

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/358347625>

# On (Not) Fitting In: Fat embodiment, affect and organizational materials as differentiating agents

Article in *Organization Studies* · February 2022

DOI: 10.1177/01708406221074162

---

CITATIONS

9

---

READS

146

3 authors, including:



**Noortje van Amsterdam**

Utrecht University

38 PUBLICATIONS 413 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE



**Dide van Eck**

Radboud University

13 PUBLICATIONS 86 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



Working women's experiences of the menopause [View project](#)



Special Issue Call for Papers - Embodied Writing, Culture & Organization [View project](#)



### **On (not) fitting in. Fat embodiment, affect and organizational materials as differentiating agents**

Journal:	<i>Organization Studies</i>
Manuscript ID	OS-20-0339.R4
Manuscript Type:	Article
Keywords:	affect, fat embodiment, gender, difference, feminist new materialism, Karen Barad, Sara Ahmed, shame
Abstract:	This paper focuses on the experiences of self-identified fat women employees. Combining the works of Karen Barad and Sara Ahmed, we offer a feminist new materialist analysis of the production of difference in organizations related to size as an entanglement of bodies, discourses, organizational materials and affect. We show how our participants predominantly became shameful and a 'bad fit' within their jobs through the intra-action of their large bodies with obesity discourse and

1  
2  
3  
4  
5  
6  
7  
8  
9  
10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

	<p>organizational materials such as chairs and workwear. Yet we also illustrate how some material-discursive entanglements offered situations where shame was circumvented, instead producing our participants as acceptable within their organizational context. Our research contributes to discussions on embodied normativities in organizations by taking these issues beyond the discursive realm and highlighting the importance of materiality and affect in 'fitting in' at work. We offer new theoretical pathways to explore differentiating practices by looking at shame as part of collective and affective histories of marginalization.</p>

SCHOLARONE™  
Manuscripts

1  
2  
3 **On (not) fitting in. Fat embodiment, affect and organizational materials as differentiating**  
4 **agents**  
5  
6

7  
8  
9  
10 Dr. Noortje van Amsterdam

11  
12 Utrecht University, the Netherlands  
13

14  
15  
16  
17 Dide van Eck, MSc

18  
19 KU Leuven, Belgium  
20  
21

22  
23  
24 Dr. Katrine Meldgaard Kjær

25  
26 IT University of Copenhagen, Denmark  
27  
28  
29

30  
31 **Abstract**  
32

33 This paper focuses on the experiences of self-identified fat women employees. Combining the  
34 works of Karen Barad and Sara Ahmed, we offer a feminist new materialist analysis of the  
35 production of difference in organizations related to size as an entanglement of bodies,  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

discourses, organizational materials and affect. We show how our participants predominantly became shameful and a ‘bad fit’ within their jobs through the intra-action of their large bodies with obesity discourse and organizational materials such as chairs and workwear. Yet we also illustrate how some material-discursive entanglements offered situations where shame was circumvented, instead producing our participants as acceptable within their organizational context. Our research contributes to discussions on embodied normativities in organizations by taking these issues beyond the discursive realm and highlighting the importance of materiality

1  
2  
3 and affect in ‘fitting in’ at work. We offer new theoretical pathways to explore differentiating  
4  
5 practices by looking at shame as part of collective and affective histories of marginalization.  
6  
7  
8  
9

### 10 **Keywords**

11 affect, fat embodiment, gender, difference, feminist new materialism, shame, Sara Ahmed,  
12  
13 Karen Barad  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18

19 **Corresponding author:** Noortje van Amsterdam, Utrecht School of Governance,  
20  
21 Bijhouwerstraat 6, 3511ZC Utrecht, the Netherlands, [n.vanamsterdam@uu.nl](mailto:n.vanamsterdam@uu.nl)  
22  
23  
24  
25

### 26 **Introduction**

27  
28  
29 Critical management research has shown how contemporary ideas about embodiment shape  
30  
31 disciplinary practices categorizing certain bodies – e.g. those considered masculine, white,  
32  
33 cisgendered, ablebodied and slender – as ‘normal’ or ‘suitable’ while brandishing others as  
34  
35 ‘abnormal’ or ‘unsuitable’ within the workplace (e.g. Acker, 2006; Fotaki, 2013; Holvino,  
36  
37 2010; Tyler & Cohen, 2010). In this paper, we refer to these processes as differentiating  
38  
39 practices as we seek to understand how the politics of difference plays out in workplaces with  
40  
41 regards to fatness<sup>1</sup>. Our study is based on in-depth interviews with 22 Dutch working women  
42  
43 who self-identify as fat, full-figured or obese. In order to provide a rich understanding of the  
44  
45 differentiating practices these women are confronted with, we draw theoretical insights from the  
46  
47 works of Karen Barad (2003, 2007, 2008) and Sara Ahmed (2004a, 2004b, 2014). Both offer  
48  
49 new avenues of thinking about the ways in which inequalities based on bodily markers of  
50  
51 difference are co-produced by discourses, affect and materialities.  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 With the rise of neoliberal healthism in society and organizations alike, size as a marker  
4 of difference seems to have become more prominent, as slenderness is conflated with being fit  
5 and healthy (Johansson et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2007). Fat employees are therefore often  
6 considered unhealthy, and by extension lazy, unproductive and unprofessional (van Amsterdam  
7 & van Eck, 2019a; Johansson et al., 2017; Levay, 2014; Mik-Meyer, 2010). Research on  
8 gendered embodiment within organizations shows that the norms constructed around size are  
9 also gendered; although men are affected too (see Dickson, 2015), these norms seem to  
10 discipline women more severely (Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Meriläinen et al., 2015; Trethewey,  
11 1999). This produces particularly marginalized subject positions for fat women employees (van  
12 Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019a, 2019b).

13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26 Literature on normative embodiment in organizations has traditionally focused on  
27 discourse and rhetoric (Fotaki et al., 2014). Yet, as some scholars have shown, bodies are not  
28 only subject to discursive power, they are also a socio-material reality (Harding et al., 2021;  
29 Dale & Lathem, 2015). Similarly, scholars such as Fotaki, Metcalf and Harding (2014) have  
30 argued that the materiality of the human body itself is often glossed over in discursive  
31 approaches to embodiment. With Levay (2014) we would add that the fat body as a particular  
32 type of material embodiment is largely overlooked in current organization studies research. But  
33 this is not all. Research has indicated that non-human bodies – such as organizational objects –  
34 participate in organizational practices too (e.g. Nyberg, 2009; Orlikowski & Scott, 2015a,  
35 2015b; Symon & Pritchard, 2015). Our research adds to scholarship on the body, health and  
36 gender in organizations by addressing differentiation from a feminist new materialist  
37 perspective, focussing both on the materiality of fat embodiment, organizational materials,  
38 discourses and the affective flows produced by these entanglements. We show how this  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 approach can help combat a plethora of differentiating practices, specifically also those who are  
4 understudied. We will do this by adopting insights from Karen Barad (2003, 2007, 2008) and  
5 Sara Ahmed (2004a, 2004b, 2014), who both, from each their perspective, extend queer  
6 feminist perspectives to understand the workings of power. Together they provide tools for  
7 understanding the socio-material life of differentiation in relation to (fat) embodiment,  
8 something that is largely lacking in organization studies scholarship to date.  
9

10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17 Previous scholarship has argued that fat bodies are queer bodies, as they disrupt the  
18 normative order and are often considered “out of bounds” (LeBesco, 2001). Yet, fat bodies are  
19 not protected from discrimination under (Dutch) law, and their marginalisation therefore often  
20 remains invisible or legitimized by organizational practices related to “health”. Our study asks  
21 what role materialities and affect play in the differentiating practices that fat women encounter  
22 in the workplace.  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29

30  
31 Barad’s work offers analytical tools for understanding the entanglement of discourses  
32 and human and non-human actors. This framework allows us to take both human agency and  
33 the agency of materials into account when analysing differentiating practices. Barad hints at the  
34 political potential of their theory when they write ‘Particular possibilities for acting exist at  
35 every moment, and these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world’s  
36 becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering’ (2003, p.  
37 827). Yet at first glance, Barad’s focus on immanence seems to complicate theorizing power  
38 asymmetries that result from socio-material entanglements. If analyses stay 'in the moment',  
39 how are we going to understand systemic power differences? And what role does affect play  
40 within entanglements that produce power asymmetries? With its focus on how emotions  
41 materialize bodies, Ahmed’s work on affect is explicitly political and offers critical tools to  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 understand how bodies become in- and excluded. On a theoretical level, our focus on the socio-  
4 material will thus allow us to unpack a more expansive set of dynamics that structure  
5  
6 differentiating practices in organizations. On a practical level, this will give us insights into  
7  
8 concrete steps that may be taken to make organizations more size-inclusive; this aligns with the  
9  
10 feminist tradition of taking political action. A materialist approach such as ours opens up wider  
11  
12 possibilities for doing so by looking at the entanglement of discursive, material and affective  
13  
14 realities.  
15  
16  
17

18  
19 We begin by outlining existing literature on embodiment to understand the role of size  
20  
21 within organizations. We then delineate the usefulness of Barad's analytic framework for  
22  
23 teasing out the agentic power and co-construction of human and non-human actors in relation  
24  
25 to differentiation. Subsequently, we discuss Ahmed's insights on how affect is wrapped up in  
26  
27 differentiating practices, materializing the body in particular ways. We then move on to discuss  
28  
29 our methodology and the analysis of our interview materials. Here, we show how our  
30  
31 participants predominantly became a 'bad fit' with their jobs and organizations through the  
32  
33 entanglement of their large bodies with everyday organizational materialities, as well as  
34  
35 instances where entanglements provided possibilities to circumvent becoming a 'bad fit' within  
36  
37 their workplaces. Subsequently, we provide ideas for extending the debate on normative  
38  
39 embodiment in organizations, both theoretically and practically, by focusing on the role of both  
40  
41 materials and affect within the differentiation practices we describe.  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48

### 49 **Fat embodiment within organizations**

50  
51 Organization Studies research that focuses on gendered embodiment and/or health has previously  
52  
53 touched on the importance of employees' size (e.g. Johansson et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2007;  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 Levay, 2014; Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Meriläinen et al., 2015; Thanem, 2009, 2013; Trethewey,  
4  
5 1999; Waring & Waring, 2009). Johansson et al. (2017), for example, indicate that managers who  
6  
7 are passionate about their own healthy and fit bodies and lifestyles tend to morally condemn fat  
8  
9 people. This dovetails with the findings of Trethewey (1999), Haynes (2012) and Meriläinen et  
10  
11 al. (2015) who show how fit bodies are conflated with non-fat bodies and become the norm for  
12  
13 professional embodiment, also in organizations where health is not formally managed. Thanem  
14  
15 (2013) similarly illustrates how employees who do not conform to normative fit and slender  
16  
17 embodiment become subject to marginalization and relentless discipline. With the exception of  
18  
19 Mik-Meyer (2008, 2010), Levay (2014) and van Amsterdam & van Eck (2018, 2019), however,  
20  
21 little research has taken size as an entry point to analyze how differentiating practices take shape  
22  
23 within organizations. Mik-Meyer (2008, 2010) shows how managers and health consultants in  
24  
25 Danish organizations explicitly construct size as an important organizational concern. Bringing  
26  
27 together research from different disciplines on embodiment, health and organization, Levay  
28  
29 (2014) argues that size has become a way to legitimize power differences in organizations,  
30  
31 producing fat employees as objects of organizational control, marginalization and discrimination.  
32  
33 Our own earlier work (van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019a, 2019b) supports these claims with  
34  
35 empirical findings, demonstrating how fat women employees are often stigmatized and  
36  
37 constructed as unprofessional, lazy, and unintelligent.

38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

Aforementioned studies thus show that a legitimate professional body needs to be slender,  
a norm that is more strictly applied to women than to men (Haynes, 2012; Johansson et al., 2017;  
Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Following Orbach (1987), several scholars have argued that ‘fat is a  
feminist issue’ because the intersection of size with gender renders fat women more vulnerable  
to stigmatization and negative appraisal than thin women and men of all sizes (e.g. Fikkan &

1  
2  
3 Rothblum, 2012; Saguy, 2012). The focus on women's size can also be read as part of a more  
4  
5 general quest to control women's bodies (e.g. Maving & Grandy, 2016; Tyler & Cohen, 2010).  
6  
7 Although aforementioned studies do not explicitly analyse the affect or emotions that circulate  
8  
9 around embodied normativities in the workplace, they demonstrate that the affective responses of  
10  
11 managers and co-workers to fat workers position them unfavorably. As visibly fat employees, the  
12  
13 women in our study thus conduct their everyday lives within the affective flow based on obesity  
14  
15 discourse, which relies heavily on rhetorical strategies of shaming, blaming and individualization  
16  
17 (van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019a, 2019b; Levay, 2014). Yet through the emphasis on the  
18  
19 discursive aspects of these differentiating practices, both the affective and material aspects herein  
20  
21 become muted: how affect and organizational materials are implicated in processes of  
22  
23 differentiation remains largely unknown. We now turn to Barad's work on material-discursive  
24  
25 entanglements and Ahmed's work on affect in order to surface the material and affective aspects  
26  
27 of differentiating practices related to fat embodiment within organizations.  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34

### 35 **Material-discursive-affective entanglements**

36  
37 To understand how materials, bodies and discourses interact to create social hierarchies in  
38  
39 organisations, we adopt analytic insights from Karen Barad (2003, 2007, 2008) and Sara Ahmed  
40  
41 (2004a, 2004b, 2014). We have chosen to combine these two theorists because they each, from a  
42  
43 critical feminist standpoint, conceptualize exclusion as formed in a relationship between  
44  
45 materiality and discourses. Their grounding in feminist research implies that they are both  
46  
47 concerned with power structures and an intersectional understanding of exclusion, which make  
48  
49 them well-suited to examine experiences of marginalization and embodiment in organisations.  
50  
51 We have previously proposed that body size is an important category to include in intersectional  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 analyses (van Amsterdam 2013). In this article, we build on and contribute to this argument by  
4  
5 drawing on Barad and Ahmed's insights on materiality.  
6

7  
8 Barad is fundamentally concerned with the ways in which matter 'kicks back' and how  
9  
10 matter is part of entanglements that produce phenomena. In the article "Posthumanist  
11  
12 Performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter" (2003), Barad argues  
13  
14 that language and discourse have been awarded too singular prominence in representational  
15  
16 analyses, at the expense of theoretizations of matter. Barad argues that discourse and matter –  
17  
18 nonhuman (i.e. objects) as well as human (i.e. bodies) – do not exist as meaningful separate and  
19  
20 separated entities, and that it does not make sense analytically to separate them. If we want to  
21  
22 understand questions of becoming, they argue, we must look at the productive power of *intra-*  
23  
24 actions between the material-discursive, the entanglement of matter, objects, discourses and  
25  
26 subjects. The concept 'intra-action' highlights the ways in which the material-discursive realms  
27  
28 are entangled, and, in turn, rejects the more common term *interaction*, which 'presumes the prior  
29  
30 existence of independent entities' (ibid, p. 815). As Harding, Gilmore and Ford (2021, p. 13) write  
31  
32 about intra-action 'Rather than envisioning distinctions between entities... they are blurred at the  
33  
34 edges, bleeding into and participating in each other's performative constitution'. This also means  
35  
36 that subjects and objects are never fixed in time or space; rather, they are continuously  
37  
38 materializing in context specific ways; they are always 'becoming'.  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43

44  
45 Importantly, Barad bases their conceptualizations on queer feminist perspectives in order  
46  
47 to address power differentials: '... how different differences get made, what gets excluded and  
48  
49 how these exclusions matter' (2007, p. 30), is the outcome of intra-actions between human and  
50  
51 non-human agents. Most organization studies scholars use Barad's work to come to grips with  
52  
53 technological advancements (e.g. Nyberg, 2009; Orlikowski & Scott, 2015a, 2015b; Symon &  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Pritchard, 2015). In focusing on materiality without examining the power structures involved,  
4  
5 these studies depoliticize Barad's work, negate its queer feminist geneology, and forgo its  
6  
7 critically feminist potential (Harris & Ashcraft, 2019). However, organization studies scholars  
8  
9 such as Harris et al. (2020), Harding et al. (2017, 2021), Visser & Davies (2021) and Dale and  
10  
11 Lathem (2015) provide preliminary steps to redress this deficit. The latter use Barad's framework  
12  
13 to understand how embodiment is entangled with non-human materialities such as technology,  
14  
15 producing the basis of discrimination for disabled people. They write: 'we need to explore how  
16  
17 organisational processes are involved in the 'cuts' that form (both material and social) boundaries  
18  
19 and differences, and produce inclusions and exclusions, inequalities and hierarchies, subjects and  
20  
21 objects.' (p. 179). Barad's framework thus offers the necessary tools to analyse how material  
22  
23 agency – the capacity of matter to actively participate in phenomena – gets enacted within  
24  
25 differentiating practices. Yet it provides little concrete foothold to expand these political aspects  
26  
27 of in- and exclusions related to embodiment.  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32

33 Combining Barad and Ahmed's work allows us to both attend to the material and affective  
34  
35 qualities of differentiation as this relates to the fat body in organisations. Therefore, we now turn  
36  
37 to Ahmed's work to analyse how bodies materialize in specific ways - as included or excluded -  
38  
39 through the circulation of affect. Ahmed argues that emotions are one of the ways in which the  
40  
41 body materializes, thus providing a bridge between the material and the discursive and offering  
42  
43 possibilities for collective politics and social alliances (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 117). Although  
44  
45 language and the discursive figure more prominently in Ahmed's work than in Barad's, both draw  
46  
47 from and aim to extend Judith Butler's theorizing on performativity (Ahmed, 2014; Barad, 2008).  
48  
49 Overall, Ahmed's work can be read as an articulation of how bodies materialize and are shaped  
50  
51 as a part of social collectivities through the circulation of affect or emotion. With this, Ahmed's  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 ideas about materiality allow us to analyse how bodies become part of an ‘us’ or a ‘them’ through  
4  
5 the circulation of affect.  
6

7  
8 Ahmed conceptualizes this materialization of the body as taking place within ‘affective  
9  
10 economies’. With the term ‘economy’, a process of circulation is implied: here, she borrows from  
11  
12 Marx to argue that emotions work ‘as a form of capital’ where ‘affect does not reside positively  
13  
14 in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation’ (Ahmed, 2004a, p.  
15  
16 120). Emotions and affect thus travel between people and are profoundly social. In these affective  
17  
18 economies, Ahmed argues, emotions are not binarily ‘within’ or ‘without’ bodies, but indeed  
19  
20 ‘create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries of bodies’ (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 10). Thus,  
21  
22 Ahmed outlines that emotion and affect are a central part of differentiating practices that shape  
23  
24 social collectives, as affective responses and assignments (e.g. “you should be ashamed”, “I’m  
25  
26 afraid of him”) work to ‘give others meaning and value’ (2004a, p. 28). Feelings and emotions  
27  
28 thus play a fundamental role in shaping differentiating practices, as they continuously create and  
29  
30 re-create the boundaries of the collectives different bodies can legitimately be a part of. As  
31  
32 Pouthier & Sondak (2019, p. 3) write, attending to affect is important for understanding ‘the  
33  
34 challenges and possibilities of emancipation from oppressive and discriminatory bodily norms’.  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39

40 This resonates with the work of Pullen et al. (2017) and Fotaki et al. (2017) who - as  
41  
42 part of the ‘affective turn’ in organization studies - call for an increased attention toward the  
43  
44 work affect does within and around organizations, and specifically how it may be used to  
45  
46 unpack how ‘real people with real bodies might experience and challenge’ organizations on an  
47  
48 everyday basis (Pullen et al., 2017, p. 112). Affect, defined here as social emotions informed  
49  
50 ‘by a variety of lived experiences and visceral feelings’ (ibid2) saturates organizational life.  
51  
52  
53  
54 Fotaki at al. (2014, p. 13) argue that ‘affect can provide new and fruitful lenses for the critical  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 analysis of organizational life', and Pullen et al. (2017, p. 122) call for an examination of how  
4  
5 'lived experience' informs the circulation of affect in this context. Fraser et al. (2010, p. 204)  
6  
7 point to Ahmed's work as being particularly helpful to understand the theme of fatness as a  
8  
9 social category today because of its emphasis on processes of ex- and inclusion as opposed to  
10  
11 individualization of emotional states.  
12  
13

14  
15 Using the lenses of both Barad and Ahmed, we thus add to the existing scholarship on  
16  
17 embodiment within organizations by surfacing the role of materiality and affect in differentiating  
18  
19 practices that fat women employees encounter.  
20  
21  
22  
23

## 24 **Methodology**

### 25 Data collection

26  
27 This paper forms part of a larger research project in which we explored the experiences of self-  
28  
29 identified fat, obese or full-figured people living and working in the Netherlands (see also van  
30  
31 Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019a, 2019b). We emphasize the importance of doing research *with*,  
32  
33 rather than *on* marginalized groups. This research project evolved out of an epistemological  
34  
35 commitment and concern for a marginalized group whose experiences are rarely included in  
36  
37 organization studies. The first author interviewed 14 self-identified fat women and the second  
38  
39 author interviewed 8. An important ethical consideration involved the way we approached and  
40  
41 selected our participants. Because identifying someone as 'fat' is often perceived as offensive,  
42  
43 we needed an approach in which we did not categorize people ourselves, while also making  
44  
45 clear that we did not want to reproduce the dominant negative stereotypes surrounding fatness.  
46  
47 After reflecting on this issue, we decided to focus on people who *self-identify* as fat, large, full-  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  
61  
62  
63  
64  
65  
66  
67  
68  
69  
70  
71  
72  
73  
74  
75  
76  
77  
78  
79  
80  
81  
82  
83  
84  
85  
86  
87  
88  
89  
90  
91  
92  
93  
94  
95  
96  
97  
98  
99  
100  
101  
102  
103  
104  
105  
106  
107  
108  
109  
110  
111  
112  
113  
114  
115  
116  
117  
118  
119  
120  
121  
122  
123  
124  
125  
126  
127  
128  
129  
130  
131  
132  
133  
134  
135  
136  
137  
138  
139  
140  
141  
142  
143  
144  
145  
146  
147  
148  
149  
150  
151  
152  
153  
154  
155  
156  
157  
158  
159  
160  
161  
162  
163  
164  
165  
166  
167  
168  
169  
170  
171  
172  
173  
174  
175  
176  
177  
178  
179  
180  
181  
182  
183  
184  
185  
186  
187  
188  
189  
190  
191  
192  
193  
194  
195  
196  
197  
198  
199  
200  
201  
202  
203  
204  
205  
206  
207  
208  
209  
210  
211  
212  
213  
214  
215  
216  
217  
218  
219  
220  
221  
222  
223  
224  
225  
226  
227  
228  
229  
230  
231  
232  
233  
234  
235  
236  
237  
238  
239  
240  
241  
242  
243  
244  
245  
246  
247  
248  
249  
250  
251  
252  
253  
254  
255  
256  
257  
258  
259  
260  
261  
262  
263  
264  
265  
266  
267  
268  
269  
270  
271  
272  
273  
274  
275  
276  
277  
278  
279  
280  
281  
282  
283  
284  
285  
286  
287  
288  
289  
290  
291  
292  
293  
294  
295  
296  
297  
298  
299  
300  
301  
302  
303  
304  
305  
306  
307  
308  
309  
310  
311  
312  
313  
314  
315  
316  
317  
318  
319  
320  
321  
322  
323  
324  
325  
326  
327  
328  
329  
330  
331  
332  
333  
334  
335  
336  
337  
338  
339  
340  
341  
342  
343  
344  
345  
346  
347  
348  
349  
350  
351  
352  
353  
354  
355  
356  
357  
358  
359  
360  
361  
362  
363  
364  
365  
366  
367  
368  
369  
370  
371  
372  
373  
374  
375  
376  
377  
378  
379  
380  
381  
382  
383  
384  
385  
386  
387  
388  
389  
390  
391  
392  
393  
394  
395  
396  
397  
398  
399  
400  
401  
402  
403  
404  
405  
406  
407  
408  
409  
410  
411  
412  
413  
414  
415  
416  
417  
418  
419  
420  
421  
422  
423  
424  
425  
426  
427  
428  
429  
430  
431  
432  
433  
434  
435  
436  
437  
438  
439  
440  
441  
442  
443  
444  
445  
446  
447  
448  
449  
450  
451  
452  
453  
454  
455  
456  
457  
458  
459  
460  
461  
462  
463  
464  
465  
466  
467  
468  
469  
470  
471  
472  
473  
474  
475  
476  
477  
478  
479  
480  
481  
482  
483  
484  
485  
486  
487  
488  
489  
490  
491  
492  
493  
494  
495  
496  
497  
498  
499  
500  
501  
502  
503  
504  
505  
506  
507  
508  
509  
510  
511  
512  
513  
514  
515  
516  
517  
518  
519  
520  
521  
522  
523  
524  
525  
526  
527  
528  
529  
530  
531  
532  
533  
534  
535  
536  
537  
538  
539  
540  
541  
542  
543  
544  
545  
546  
547  
548  
549  
550  
551  
552  
553  
554  
555  
556  
557  
558  
559  
560  
561  
562  
563  
564  
565  
566  
567  
568  
569  
570  
571  
572  
573  
574  
575  
576  
577  
578  
579  
580  
581  
582  
583  
584  
585  
586  
587  
588  
589  
590  
591  
592  
593  
594  
595  
596  
597  
598  
599  
600  
601  
602  
603  
604  
605  
606  
607  
608  
609  
610  
611  
612  
613  
614  
615  
616  
617  
618  
619  
620  
621  
622  
623  
624  
625  
626  
627  
628  
629  
630  
631  
632  
633  
634  
635  
636  
637  
638  
639  
640  
641  
642  
643  
644  
645  
646  
647  
648  
649  
650  
651  
652  
653  
654  
655  
656  
657  
658  
659  
660  
661  
662  
663  
664  
665  
666  
667  
668  
669  
670  
671  
672  
673  
674  
675  
676  
677  
678  
679  
680  
681  
682  
683  
684  
685  
686  
687  
688  
689  
690  
691  
692  
693  
694  
695  
696  
697  
698  
699  
700  
701  
702  
703  
704  
705  
706  
707  
708  
709  
710  
711  
712  
713  
714  
715  
716  
717  
718  
719  
720  
721  
722  
723  
724  
725  
726  
727  
728  
729  
730  
731  
732  
733  
734  
735  
736  
737  
738  
739  
740  
741  
742  
743  
744  
745  
746  
747  
748  
749  
750  
751  
752  
753  
754  
755  
756  
757  
758  
759  
760  
761  
762  
763  
764  
765  
766  
767  
768  
769  
770  
771  
772  
773  
774  
775  
776  
777  
778  
779  
780  
781  
782  
783  
784  
785  
786  
787  
788  
789  
790  
791  
792  
793  
794  
795  
796  
797  
798  
799  
800  
801  
802  
803  
804  
805  
806  
807  
808  
809  
810  
811  
812  
813  
814  
815  
816  
817  
818  
819  
820  
821  
822  
823  
824  
825  
826  
827  
828  
829  
830  
831  
832  
833  
834  
835  
836  
837  
838  
839  
840  
841  
842  
843  
844  
845  
846  
847  
848  
849  
850  
851  
852  
853  
854  
855  
856  
857  
858  
859  
860  
861  
862  
863  
864  
865  
866  
867  
868  
869  
870  
871  
872  
873  
874  
875  
876  
877  
878  
879  
880  
881  
882  
883  
884  
885  
886  
887  
888  
889  
890  
891  
892  
893  
894  
895  
896  
897  
898  
899  
900  
901  
902  
903  
904  
905  
906  
907  
908  
909  
910  
911  
912  
913  
914  
915  
916  
917  
918  
919  
920  
921  
922  
923  
924  
925  
926  
927  
928  
929  
930  
931  
932  
933  
934  
935  
936  
937  
938  
939  
940  
941  
942  
943  
944  
945  
946  
947  
948  
949  
950  
951  
952  
953  
954  
955  
956  
957  
958  
959  
960  
961  
962  
963  
964  
965  
966  
967  
968  
969  
970  
971  
972  
973  
974  
975  
976  
977  
978  
979  
980  
981  
982  
983  
984  
985  
986  
987  
988  
989  
990  
991  
992  
993  
994  
995  
996  
997  
998  
999  
1000

1  
2  
3 figured women called *Wondervol* (Wonderfull), placed a call in the Dutch Obesity Network  
4  
5 monthly (a foundation that offers biomedical information about being obese) and reached out to  
6  
7 participants via a plus size blogger.  
8  
9

10 Most of the 22 women we interviewed in total reached us via the *Wondervol* Facebook  
11  
12 page. This is a group of 1500 members who share experiences and information about living in a  
13  
14 large body, for instance about fat stigma, work, romantic relationships, activism or general body  
15  
16 positivity. Thus, most of our participants have experience with reflecting on their body size with  
17  
18 others and might therefore be more able to articulate their thoughts and experiences compared  
19  
20 to others who do not participate in such an online community. In the announcement we  
21  
22 emphasized that we recognize how fatness is often negatively portrayed in the media. We  
23  
24 expressed an awareness of harmful effects of such stereotyping and added that we wanted to  
25  
26 hear from those who live in/with large bodies, because their stories rarely get told. Due to our  
27  
28 reliance on self-identification, we did not recruit a heterogeneous group of participants in terms  
29  
30 of gender and race/ethnicity: all of our participants identified as women and most were part of  
31  
32 the Dutch ethnic majority. Two of our participants had a minority ethnic background: Afro-  
33  
34 Surinamese and Antillian-Dutch. We also did not recruit a homogenous group in terms of  
35  
36 occupations, job sector or rank. However the diversity in occupations (see table I) allowed us to  
37  
38 see that fatness acts as a marker of difference both in highly visible occupations (e.g. opera  
39  
40 singer, comedian) as well as in more back-office roles (e.g. information analyst), and both in  
41  
42 high-wage occupations (e.g. accountant, head principal) as well as in low-wage occupations  
43  
44 (e.g. caregiver, shop assistant). We argue in line with Ford et al. (2017, p. 1557) that our  
45  
46 objective with this qualitative project is ‘not generalization from a sample but theorizing from  
47  
48 “knowing subjects”’.  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Interviews lasted between 50-160 minutes. The general aim of the interview was to  
4  
5 explore how participants' size mattered in their daily work. During the interviews, the type of  
6  
7 questions we asked were, for instance: *When and how does your body size become an issue at*  
8  
9 *work? How do others in the organizational environment respond to your body? Do you have*  
10  
11 *examples of the physical environment that enabled or limited your body in your daily work?*  
12  
13

14  
15  
16  
17 Table I about here  
18  
19

20  
21 Data analysis  
22

23  
24 All interviews were conducted in Dutch, fully transcribed and coded in NVivo. This enabled us  
25  
26 to approach the material-discursive entanglements in the 'spoken word' of our participants. As  
27  
28 Barad shows that discourse and material are mutually constituted, 'matter cannot register in and  
29  
30 for itself alone, or un-discursively' (Iedema, 2007, p. 938), but research into organizational  
31  
32 materialities 'can only be approached through the discursive, so studies must infer from the  
33  
34 spoken word how human and non-human actors intra-act' (Ford et al., 2017, p. 1557). Although  
35  
36 analyzing materiality through spoken word is somewhat limited by its focus on the linguistic,  
37  
38 neglecting other modes of meaning-making such as 'image, design, and technology' (Iedema,  
39  
40 2007, p. 931), we also paid attention to the bodily aspects in the interview, such as tone of  
41  
42 voice, rhythm of speech, silences, body postures and gesticulation. A challenge we faced  
43  
44 concerned the Dutch-to-English translations of our interviews, and vice versa, sharing our  
45  
46 results in English with our Dutch participants. For instance, the term 'fat' in English sounds  
47  
48 similar to the Dutch term 'vet' (meaning: greasy), which can be perceived as a highly insulting  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 term to refer to someone's body. In order to produce a culturally sensitive account, we did a  
4  
5 back translation and had a bilingual speaker check our work.  
6

7  
8 Our data analysis was an abductive process: we re-read Barad's and Ahmed's texts  
9  
10 alongside the transcripts, bringing together theory and data while together reflecting on the  
11  
12 'becomings' that resulted from the material-discursive entanglements. This involved two stages:  
13  
14 First, we selected the fragments in which materiality became particularly relevant in our  
15  
16 participants' accounts of being a fat woman in the workplace. This first stage revealed the  
17  
18 agentic role of different types of chairs, clothes, doorways, badges, food, make-up, computer-  
19  
20 screens and the materiality of bodies themselves (e.g. sweat, size, smell, movement) in co-  
21  
22 constituting the ways in which our participants could participate in their workplace. Particularly  
23  
24 the materiality of clothes and chairs and their intra-actions with fat bodies featured prominently  
25  
26 in all our participants' accounts, which is why we decided to select and zoom in on these  
27  
28 material agencies. The second stage involved intense exploration of the fragments by focusing  
29  
30 on the 'hotspots' (MacLure, 2013, pp. 172–173), that is, we approached the data through  
31  
32 looking at where data 'glows', where it creates disconcert or a sense of wonder. Sitting down  
33  
34 with our data, we discussed among the three of us which parts of the material-discursive  
35  
36 entanglements that we found in our data evoked particular feelings or emotions. We thus had to  
37  
38 go beyond the transcripts, to also include the experiences and affects that circulated during the  
39  
40 interviews as we recalled them through our fieldnotes (see also van Amsterdam & van Eck,  
41  
42 2019b). The third author in particular interrogated the first and second author about the reasons  
43  
44 for choosing certain fragments, and which feelings or emotions it had invoked in our  
45  
46 participants and/or ourselves. After (re)reading the transcripts and fieldnotes, reliving the  
47  
48 interviews, and thoroughly discussing our experiences, we found that the fragments in our data  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 that had a heightened affectivity were all in some way related to the way our participants  
4  
5 became a ‘bad fit’ with their jobs and organizations. This heightened affect points to where our  
6  
7 participants indicate feeling humiliated, insecure, uncomfortable and afraid. Together we  
8  
9 carefully considered the instances where our participants literally and symbolically became a  
10  
11 ‘bad fit’ in the organization through material-discursive-affective entanglements. This became  
12  
13 our first theme. Yet, we also recognized how entanglements sometimes offered fat employees  
14  
15 opportunities to fit in and become acceptable. Reflecting on this ‘disconcert’ in the data, we  
16  
17 coined this as our second theme.  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23

## 24 **Results**

25  
26 In the following, we will discuss our most important insights through two themes: *becoming a*  
27  
28 *bad fit* and *becoming acceptable*. The first theme describes how our participants often emerged  
29  
30 as ‘unfit’ for their jobs through intra-actions of their large bodies with everyday organizational  
31  
32 materials and discourses. The second theme describes instances where they were able to align  
33  
34 their bodies with legitimate others in their work environment, thus becoming acceptable.  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39

### 40 **Becoming a bad fit: intra-actions between fat bodies, clothing, seats and obesity discourse.**

41  
42 As we show in earlier publications (van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019a, 2019b) our participants  
43  
44 were often stigmatized or excluded from workplaces because their fatness is seen as a sign of  
45  
46 incompetence or ill-health. Megan, for example, recounted how size normativities impacted her  
47  
48 chances on the job market, as she was denied an internship at a photography studio: “The  
49  
50 manager simply told me, well you are too fat to intern here, because this is physically  
51  
52 demanding work”. After several attempts at finding a job, Amy started mentioning her health  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 status in job interviews: “I come straight out and say I don’t have a medical record (...) They  
4 won’t ask directly but they’ll assume – this one won’t be able to do the job”. Previous research  
5 (e.g. Levay, 2014; Mik-Meyer, 2008) substantiates how the conflation of fatness with ill-health  
6 informs norms around embodiment in organizations and thus structures who gets acknowledged  
7 as a good fit and who does not.  
8  
9

10  
11  
12  
13  
14  
15 Importantly, these differentiating practices are not merely structured by discourses about  
16 health; materiality and affect play an important role in co-constructing these realities. Josie’s  
17 words indicate the circulation of affect:  
18  
19

20  
21  
22 When you are fat, people automatically think you’re unhealthy (...) The association with  
23 laziness is there too. Fat people are considered dirty, they’re not motivated, and it is all  
24 their own fault. (Josie)  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30

31 Although shame and disgust are not explicitly mentioned here, these affects ‘stick’ to the  
32 normative associations of fatness with ill-health, laziness, dirt and individual responsibility. As  
33 Ahmed (2004a) notes ‘emotionality involves movements or associations whereby “feelings”  
34 take us across different levels of signification, not all of which can be admitted in the present...  
35 “what sticks” is also bound up with the “absent presence” of historicity’ (p. 120). Historicity  
36 here refers to obesity discourse through which normative associations and negative affects  
37 regarding fatness - shame in particular - have been endlessly circulated over the past decades  
38 (Levay, 2014). Shame circulated in the interviews mostly in non-verbal ways: participants often  
39 lowered their eyes and voices when discussing the negative assumptions their fat bodies evoked  
40 and we felt the atmosphere tense during these exchanges.  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Normative assumptions and affects related to fat embodiment cannot be disentangled from  
4  
5 the materiality of the fat body that makes it extra visible as nonnormative (van Amsterdam &  
6  
7 van Eck, 2019a). Many participants described how embodied normativities emerged through  
8  
9 their encounters with the material-discursive realities of everyday work life. Rifka, who had  
10  
11 different jobs in the service sector, talked extensively about how rare it is to see someone of a  
12  
13 larger size performing service-related work in shops, cafés and restaurants. The norm, according  
14  
15 to Rifka is ‘... around size 38, 40 [European sizes]. If you carry size 42 or up, society thinks  
16  
17 you are plus size, so good luck finding a job’. This resonates with the findings from Haynes  
18  
19 (2012), Mavin and Grandy (2016) and Trethewey (1999) that indicate the pressure on working  
20  
21 women to be slender. To illustrate the normative assumptions employers have about size, Rifka  
22  
23 referred to her experiences with job application interviews ‘they give you disapproving looks,  
24  
25 like they are disappointed [...] That is why I always add a picture to my CV. Then they know in  
26  
27 advance I am fat’. Here, it seems that the histories of experiencing disapproval and  
28  
29 disappointment in previous job application interviews produced the particular material reality of  
30  
31 the photo on the CV, which acts to disrupt the circulation of these affects during a new  
32  
33 interview experience, illustrating that ‘the past and the future are enfolded participants in  
34  
35 matters iterative becoming’ (Barad, 2007, p. 181). Rifka’s narrative furthermore dovetails with  
36  
37 Carinda’s, who noted in her interview that ‘people dress their arguments up as being about  
38  
39 health while they are actually talking about appearance’. This aligns with Johansson et al.  
40  
41 (2017) who note that health is used to legitimate appearance norms in organizations.  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49 Importantly, discourses around appearance and health are entangled with the materiality of fat  
50  
51 embodiment, producing fat employees as people who *are* not fit and *do* not fit.  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 Clothing often came up in the interviews as an important agentive force that co-produced  
4 these differentiating practices. Mostly, the entanglement of a fat body with work clothes  
5 produced participants as unfit for their jobs, or a bad fit with the organization of their  
6 employment. Participants described that their sizes are not only harder to find; the clothes that  
7 are available in larger sizes are often more expensive or only suitable for non-professional  
8 occasions. Especially those who were obliged to adorn corporate wear or who were confronted  
9 with a particular dress code found their size becoming problematic. Kara, who worked a side  
10 job at a hospital, and Alice, a shop assistant, offer how they emerged as a bad fit within their  
11 jobs through intra-action of their fatness with ill-fitting clothes at their place of work:  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

26 I used to work in a hospital and you get this outfit. I always had trouble with it. The biggest  
27 pair of pants would fit me, but it was often in the wash. So I would have to wear smaller  
28 pants. On me, those looked like I was wearing leggings while everyone else had normal  
29 pants on. And everything feels too tight, which is uncomfortable... Or there was someone  
30 else who was a bit fatter too, and they would already be wearing the bigger pants... It  
31 makes you feel insecure. (Kara)  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41

42 I have a lot of trouble with corporate wear [*bedrijfskleding*].

43 Interviewer: So what do you need to wear at your job?

44 Well, it is compulsory. But the sweater that we have is very ugly. And then I feel  
45 uncomfortable. It does look good on them [non-fat employees] but it looks pretty bad on  
46 me. It makes a difference in your work. Like, here I am in my sweater. You have to look  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 presentable but that won't happen for me because this sweater looks like a tent. That is the  
4  
5 way it is made (Alice).  
6  
7  
8  
9

10 Here we see how the material realities of the clothes - the tight fit of the pants, the tent-like  
11  
12 shape of the sweater - cannot be disentangled from Kara and Alice's fat embodiment and  
13  
14 obesity discourse. Materials co-constitute the flow of agency here (Barad, 2007, p. 141); the  
15  
16 material-discursive entanglements produce Kara and Alice as employees who - both literally  
17  
18 and symbolically - do not fit within their organizations, which makes them feel uncomfortable  
19  
20 and insecure about their professional capabilities. The clothes are 'too small' or 'pretty bad'  
21  
22 only in relation with their bodies, which in turn become produced as 'too large' or 'unable to be  
23  
24 presentable' in this encounter. From Barad's perspective this becoming can be considered a  
25  
26 specific 'cut': a boundary making practice that produces exclusions by performing seemingly  
27  
28 separable and fixed categories (Barad, 2008, p. 140) such as 'fat' and 'presentable'. Alice's  
29  
30 story in particular exemplifies how through the intra-action of the sweater difference emerges as  
31  
32 an issue of size ('it looks good on *them*, but it looks pretty bad on *me*').  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37

38 The effects of the encounter between material realities is thus inevitably tied up with  
39  
40 normative ideas about embodiment. The preferred slender embodiment within organizations can  
41  
42 be seen as part of a broader interest in controlling women's bodies in organizations and beyond  
43  
44 (e.g. Tyler & Cohen, 2010). It is furthermore entangled with constructions regarding a  
45  
46 'professional' appearance (Haynes, 2012; Johansson et al., 2017; Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Ford  
47  
48 et al. (2017, p. 1566) argue that the work attire of a given workplace may be seen as a type of  
49  
50 visualization of the larger ideals and social hierarchies that mark this space. Accordingly, '  
51  
52 ...  
53  
54 business wear forms a visual discourse encapsulating norms, histories, cultures, economics,  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 class, gender and so on.... the norms encapsulated in the suit inform wearers how to look, how  
4  
5 to act and how to take the identity of ‘leader’’. This dovetails with Just et al. (2019) who show  
6  
7 that uniforms are markers of belonging within a particular job or sector. They conceptualize the  
8  
9 uniform as ‘a figure of affective attachment’ and warn that a person who does not wear the  
10  
11 uniform appropriately jeopardizes their belonging (p. 126). The corporate wear that Alice and  
12  
13 Kara describe similarly represents and enacts norms about appropriate behaviour and  
14  
15 appearances required within their jobs and pushes toward a homogenized ‘professional’  
16  
17 appearance that is inverted for these fat women; they stand out because they can’t fit. Fitting  
18  
19 into clothes thus becomes an integrated part of performing work-ability and belonging; the  
20  
21 clothes mark the extent to which their body may be considered acceptable. These norms  
22  
23 intersect with gender ideals too: women are pushed towards more self-governance in terms of  
24  
25 appearance because their bodies are historically constructed as out of place in organizations  
26  
27 (Haynes, 2012; Johansson et al., 2017; Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Accordingly, when Kara and  
28  
29 Alice’s bodies defy embodied norms about size by not fitting into the work clothes offered by  
30  
31 their employers, they emerge as ‘a professional liability’ (Mavin & Grandy, 2016, p. 1100).  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36

37  
38 Seating arrangements were also highlighted by the participants as a challenge to their  
39  
40 belonging. Many participants indicated that they struggled with fitting comfortably into office  
41  
42 chairs and always looked carefully at the seating present at business meetings or other work  
43  
44 gatherings. They recurrently voiced concerns about armrests that would make it painful or  
45  
46 difficult for them to fit and spoke of the sturdiness of seats. Jane for example, mentioned this  
47  
48 issue during her interview:  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 All the things I have to take into account that other people never think about... When  
4  
5 you go to dinner with clients at a restaurant with very small chairs, like those fragile  
6  
7 folding chairs, then you sit down very carefully. You don't want the client to sit across  
8  
9 from you while you are lying on the ground. Those moments can be really  
10  
11 confronting. (Jane)  
12  
13  
14  
15  
16

17 In the material-discursive entanglement of the fragile chairs and Jane's body in the specific  
18  
19 context of the client-meeting, Jane becomes cautious. She is afraid of breaking a chair and  
20  
21 falling on the floor in front of clients not because she is afraid of hurting herself in the fall, but  
22  
23 rather on account of how this would produce her as unprofessional and unfit for the workplace  
24  
25 (cf. Levay, 2014; Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Jane's story illustrates how this entanglement  
26  
27 prohibits her from aligning her body with those of her co-workers ('all the things *I* have to take  
28  
29 into account that *other people* never think about'). Here, shame is once again not mentioned  
30  
31 explicitly, but nonetheless circulated in the interview, making the interviewers' cheeks flush  
32  
33 while listening to Jane talk. This illustrates how affect passes 'from person to person, in a way  
34  
35 that is contagious but remains unspoken' (Fotaki et al., 2017, p. 4) and highlights the difficulties  
36  
37 in articulating the circulation of affect through interviews.  
38  
39  
40  
41

42 The central role of objects such as seats in differentiating practices also became apparent  
43  
44 when our participants talked about having to take flights for their work. Tamar stated that her  
45  
46 size is an issue in her search for a new job, as she is aware that she does not 'fit in everything  
47  
48 (...) planes for example, those seats are just too small.' For this reason, she does not feel that she  
49  
50 can apply for a job that involves frequent traveling. Similarly, Jane explicitly outlines the  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 economic consequences of the particular material-discursive entanglement of her larger body at  
4  
5 work:  
6  
7  
8  
9

10 I have to fly regularly [for my job] so that is a challenge. The more expensive airlines are  
11 fine. But when I have to fly with a cheaper airline, I probably have to book two seats. These  
12 seats are really small with small belts. So those moments of entering the plane are rather  
13 tense. What if I need an extra chair and it is at the expense of my boss? How will they deal  
14 with that? And how will it affect my possible career? Because it will cost extra. (Jane)  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23

24 In this example, the fat employee becomes not only different, but indeed an economic burden  
25 through the intra-action of Tamar and Jane's size with small airplane seats and obesity discourse  
26 that constructs fat people as unproductive and financially risky for employers (see Levay, 2014;  
27 Mik-Meyer, 2008). Here, the encounters with the materiality of 'regular' seats makes it clear  
28 that fat bodies take up different kinds of space than bodies that are not fat, which are assumed to  
29 be the norm. Through Ahmed (2004, p. 119), we see here how bodily space becomes aligned  
30 with social space through the intensity of the affective circulation of tension and anxiety that  
31 Jane describes. The literal, material not 'fitting in' becomes entangled with the normative idea  
32 that fat bodies do not belong at the workplace, and this entanglement produces Jane and Tamar  
33 as different from their 'normal' colleagues. As illustrated above, normative assumptions  
34 regarding size include the idea that fat people take sick leave more often and are less able to  
35 perform strenuous physical work. According to our participants, this makes it difficult for them  
36 to find new employment. This echoes research that shows how size functions as a basis for  
37 various forms of discrimination in the workplace (Levay, 2014).  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 As a part of Jane's anxiety over ill-fitting airplane seats, she describes feeling 'rather  
4  
5 tense' when entering a plane. This signals the anticipated shame of (possibly) not fitting in the  
6  
7 airplane seat. The affective implications of the relationships between airplane seats, large bodies  
8  
9 and working life also become clear in Jill's story about one particular flight she took for her job:  
10  
11

12  
13  
14 For work I usually flew with [airline] and I would ask if I could sit at the emergency exit  
15  
16 because then you have a slightly bigger space. But one time they cancelled a flight and we  
17  
18 all had to get into a very small airplane for like 8 people. And they had to balance the  
19  
20 weight carefully so then they started looking at people like, 'those look very fat'. So they  
21  
22 put all the skinny people on my side of the plane. Well, I felt very humiliated. I could just  
23  
24 die. That is really horrible, and then you are also sitting in a chair but you really don't fit.  
25  
26

27  
28 (Jill)  
29  
30  
31  
32

33 In this example, through the material circumstances - the cancelled flight, the alternative small  
34  
35 airplane that needs weight balancing, and the ill-fitting airplane seat - Jill becomes both  
36  
37 symbolically and practically Other. The difference of her body is brought into view as she is  
38  
39 placed among other bodies that look radically different from hers. She sticks out, she is made  
40  
41 singular. The fact of Jill's high weight compared to other passengers might not be an issue to be  
42  
43 humiliated by had the separation of bodies been isolated to a material, practical circumstance.  
44  
45 However, because the material and the discursive cannot be separated, ideas about the non-  
46  
47 desirability of a fat body inform the intra-action between fat and thin here, and expose Jill as  
48  
49 different from the other passengers. Jill's humiliation works as a form of shame aligned with  
50  
51 negative meanings surrounding size as being too much - taking up too much space; adding too  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 much weight; costing too much - and consolidates these. This resonates with scholarship that  
4 explores space as a gendered issue. Tyler and Cohen (2010) for example show that  
5  
6 organizational space is gendered: dominant gender norms make it difficult for women to  
7  
8 legitimately take up space within organizations. Ahmed (2004) expands this theorization of  
9  
10 space by relating it to affective intensities produced by embodied normativities. She writes that  
11  
12 ‘fear works to restrict some bodies through the movement or expansion of others.’ (p. 127) We  
13  
14 posit that a similar argument can be made for fat subjects in organizations: our participants  
15  
16 emerge as a bad fit through the entanglement of their bodies with organizational materials,  
17  
18 norms regarding both gender and size, and related affective economies.  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23

24 In the interviews, shame surfaced as an important theme, but was explicated almost  
25  
26 exclusively with reference to nonwork contexts. Wendy talked about a ‘shaming moment’ when  
27  
28 she was told she couldn’t sit at the emergency exit and had to walk through the plane to find  
29  
30 another seat. Constance mentioned feeling ashamed while ordering lunch during the interview,  
31  
32 whispering ‘people are watching’. It is significant that our participants told stories of repeatedly  
33  
34 experiencing these feelings and this positioning of their bodies. There is a cumulative effect of  
35  
36 their experiences: Tamar has stopped applying for jobs involving airflight; Jane worries about  
37  
38 the impact of her size on her career. The narratives presented within this theme thus indicate  
39  
40 how our participants’ bodies gain a history of being ‘objects of shame’, through which they  
41  
42 emerge as a bad fit with their jobs and organizations. As Probyn (2004, p. 329) writes, shame  
43  
44 refers to ‘the body calling out its hopes and discomfort because it feels out-of-place. This shame  
45  
46 is the body saying that it cannot fit in although it desperately wants to’. Shame thus structures  
47  
48 belonging and, although difficult to pinpoint and capture, is crucial for understanding  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60 differentiating practices in organizations.

**Becoming acceptable: entanglements that allow fat employees to fit**

Although moments of becoming shameful and ill-fitting in the context of their work were repeatedly mentioned by our participants, they also told stories about moments when expectations related to their embodiment were circumvented. In contrast to the material-discursive entanglements described in the first theme, our participants emerged here as acceptable. Interestingly, all examples involve the potential of becoming a bad fit which is then circumvented by particular intra-actions between organizational materials and our participants' large bodies.

For example, while many of our participants told stories about how clothes created difference at their workplace, Katy pointed out that dress codes can also diminish differences between fat and slender employees:

I worked at a hotel-restaurant in the UK for a while, where I had to wear a white blouse and a black skirt. I had to look really hard to find a suitable black skirt that looked neat and would fit me [...] but because of the uniformity I stood out less. With everyone wearing a white blouse and a black skirt, you sort of disappear in the bigger picture. So even though the food service industry is very much focused on appearance, my size did not bother me there. (Katy)

On the one hand, Katy's experience bears the potential of becoming a bad fit because of her size. The labour involved in 'looking hard' to find suitable black shirt echoes Hannah's points about the lack of accessibility of professional clothing for fat women, as well as Rifka's and

1  
2  
3 Kara's problems with gaining access to clothes that fit them in the professional environments  
4 they have been part of. On the other hand, Katy also points to the ways in which clothes -  
5 especially uniforms - may work to make her body similar to her colleagues instead of different.  
6  
7 The identical outfits that the waiting staff all carry, regardless of shape and size, make them a  
8 group. This allows them, as Ahmed argues when describing community and collectivity, to  
9  
10 'align' their bodies towards each other (2004a, p. 119). Clothes can thus also be considered  
11  
12 active agents in dissolving or erasing difference - if, that is, they are accessible and are designed  
13  
14 to accommodate bodies of different sizes and shapes. If, as we have argued, differentiating  
15  
16 practices revolve around 'fitting in', the uniformity of a uniform - developed with diversity and  
17  
18 comfort in mind - can signal that all bodies belong. Indeed, as Ahmed notes, there is an intimate  
19  
20 relationship between comfort (both one's own and other's comfort with one's body) and fitting  
21  
22 in: 'to be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish  
23  
24 where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting the surface of bodies  
25  
26 disappears from view' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 159). Katy draws our attention to the ways in which  
27  
28 clothes can allow her to blend in and become acceptable. Sarah and Jane, on the other hand,  
29  
30 indicated how they used the materiality of their outfits (bright colours and cupcake print) to  
31  
32 resist the shaming and invisibilizing of their fat bodies (see also van Amsterdam & van Eck,  
33  
34 2019a).

35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60  
Participants furthermore mentioned how make-up and other beauty practices and products are also entangled within the flow of agency, opening up space for fat women to become acceptable. Jane mentioned always making sure to have manicured hands, smart hair and impeccable make-up during work activities. Her narrative shows the agentic capacity of

1  
2  
3 such materialities in opening up possibilities for becoming acceptable, in spite of the material-  
4  
5 discursive entanglement of her fat body with obesity discourse that pushes towards exclusion:  
6

7  
8       After the job interview, the manager told me they wouldn't have hired me if my  
9  
10       appearance hadn't been so impeccable: 'Your appearance was immaculate, so we hired  
11  
12       you. If you wouldn't have had that, you'd be unsuitable for the position because of  
13  
14       your size'. This made me very uncomfortable (Jane)  
15  
16

17  
18  
19 Applying Barad's ideas around difference as produced through particular 'cuts' (2003), we see  
20  
21 that the materiality of Jane's immaculate appearance enacts organizational boundaries,  
22  
23 producing her as acceptable instead of a bad fit. The discomfort Jane experienced, can be related  
24  
25 to the normativities present in this encounter. As Ahmed (2014, p. 147) writes 'Normativity is  
26  
27 comfortable for those who can inhabit it'. By extension, those who cannot inhabit the  
28  
29 normativities related to size in organizations can expect to feel uncomfortable: 'Discomfort is a  
30  
31 feeling of disorientation: one's body feels out of place, awkward, unsettled' (p. 148). Here Jane  
32  
33 becomes acceptable through the material-discursive entanglement of an impeccable appearance  
34  
35 with ideas about professionalism. Yet the circulation of discomfort challenges her feelings of  
36  
37 belonging within the organization in question.  
38  
39  
40

41  
42       The examples presented in this theme illustrate the work materialities can do to align fat  
43  
44 women's bodies with legitimate others in their organizational context. Barad's new materialist  
45  
46 perspective allows us to see that human and non-human materialities are entangled with  
47  
48 discourses and 'help constitute one another' (2007, p. 239). Shame seems to be at the heart of  
49  
50 these material-discursive entanglements regarding fat embodiment; positions of becoming  
51  
52 shameful and circumventing shame change according to the specific intra-actions, and are often  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 folded into each other. They predominantly produce fat women employees as a bad fit with their  
4  
5 jobs and organizations, but sometimes also provide opportunities for our participants to  
6  
7 challenge or resist normative assumptions about size in this context.  
8  
9

## 10 11 12 **Discussion**

13  
14 In this paper, we set out to explore differentiating practices in organizations related to size from  
15  
16 the perspective of self-identified fat women. In line with Levay (2014) we have argued that size  
17  
18 is an important but understudied marker of difference in modern-day organizations. Drawing  
19  
20 from the works of Karen Barad and Sara Ahmed we illustrate how this ‘fitting in’ is not just a  
21  
22 matter of symbolically or discursively fitting into the job or the culture of the organization;  
23  
24 fitting in or belonging are thoroughly material and affective issues as well.  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29

### 30 31 **Differentiating practices beyond the discursive**

32  
33 Our first contribution lies in adding a material dimension to theorization on embodied  
34  
35 normativities and related differentiating practices in organizations. Extending earlier work in  
36  
37 MOS that focuses mostly on the discursive aspects of embodied difference (e.g. Johansson et  
38  
39 al., 2017; Levay, 2014; Meriläinen et al., 2015; Trethewey, 1999; Waring & Waring, 2009), our  
40  
41 study shows how materials co-produce the basic premises of who ‘fits in’ at different  
42  
43 workplaces. Through the use of Barad’s (2003, 2007, 2008) analytical framework, we have  
44  
45 shown how everyday organizational materials such as chairs, clothing, airplane and office seats  
46  
47 as well as the fat body itself, can become agentic actors within material-discursive  
48  
49 entanglements that produce our participants’ fit within their workplace. Ahmed’s (2004a,  
50  
51 2004b, 2008, 2014) ideas about affect furthered our analysis by showing that through affects  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 such as shame, humiliation and insecurity, fat bodies become aligned with each other as ‘a bad  
4 fit’. We furthermore show how everyday objects can work to produce otherwise marginalized  
5 fat bodies as acceptable. While earlier work in MOS mainly used Barad’s theory to understand  
6 the role of technology in organizations (e.g. Nyberg, 2009; Orlikowski & Scott, 2015a, 2015b;  
7 Symon & Pritchard, 2015), our work highlights how Barad’s concept of intra-activity can be put  
8 to work to critically analyze difference in organizations. Our framework offers a rich  
9 understanding of differentiating practices by incorporating an analysis of material agencies and  
10 affective flows. This makes it possible to address underexplored markers of difference such as  
11 body size, as well as gain a more comprehensive understanding of the production of inclusion  
12 and exclusion in organizations.  
13  
14  
15  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

26           Gender intersects with size in the differentiating practices we showcase, not only  
27 because professionalism for women is largely constructed around ideals related to their  
28 appearance (cf. Haynes, 2012; Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Trethewey, 1999) but also because the  
29 issues our participants highlight around ill-fitting clothes, chairs and airplane seats in essence  
30 revolve around the possibilities to legitimately take up space. As Tyler and Cohen (2010) argue,  
31 dominant gender norms marginalize women employees through the symbolic and performative  
32 organization of space. At the intersection of size and gender it becomes clear that taking up  
33 space needs to be considered beyond the discursive realm as material and affective. Fat  
34 women’s bodies are considered excessive in terms of space, both literally and symbolically.  
35 Their bodies are queer bodies (LeBesco, 2001) since their material presence disrupts the  
36 organizational order – for example by not fitting into chairs and work wear – and this, in turn,  
37 produces shame. We want to highlight this socio-materiality of bodily shame, taking Probyn  
38 (2004, p. 329) literally when she writes that shame is felt ‘in the rupture when bodies cannot or  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 will not fit the place - when seemingly there is no place to hide'. This dovetails with Ahmed's  
4  
5 ideas around space and affectivity. She states that normative embodiment allows '...bodies to  
6  
7 extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. Those spaces are lived as comfortable as  
8  
9 they allow bodies to fit in; the surfaces of social space are already impressed upon by the shape  
10  
11 of such bodies' (p. 148). We therefore argue, in line with Barad's onto-epistemological stance,  
12  
13 that space should be theorized as a material, affective *and* discursive reality that structures  
14  
15 belonging and as such should be considered in future research on embodied differences in  
16  
17 organizations. The theoretical contribution of our work lies in surfacing the critical feminist  
18  
19 potential of material and affective analyses to gain a more refined understanding of the  
20  
21 workings of power in relation to embodiment in organizations. In the next section, we will  
22  
23 discuss the theoretical implications of the circulation of shame for the possibilities of affective  
24  
25 and material becoming of fat women in organizations.  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32

### 33 **Marginalized bodies and shame**

34  
35 Our research indicates that affect is crucial to the differentiation that our participants experience  
36  
37 in relation to their fat embodiment. We argue that shame is a particularly pertinent affect to  
38  
39 theorize differentiation in relation to embodiment (cf. Dolezal, 2015). Indeed, shame is at the  
40  
41 heart of the prevalent obesity discourse; it relies on neoliberal ideas around individual  
42  
43 responsibility regarding bodies that are constructed as deviant (Levay, 2014). Because shame is  
44  
45 often assumed to inspire weight loss, it is naturalized at both individual and structural levels.  
46  
47 Shaming bodies of size therefore becomes socially acceptable, often even encouraged (cf.  
48  
49 Johansson et al., 2017; Mik-Meyer, 2008). Our research shows that the circulation of shame  
50  
51 shapes how our participants feel and has consequences in terms of their place within the  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 organization. As Ahmed argues, shame bridges publicness and the self: ‘shame feels like an  
4 exposure - another sees what I have done is bad and hence shameful - but it also involves an  
5 attempt to hide, a hiding that requires the subject to turn (...) towards the self’ (2004a, p. 103).  
6  
7  
8 This turn towards the self, we argue, makes it hard to speak about shame. This also intersects  
9  
10 with gender: women’s bodies are subjected to judgment and scrutiny in organizational settings  
11  
12 (Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Trethewey, 1999), which increases the pressure to ‘hide’ (Tyler &  
13  
14 Cohen, 2010). Our participants often did not speak about shame explicitly in relation to their  
15  
16 experiences at work, a move that would involve turning outward. They talked instead about  
17  
18 feeling insecure, uncomfortable or humiliated, and their actions were often shaped by the  
19  
20 anticipation of possible shameful encounters. We argue, in line with Pullen et al. (2017) that  
21  
22 previously experienced histories of not fitting in were evoked, leading our participants to avoid  
23  
24 situations that could produce shame. Affect thus builds momentum (Pullen et al., 2017, p. 106):  
25  
26 when a person has a history of being marginalized because of their size, small objects, gestures  
27  
28 or comments can evoke that history and accumulate negative feelings. This resonates with  
29  
30 Ahmed’s (2004a) argument that emotional responses to discrimination and exclusion are based  
31  
32 on histories of marginalization: ‘those moments of interpellation get repeated over time, and can  
33  
34 be experienced as bodily injury; moments which position queer subjects as failed’ (Ahmed,  
35  
36 2014, p. 147). Yet a certain history ‘may operate by concealing its own traces’ (Ahmed 2004a,  
37  
38 p. 119) thereby making it invisible for those who do not share this history. This also aligns with  
39  
40 Barad’s (2007, p. 236) ideas about temporality: ‘the past is never left behind (...) the past and  
41  
42 the future are enfolded participants in matter’s iterative becoming’. This leaves us with the task  
43  
44 to question the histories related to embodiment that are made significant in organizational  
45  
46 contexts and how these feed into differentiating practices through their material and affective  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 becomings. This is especially relevant in organizations, where objects are often regarded as  
4 neutral and emotions tend to be put aside as ‘private’. Our research thus contributes to the  
5 ongoing theorization of normative embodiment in organization studies scholarship by adding  
6 insights on the co-production of difference through the material and affective realms.  
7  
8  
9

10  
11  
12         Moreover, even though we could *feel* the circulation of shame in the interviews, our  
13 participants rarely mentioned shame explicitly when talking about their work. This could partly  
14 be due to the difficulty of articulating affect (Fotaki et al., 2017). But perhaps speaking about  
15 shame can be experienced as shameful in itself too. This could be amplified in organizational  
16 contexts because expressing emotions is coded as feminine and private, and therefore regarded  
17 as inappropriate here (Lewis, 2014). Theoretically this is interesting because, in feeding silence,  
18 shame seems to consolidate unequal power structures. It eclipses possibilities for speaking out  
19 and forming social collectives that can disrupt exclusion and marginalization. Yet our study  
20 shows that there are also material-discursive entanglements that circumvent shame. Here, the  
21 agency of workwear and other organizational materialities becomes enacted differently in intra-  
22 action with discourses about obesity and gender, and the fat bodies of our participants; these  
23 entanglements produce situations where shame is not the outcome, instead producing our  
24 participants as acceptable. More research is needed to unpack the potential of different affective  
25 economies that may indeed move people to disrupt dominant practices within organizations that  
26 feed marginalization and exclusion. As Dolezal (2015, p. xv) writes ‘shame and overcoming  
27 shame (which is often centered on the body), has an important role to play in terms of the  
28 validation of subjectivity, both personally and politically’. A limitation of this study is our  
29 reliance on linguistic data (e.g. interview transcripts), future research could further look into  
30 post-qualitative and affective methodologies to better address and represent material agencies  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 and affective flows (e.g. Gherardi, 2019). Below we discuss practical possibilities for moving  
4  
5 beyond body shame and size discrimination in organizations.  
6  
7  
8  
9

### 10 **Moving toward inclusivity**

11  
12 As Pouthier and Sondak (2019) show, there is emancipatory potential in affect. Their research  
13  
14 provides insight into possibilities for interrupting oppressive bodily norms through affective  
15  
16 encounters that focus on communal laughter, compassion and the recognition of mutual  
17  
18 vulnerability. This begs the question what interventions are possible in organizations that enable  
19  
20 these ‘affective pathways to freedom’ with regards to size. We think addressing body shame  
21  
22 related to size in organizations is pertinent but needs to be done carefully. Similar to Pouthier  
23  
24 and Sodank, our previous work on poetry (van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019b) shows how art  
25  
26 provides possibilities towards this end. Yet the organizational climate and safety herein are  
27  
28 crucial prerequisites for talking about and feeling through embodied normativities and the  
29  
30 differentiating practices these produce. Below, we address how organizational materials could  
31  
32 play a role in the political project towards creating a size inclusive climate in organizations.  
33  
34  
35  
36

37  
38 The narratives of our participants indicate that the costs of finding suitable clothing,  
39  
40 having your own orthopaedic chair made and buying (multiple) airplane seats can provide  
41  
42 obstacles to perform well in their jobs or inhibit their chances of promotion. Some feel like an  
43  
44 economic liability to their employer, not because they have to take sick leave more often than  
45  
46 their non-fat co-workers as dominant obesity discourse suggests (Mik-Meyer, 2008; van  
47  
48 Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019a), but because their size needs to be accommodated in special  
49  
50 orthopaedic chairs, tailor made uniforms or corporate wear, and particular (spacier) airline seats.  
51  
52 The economic burden of finding suitable (thus expensive) clothing that looks professional is  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 carried on an individual basis by our participants. Following the reasoning used in disability  
4 scholarship and activism (e.g. Garland-Thomson, 2005; Grue, 2011) we contend that it is not  
5 the individual fat employee who is at fault here, but the material circumstances through which  
6 these differentiating practices emerge. As Colls and Evans (2014, p. 733) write, we should be  
7  
8 'redefining obesogenic environments not as environments that make bodies fat, but as  
9 environments that make fat bodies problematic'. Our focus on materials as differentiating  
10 agents shows that fat employees do not have equitable access to fitting clothing and seating.  
11  
12 This puts them at a disadvantage in the context of their employment. A materialist perspective  
13 provides a good starting point for making organizations more equitable: arguably objects and  
14 other organizational materials are more easily changed than organizational discourses. Our  
15 research offers several practical starting points for doing so. Employers could, for example,  
16 critically assess their seating arrangements to secure that every employee has the opportunity to  
17 use a chair that accommodates their particular bodily needs. A similar argument can be made  
18 related to workwear policy. Employers should ensure everybody has equal access to suitable  
19 and affordable clothing. Furthermore - akin to policy arrangements related to disability - official  
20 organizational policies should specify the willingness to fund extra costs related to airplane  
21 travel or other material needs employees may have based on their specific embodiment. If  
22 organizations are invested in creating inclusive work environments, our suggestion is that they  
23 start by cultivating practices that literally and figuratively allow more room for bodies of  
24 different sizes and shapes.  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50

## 51 **Acknowledgements**

52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 We would like to thank Koen van Laer and Emma Bell for their feedback on earlier versions of  
4 the manuscript. We would also like to thank the editor and three anonymous reviewers for their  
5  
6  
7  
8 constructive comments and support during the review process.  
9

## 10 11 12 13 **Funding**

14  
15  
16 This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or  
17  
18 not-for-profit sectors  
19

## 20 21 22 **Notes:**

23  
24  
25 1. Participants identified themselves differently: e.g. ‘large’, ‘fuller-sized’, ‘big’, ‘full-  
26  
27 figured’, ‘obese’ and ‘fat’. In this paper we use the term fat in its’ descriptive sense in order to  
28  
29 disentangle it from the negative moral connotations it has in everyday use. We refrain from  
30  
31 using medicalized terms such as ‘obesity’ and ‘overweight’ because we want to avoid  
32  
33 reproducing this medicalization of fatness.  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40

## 41 42 **References**

- 43 Acker, Joan (2006). Inequality regimes: Gender, class, and race in organizations. *Gender &*  
44  
45 *Society*, 20, 441-464.  
46  
47  
48 Ahmed, Sara (2004a). Affective economies. *Social text*, 22, 117-139.  
49  
50  
51 Ahmed, Sara (2004b). Collective feelings: Or, the impressions left by others. *Theory, Culture &*  
52  
53 *Society*, 21, 25–42.  
54  
55 Ahmed, Sara (2014). *The cultural politics of emotion*. Routledge: Edinburgh University Press.  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

- 1  
2  
3 Barad, Karen (2003). Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter  
4 comes to matter. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28, 801–831.  
5  
6  
7 Barad, Karen (2007). *Meeting the universe halfway: Quantum physics and the entanglement of*  
8 *matter and meaning*. Durham, NY: Duke University Press.  
9  
10  
11 Barad, Karen (2008). Queer causation and the ethics of mattering. In Noreen Giffney & Myra J.  
12 Hird (Eds.), *Queering the non/human*. (pp. 311–338). London: Ashgate Publishing Ltd.  
13  
14  
15 Colls, Rachel, & Evans, Bethan (2014). Making space for fat bodies? A critical account of ‘the  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25  
26  
27  
28  
29  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37  
38  
39  
40  
41  
42  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60
- Dickson, Andrew (2015). Hysterical blokes and the other’s jouissance. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 22, 139–147.
- Dolezal, Luna (2015). *The body and shame: Phenomenology, feminism, and the socially shaped body*. Idaho Falls: Lexington Books.
- Dolezal, Luna (2017). Shame, vulnerability and belonging: Reconsidering Sartre’s account of shame. *Human Studies*, 40, 421–438.
- Fikkan, Janna L., & Rothblum, Esther D. (2012). Is fat a feminist issue? Exploring the gendered nature of weight bias. *Sex Roles*, 66, 575–592.
- Ford, Jacky, Harding, Nancy, Gilmore, Sarah, & Richardson, Sue (2017). Becoming the leader: Leadership as material presence. *Organization Studies*, 38, 1553–1571.
- Fotaki, Marianna (2013). No woman is like a man (in academia): The masculine symbolic order

1  
2  
3 and the unwanted female body. *Organization Studies*, 34, 1251–1275.

4  
5 Fotaki, Marianna, Metcalfe, Beverly D., & Harding, Nancy (2014). Writing materiality into  
6  
7 management and organization studies through and with Luce Irigaray. *Human Relations*,  
8  
9 67, 1239–1263.

10  
11  
12 Fotaki, Marianna, Kenny, Kate, & Vachhani, Sheena J. (2017). Thinking critically about affect  
13  
14 in organization studies: Why it matters. *Organization*, 24, 3–17.

15  
16 Fraser, Suzanne, Maher, Jane M., & Wright, Jan (2010). Between bodies and collectivities:  
17  
18 Articulating the action of emotion in obesity epidemic discourse. *Social Theory & Health*,  
19  
20 8, 192–209.

21  
22  
23 Garland-Thomson, Rosemary (2005). Feminist disability studies. *Signs: Journal of Women in*  
24  
25 *Culture and Society*, 30, 1557–1587.

26  
27  
28 Gherardi, Silvia (2019). Theorizing affective ethnography for organization studies.  
29  
30  
31 *Organization*, 26, 741–760.

32  
33  
34 Grue, Jan (2011). Discourse analysis and disability: Some topics and issues. *Discourse &*  
35  
36 *Society*, 22, 532–546.

37  
38  
39 Harding, Nancy, Gilmore, Sarah, & Ford, Jacky (2021). Matter that embodies: Agentive flesh  
40  
41 and working body/selves. *Organization Studies*. 0170840621993235.

42  
43  
44 Harris, Kate L., & Ashcraft, Karen L. (2019). Doing power, deferring difference: Gendered-  
45  
46 raced processes and the case of Karen Barad. *Presented at EGOS 2019*.

47  
48  
49 Harris, Kate L., McFarlane, Megan, & Wieskamp, Valerie (2020). The promise and peril of  
50  
51 agency as motion: A feminist new materialist approach to sexual violence and sexual  
52  
53 harassment. *Organization*, 27, 660–679.

54  
55  
56 Haynes, Kathryn (2012). Body beautiful? Gender, identity and the body in professional service  
57  
58  
59  
60



1  
2  
3 firms. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 19, 489–507.

4  
5 Holvino, Evangelina (2010). Intersections: The simultaneity of race, gender and class in  
6  
7 organization studies. *Gender, Work & Organization*, 17, 248–277.

8  
9 Iedema, Rick (2007). On the multi-modality, materially and contingency of organization  
10  
11 discourse. *Organization Studies*, 28, 931–946.

12  
13 Johansson, Janet, Tienari, Janne, & Valtonen, Anu (2017). The body, identity and gender in  
14  
15 managerial athleticism. *Human Relations*, 70, 1141–1167.

16  
17 Just, Sine N., Kirkegaard, Line, & Muhr, Sara Louise (2019). Uniform matters: Body  
18  
19 possibilities of the gendered soldier. In Marianna Fotaki & Alison Pullen (Eds.),  
20  
21 *Diversity, affect and embodiment in organizing* (pp. 113–138). Cham, Switzerland:  
22  
23 Palgrave Macmillan.

24  
25 Kelly, Peter, Allender, Steven & Colquhoun, Derek (2007). New work ethics?: The corporate  
26  
27 athlete's back end index and organizational performance. *Organization*, 14, 267–285.

28  
29 LeBesco, Kathleen (2001). Queering fat bodies/politics. In Jana Evans Braziel & Kahtleen  
30  
31 LeBesco (Eds.), *Bodies out of bounds: Fatness and transgression* (pp. 74–87). Berkely  
32  
33 and Los Angeles: University of California Press.

34  
35 Levay, Charlotta (2014). Obesity in organizational context. *Human Relations*, 67, 565–585.

36  
37 Lewis, Patricia (2014). Postfeminism, femininities and organization studies: Exploring a new  
38  
39 agenda. *Organization Studies*, 35, 1845–1866.

40  
41 MacLure, Maggie (2013). Researching without representation? Language and materiality in  
42  
43 post-qualitative methodology. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*,  
44  
45 26, 658–667.

46  
47 Mavin, Sharon, & Grandy, Gina (2016). A theory of abject appearance: Women elite leaders'

- 1  
2  
3 intra-gender ‘management’ of bodies and appearance. *Human Relations*, 69, 1095–1120.  
4  
5 Meriläinen, Susan, Tienari, Janne, & Valtonen, Anu (2015). Headhunters and the ‘ideal’  
6  
7 executive body. *Organization*, 22, 3–22.  
8  
9  
10 Mik-Meyer, Nanna (2008). Managing fat bodies: Identity regulation between public and private  
11  
12 domains. *Critical Social Studies*, 2, 20–35.  
13  
14 Mik-Meyer, Nanna (2010). Putting the right face on a wrong body: An initial interpretation of  
15  
16 fat identities in social work organizations. *Qualitative Social Work*, 9, 385–405.  
17  
18  
19 Nyberg, Daniel (2009). Computers, customer service operatives and cyborgs: Intra-actions in  
20  
21 call centres. *Organization Studies*, 30, 1181–1199  
22  
23  
24 Orbach, Susie (1987). *Fat is a feminist issue II*. Berkley: Berkley Books.  
25  
26 Orlikowski, Wanda J., & Scott, Susan V. (2015a). Exploring material-discursive practices.  
27  
28 *Journal of Management Studies*, 52, 697–705.  
29  
30  
31 Orlikowski, Wanda J., & Scott, Susan V. (2015b) The algorithm and the crowd: Considering the  
32  
33 materiality of service innovation. *MIS Quarterly*, 39, 201–216.  
34  
35  
36 Pouthier, Vanessa, & Sondak, Harris (2019). When Shame Meets Love: Affective pathways to  
37  
38 freedom from injurious bodily norms in the workplace. *Organization Studies*, 42, 385–406.  
39  
40  
41 Probyn, Esther (2004). Everyday shame. *Cultural Studies*, 18(2-3), 328–349.  
42  
43  
44 Pullen, Alison, Rhodes, Carl, & Thanem, Torkild (2017). Affective politics in gendered  
45  
46 organizations: Affirmative notes on becoming-woman. *Organization*, 24, 105–123.  
47  
48  
49 Ringrose, Jessica, & Renold, Emma (2014). “F\*\*k rape!” Exploring affective intensities in a  
50  
51 feminist research assemblage. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 20, 772–780.  
52  
53  
54 Saguy, Abigail (2012). Why fat is a feminist issue? *Sex Roles*, 66, 600–607.  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60 Symon, Gillian, & Pritchard, Katrina (2015). Performing the responsive and committed

1  
2  
3 employee through the sociomaterial mangle of connection. *Organization Studies*, 36, 241–  
4  
5 263.

6  
7  
8 Thanem, Torkild (2009). ‘There is no limit to how much you can consume’: The New Public  
9  
10 Health and the struggle to manage healthy bodies. *Culture and Organization*, 15, 59–74.

11  
12 Thanem, Torkild (2013). More passion than the job requires? Monstrously transgressive  
13  
14 leadership in the promotion of health at work. *Leadership*, 9, 396–415.

15  
16  
17 Trethewey, Angela (1999). Disciplined bodies: Women’s embodied identities at work.  
18  
19 *Organization Studies*, 20, 423–450.

20  
21  
22 Tyler, Melissa, & Cohen, Laurie (2010). Spaces that matter: Gender performativity and  
23  
24 organizational Space. *Organization Studies*, 31, 175–198.

25  
26  
27 Van Amsterdam, Noortje (2013). Big fat inequalities, thin privilege: An intersectional  
28  
29 perspective on ‘body size’. *European Journal of Women’s Studies*, 20, 155–169.

30  
31  
32 Van Amsterdam, Noortje, & van Eck, Dide (2019a). “I have to go the extra mile”. How fat  
33  
34 female employees manage their stigmatized identity at work. *Scandinavian Journal of*  
35  
36 *Management*, 35, 46–55.

37  
38  
39 Van Amsterdam, Noortje, & van Eck, Dide (2019b). In the flesh: a poetic inquiry into how fat  
40  
41 female employees manage weight-related stigma. *Culture and Organization*, 25, 300–316.

42  
43  
44 Visser, Laura M., & Davies, Olivia E. (2021). The becoming of online healthcare through  
45  
46 entangled power and performativity: A posthumanist agential realist perspective.  
47  
48 *Organization Studies*, 42, 1817–1837.

49  
50  
51 Waring, Amanda, & Waring, Justin (2009). Looking the part: Embodying the discourse of  
52  
53 organizational professionalism in the City. *Current Sociology*, 57, 344–364.

54  
55  
56 Zoller, Heather M. (2003). Working out: Managerialism in workplace health promotion.  
57  
58  
59  
60

1  
2  
3 *Management Communication Quarterly*, 17, 171–205.  
4  
5  
6  
7

### 8 **Author biographies**

9

10 Noortje van Amsterdam is assistant professor Organization Studies at Utrecht School of  
11 Governance. Her research focuses on embodiment and health in organizations. She is  
12 particularly interested in how inequalities around gender, age, size, and disability play out in the  
13 workplace, and often uses arts-based methodologies to explore the affective and material  
14 dimensions of these phenomena. Her work has been published in peer-reviewed journals and  
15 edited books.  
16  
17  
18  
19  
20  
21  
22  
23  
24  
25

26 Dide van Eck is a postdoctoral researcher in Work and Organization studies at the KU Leuven.  
27 Her research focuses on diversity management and organizational inclusion, particularly in  
28 service sector work contexts. She is interested in exploring how workplace diversity can be  
29 accommodated by more equal and inclusive forms of organizing.  
30  
31  
32  
33  
34  
35  
36  
37

38 Katrine Meldgaard Kjær is assistant professor at the IT University of Copenhagen. Her research  
39 focuses on the relationship between health and digital culture, often with interdisciplinary as  
40 well as experimental or creative methods and approaches. She has previously published on new  
41 materialism and affect in relation to diet culture, and is currently working on a project about  
42 medicinal cannabis in Denmark.  
43  
44  
45  
46  
47  
48  
49  
50  
51  
52  
53  
54  
55  
56  
57  
58  
59  
60

Table I: Participants

<b>Name*</b>	<b>Profession</b>	<b>Age*</b>	<b>Duration of the interview</b>
<b>Jill</b>	Debt counselor	53	50 min
<b>Katy</b>	Secondary school teacher	37	60 min
<b>Laura</b>	Elderly caregiver	24	80 minutes
<b>Rifka</b>	Back and front office worker	22	55 minutes
<b>Mell</b>	Owner beauty salon	33	60 minutes
<b>Sandra</b>	Youth counselor	46	50 minutes
<b>Alice</b>	Shop assistant	22	90 minutes
<b>Kara</b>	Photographer	28	90 minutes
<b>Jenny</b>	Information analyst	47	60 minutes
<b>Susan</b>	Care-giver	39	60 minutes
<b>Wendy</b>	Opera singer	52	120 minutes
<b>Claire</b>	Service employee	25	55 minutes
<b>Carinda</b>	Medical researcher	34	70 minutes
<b>Maxime</b>	Head principal at a primary school	43	120 minutes

<b>Monique</b>	Project leader	26	80 minutes
<b>Ingrid</b>	Project manager	30	60 minutes
<b>Nora</b>	Actress, public speaker and comedian	50	90 minutes
<b>Hannah</b>	Student counselor	50	50 minutes
<b>Constanc e</b>	Caregiver	40	140 minutes
<b>Nancy</b>	Pedagogical staff member	45	150 minutes
<b>Kathleen</b>	Accountant	30	120 minutes
<b>Tamar</b>	Former IT tech and communications specialist	41	160 minutes