The greater prevalence of ‘excess’ weight among men compared to women (NAO, 2001; WHO, 1998) is important, but this is not simply a matter of numbers and epidemiology. For example, Campos (2004) underscores the immense power and profitability of the US obesity industry, which has fabricated an ‘obesity myth’ that reproduces typically white, middle-class cultural anxieties.

Other factors include the importance of sport as a gendered institution, the transformation of labouring bodies into desiring bodies, and the denial of ageing and death (Turner, 1996). The cult of male beauty – the aestheticization of ‘fit’ male bodies in consumer and gay cultures – is also significant. Wernick (1991), for example, discusses the (re-)imaging of men in promotional culture, including the objectification and sometimes eroticization of men’s bodies and male/female and gay/straight interchangeability in advertising imagery. Certainly, as suggested by statistics on cosmetic and other weight-related surgery, a ‘dubious equality’ (Davis, 2002) exists between the sexes. Nonetheless, the web of meanings associated with fatness increasingly figures in the presentation, evaluation and figuration of male bodies in social space.

Theoretically, I draw from various writings. Embodied sociology, which is attentive to the corporeality of social life (Shilling, 2003; Turner, 1996) – viewing minds, bodies and society as thoroughly integrated phenomena – is an important source of reference. Rather than simply advocating a sociology *of* the body, proponents of embodied sociology theorize *from* bodies as lived entities (Williams and Bendelow, 1998). I also draw from Schutz and Goffman – classic interpretive sociologists whose work may be re-read in a thoroughly corporeal light following the ‘somatic turn’ in the social sciences. Goffman (1983), for example, in his seminal micro-studies of the ‘interaction order’, provides a wealth of concepts and insights that may be extended to body-relevant digital space. Similarly, Schutz was writing before the explosion in information technologies, and body studies in the social sciences, but his writings are also good to think with. Schutz (1962) explores how social actors intersubjectively construct meaningful realities through systems of typification and relevance, that is, meanings of persons, things or events organized not in terms of unique qualities and random concerns but in terms of typical features and particular interests. When exploring fat male embodiment online this conception of the social is useful, especially if combined with other theoretical and empirical work.

I also draw from writings on cultures of technological embodiment (e.g. Featherstone, 1995), the sociology of food (Murcott, 1998), and the study of men and masculinities (Connell, 1995). I include literature on the ‘gendered dimensions’ of fatness; while such writings often discuss dieting women (e.g. Sobal and Maurer, 1999), men and boys are being ‘brought into’ academic debate. Gilman (2004), Grogan and Richards (2002), Joanisse and Synnott (1999), Kruger (1998), LeBesco (2004), Mosher (2001), Textor (1999) and Wright (1997) offer useful contributions. Themes discussed by these writers include: fat men in fictional literature and television, gendered responses to social stigma and constructions of masculinity in ‘body oriented’ gay subcultures. Studies such as Kruger’s (1998)

and Textor's (1999) discuss representations of fat gay men in magazines and cyberspace, and the meanings of fat and eating in response to HIV/AIDS. However, while highly relevant, these studies are not grounded in embodied sociology, nor do they advance the case for an embodied sociology. Also, the limited amount of sociological research in this area means there is much to be explored. Even detailed books on this topic are, by their own admission, 'slim' in their coverage of a big issue (Gilman, 2004).

Following Connell (1995), Watson (2000) is one of the few sociologists to have researched male bodies and health using an embodied perspective. Drawing from interviews, Watson (2000) offers some discussion on 'overweight' and his male respondents' anti-fat sentiments. However, this issue does not receive sustained attention despite the centrality of body weight to current (often imposed) evaluations of health and self. Also, the negativity identified in this study, which reflects everyday stigma in Anglophone culture, is not counterbalanced by the suggestion that fatness may be positively valued and embraced. In short, such work usefully grounds male experiences in relational, processual bodies, but ignores positive typifications among those constructing plural masculinities and sexualities.

With this in mind, this article focuses upon online co-constituted *meanings* which *could* figure in the management of spoiled masculine identities. Drawing from a 'virtual ethnography' (Hine, 2000) of size-accepting or -admiring (SA) groups primarily based in the USA, I explore cyberspace as a possible domain for constructing positive masculinities. These constructions overwhelmingly relate to men (often in sexualized contexts), though boyhood and adolescence are sometimes topical. Data were obtained over a 10-month period (December 2003 to September 2004), incorporating observations of websites ($N = 15$) and online group interactions. I also actively generated data in chat rooms (Internet Relay Chat or IRC) and through email exchanges with key informants ($N = 7$). As with offline ethnography, research participants and sites are rendered anonymous through the use of pseudonyms. Textual data were regularly imported into, and systematically analysed using *Atlas.ti* (Muh, 1997). For an extended methodological discussion, see Monaghan (forthcoming).

Typifying 'Fat' Male Body-subjects and their Cybersociates

Many types of 'fat' male body-subject (forms of embodiment) are identifiable in SA cyberspace, co-constituting meaningful domains which may be real in their consequences. In contrast to the physicality of fatness, these virtual bodies are clearly 'reduced versions of the primordial real thing' (Goffman, 1983: 2). They

may even be radically different from their offline correlates: the Internet, in contrast to bodily co-presence (Goffman, 1967), provides limited opportunity for sharing corporeal signs and visual clues. Yet, similar to bodies co-constituting *and existing outside* situations of physical co-presence, cyberbodies are structured according to systems of relevance and typification. Re-presenting and possibly reforming participants' on/offline modalities of embodiment (comprising particular viewpoints and the obfuscation of object–subject, other–self, observer–participant, author–reader, fantasy–reality), cyberbodies are located, and locate themselves, according to somatic interests and dimensions. These include projects of self-acceptance or promotion as well as erotic and/or gustatory motivated relevances. Reported age, height, weight, ethnicity and other physical markers of selfhood may also be relevant. In short, participants (self-)name and interpret others (including supportive/admiring others) in the mode of typicality. Cyberbodies are generalized types with typically defined appearances, mutual relations and styles of being experienced (Schutz, 1970).

Table 1 presents a typology of 'fat' male body-subjects and cybersociates who may act as supportive others. In defining terms, cybersociates are 'imagined' types (dissembling is certainly acknowledged online) who may never meet face to face but who nonetheless have the potential to influence and/or interact with others via the Internet. The traffic of communication and influence between cybersociates is variable. Communication may be unidirectional or reciprocal, depending upon the features and temporal dimensions of different communicative channels. For example, notices may be posted on discussion boards, and remain for some time, without any further dialogue between the originator and successive readers. IRC comprises more synchronous interaction and reciprocal information flows. Following Schutz's (1962) discussions on the structures of the life-world, I would add that if cybersociates meet offline with concrete others in face-to-face interaction (as may occur within the spatial boundaries of certain groups), then they may be described as 'consociates' for the duration of that interaction. Cybersociates, as social types existing outside face-to-face interaction, may also be described as 'contemporaries' if they share a temporal reality.

Generic modalities of fat male embodiment, which, in this paper, largely refer to adult males, include: Big Handsome Men (BHM), 'Cuddly' Bears and other corpulent males. These types are differentiated according to relevances prevailing within particular groups, though participants sometimes offer inclusive and imprecise definitions (albeit without explicating taken-for-granted in-group characteristics such as sexual orientation). For example, 'if you think you're a BHM, then you are' or 'part of the magic of the Bear label is that it escapes precise definition'. Such definitional practices, intended to include and empower

bodies, contrast with objectifying biomedical categorizations, which are geared towards disciplining bodies (Foucault, 1977). In biomedicine, 'big' bodies are negatively typified as 'overweight' or 'obese' depending upon Body Mass Index, calculated using a simple weight-for-height formula (WHO, 1998: 9). *SA* typifications are more ambiguous and complex. Even so, when observing modalities-of-embodiment-in-action, points of identification, convergence and divergence emerge. It is therefore possible to concisely define types of fat male body-subject.

BHM, in association with supportive cybersociates, typically engage in processes of accepting and promoting (rather than simply measuring) their already sizeable bodies in heterosexual space. A romantic or sexual focus is common, alongside other concerns which render direct reference to offline bodily dimensions (e.g. weight, height and waist measurement) more or less relevant. Bears engage in similar processes in gay male space. Although often considered more of an 'attitude' than a definable male type (Mosher, 2001: 186), Bears have a distinct symbolic style. Their body schema incorporates full facial hair, an assured sense of masculinity and a level of body-mass typically equated with the ageing male body. Other types include gay male Chubbies. Typically more expansive than Bears (visible online from digital photographs, though body weight may be cited), their expressions of self-acceptance are less assured. Others promote feeding and/or fattening processes, possibly with a sexual focus. Foodees or Gluttons are primarily food-oriented. They share a gastronomic interest in tasty, fattening recipes and eating competitions. Feedees seek female Feeders, or gay male Gainers seek Encouragers, to help them derive greater (eroticized) pleasures from eating calorific food and/or accruing body fat. For them, increasing offline body measurements may be cited and framed as indicators of progress.

Finer points of analysis will emerge below, but I should stress that this framework is an 'ideal typical' (Weber, 1976) abstraction. As an 'objectively possible' approximation, the table does not exhaust all potentially relevant aspects of multiple online realities or correspond exactly with concrete, empirical individuals. (For example, any one person may occupy multiple subject-positions and perform multiple identities as part of their expressed 'love of fat'. The dynamism of cyberspace also means that definitions are always mutable.) Nonetheless, the table is subjectively adequate because it is understandable in terms of the typifications routinely used in various *SA* cyber-groups. Restated, the table makes sense in terms of the taken-for-granted, culturally pre-established typifications used by in-groups when orienting to, and interpreting, fat male embodiment (though this collective element does not prevent idiosyncratic interpretations of cultural typifications) (Schutz, 1970). Hopefully, the table has

Table 1 A typology of ‘fat’ male body-subjects and their cybersociates

<i>Generic types of fat male body</i>	<i>Subtypes</i>	<i>Supportive cybersociates</i>
Big Handsome Men (BHM)	Super Size BHM (SSBHM)	Female Fat Admirers (FFA), including but not limited to Big Beautiful Women (BBW)
	Teen BHM	
	Big Handsome Black Men (BHBM)	Size Acceptance community more generally
‘Cuddly’ Bears	Daddy or Polar Bear	Other Bears and thinner subtypes (e.g. the Otter and Wolf)
	Cub	Gay Bear Lovers or Admirers more generally
	Hybrids and other subtypes (e.g. Chubby or Grizzly Bear, Big Teddy Bear, Black Bear)	STR8 women who admire ‘bear-like’ men
	Other large hirsute men identified as heterosexual (STR8) Bears	
Other Big/Fat Males	Chubbies	Chubby Chasers, Encouragers or Gay Fat Admirers
	Gainers	Feeders
	Belly Builders	Various others, including those supporting or admiring BHM and Bears
	Feedees	
	Foodees	
	Gluttons	

heuristic value, aiding description and analysis of virtual constructions of fat male embodiment – online ‘presentations of self’ (Goffman, 1959) which are relational, contingent and not necessarily neat constructions.

Big Handsome Men: Putting On(line) a Desirable Body and Face

This typification is relatively inclusive. One of my contacts wrote: ‘Any fat guy is a BHM, be he gay, teenager, African American, Asian or if he comes from

Jupiter' (AdorableFFA, email: 11 May 2004). However, in practice, this universality is highly circumscribed. If reference is made to sexuality, the BHM label is largely constructed within heterosexual SA groups (some meet off- as well as online). Although primarily catering to Big Beautiful Women (BBW), and their typically slim male Fat Admirers (FAs), these (cyber-)groups also offer acceptance, support and heterosexual validation for fat men. Online, self-typifying BHM (or, more modestly, 'big men') often seek corporeal connections and offline dating opportunities with Female Fat Admirers (FFAs). This is illustrated below. Here 'nice and thick' refers to the author's offline body, rather than intellect, amidst similar postings where geographically locatable BHM described their eye and hair colour, as well as weight and height:

Any FFA's in California? Hi, I'm a big man in Santa Barbara, I would just love to meet a woman who appreciates someone nice and thick. If you're a FFA who is hungry for a date, email me! (Posting on a BHM/FFA discussion board)

In contrast to gay male typifications (discussed below), the genus BHM is relatively homogeneous. When differentiation was observed, this often coincided with the heavy offline stigma associated with particular categories of fat male. These include adolescents (Teen BHM), who are often considered 'body conscious' (WHO, 1998: 61), and those clinically defined as 'morbidly [*sic*] obese' (Super Size BHM). The typification Big Handsome Black Men (BHBM) was unusual, despite AdorableFFA's ethnically inclusive definition. Following Mosher (2001: 176), this could be due to a more accommodating attitude to fat among African Americans. However, I did observe one self-typifying BHBM (reportedly weighing 260 pounds at 5 feet 10 inches) admonish African American women for ignoring or insulting their fat 'brothers' offline. However, while all BHM may be vulnerable to offline stigma, or 'non-person treatment' (Goffman, 1959), the Internet allows fleshy bodies to become more durable and valued cyborgs. For Haraway (1991: 175), cyborgs embrace technology in order to exercise 'the power to survive . . . to mark the world that marked them as other, [to] reverse and displace hierarchical dualisms' such as ugly and handsome. Following Wernick (1991), this also meshes with a promotional culture where men, like women, are increasingly being constructed as fleshy advertisements for the self.

The BHM label is a 'personal front' (Goffman, 1959) in the theatre of life. As part of the online presentation or promotion of self, BHM seek acceptance and heterosexual matching through 'face work' (Goffman, 1967), which could more appropriately be termed 'screen work'. This work, sometimes manifest in light-hearted sociability, draws positive meanings from the symbolism of the desirable

(handsome) male face (on the cultural significance of the face, see Synnott, 1989). Photographs purportedly depicting the BHM's face, and favourable self-comparisons to 'famous faces' (e.g. the BHBM mentioned above claimed he looked like Sidney Poitier) may also render this 'screen work' more corporeally grounded. Here the Internet provides a stage upon which 'real' fat males may (virtually) construct a self that (partially) transcends the increasing bodyism of somatic society. Though, as indicated below, corpulent male bodies (fat body parts below the neck) are still relevant, contrasting with common representations of fat as 'an unwanted appendage of the head-self' (Millman, 1980; cited by Mosher, 2001: 174). These male body-selves also include those typified as SSBHM in SA circles:

Once, on a 'You're Too Fat to Be All That' episode of Ricki Lake, I heard a 500 pound man describe his belly as 'the playground'. 'Ladies love the playground!', he said. 'They love to ride and slide and do the glide'. It was a horrible episode, but man, did I laugh. And I now call my belly the playground. And I still laugh. I've been called many things, but the best was 'big, sexy beast'. (A BHM responding to FFAs on a fat-acceptance discussion board)

SA cyber-groups typically comprise 'the own and the wise' (Goffman, 1968). These cybersociates are instrumental in manufacturing favourable (recognizably human) versions of fat male embodiment. Through collaborative efforts, participants promote a 'line' (Goffman, 1967) which, in the words of AdorableFFA, 'is designed to make both the person of size and the public aware that fatness does not imply ugliness' (email: 11 May 2004). The consistency of this shared viewpoint – along with its promotion of civil liberties, social support and legitimacy – leads me to suggest that it is a *relatively* proactive, rather than reactive, stance. Julie, who, like AdorableFFA, was a key member of a prominent fat activist group, also stated that fat men unaffiliated to SA organizations are BHM irrespective of their own awareness or promotion of fat civil rights (email: 26 December 2003). To borrow from, and modify, Marxist social thought, these 'fat-male-bodies-in-themselves' may lack political consciousness but they share discredited corporeal capital and are therefore potential advocates of fat civil rights.

The materiality of offline bodies, as well as being an important aspect of participants' online definitions and interactions, was recurrent during interviewing. In response to my questioning, Julie added that 'real-life' BHM (experienced by her as unique individuals rather than social types) do not have to be facially handsome. This, in turn, countered the suggestion that the BHM typification simply perpetuates the importance of actual physical looks (email, 26 December 2003). In short, the handsome 'face' in face (and screen) work does not have to be realistic; rather, it is a virtual construction which is aligned with particular

expectations and emotions, calling forth supportive social responses as part of a more general cult of the self (Goffman, 1967). Of course, such efforts to fight stigma actually consolidate a public conception of fatness as a ‘real thing’ and fat people as constituting a ‘real’ group (cf. Goffman, 1968: 139). Transforming ‘fat-bodies-in-themselves’ into ‘fat-bodies-for-themselves’ may therefore have its downside, as well as its advantages (also, see LeBesco, 2004: 89, 137).

Because desire is an important dimension in the constitution of acting bodies, it is worth underscoring its relevance in the context of BHM/BBW/FFA sexual social relations. Sexual desire, socially patterned according to ‘a joint system of prohibition and incitement’ (Connell, 1987: 112), is produced relationally. Organized within what Connell terms the ‘structure of cathexis’ (1987: 112), this ‘mode of desire’ determines fat men’s eligibility for sexual matching and ‘interpellates’ them as ‘sexual objects’ (Turner, 1996: 46). As noted, the ‘reality’ of physical appearance/attraction may be disavowed online for political reasons, yet the BHM typification connotes sexual (physical) desirability rather than mere acceptability. Offline, Gimlin (2002: 136) observes that many fat women belonging to a prominent US organization (The National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance or NAAFA) do not find fat men sexually desirable. Confirmatory evidence is available online. However, there is also, methodologically speaking, much ‘negative evidence’, that is, more positive online meanings. Cyber-support from FFAs and others (e.g. BBW and the larger SA community) is revisited below in a discussion of the virtual construction of viable masculinities.

Bears: ‘Cuddly’ Hirsute Types in Gay Culture

This typification ‘includes many big men deemed fat and denigrated by the mainstream of gay male social and community networks’ (Textor, 1999: 223). In-group purists would disagree, but this is a relatively inclusive and self-referential label which overlaps with other identity categories (cf. LeBesco, 2004: 90). Similar to BHM, Bears also engage in processes of self-acceptance and promotion. This proactive stance is especially relevant in gay male culture given the intensity of bodyism and ‘aesthetic inequality’ (Synnott, 1989). Gay culture, more so than heterosexual culture, objectifies a standard image of male beauty: ‘the young, blond, smooth-skinned, gym-buffed’ model type or ‘twink’ (Wright, 1997: 2). Bears seek to transcend this body ideal through their symbolic style and advocated codes of self-body relatedness:

The most common definition of a ‘bear’ is a man who is hairy, has facial hair, and a cuddly body. However, the word ‘bear’ means many things to different people, even within the bear movement. Many men who do not have one or all of these characteristics define themselves as

bears, making the term a very loose one. Suffice it to say, 'bear' is often defined as more of an attitude than anything else – a sense of comfort with our natural masculinity and bodies that is not slavish to the vogues of male attractiveness that is so common in gay circles and the culture at large. (Bear Information Website)

Thinner and less hirsute types sometimes embrace this identity. And, similar to the possibility of rotund gay men being described as 'big' and handsome, heterosexual men with a 'bear-like' appearance could also be typified as Bears. However, responding to 'heterosexual [STR8] bears' or 'women looking for them', the above website administrators write: 'heterosexuals are always welcome to use our resources, and we will gladly link in heterosexual-related bear sites, should they come to our attention. But unfortunately, at present, we aren't aware of any.' This open and communicative stance toward others suggests that Bears can be highly supportive and accepting.

There are many Bear subtypes. In the mordant words of one IRC participant: 'bears have more self-identification strata than regular people have underwear' (Wolf Man). 'Cybearspace' is informative. Websites describe 'subclasses of bear' including Cubs, who are typically younger, smaller and possibly less experienced group members; Daddy Bears (or Polar Bears) who are typically older (greying) and (sexually) superordinate to Cubs; and Otters and Wolves who are 'thin bears, the wolf being more aggressive' (Bear Information Website). Because Table 1 is structured at the generic level according to typifications of 'fat' male body-subjects, Otters and Wolves are categorized as cybersociates of 'cuddly' Bears. However, there are many other sizeable subtypes. For example, ethnic variation is signified by labels such as Black Bear though 'the predominant types of bears are "American Bears" who are typically Caucasian males' (Bear Admirer Website). Some are hybrids with other generic types: Grizzlies are gay males whose physical characteristics border those of Bears and large Chubbies (see discussion below).

Systems of relevance, including motivational relevances which reflect participants' (sexual) interest in big men, render further differentiation possible. Indeed, the 'inner horizon' or 'frame of further determination' (Schutz, 1966: 95) of this typification can become extremely variegated. Drawing from Turner (1996: 47), it may be stated that Bears live their sensual, sexual yet resistant lives via the heterogeneous categories of a homoerotic mode of desire. 'Because "Bears" mean so many things to different people, because bears come in all shapes and sizes and have different sexual proclivities', and also given the purported expense of placing personal ads to meet potential sex partners, the administrators of one website offer what they describe as 'an incredibly scientific system to describe bears and bear-like men' (Bear Information Website). Admittedly 'somewhat

tongue-in-cheek' (Wright, 1997: 33), the so-called 'Natural Bear Code' differentiates types on the basis of various eroticized bodily dimensions. These include facial hair (length, thickness and tidiness), body hair (chest, back, buttocks, etc.), other aspects of the physique (e.g. height, muscularity, weight), bodily comportment and action (e.g. dominance, passivity, sexual proclivities).

Focusing upon bodily bigness, codes exist for Round Bears, Big Teddy Bears, Big Boned Bears and Bears with a Tummy. Heaviness is not always relevant, but 'cuddly' types with 'bear bellies' are common and are desired. This, in turn, may render fatness an explicitly eroticized 'body project' (Shilling, 2003), where being a 'man of girth' is not simply accepted but positively embraced and cultivated as part of an alternative gay identity. This is discussed below in relation to Gainers. However, while the value of fatness (and other bodily capital such as youthfulness) is being inflated in the US gay male cultural economy following the devastating impact of AIDS (Kruger, 1998), there are limits. AIDS 'wasting syndrome' and horrific images of the emaciated 'homosexual body' have not simply resulted in a gay fat utopia. Even Bears sometimes police types of fat male body, constituting their subjectivity by producing excluded and abjected Others (LeBesco, 2004: 5, 91).

Other Fat-friendly Typifications

There are other typifications and associated relevances. For example, eating 'excessively' is a primary concern among Gluttons while the gay eroticization of corpulence is thematic among Chubbies and Chubby Chasers. Inseparable from the history of Christian asceticism, where eating and sex have long been considered 'gross activities of the body' (Turner, 1996: 49), other recalcitrant types embody an amalgam of corporeal concerns. In pursuing greater pleasures from eating and growing, Gainers or Feedees seek eroticized relations with Encouragers or Feeders. This gives an explicitly sexual twist to what Campos (2004: 70) terms 'food porn' – the investment of quasi-erotic qualities and compensatory sexual meanings to food.

Focusing first upon the gay male community, the Chubby label is common. Existing on/offline, Chubbies can be differentiated from other large gay men along two axes, namely (1) their physical characteristics and (2) self-body relatedness. First, these men tend to be bigger than their bear-like cousins: '[unlike] the "traditional" bear types, "chubbies" have sumo wrestling builds' (Bear Admirer Website). Other physical characteristics are also relevant. For example, hair can act as a symbolic marker for (overlapping) membership categorization, belonging and rejection. Harry, a bearded, middle-aged man reportedly weighing

400 pounds and self-typifying as a Chubby, wrote: ‘chubbies who are not bears (no beard, no body hair) feel excluded by some bears’ (email: 12 June 2004). Second, Chubbies do self-acceptance/promotion work, seeking recognition and/or sexual validation via the Internet. However, they are typically dissatisfied with their weight, adopting more of a reactive rather than proactive stance. Certainly Harry felt his weight was ‘a bit much’, adding ‘if I could, I’d like to be under 300 [pounds]’ (email: 12 June 2004). Another gay contact, Ray, reportedly weighing 250 pounds, said more generally: ‘I think of chubbies as the big guys who are big not by choice and wish they were thin (usually complain all the time about the diet they should start tomorrow!)’ (email: 13 January 2004).

However, while ‘most chubbies want to weigh less’ (Harry, email: 12 June 2004), their corpulence is eroticized. The Internet and offline convergences, organized by ‘fat-friendly’ European and US gay clubs, offer spaces for sexual expression and matching. Websites for and by Chubbies and Chubby Chasers (who may not necessarily be ‘big’ themselves) are often sexually explicit. Some are commercial porn sites, though others are personal homepages. Again, white ethnicity and US nationality are often taken for granted, though some websites present other nationalities and ethnicities. Several sites I came across described the biographies and romantic hopes of African American Chubbies – cyberbodies whose weight *and* ethnicity have reportedly led to offline discrimination and subordination in gay culture.

Other typifications refer to (typically smaller) men who actively embrace and possibly eroticize fattening processes. Here, if only in imagination, the internal and external spaces of the (cyber)body are constructed as ‘free territory’ – a place of liberty and licence that may be manipulated, adorned and penetrated according to the owners’ intentions and will (cf. Lyman and Scott, 1970: 106). Gainers and Belly Builders are typically, though not necessarily, gay men whose bodies, or specific body-parts (the stomach), are in a state of ‘unfinishedness’ (Shilling, 2003). Similar to the ‘grotesque medieval body’ (Bakhtin, 1965), they happily resist being devoured by the world by consuming, growing and playfully partaking of the world. As an aside, it is interesting to note that clinicians, without any irony or recognition of the fat-bellied cyborg, refer to accumulated abdominal fat as ‘android obesity’ (WHO, 1998: 7).

It would be wrong to view websites (and the typifications used therein) as exclusively heterosexual or gay. Ray, who hosted an internationally popular Gainer website, wrote: ‘over recent years more straights [heterosexuals] seem to be showing up in typically gay “places” so the line blurs’ (email: 15 March 2004). Understandings gleaned from an early visit to a Gainer/Builder chat room suggest that men identifying as heterosexual in everyday life (i.e. claiming to be married to

women) visit such spaces, albeit with the intention of making gay sexual contacts. Drawing from Waskul's (2005) concept of 'alter-sexuality' or liminal sexuality, there is nothing unusual about this: cyberspace provides suitable conditions for safely 'bounded' reinventions of the sexual self which may contrast radically with everyday life. Nonetheless, essentialist constructions of sexuality often prevail. For example, those providing the aforementioned 'freebie' IRC room sought to include straight men. Distinguishing their space from other 'chub sites', they encouraged the appreciation and cultivation of men's fat stomachs by focusing upon 'guts' not genitals. Even so, gay male sexuality remained highly thematic.

Whether reference is made to gay or heterosexually oriented cyberspace, emphasis may shift from weight-gain fantasies to the pleasures of eating. Often there is overlap. Either way, dyadic relationships may be sought with supportive cybersociates as part of the expression, production and direction of discreditable desires (including desires which some participants describe as 'mildly' masochistic). These resistances against dietary and sexual restraint entail praise and/or playful degradation in techno-sexualized contexts. (If actual physical interaction does not occur, then the telephone may serve as a more immediate alternative to text-based interaction.) Here erotic fantasies and fictional stories render food, sex and expanding/expansive bodies pivotal concerns. Food is not necessarily a compensation for sex in these representations; rather, food may complement the sensual pleasures of sexual relations (e.g. eating chocolate cake which is smeared on a sexual partner's naked body). Textor (1999) discusses this in relation to US gay men, where Gainers form eroticized feeding relationships with Encouragers. Similar relationships are forged in heterosexual space, though participants may typify as Feedees and Feeders and call their practice Feederism. A FFA elaborates, noting subtle distinctions and the fact that gay men do not have a monopoly on the Gainer label:

As far as gainers/feedees go, they may or may not be fat. For many, the feeding and gain is just a fantasy, because their real life circumstances do not allow them to feel they can get as fat as they want. Many of course are already quite chubby or fat, want to get even fatter, and are interested in a woman who wants to feed them and then tease them about their excess girth. You can even split up the gainer and the feedee into two different categories, as each may have a different end to attaining sexual pleasure. The gainer wants to gain weight because he finds the feeling of having the extra weight erotic, and wants to please his FFA [qua Feeder], or at least wants her to notice his extra flab. The Feedee may or may not want to gain, but finds the fullness and sensual experience of indulging to be the most erotic aspect. I think there's usually overlap, but a distinction is worth noting. I think both carry a hint of the masochism role, but there are subtle differences. (WarmFFA, email: 12 May 2004)

Feederism in cyberspace sometimes entails role-play between two self-identified heterosexual men, with one adopting the role of a female Feeder in a

‘mutual-pretence awareness context’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1964). Drawing from ethnomethodological studies of gender attribution, this is an instance of social cognition and interpretation transforming ‘naturalistic’ bodies according to shared structures of practical relevance (Connell, 1987: 78). Following Featherstone (1995: 233), this may also be described as ‘computer cross-dressing’ which destabilizes boundaries such as sex and gender, intimacy and anonymity, organic and cybernetic, reality and fantasy.

Other typifications in heterosexually oriented space include Glutton and Foodee. They too lend weight to the sociological truism that ‘food is not just something to eat’ (Murcott, 1998: 14). Their relatedness to supportive others, comprising dyadic (sexualized) feeding and eroticized weight gain, may be less central but they collectively emphasize gluttonous pleasures. These relevances encode an open disregard for medical models of healthy diet – models which often clash with people’s gustatory habits and preferences (Beardsworth and Keil, 1997: 256). In the gluttony email group I subscribed to, there was often a caustic championing of fat people’s rights to share in the public’s growing fascination with eating (cf. Murcott, 1998: 1). Here tales of gluttony were posted in an atmosphere of camaraderie and acceptance. (Re)producing a shameless orientation to fat male embodiment, information was circulated on competitive eating events, ‘all-you-can-eat’ restaurants and fattening recipes. In contrast to bourgeois stylization, refinement and distinction, ‘the crudely material reality’ (Bourdieu, 1984: 203) of eating was celebrated as part of the performance of gender, class and identity. That said, other issues were also discussed, including: discrimination, ambivalence about weight gain, affordability of food and the eroticization of those BBW who publicly display gustatory verve, flesh and a desire to become even fatter.

Finally, typifications may be defined relationally independent of possible incumbents’ feelings (cf. Schutz, 1964: 45). Typifications may even be constructed in ‘closed awareness contexts’ (Glaser and Strauss, 1964) characterized by gendered power relations and a traditional sexual division of domestic labour. For example, a self-typifying male Glutton may become a Feedeer by forming a ‘food-centric’ relationship with a woman (Feeder) independent of her knowledge or self-identity. The host of the gluttony group cited above, writing in a characteristically self-assured style, makes this clear when advising other male Gluttons on how to form offline commensal relations with a female Feeder:

Here’s my advice for finding a female feeder. Go to a personals website. A BBW site might be more likely to yield positive responses. Or just put an ad in the regular local newspaper. NEVER specify that you are looking for a female feeder. No one knows what that means. Most female feeders are not really consciously aware of their preferences. Many of them have not

discovered this side of themselves because they have not met the right man to bring it out in them. IN your ad, just say something like 'Must be a good cook'. That's all you really need to say. You might mention that you are 'a bit of a glutton'. Be certain to include dining out and picnics and such in your list of interests. You'll probably get several responses. In the initial phone call, be sure to chat about your favorite foods and inquire about hers and her favorite recipes. From the way she talks about food or the interest she shows in your preferences, you may get a feeling if she is a potential feeder. Design your first date so that several food encounters are included. Demonstrate your strong appetite to her without drawing attention to it. Note her reaction. If the response is neutral to intrigue you have a promising lead. The acid test will come a few dates later when you know her well enough to share a home cooked meal at her place. A potential female feeder will have picked up on your abnormally well-developed appetite in the course of a date or two. She will prepare generous quantities of food in multiple courses. If she makes a 'diet' meal or fails to offer seconds, or gives you a lecture for eating too much, you may have someone too hung up on dietary restraint to ever satisfy you. (Al, host of a 'Food and Drink' website)

Virtually Constructing Acceptable, Admirable or Resistant Masculinities

The above gendered typifications figure within online schemes of orientation and interpretation and have implications for positive subjectivity. At a time when the obesity industry is actively constructing overweight as a serious problem, the Internet provides space for alternative definitions of fat male embodiment. Some common ways of managing spoiled masculine identities online are outlined below under four headings: (1) appeals to 'real' or 'natural' masculinity; (2) the admiration and eroticization of fat men's bodies; (3) transgression, fun and the carnivalesque; and (4) the pragmatics and politics of fat male embodiment.

Appeals to 'Real' or 'Natural' Masculinity

Constructions of normative masculinity are multi-dimensional, incorporating factors such as employment, marital status and fatherhood (Watson, 2000). Yet, in the context of bodyism, fatness may be used to emasculate male bodies or render them subordinate on masculine hierarchies. In contemporary Anglophone culture, fatness symbolizes lack of self-discipline and adherence to masculinist imperatives such as being active and in control. Participants in various SA groups challenge this effacement. Whether focusing upon heterosexual or gay male groups, the competing rhetoric is clear: fat men have 'real' or 'natural' bodies.

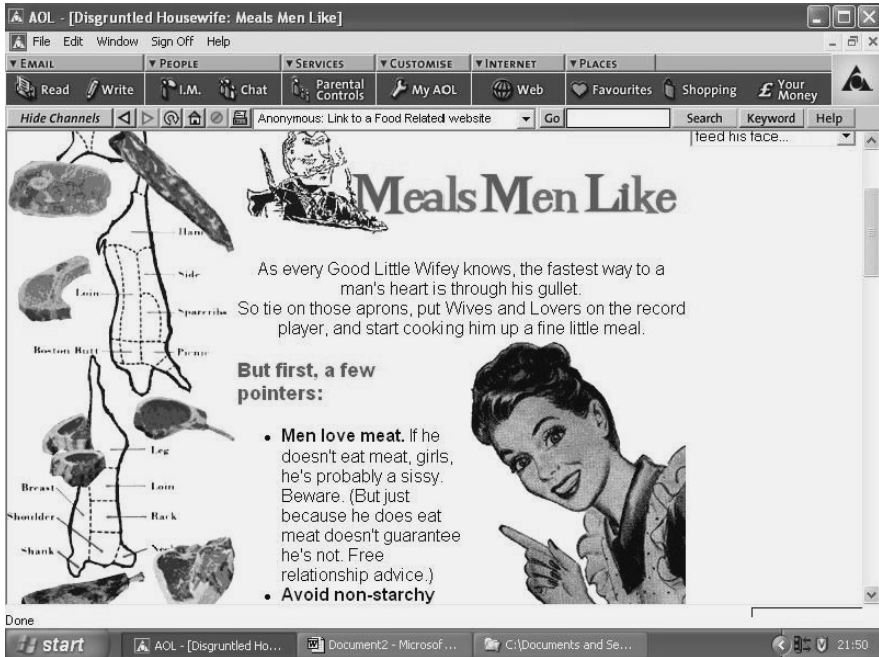
Similar to Watson's male interviewees, cyber-persona criticized media images of 'ideal' men's bodies on the basis that such bodies are unrepresentative of the 'normal bloke's everyday body' (Watson, 2000: 80). Men often know 'ideal' or 'perfect' physiques require body-maintenance regimes, rendering the hard-edged male body 'an artificial creation' (2000: 117, also, see Monaghan, 2001). Nonetheless, given the importance of sport as a gendered institution, men may

still align themselves with the functionality, if not the aesthetics, of an exercised body. By reportedly engaging in physically demanding (male-coded) sports, 'big' men seek to counter negative (feminized) stereotypes. Their vocabularies of motive derive additional weight if the type of male body invoked is 'gigantic in all its qualities' rather than 'pathologically fat' (Gilman, 2004: 53). One contributor to a mixed-sex *SA* discussion board wrote the following, joining others in condemning a 'fat discriminatory' article in a men's health and fitness magazine:

Well I was offended by this [article] a lot because as a big man none of the things said in that article are true. I am an athlete. I train in dojos, gyms and I spar with pro wrestlers to this day. I am 6 feet 7 inches and 400 pounds. I wear a size 18 shoe. I have never liked *Men's Health* [magazine] in general because they're only concerning themselves with the image of the perfect man and not the real man. (Gargantua, Big Men's discussion board)

Bears also typically accept many trappings of hegemonic masculinity. The historical association between male homosexuality and effeminacy undeniably promotes complexity and contradiction within this subculture (Wright, 1997: 11). Yet, key dimensions of masculinity are embraced, including self-confidence and assurance. The symbolism of body and facial hair, physical bulk and male-coded activity are also relevant. Bears self-present as having the 'correct attitude' towards their 'natural' ageing male bodies, hair on the body and face differentiates men from women (baldness is acceptable for the same reason), 'the battle of the bulge' is rejected (it is typically associated with the feminine), and being camp is replaced by a sense of being an 'everyday guy' who also happens to be gay. Comfort with other men's bodies is also framed in terms of 'real' masculinity – Bears are not 'afraid' to touch others, for example.

Other types also engage online in masculine validating processes. For example, Belly Builders assert control and licence over their 'body territory' (Lyman and Scott, 1970: 106) in response to a society that dispraises the 'obese' for their putative lack of control. Gluttons emphasize 'man-size' appetites, the capacity for sheer quantitative stuffing and the enjoyment of food without fear of calories (also, see Bordo, 1993: 132–4). Aligned with female Feeders, male Feedees reiterate traditional gendered stereotypes where women lovingly cook their men 'masculine' foods such as meat (see, for example, screen grab 1). Here the 'gendered accumulation process' discussed by Connell (2002: 25) takes a specifically embodied form. The space-occupying male body is also relevant: being or becoming a 'bulky' man from overeating and/or reduced physical activity may represent an easier approach to 'bodybuilding' than lifting weights. Many gay Gainers, self-presenting as former athletes (ex-Jocks), reportedly take this stance offline (Textor, 1999: 228).



Screen grab 1 A food-related website linked to Al's Gluttony Cyber-Group

Admiring and Eroticizing Fat Men's Bodies

Fatness is potentially problematic for men regardless of their achievements or non-corporeal indicators of acceptability, respectability and desirability. Despite coming from a range of socio-economic backgrounds (including the professions), unmarried fat men in a Canadian study blamed their lack of success in dating, and loneliness, on their weight (Joanisse and Synnott, 1999: 54). Correspondingly, SA cyber-communities represent possible oases of support and admiration, which, in some instances, extends to the explicit eroticization of fat men's bodies.

As noted, BHM seek to efface the perceived ugliness of fatness by putting on(line) a desirable body and face. Such 'screen work' may be tentative (real-life rejection may be mentioned, for example), but some cybersociates are highly supportive. Those reporting offline relationships with fat men, including women who have struggled to reinterpret their own fat, sometimes offer encouragement. As expressed within a heterosexual Gainer group:

Subject: Yeah, she's gaining!! Once I accepted the fact that fat does not make me a bad person, it was easy to give in to my natural tendency to be fat as well as my feelings that fat is erotic and desirable. I not only like being fat, I like Fred [partner] to be fat too. So I rub his belly

and encourage him. What about you? Would you like to be fat? Would she like it if you were fat too? (Sugar Plum Fairy, Weight-Watching group email)

And, referring to the same *Men's Health* magazine article discussed above by Gargantua and cybersociates ('Thirty-One Reasons I'm Still Fat'), another FFA cited and concurred with one of these reasons: "there actually exists a completely viable group of really hot women who are bored with totally buff, cut, in-shape guys." You bet, we FFAs are here! (Ruben's Girl, Big Men's discussion board). Ruben's Girl, who self-presented as an SSBBW married to a BHM, also initiated an extended group discussion on complementary masculine adjectives for BHM. Here BHM were described as massive, burly, imposing, robust, awesome, powerful, cuddly and magnificent. This conversation ritual elevated BHM to sacred status (cf. Goffman, 1967). In this little social system, these rituals prompted BHM to thank their cybersociates for offering esteem and validation. Renewed hope in finding romance was similarly expressed in other (free to access) SA groups by those self-presenting as single men who had spent their lives thinking their fatness was an insurmountable barrier to close, intimate heterosexual relationships.

Of course, gender asymmetry must be recognized. An important feminist argument is that women's physical appearance is more often emphasized in a broader objectifying and sexist culture. It is unsurprising, therefore, that BHM may be praised for qualities extending beyond their looks, such as personality, intelligence, charm and conversation skills. However, fat men may also be favourably positioned on sexual hierarchies because of, rather than despite, their size. WarmFFA's website expressed admiration and lascivious heterosexual attention towards fat men. These men included film and TV stars (e.g. Robbie Coltrane), musicians (e.g. Popa Chubby), athletes (e.g. sumo wrestlers) and historical figures such as Daniel Lambert who was described as one of England's biggest men, reputedly weighing as much as 52 stone (also, see Gilman, 2004: 98). Positioned as 'eye candy' for the FFA, visitors to this website were offered links to photographs of fat men (some of them available through gay-themed sites) with the stated intention of serving 'our female lustful eyes as well' (WarmFFA's website).

The range of acceptable or desirable male body types is reportedly much narrower in gay culture, rendering many gay men insecure about their looks (Locke, 1997). One response is to reject the objectification (symbolic feminization) of gay men's bodies where the emphasis upon beauty is recast as an impediment to intimacy (Wright, 1997: 9). However, many SA spaces promote the gay eroticization of expansive male bodies. Textor's (1999) work on representations

of fat men and homosexual desire within the big men's magazine media is extendable to cyberspace. Similar to magazines, 'an erotic lexicon is in place' forming 'a discourse of desire' which reflects and produces an imagined community wherein fat men have sexual currency (Textor, 1999: 218).

However, structures of sexuality and cathexis produce mixed emotions (Connell, 1987: 112). Similar to BBW/FA sexual social relations (Gimlin, 2002), some 'big' gay men are ambivalent about this sexual validation (objectification). Several gay cybersociates claimed that Chubbies are suspicious of slim Chasers because they are often predatory types, sexually 'grazing' on 'big' men who lack self-esteem and are needy of love. Harry elaborated upon this, indicating that erotic reciprocity in these (offline) power relations is based on an unequal exchange:

Chubbies have issues with chasers because chasers' desires can come off as a fetish, being more interested in the fat than the whole picture. When they say 'the bigger the better' it boils their whole attraction down to one thing. Chasers can be only interested in sex and go from one chubby to another. A slim chaser can do this because they are a scarce commodity. At [offline chubby club], although about half of the guys are chasers, only half of those chasers are slim guys. Even with chubbies who have a degree of self-acceptance, having a handsome, young, slim or muscular guy interested in you can boost your self-esteem. But this sets them up for a crash when that person leaves. (email: 12 June 2004)

Transgression, Fun and the Carnavalesque

The stigma of fatness is often challenged in a convivial atmosphere, characterized by fun and enjoyment rather than illness and disease. Again, sexual desire is relevant. However, in exploring other (interrelated) themes, I will briefly consider online representations of feeding and fattening processes. For Gainers, Belly Builders, Gluttons and Feedees, the vicarious pleasures of gluttony and/or body modification are central. For them, opprobrium is flamboyantly resisted through the assertive 'technique of self-flaunting' (Joanisse and Synnott, 1999: 64). The following supportive interchange in a mixed-sex Gainer group humorously refers to measurable offline bodies and seasonal celebrations. Even in contexts of corporeal transgression, food is socially ordered, patterned and encoded (cf. Mennell, 1991: 10):

Subject: Have gained, how do I know? Kevin wrote:

I went out today and I think I have gained, my fly on my jeans would not stay up, the pressure of that extra belly was not going to give in. :), [symbol signifies a smiling face]. Just as well it is winter and I had a large loose jumper so you could not tell anyway, blush. I am now a good 173 cm in girth, when I was 168 cm I was 172 kg so I estimate that I am now 176–178 kg or about 390 lbs, I am aiming for 180 cm by Xmas.

Reply (on the same day) from Jake:

Dude, I think you'll make it to your goal by Christmas, after all you're so close now and still 4 months away, with 3-4 big eating holidays ahead of you too, make the most of those and I believe you'll be comfortably over your goal by Christmas. . . . I only wish it was me that big. (Weight-Watching group emails)

In late modernity, the body and its appetites are increasingly regulated by the (self-)imposed imperatives of health (Lupton, 1997) – a contradiction, to be sure, given the stimulus continually to consume foodstuffs in capitalist economies. However, unlike the bourgeois ‘civilized body’ (Elias, 2000), which disciplines its own appetites and bodily boundaries according to (increasingly medicalized) middle-class dictates (Lupton, 2000), types of fat male cyberbody celebrate unrestrained yet patterned consumption. Comparable to bingeing among some women, this is ‘a virtual inevitability’ (Bordo, 1993: 130) in a culture where fat people (regardless of gender) are increasingly told to deny their hunger. Here participants seek to resist cultural injunctions against the unapologetically fat by enthusiastically and unashamedly embracing fat identities and bodies, and fattening processes. Similar to Rabelais and his world, members of these groups typically exaggerate and caricature the negative, the inappropriate (Bakhtin, 1965: 306). Here monstrous appetites and bellies (a typical grotesque hyperbola) acquire an extreme and fantastic character. A series of morphed photographs depicting a Belly Builder’s fattening career (with dates and accumulating poundage written next to a massively expanding torso), or images of forced feeding among Fatties (e.g. a funnel and tube for administering liquidized calories) mock common proprieties. If only ephemerally, the Internet gives rich expression to ‘the second life of the people’ – a space where the ‘civilising of appetite’ (Mennell, 1991) and the (medicalized) regulation of fat bodies are resisted and mocked.

Such processes, which lend themselves to a symbolic interactionist analysis of liminality and the emergence of personhood (Waskul, 2005), are not idiosyncratic. Some postmodern academic books similarly resist healthist injunctions against fat, fatness and gluttonous feeding. Extolling the virtues of periodically permitting oneself the sensual experience of gluttony (‘the beastlike satisfaction of a bloated belly’), Klein (1996: 60) writes: ‘You need once in a while to transgress the barrier between eating well and eating like a pig, in order to understand what eating well might mean’. Interestingly, this idea of ‘eating like a pig’ – painfully implicated in forms of public harassment against fat people (Joanisse and Synnott, 1999: 58–9) – figures within pre-modern carnivalesque imagery where participants subvert high/low distinctions between humans and (dirty) animals. This also occurs within online feeding communities; here politically correct labels are playfully rejected – ‘fat greedy pig’ is preferable to ‘plus size

person'. For Goffman (1968: 155–9), self-derogation is 'understandable within a framework of normal psychology' where the 'normal deviant' derives 'sad pleasure' through 'vicarious rebelliousness'. Of course, as discussed by Langman (2004) when researching cyberporn, the 'grotesque degradation' of subordinated others (usually women) represents the 'dark side' of carnivalization (a case of humiliation rather than admiration). Hence, and on a political note that converges with Bakhtin's comments (1965) on degradation and betterment, derogatory labels are only acceptable when used among (certain groups of) fat people. For Jake, this parallels the black community's appropriation of the term 'nigger' (spelt 'nigga') where repeated use is intended to defuse negative meanings and 'hurtful feelings towards us' (email: 9 February 2004).

The Pragmatics and Politics of Fat Male Embodiment

Common difficulties and common solutions to fat embodiment are discussed online. The keyword here is support for those encountering (and perhaps hoping successfully to challenge) an unaccommodating 'real' world. Importantly, prominent SA groups do not officially *support* mainstream efforts to neutralize fat bodies through restrictive dieting and other techniques of contraction. (After all, that would reinforce the acceptability of slimness among those who are unwilling and/or unable to become and remain slim.) Rather, the everyday practicalities and experiences of being fat are discussed, alongside what might be done to redress social discrimination and promote wider tolerance. However, while political concerns are often clearly articulated by fat women aligned with feminism (Gimlin, 2002), the politics of fat male embodiment largely concern the gendered 'politics of identity' (Goffman, 1968: 149).

Regarding pragmatics, communication and advice abound on tackling the routine, everyday difficulties of being large. Themes include finding suitable clothes suppliers; ensuring good health regardless of size; dealing with prejudiced clinicians; travelling comfortably (cramped aircraft seating is particularly problematic); buying reinforced furniture and other everyday items. This communication is also often gendered in form and/or content. For example, the private motor vehicle – a symbol of masculine autonomy and independence – sometimes figures within information requests. Such requests may also enact male homosociability and solidarity:

It's time for a new ride. My 95 Ford Taurus has 190,000 miles and is starting to nickel and dime me to death. I'd like to get a pickup or a car, but need something I can fit into comfortably. I'm 6 feet 2 inches, 500# [pounds] have a 68-inch waist, to give you some idea. I'd like to hear what you guys are comfortable in so I have some idea where to look. I tried a Chevy Silverado with a cab and a half and was jammed in like a sardine! A little help from my friends . . . (Mr. Round, Big Men's discussion board)

Such talk reproduces a supportive context where fat men are not condemned for their 'excessive' weight. It also reinforces a resistant position against those who would urge the 'obese' to embark upon a difficult-to-sustain and reportedly risky weight-loss regime (cf. Campos, 2004).

Pragmatics are also intertwined with gendered body politics. The politicization of women's bodies is well documented and is clearly articulated with second-wave feminism (e.g. Boston Women's Health Collective, 1971). There the female body is claimed to be a political, material subject constituted by and through 'anti-fat' cultural representations (Textor, 1999: 223). Following feminism's impact upon female body consciousness, many fat women in the USA have organized and mobilized their efforts in order to protest against size discrimination in the real world. Men (who may also, but not necessarily, be fat) are also supportive. However, as observed in NAAFA, the official politicized stance is often secondary to the male FA's eroticization of fat women's bodies (Gimlin, 2002; though see LeBesco, 2004: 37). This is highly problematic for others contributing to more politically minded SA cyber-groups.

There are parallels with the gay male community. Textor (1999: 234) states: 'feminist and lesbian insistentcies upon the body as materially central to politics have influenced the flourishing of the [gay] big men's movement in the 1990s [but] a sexual focus predominates'. Even so, micro-political concerns are still expressed online albeit in response to general political apathy. After stating that Chubbies 'hate political stuff', one participant (Harry, who also wrote for a US 'chub' newsletter) urged his peers to be 'political not polite' in everyday life. This carefully framed admonition was expressed after an observed enactment of stigma was left unchallenged during an offline chub convention.

Bears are not preoccupied with politicized social change either. Their gender politics are largely confined to intra-male relationships and practices (Wright, 1997: 7). Ray offered an explanation, after I asked whether fat gay men were politically motivated in the same way as female fat activists. For him, fat men's and women's different political orientation is due to inequitable (gendered) body norms. However, while containing an element of truth, I would treat these words as a display of perspective, or moral forms, rather than an unmediated view of somatic society. It is a functionally resistant stance, which, like Joanisse and Synnott's (1999) observations, entails transcendence and projected self-confidence. In Ray's words:

I think this relates back to the age-old 'women as objects' not as people issue. Fat men (up to a point) are seen as powerful and successful. Fat women, the opposite. I think that men can carry themselves positively and somehow have the ability to give off the sense that what I am is OK with me – that many women find harder to accomplish. (email: 29 January 2004)

Goffman (1968), in focusing upon stigma management and group alignment, comments upon the politics of identity. Here in-groups present the stigmatized individual with an ego or felt identity largely in political phrasings. This is perhaps the most suitable conceptual framework for exploring the online gender politics of fat male embodiment. According to Goffman, if the stigmatized 'adopts the right line [then] he will have come to terms with himself and be a whole man; he will be an adult with dignity and respect' (1968: 149). While Ray told me 'adopting the right attitude' is an essential yet largely individual accomplishment, he recognized that the social situation of many fat gay men has profited from others in the big men's movement. In his words, 'bears helped us all by saying I am just who I am and I'm not going to fit into some stupid mould you may have' (email: 29 January 2004). Here 'advocated codes of conduct' (Goffman, 1968: 135) provide (some types of) fat gay men not merely with a platform and a politics but with recipes for an appropriate attitude regarding the gendered self.

For others, such as Gluttons, Gainers and Feedees, recipes quite literally provide a politics of pleasure which virtually unite people seeking positively to engage with, rather than retreat from, the world. However, the 'not quite'-ness of virtuality (Hine, 2000) should be reiterated. Experiential bodies may bestow 'the accent of reality' upon cyberspace but there remains a 'paramount reality' (Schutz, 1970) which exerts its 'unbearable weight' (Bordo, 1993) on discredited offline bodies. Unsurprisingly, therefore, intimate and enduring relationships with supportive consociates – real flesh-and-blood bodies – are often valued by those wishing to 'live the dream' of fat acceptance or admiration (Jake, Weight Watching group, email).

Conclusion: Expanding and Embodying Gendered Studies of Fatness

Reference to the 'gendered dimensions' of fatness is often interpreted to mean women's dissatisfaction with their body weight. Within the social sciences, steps are being taken to 'bring in' gendered meanings of fatness as they relate to males at various stages of the life course, but this emergent literature is limited. Furthermore, embodied sociology is seldom advanced in current studies; that is, an approach which re-reads classic social theory when treating bodies as the source, location and medium of society (Shilling, 2003). Because corpulent male bodies are increasingly discredited in somatic society, I used interpretive and embodied sociology to explore some of the ways in which cyberspace may provide alternative, validating meanings. After reporting and analysing relevant ethnography, several observations are worth making.

There are clear efforts to reinterpret the gendered (masculine) meanings of fatness online. Although internationally relevant, these efforts are largely enacted on SA websites whose members and designers are from the USA: a nation known for promoting a sense of entitlement and rugged individualism among its citizenry. Within these digital spaces participants actively challenge degraded and degrading body norms which reflect and reproduce predominantly white, middle-class cultural ideals (the streamlined, rationalized, civilized body). Here forms of fat male embodiment become ‘virtually’ acceptable, admirable and even sexually desirable. Ideal typically, these are correct bodies rather than correctable bodies. ‘Screen work’ and embodied ‘identity work’ are thus conjoined as participants seek to invert negative meanings and construct (however fleetingly) viable masculinities. There is also a playfulness to fatness and eating, representing an interesting contrast to the pathology of obesity and the rationalization of diet. And, because pain may be socially inflicted through stigma, efforts to ameliorate these negative meanings and emotions through ‘screen work’ could be considered healthful.

Despite being, or rather, because they are, *reduced* versions of their ‘real’ physical selves, cyberbodies renegotiate stigma without eschewing the immediate corporeality of fatness. Ethnomethodologically speaking, the reduced tangibility of fatness online provides suitable conditions for successful ‘inflation ceremonies’, that is, the inverse of Garfinkel’s (1956) degradation ceremony, with cyberbodies practically accomplishing increased social worth. Not to be shamefully left behind the screen (scene), types of ‘big’ or ‘fat’ male body-subject occupy the centre of an electronic stage and are digitally amplified (symbolically cloaked with magical costumes) and/or normalized with potentially real consequences for offline actors and audiences. Inflationary practices – comprising advocated codes of self–body relatedness, socially constructed sexualities and other relevances – re-dress stigma by re-presenting otherwise discredited material bodies. Online, the corporeal matter of corpulent male body-subjects therefore matters, regardless of the degree to which cyberbodies are alter-bodies which depart from everyday life. In SA cyberspace, corporeality is a necessary condition and organizing principle for online sociality – mediated forms of embodied interaction which interface with the hardware and software of lived bodies in complex ways. Organic bodies are thus inseparable from these technoprocesses, rendering online constructions of fat male embodiment virtual in another sense: they are not merely social constructions because they are *anchored* in ‘real’ fleshy selves (the binary blurring cyborg).

Supportive cybersociates are integral to and integrated into the digital manufacturing of more positive typifications. Whether corpulent male bodies are

typified as young or old, black or white, big or super-size, heterosexual or gay, others provide support and possibly renewed hope for an emotionally fulfilling life. Researching male embodiment necessarily entails exploring a social world which extends beyond, while encompassing, bodies sexed/gendered as male/masculine. Similar to offline life, virtually constructing viable masculinities online is an interactional process comprising inter- as well as intra-gendered social relations. And, as may be expected, supportive cybersociates also explicitly or implicitly enact plural sexualities and other identities (e.g. ethnicity, age and social class) while co-constituting a field of hierarchical social relations. Criticism of and resistance toward stigmatizing body norms is therefore entangled with the uncritical reproduction of somatic society. In short, virtual constructions of fat male embodiment depend upon dividing practices and iniquitous meanings which hierarchically grade bodies: some bodies may be 'too fat' or the 'wrong' colour while others, such as women's bodies, may be expected domestically to service heterosexual men. Of course, and this is a double-edged sword, cybersociates know online expectations, identities, sexualities and bodies may contrast dramatically with offline life. Nonetheless, authenticity and trust are valued. This, in turn, interfaces with offline opportunities for dating, sociality and conviviality.

While cyberspace provides a treasure-house of positive meanings, interactions and previously unknown opportunities, managing spoiled identities online is ultimately a contradictory and limited project. This is not simply due to the ever-present possibility of encountering so-called 'trolls', who establish trust before enacting stigma, or the ultimate 'flatness' of cyberspace compared to the physicality of fatness. Crucially, constructing alternative definitions of fatness is dependent upon reified, negative typifications. Restated, favourable online constructions derive their meanings by implicitly and explicitly reproducing stigmatizing body norms: positive and negative typifications are not polar opposites but mutually informing and interdependent social constructs. Unsurprisingly, therefore, participants sometimes express ambivalence about being fat and practices which increase body fat. For example, those wholeheartedly endorsing carnivalesque gluttony sometimes voice regret about their reported size. Stigma is also sometimes enacted by supposedly supportive cybersociates. During such instances, actual (everyday) typifications of fatness also become virtual (digital) constructions – an unfortunate convergence which creates a stigmatizing divergence between some fat men's virtual identities (desire to be valued) and actual (tainted) identities (Goffman, 1968).

Before closing this article, I will briefly add to recent commentary on the usefulness of classic social theory for studies of the body and society, as well as

reiterate the case for an embodied sociology. While key body theorists such as Williams and Bendelow (1998) and Shilling (2003) have critically fleshed out the relevance of classic sociologists (e.g. Goffman, Simmel, Weber), other interpretive sociologists have been sidelined. On the basis of my research, Schutz should be recognized as an important source of reference for body studies. Focusing upon typifications and the intersubjectively constructed life-world, Schutz certainly appears to have been more concerned with developing a social theory of cognition rather than sexed/gendered bodies and the embodiment of social action. However, similar to other classic work, Schutz's writings may be re-read in corporeal terms as part of a broader effort to overcome some of the problematic dualisms in social theory. Cognition is not disembodied, with fe/male social actors intersubjectively (intercorporeally) constructing life-worlds (dream-worlds and fantasies), which may be governed by the laws of the body and pleasure (Monaghan, 2002). This is exemplified in Dionysian contexts where eating and sex are topically and motivationally relevant. Furthermore, Schutzian phenomenology is extendable to cyberspace, where body-subjects are structured according to shared systems of typification and relevance.

Embodied sociology clearly has much to offer. It is attentive to the sociality of lived bodies and the embodiment of the social. Even when studying supposedly disembodied spaces such as the Internet, there is a complex intermixing of minds, bodies and society. The indivisibility of human corporeality, sociality and cognitive/emotional dimensions means that social scientists are increasingly addressing the importance of embodiment while also drawing insights from the sociological tradition. Based upon my own engagement with the body-literature and ongoing empirical work, I envision an exciting and highly relevant research agenda. With one foot in classic and recent social theory, and the other in an increasingly digitally mediated 21st century, embodied sociology has the potential critically to advance our knowledge of an expanding and expansive somatic society. Of course, this theoretical argument acquires particular meaning and relevance given the current societal focus upon 'obesity' in a global context.

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