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EMBODIED FATNESS IN BOYS: A CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

A Dissertation

Submitted to the McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By

Sean Leadem

May 2023

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Sean Leadem

2023

EMBODIED FATNESS IN BOYS: A CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

By

Sean Leadem

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ABSTRACT

EMBODIED FATNESS IN BOYS: A CRITICAL PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

By

Sean Leadem

May 2023

Dissertation supervised by Dr. Roger Brooke, PhD ABPP

This dissertation was an exploratory study of experiences of fatness in boyhood using a hermeneutic phenomenological qualitative method. The author conducted in-depth, open-ended interviews with participants who identify as men and for whom fatness or related body-difference was an issue in childhood or adolescence to gather data on the meanings of fatness for boys and the men they become. Data analysis was organized around the existential dimensions of embodiment, temporality, and relationality. Themes emerging from this analysis included a) the discovery of fatness as ambiguous meanings mediated by others, b) fatness as a problem in a horizon that does not include its solution, c) fatness as care - care as a problem for masculinity; d) moments of arrest, in which hitherto ambiguous meanings are crystalized and intrusive; e) the oscillating character of fat experience; f) fatness as complicating factor or threat to masculine identification. Themes were discussed in dialogue with critical phenomenological and

intersectional frameworks, including exploring fatness as a productive site for problematizing narrow constraints of masculinity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I want first to thank the men who offered their time and memories so generously to this project, and to acknowledge that what I have been able to do with their stories here represents only a fraction of what they offered. Thank you.

Next, deepest thanks to my dissertation committee: Roger Brooke for his teaching and supervision during my time as a student at Duquesne, his gracious and encouraging elaborations of phenomenology and human science, and for agreeing to marshal this dissertation into existence; readers Derek Hook and Elizabeth Fein for their brilliance and generosity and for their many, many interventions in my thinking.

I could not have begun this project without the support and inspiration of Duquesne professor emeritus Eva Simms and the members of PlaceLab. I could not have overcome my fear of the data without the well-timed assistance of colleague and doctoral candidate, Anna Lampe. And I would still be writing outlines were it not for the fellowship and tenacious attention and collaboration of colleague and doctoral candidate, Benjamin Strosberg. I am indebted also to Dr. Ryan Mest for his careful elaboration of a philosophical texts and their relevance for psychology, and to Marilyn Henline for her indefatigable professionalism and courtesy. This dissertation could only have come out of Duquesne's psychology department, a community and institution for which I am incredibly grateful. And I only survived it through the fellowship of my cohort, Sadie, Autumn-Marie, Adina, Kaitlyn, Christine, Tricia and Luiggi, and longtime friends Kerry Ward, Hunter Slaton and Kirk Duncan.

I want to acknowledge the scholarly work of Brian Coleman, Leland Guthrie and Sadie Mohler, whose dissertation projects served as exemplars and guides for this one.

Special appreciation to my sister, Kristen, and brother-in-law, Christo, for caring so well for our mother at the end, and for the much-needed moral support and occasional housing.

Finally, and most importantly, my thanks to Nina and Augustine, for everything, forever.

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Introduction

This is a qualitative study exploring experiences of childhood fatness remembered by persons socialized as men in North America. It posed questions about the experiences of fatness in childhood to men who remember their body difference being an issue in childhood or adolescence, and it sought to elucidate those questions and analyze responses without recourse to previously held assumptions or knowledge derived either from medicalized discourses about health and illness or derivative formulations in the fields of psychology and public policy initiatives. I spoke with a number of men who remember self-identifying as fat or overweight or obese, and asked them to share what they remember. I was guided by a hope to learn more about the ‘fat experience’ for men, or to learn about the lived experiences of these men who lived under fatness in the late 20th and 21st century. What emerged in the interviews and analyses were a series of distinctly particular vignettes from childhood and adolescence in which the men recalled discovering their fatness, contending with its uncertain implications, effecting ambivalent identifications with fatness, while also revealing the important ways that other people and ideas influenced their experience of themselves as different or fat, exhibiting curious patterns of attending to their bodies associated with their experiences, and reflecting on the significance of fatness in the experiences of becoming an adult man. This research is exploratory. Its intervention in the field is to reveal fatness as a lived manifold of meanings arising from the experiences and recollections of fatness.

In this introduction I will give a brief account of the state of affairs of fatness research into which this dissertation sought to intervene and a guide to the chapters.

Fatness is consistently in the public discourse, especially in the figure of obesity as a pressing health concern in the United States. And yet, fatness means different things to different

people at different times and places. The literature on fatness is inconsistent, generally quantitative in approach, and tends to focus on women. American psychological research into fat experience is preoccupied with concepts of disease, health, correlations between body diversity and psychiatric diagnosis, and quantitative outcome studies examining interventions and weight loss. But, there are problems with the view that enshrines ‘obesity’ as a proxy for poor health, or a mental problem. Some research calls into question the idea that people can ‘change their ways’ or that ‘diet and exercise’ are reasonable recommendations, in light of the difficulties posed at the level of metabolism and social and/environmental milieu. Healthist assumptions—the equation of fatness with illness; the injunction that institutional and individual attention to fatness be organized around fat reduction (or fat shaming)—pose problems both because of mounting research destabilizing their claims as well as growing research and activism drawing attention to the harm that obesity discourse theorizing may cause.

There are alternative approaches to studying fatness, as I will outline below. Critical psychology tends to focus on critiques of social norms in psychology and seems like an obvious candidate for providing a theoretical grounding for studying the experience of fat people, so much of whose lived experiences are conditioned by discourses that pathologize their bodies and insist on medical responses. However, critical psychology is limited by its only nascent progress in theorizing the ‘actual,’ and not just the discursive, body in psychology. Fat studies is an evolving field that finds common cause with other critical and activist research paradigms, and invites studies that do not lose sight of the ‘actual’ body in the critique. Feminism, phenomenological philosophy, psychoanalysis, and postcolonial critical theory furnish considerable insights into the complex nature of embodiment and the problems that subjects of “differential embodiment” (Hook, 2008) experience in social and discursive settings where they

are alienated or marginalized. These themes are also invoked passionately, though unsystematically, in the memoirs and literature of fat activist authors and memoirists, who offer in-depth experience-near accounts of the body in fatness. And, although the activist authors of popular memoirs are deeply concerned with the lived experience of fatness, to date most of them have been concerned with the experiences of women or persons who are gender nonconforming. Neither theorists nor memoirists are particularly concerned with what qualitative researchers in fat studies have struggled to furnish—accounts that are experience-near and sufficiently critical. Although a few memoirs on the fat male experience have been published in recent years, few accounts of fat male embodiment are available for analysis. Critical phenomenology offers promise, especially because its focus on lived experience and its ability to bracket—set aside and examine—the very assumptions that inform so much of obesity discourse theorizing. Yet, with recent laudable exceptions, much of the empirical phenomenological literature on fatness is uncritical concepts of health and normality. Further, qualitative empirical research literature on fat male embodiment is scant.

The present dissertation attempted to fill the gap in the literature—on embodied fatness and on the experiences of men—through a hermeneutic phenomenological analysis of interviews, oriented by work by critical phenomenologists. Because the field of fat studies is so small and there is little research focused on men, this is a preliminary exploration of the subject. The dissertation will not be solving the problem posed by male fatness but will be delineating the questions expressed by fatness and posed to and by phenomenological investigation.

Overview of Chapters

The project is divided into seven chapters. In chapter one, I outline some problems emerging in medicalized theorizing fatness as obesity—it imposes an understanding of fatness

that gives little consideration to lived experience and has increasingly been called into question by recent research and activism—which urges alternative considerations of the topic. Chapter two considers alternative approaches, introduces the theoretical orientations informing this project, and offers a review of the empirical phenomenological literature. In chapter three I lay out the phenomenological methodology that guides my analysis, provide a detailed account of procedures, and briefly introduce the men who served as participants. In chapter four I offer a demonstration of the research method through analysis of the case of “John.” There, I uncover a series of themes involved in the situated structure of fatness for John, including embodiment, temporality, relationality, ambivalence, identification, and care. In chapter five, I give a deeper analysis of the existential of embodiment as it is expressed in the interviews with several participants. I emphasize the figural moments of discovery and arrest in the encounters and experiences of one’s fatness. The effort to examine vignettes in terms of embodiment reveals how thoroughly analyses of the lived body implicate horizons of meaning in terms of other lifeworld existentials, most notably, in these analyses, relationality. In chapter six, I explore the ways that relationality became focal during the study. Chapter seven explores vignettes with a focus on temporality. And in chapter eight, I offer concluding remarks, address limitations of the study, suggest a direction for future research on the topic.

Chapter One: Obesity Problems

American psychological research into fat experience has been preoccupied with concepts of disease, health, correlations between body diversity and psychiatric diagnosis, and quantitative outcome studies examining interventions and weight loss. In what has been called the ‘obesity discourse,’ (Monaghan, 2008; Monaghan, Bombak, & Rich, 2018) these preoccupations are mobilized into a generalized injunction to address and intervene against the growing ‘epidemic’ of obesity. This section will outline the issue of and problems with ‘obesity,’ which will lead to a rationale, in chapter 2, for a critical phenomenological approach.

Most research elides fatness with “obesity.” The elision is so thoroughgoing that it feels strange to raise questions about it. But there are problems with obesity—as a paradigm for thinking for fat people, and for research.

Obesity, and overweight, are both defined as “weight that is higher than what is considered as a healthy weight for a given height,” (CDC, 2020, n.p.), obesity being the higher, and therefore less healthy. In 2013, the American Medical Association resolved at its annual House of Delegates meeting to “recognize obesity as a disease state with multiple pathophysiological aspects requiring a range of interventions to advance obesity treatment and prevention” (Kyle, Dhurandhar, & Allison, 2016). Obesity is widely regarded as an epidemic (Masters et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2011). Globally, as many as one third of the world's population were obese or overweight, according a study that gathered data from 183 countries: 36.9% of males and 38% of females (McKay, 2014). Child and adolescent obesity also continues to rise. Nearly one quarter of girls and boys under age 18 in developed countries are overweight or obese. In the United States, Masters (2013) et al reviewed 19 National Health Interview

Surveys taken between 1986 and 2006, and found obesity was associated with cause of death in 15.6% white men and 5% of black men. Rates were higher among women--nearly 27% for Black females and 21.7 % for White females. Mitchell et al in 2011 estimated that 34% of adults in the United States were obese. By 2017-2018, the age-adjusted prevalence of obesity among U.S. adults was 42.4% (Hales, Carroll, Fryar, & Ogden, 2020). Masters et al (2013) suggested that, in light of their findings on the mortality rates associated with obesity, life expectancy rates projections should be lowered.

World Health Organization guidelines responding to the obesity epidemic, adopted in 2004 and recognized again in 2011, included strategies for dieting and physical exercise (WHO, 2014). The WHO's recommendations are meant to encourage stakeholders to improve patterns at the population level, but the message as it is conveyed in thousands of encounters with the medical profession and broadcast throughout the media, individualizes the effort and the responsibility, as evinced in this 2012 report from Reuters, which carried the grim news: Half of Americans will be obese by 2030, "if they don't change their ways" (Reuters, 2012). As recently as 2016, the United States Equal Employment Opportunity Commission proposed rules allowing employers to penalize employees up to 30% of health insurance costs if they fail to meet 'health' criteria, such as reaching a specified body mass index (Tomiya et al, 2016).

If obesity is an epidemic (Masters et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2011), just what it is an epidemic *of* is unclear. Fat Studies scholars and activists have challenged the widespread medical practice of using a measure of height and /weight proportion, body mass index (BMI), as a proxy for *health*, and have critiqued widespread recommendations for remediating obesity as unrealistic and shaming. These efforts have shown mixed success. On the one hand, in 2017 the CDC (Dodgen & Spence-Almaguer, 2017) effectively reversed its position on BMI and recommended revision of the metric and reconsidering the way fatness is diagnosed and treated

in some populations. On the other hand, a recent review by a major Fat Studies author in the field of psychology (Rothblum, 2018) suggests that widespread attitudes toward obesity held by medical professionals and the general public may resist revision, despite scientific evidence that undermines them considerably.

BMI¹ has been used as the single dispositive measure of fatness, and fatness has served as proxy for health. But research has shown that BMI is a poor proxy for health, in part because it does not take into account differences in body composition or fitness levels--BMI misclassified people with large muscle mass (Burkhauser & Cawley, 2008) and nutritional differences that *do* predict health and longevity (Barry, et al., 2014). Further, National Health And Nutrition Examination Survey data from 2005-2012 indicated that using the BMI to predict cardiometabolic risk “misclassified nearly 75 million US adults, of whom more than 54 million are overweight or obese but have healthy cardiometabolic indicators” (CDC, 2017, citing Tomiyama , et al., 2016). Further, a systematic review of 36 studies indicated that individuals with high BMI and good aerobic fitness are at lower risk for all-cause and cardiovascular mortality compared with individuals with normal BMI and poor fitness (Fogelholm, 2010).^[2] Based in part on these studies, a 2017 paper published by the Centers for Disease Control concluded that Obesity is not a reliable proxy for health. Addressing policy recommendations for African American women—who are mischaracterized as unhealthy due to BMI more than other cohorts—the CDC paper noted that people can be obese but in good health because of diet and

¹ BMI is a metric used to define height and weight characteristics and classify them into groups—obese, overweight, normal, underweight—and is widely regarded as a measure of personal fatness (Nuttall, 2015). BMI is defined as weight in kilograms divided by height in meters squared (NIDDK/NIH, 2020). An expert panel of the American Journal of Clinical Nutrition in 1998 classified persons overweight whose BMI ranged between 25-29.9kg/m². BMI greater than 30 kg/m² defines obesity. (Pi-Sunyer et al., 1998). The panel also noted that waist circumference, taken together with BMI, can be used to evaluate health risk for individuals.

physical activity. The CDC also recommended replacing metrics such as BMI with more holistic, whole-person approaches to health, such as might be developed in community based participatory research.

In her 2018 paper, *Slim Chance for Permanent Weight Loss*, Fat Studies scholar and psychologist Esther Rothblum reviewed a collection of research findings suggesting that bodyweight change is very difficult to achieve and statistically unlikely to be maintained. Most public weight-loss initiatives are unsuccessful, and most diets fail. This research urges a reconsideration of the emphasis on will-power and personal agency in adopting health policy. But the medical community's response to the obesity epidemic has been to blame individuals (Cusick, 2019; Kyle et al., 2016). Rothblum has made use of social psychology to attempt an interpretation of the medical establishment's resistance to revising its position toward fat shaming. (Rothblum, 2018; Rothblum & Solovay, 2009).

BMI is a questionable measure of fatness (Dodgen & Spence-Almaguer, 2017), obesity is a pejorative term and a spurious proxy for health, weight-loss initiatives have largely failed and diets produce more distress than weight loss (Rothblum, 2018). Most contemporary research converges on this point: BMI does not measure fatness, and fatness's suitability as a proxy for health is seriously questioned. Something else is going on. What began as a health crisis is now regarded by some as a moral panic (Campos, 2004) or, more recently, as "fat panic" (Monaghan, Rich & Bombak, 2018), and much of this is related to psychology.

There have been concerning initiatives to formally associate fatness, as obesity, with mental illness by introducing obesity into diagnostic classification as a psychiatric disorder (Marcus & Wildes, 2012). A body of research has emerged documenting a relationship between obesity and number psychiatric disorders (Pagato, et al., 2012; Pagoto, Curtin, Lemon, Bandini, Schneider, Bodenlos, Ma, 2009; Allison et al., 2009), and prompting The Eating Disorders Work

Group of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, Fifth Edition Task Force to consider whether obesity should be classified as a mental disorder and included in the diagnostic manual. Some reasons to consider inclusion: phenotypic similarities in the behaviors associated with obesity and both eating disorders and substance use disorders; and research documenting “different brain responses to food-related cues in lean and obese individuals” (Marcus & Wildes, 2012, p.431). Ultimately, the Work Group concluded that obesity should not be included in DSM-5. Instead, the Work Group averred that “obesity is a heterogeneous condition with a complex and incompletely understood etiology, and thus cannot be considered a mental disorder per se” (Marcus & Weathers, 2012, p.434). Or at least not yet. The authors acknowledged that there may be obesity phenotypes associated with mental disorder, “but research focusing on the role of neural mechanisms in the onset and maintenance of obesity and obesity-related behaviors (e.g., overeating) is in its infancy” (p.434). The authors recommended further research on “conceptually relevant biological dimensions that may underlie both obesity and psychiatric disorders” (p.434).

The biological dimensions of fatness and its impact on psychiatric disorders are not well established. What *does* seem well-established is the association between fat shaming and psychological suffering, which includes poor functioning found in connection to weight stigma (Puhl, Peterson & Luedicke, 2013; Puhl & Heuer, 2009; Kolata, 2016; Puhl & Brownell, 2001, Mills & Andrianopoulos, 1993). Research is needed that can interrogate the intersection of embodied fatness and the world of shaming practices in which it is so often found.

Chapter Two: Orientation and Literature review

In this section I discuss some of the theoretical orienting literature that informs my approach to this project and the body of contemporary literature surrounding fatness. I show how my project is situated within that contemporary literature and how it fills a gap in that literature through the critical phenomenological study of fatness for men.

Popular Literature

Popular memoirists offer provocation and insight into fat experience, and invite research into the psychological particularities of differential embodiments. Most of these authors are concerned with the experience of women. Roxanne Gay (2017) and Lindy West (2016) each offer exemplary accounts of living as a fat women, and each offer resistance against dominant anti-fat discourses.

Gay's memoir, *Hunger* (2017) is a story of trauma, intersectional identity—Gay is Black woman, a feminist, and morbidly obese—and how her unruly body is implicated in both. She offers rich accounts of her body's encounter with a world that is not equipped for it and in a culture that despises it. She also describes a nuanced ambivalence toward recent movements that urge acceptance and celebration of fatness, complicating a narrative that, as noted below, predominated in early fat studies. Another ambivalence predominates the narrative, too, arising from observations about how embodiment and self-concept form an uneasy relationship. On good days, Gay writes, she understands that much of her negative self-evaluation results from anti-fat sentiments promulgated by the medical community and dominant social discourses. "On bad days, though, I forget how to separate my personality, the heart of who I am, from my body," (p1.149). West (2016; Glass, 2016) articulated a central concern in the exploration of socially mediated fat experience, namely that fatness is only tolerated in society if it is expressed

and lived as a *problem*, and with an implicit promise to change. “The way we are taught to think about fatness is that fat is not a permanent state. You’re just a thin person who’s *failing consistently* for your whole life” (Glass, 2016, np).

The fat person, in both Gay’s and West’s accounts, is a) regarded as excluded from a norm, b) hated in the eyes of the other, and c) someone who is expected to live toward a future where their body must change. These dimensions of the fat experience for these women authors—one in which the social location of the subject is conditioned by their particular embodiment, and negatively evaluated because of it, unless they are taken up in an agenda of change, improvement or apology—animates my orientation in this project. I also read Gay’s and West’s observations as a call for research that can offer a rich account of the experience of fatness.

These accounts eventually led me to orient my questions, at least initially, around the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1964, 1968, 2011; 2012). For Merleau-Ponty embodied subjective life is inaugurated in a relation between what is experienced pre-reflectively and what is reflected in the other, anticipated in the future. For this reason he offers strong conceptual frameworks for analysis of the lived experience of fatness exposed by authors like Gay (2017) and West (2016), which appears at the outset to require analysis that is at once biological, psychological, developmental, and discursive.

Critical psychology

Research into the psychology of particular body experiences necessitates (a) contending with the question of embodiment for psychology and (b) relatedly, encountering the refractory presence of shame and marginalization of fat people, which inevitably leads to the issues of social norms and discursive practices. Critical psychology (Parker, 2007) challenges the

assumptions at play in mainstream psychology, revealing social forces and discursive practices that inform both the practice of psychology and the constitution of the psychological subject. Because it articulates these issues explicitly, critical psychology seems a fitting sub-discipline in which to begin. However, the body seems to be missing from much of critical psychology.

Cromby (2005) attempted to theorize the body for critical psychology: “The body is simultaneously the basis of who we are as subjects: it is not just something we know but also the very basis of our knowing, so its character always already contributes to the meanings we make” (Cromby, 2005, p.3). He argues that a critical psychology, for it to *be* psychology and not merely a collection of themes from philosophy and sociology, must theorize embodied subjectivity. As Cromby sees it, both “mainstream” psychology and critical psychology constitute “disembodied” psychologies:

Mainstream psychology reductively distorts human sociality into individual characteristics, such as facets of personality; critical psychology without a notion of embodied subjectivity simply does the opposite, reducing embodied subjectivity to a discursive trope, performative stratagem or interaction effect. This instantiates a problematic dualism between person and society producing both conceptual confusion and errors of reification (Cromby, 2005, p.2)

Mainstream psychology, according to Cromby, reifies deterministic causal laws and ahistoric individual mental processes. On the other hand, critical psychology’s reliance on poststructuralism and discursive psychology also result in a problematic disembodiment in the field. “Poststructuralist approaches that treat the body and its parts as symbolic forms or cultural constructions can usefully highlight how embodiment is socially produced, but may tend in doing so to negate *actual* embodied experience.” (Cromby, 2005, p.2) A truly psychological

critical psychology, Cromby asserts, must resist articulating subjectivity as a set of individualistic, essential determinisms *or* as the discursive practices that inscribe bodies in social praxes and performances.

It seems strange, then, that Cromby (2005) proposed *neuroscience* as a way to ground his new embodied critical psychology, given that there are alternatives. Two psychology-adjacent intellectual traditions that have specifically engaged psychology in terms of embodiment are phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Admittedly, both traditions have produced exemplars who were accused of reifying deterministic causal laws (critics of Freud [Smith, 1979; Boss, 1963; 1977] have accused him of this) and ahistoric individual mental processes (critics of both Husserl and Freud, for example).^[3] But both phenomenology and psychoanalysis have also produced sophisticated and non-reductive approaches to embodiment. I will return to phenomenology and outline its original and particular contribution to embodiment for psychology, as well as renovations to phenomenology by critical scholars that have elaborated its potential as a critical discipline.

Fat Studies

Another relevant contemporary and interdisciplinary field of study is Fat Studies. As a precursor, Susie Orbach's seminal work, *Fat is a Feminist Issue* (or FIFI, as both Orbach and her critics refer to it), deserves mention here, because it helped to inaugurate and popularize critical appraisals of anti-fatness, and for its formulation of fatness as a dynamically meaningful response to operations of power in the world. It is also notable, though, as appreciative critics have observed, for ramifying certain conceptual links and operations that most fat studies thinkers openly contest and which this dissertation sought to bracket; namely, its emphasis on binge-eating's role in fatness, on rediscovering an authentic relationship to the body, its promise of weight loss as the consequence of that rediscovery.

Sondra Solovay and Esther Rothblum write in the introduction to their *Fat Studies Reader* (2009), that the field was born out of suspicions that the dominant medical and popular discourses on obesity were inaccurate and prejudicial. Solovay and Rothblum cite 1970's "The Fat Liberation Manifesto" (Freespirit, 2019), by members of the Fat Underground, as a point of origin for the political movement that has since grown into a research area. Solovay and Rothblum write that "fat studies is an interdisciplinary field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions, stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body" (p.2). The authors cite critical race studies, queer theory and women's studies as guides to their approach. Cooper (2010) agreed, noting that "the alarmist BMI is largely rejected," replaced with a complex definition of fat as "a fluid subject position relative to social norms, it relates to shared experience, is ambiguous, has roots in identity politics and is thus generally self-defined" (p.1021). More recent collections (Friedman, Rice & Rinaldi, 2020) include efforts from anthropologists and human geographers, emphasizing intersectionality and aiming "to stretch the capacity of Fat Studies to consider the multiple, dynamic, and complex ways that fat may be layered into and muddled with other markers and materialities of identity and difference" (Friedman , Rice & Rinaldi, 2020, np).

In her thorough review of Fat Studies scholarship, Cooper (2010) draws a sharp distinction between those researchers who are critical of obesity discourse norms but who perpetuate health- or fat-bias or commitments to objective-objectifying scientific approaches, and those who write "oppositional literature" Cooper was encouraged by the then-recent surge of scholarship that challenged medicalized appraisals of fat embodiment, but raised two concerns about much of the research. According to Cooper, some Fat Studies researchers are uncritically committed to positivist assumptions and to adopting a scholarly, distant tone in the presentation of their work, which may reproduce the alienating effects of the anti-obesity movement.

Relatedly, researchers who are removed from the experience of being fat tend toward abstract, objectifying characterizations. Although fat people are the subjects of the research, “they are often abstract presences within it, a nebulous blob of people sometimes known as ‘the obese’, which echoes contested approaches to fat people within more traditional medicalized obesity discourses” (p.1024). On this second point, Cooper gestures toward the view held within some activist research and political communities--that research of an identity position with which you have no direct experience tends to deform and objectify the experiences of those persons whose identities you presume to study. Cooper’s immediate suggestion appears to be that *Fat Studies should be conducted by fat people*. But she might just as well be advocating for methodologies that intentionally partner with participant experts, as does participatory action research (PAR), or those that are specifically designed to engage naturalistic lived experience, such as ethnography and phenomenology.

Cooper (2010) designates as “oppositional literature” those research efforts that “seek to explore the very nature of fat subjectivity” (p.1026) in an effort to rethink the “problem of obesity” outside the obesity-epidemic discourse. Included here are the works of fat liberation movement authors, researcher activist seeking a paradigm shift and embraces a discourse of legal rights for fat people, and a variety of authors—most notably, for my study, the ethnographic work on fatness and masculinity by sociologist Lee Monaghan(2005, 2008) and Monaghan, Bombak, & Rich (2018)—whose work will be considered further in my completed literature review.

Summing up her review of the field, Cooper (2010) suggested that Fat Studies should be nonreductive, engaged and participatory, and critical, offering:

...a potential for expansive critical engagement with fat that is not limited to obesity discourse, medicalization or the rhetoric of the war on obesity. Moreover, one of the

strengths of Fat Studies is that it supports the work of people who have direct experience of fat embodiment, grassroots activists and other autonomous voices, it is not simply the product of remote expert curiosity. (p.1028)

For much of its history, the field of fat studies has favored pushing back against the *medical* with the *critical*, and resisting the *pathological* with the *political*. Cooper (2010) raised concerns that fat studies was insufficiently intersectional and at risk of territorialization by commercial interests who might design retail programs around the pushback Fat Studies engenders. Gaps in the literature existed, she said: there were few critical cross-cultural studies; a lack of empirical studies supporting the “Healthy at Every Size” movement; insufficient scholarship engaging popular literature; very little scholarship on fat activism. Finally, Cooper (2010) identified “a distressing polarization between those who wish to preserve dominant obesity discourses and those who wish to dismantle them” (p. 1028).

Cooper acknowledged that some voices in the field of Fat Studies raise concerns that positivity as an ideological movement may flatten subjectivity and leave no space for an examination of ambivalences, conflicts in self-assessment that present themselves in the fat field of experience. For example, there may be a shame people experience when they are shamed, a weight they carry, emotionally and physically, as they carry the weight of their fatness. This is evident in Gay’s memoir (2018), as she negotiates her political commitments with what she regards as her internalized biases. She also offers rich, close descriptions of the fatigue and bruising that her body endures as she navigates a world of human infrastructure that was not designed to accommodate her. Murray (2006) has written about the danger of positivity scholars’ erasure of the ambivalences she experiences. Murray has also criticized a narrative within fat liberation, that after one comes out as fat, there should be no ambiguity or discomfort in the way that one might experience one’s fatness. (Cooper, 2010, p. 1027)

The editors of the 2020 collection, *Thickening Fat Studies*, attempt to answer some of the gaps Cooper (2010) mentions, especially in terms of intersectional research and addressing the complexly material aspects of fatness that strictly critical accounts seem to occlude.

Moving beyond an analysis of fat oppression as singular, this book will aim to unpack the volatility of fat—the mutability of fat embodiments as they correlate with other embodied subjectivities, and the threshold where fat begins to be reviled, celebrated, or amended.

(Friedman, Rice & Rinaldi, 2020, np)

So, critical psychology has not quite theorized the body but is gesturing toward neuroscience to do so. And the field of fat studies is calling for greater diversity and an approach that can furnish analyses of fatness in its complex, ambiguous, and various embodiments. Here, phenomenology can serve critical psychology, even a neuropsychology, because a critical approach entails abandoning obesity-era commitments to concepts such as health or ideal body. Phenomenology can offer that, without then immediately resorting to conceptualizing the body in its structural roles. And phenomenology can similarly complement fat studies' efforts to challenge dominant discourse without abandoning the body.

Phenomenology

Anthropologist, Thomas Csordas (1990) offered the term 'embodiment' as a research paradigm that “begins from the methodological postulate that the body is not an object to be studied in relation to culture, but is to be considered as *the subject of culture*, or in other words as the existential ground of culture” (p.5). Csordas develops his approach reading Merleau-Ponty (1945;1964;1968), whose phenomenology rejects Cartesian mind/body dualisms in favor of an account of human being that is existential and grounded in perception, the medium or “primordial habit” (Merleau-Ponty, PP, p. 91) of which is the lived body. One definition Merleau-Ponty offers for existence is particularly relevant in a study of psychology and

embodiment. Existence, according to Merleau-Ponty, describes “the perpetual appropriation of facts and chance occurrences by a reason that does not exist prior to them or without them” (p.123). The lived body is the site and medium of this scene where embodiment meets temporality—themes that become figural in the present analysis of male fatness.

Merleau-Ponty distinguishes between the objective body--the body as that which can be scrutinized and measured, an object of science, the observed body--and the phenomenal or lived body. The lived body is no object at all; it furnishes or imposes on the subject of consciousness a point of view while at the same time making perception possible. Or, perhaps better, the lived body is the location of perception. The lived body is open and to a certain extent ambiguous with respect to its boundaries, for example it can “annex” things like clothing, or a stick used for pointing, such that these become incorporated in my perception. Dwelling for a moment on this point is important: The boundaries of my lived body are determined not by the parts of my objective body but by the elements of the world which I can appropriate.

In Merleau-Ponty’s formulation, the lived body is also distinguished from the observed and observable body in that, as lived, it is not also self-observant. One commentator (Dreyfus, 2005) has noted that the real exemplar of Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of Perception should be the body in sport—engaged body experience, not reflections thereof or self-conscious meditations. This will have implications for a discussion of the experience of marginalized bodies or “differential embodiment” (Hook, 2008). The lived body is a medium of perception, which is the “ground on which all acts come forth” and, as such, “is presupposed by them” (PP p.10).

To complete this refurbishment of the conditions subjectivity--contra empiricist or idealist formulations--Merleau-Ponty adds that the world is, like the body proper, also “not an object whose law of constitution is in my possession; it is the field and natural milieu of all my

thoughts and all my explicit perceptions” (Merleau-Ponty, PP p.10). Although he makes little use of the term in his major works, “embodiment” has come to denote Merleau-Ponty’s formulation of the body as the stage for perception, which grounds the subject in the world. Iris Young (1990), in a gloss of Merleau-Ponty, explains: “There is a world for a subject just insofar as the body has capacities by which it can approach, grasp, and appropriate its surroundings in the direction of its intentions” (p. 148). Merleau-Ponty also emphasizes the existential character of this model, in which the mind and body are both constituted by the world and actively imposed on that world. Merleau-Ponty at one point describes existence as “the perpetual appropriation of facts and chance occurrences by a reason that does not exist prior to them or without them” (p.123).

In *The Child’s Relations with Others* (1964) *Sorbonne Lectures* (2010), which reflects Merleau-Ponty’s prolonged engagement with developmental psychology, we see an account of embodiment that intersects with other existential categories such as temporality and relationality. Embodiment is situated temporally prior to the elaboration of thoughts and individuation associated with individual, intellectual, consciousness, and constitutive of that mode of being and foundationally intersubjective or intercorporeal. The body proper or lived body is the staging ground for intentionality and action, and is constituted in the interactions with the world of the early caregivers. These points are of central importance in circumscribing the problem of fatness as simultaneously active and passive, ‘physical,’ as well as socially and culturally mediated. These terms are already implied in Merleau-Ponty’s notion of the lived body or embodiment. Here, Merleau-Ponty’s thinking on embodiment can be clarified via the conceptual distinction between body-schema and body-image. “Body schema,” for Merleau-Ponty “refers to the regulation and experience of pre-reflective action in goal-directed or, in the phenomenological language, intentional behavior” (Abrams, 2018). The body schema refers to the pre-reflective

“bonding” of body and world that constitutes the human world. Body image, on the contrary, refers to conscious thoughts or feelings *about* our body. Body schema refers to the unselfconscious body in action; the body as such becomes “hidden” behind the actions oriented towards the goal (Gallagher, 2002). Body image is the body as an intentional object or the body I see in the mirror, and which I imagine others seeing when they see me.

Lacan and the Mirror Stage

The Child's Relations with Others (1964) is also where Merleau-Ponty most directly engages with the work of psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whose theory of the mirror stage offers guideposts to this project: It contributes conceptual detail to the interrelated concepts of imaginary identity and ego-ideal salient to the study of body image and body experience. More salient for this dissertation, it also articulates a theory of the body as *anticipated*, but never accomplished, which can inform some of the problematics in fat body experience. It allows for Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the specular image as inaugurating the distinction between the felt body or body schema and the body image. These issues became salient in the embodiment chapter below around the discovery of one's body as fat.

Lacan's (2006) paper on the Mirror Stage, introduces and problematizes issues of embodiment and subjectivity. Developed between 1932 and 1949 (Neill, 2019), the essay appropriates the developmental work of Henri Wallon (1931) about the curious way in which humans appear to become preoccupied with their own image in the mirror. In the mirror, the child of approximately 6 – 18 months sees herself and effects a “jubilant assumption,” and the child's ‘capture’ in the mirror inaugurates a lifelong but always unstable relationship to images of one's body and related notions of completeness and wholeness. Prior to the instantiation of this stage of identification, the child experiences her body as a collection of disorganized movements, feelings, associations. Lacan refers to this as *le corps morcelé*, the body in pieces.

The body in pieces refers to a state of affairs in which conceptual distinctions between what is provided or produced by the body and what are the affordances of the surrounding world may not obtain, or at least not clearly. And there is little clarity of *capacities* present in this state of affairs. Once captured by her reflection in the mirror, though, she begins to see herself as a whole, as a unified something, distinguished from other somethings. The gestalt in the mirror appears to the child “as the contour of his stature that freezes it and in a symmetry... *in opposition to the turbulent movements with which the subject feels he animates it*” (Lacan, 2006, p.94). Merleau-Ponty (1964), explains: “By means of the image in the mirror [the child] becomes capable of being *a spectator of himself*. ... I leave the reality of my lived me in order to refer myself constantly to the ideal, fictitious, or imaginary me, of which the specular image is the first outline” (1964, p. 136). Merleau-Ponty helps to translate Lacan’s insights, here, into phenomenological language.

This specular image that now offers an outline of wholeness is unlike the child’s experience of herself previously, as noted above. There are two important corollaries of the moment of this imaginary identification. First corollary: The child, in his lived reality, cannot stand on his own; developmentally he is “still sunk in his motor incapacity and nursling dependence” (p.94), and he requires the (relational) support of caregivers or other ‘props.’ In the mirror the child quickly begins to see where her props end and her ‘self’ begins; and in this contour she also sees a set of capacities for self-direction that she is not yet able to achieve but which she can *anticipate*. This inaugurates a temporal dimension to imaginary identification, which may be of interest in the analysis phase of my study. Second corollary: The contour that the child sees in the mirror is accompanied not only by his own gaze but by the gaze of supportive onlookers. Here, then, the child sees *what his mother is smiling at* when she is smiling at him. Again, Merleau-Ponty clarifies: “it is necessary that the child understand that there are

two points of view on himself, that his body which feels is equally of the visible not only for him but for others. There is thus an interdependence between the development of the specular image and the development of the relationship with others” (Sorbonne lectures, quoted in Moss, 1982). Here we see how Merleau-Ponty borrows from Lacan to better understand the intersection of embodiment, temporality, and relationality.

So this imaginative identification entails three alterations in the subject’s experience of himself. Lacan says these constitute an alienation, but not in the sense that anyone is spared it, or in the sense that any demystification would redress it. It is an alienation in the sense that, henceforward, the subject identifies with her image, which is *other*, in three respects: The child sees a unified whole, hitherto unlike the collections of sensations she experienced before this identification process. She sees herself now not as the experiences she feels but the image that she sees. The child sees not her own current capacities, but what she will be able to do in the future. The unified whole, able to self-direct its limbs, is only *anticipated*. She sees what she expects to be the child, in seeing himself, sees what *others* see, what others expect and approve. In this imaginary identification, the “I” ceases to identify with what it experiences or desires at each moment, or ceases to do so exclusively. The psychoanalytic agency of the Ego is the result of the identification with the image of the body as unified, capable (but only in the future) and contingent on other’s responses to it and expectations of it.

In the mirror stage, Lacan makes several bold claims about embodiment and psychology. The ego agency, for Lacan, with which psychology (and much of psychoanalysis) is so concerned is, for Lacan, a) born of an illusory relationship with an image—I am that, over there, unitary and whole, alike and different from other wholes also appearing, capable (but only in the future); I am not the wild assortment of feelings and stimuli of the pre-mirror body. As such, the ego is b) constitutionally oriented to resist discontinuities, incompleteness, instances of

inconsistency, states of embodiment marked by incoherence or lack, and lastly, the ego is c) fundamentally concerned with a *body*. The ego here is born of the subject's encounter with the "contour" that distinguishes itself as alike to but distinct from all others and, perhaps most important, attempts to resolve the discontinuities and incoherence, the "turbulent movements" of the body outside of imaginary identification. That "contour," is an image (or series of images) associated with the body.

In Merleau-Ponty we have a body-schema that is unconsciously purposive and agentic, and in Lacan we have the ego of the subject—which is often regarded as the very subject of psychology—as imaginary, self(other)-referential, identified and stabilized in the other's appraisal. Importantly, Merleau-Ponty interprets the mirror stage as characterized as the *repression* of the proprioceptive, sensory 'me' that is immersed in the world, in favor of the alienated self as another (among others). Here is the "fiction that we are a delineated body as others see us. Here is the rift between the body proper and the concept of the body" (Simms, 2018, personal communication).

Merleau-Ponty articulates a framework in which psychological life and embodiment are co-constituted and inter-implicated. Embodiment here is the site of enactment of possibilities. A psychological study about the experience of fatness in and around masculinity, two conceptual forms that are at once embodied and psychological, is well oriented here. Self-image and self-concept are radically rooted in terms of temporal anticipation and projections of the relational other.

Merleau-Ponty and Lacan articulated the elaboration of subjectivity, and embodiment, as general conditions of existence. This is embodiment as such. In Merleau-Ponty embodiment is characterized as the subject's being ever-open to the world it co-constitutes. Lacan's notion of the ego is formed in an unstable image, ever dependent on a wholeness it can only anticipate,

ever concerned with the other's appraisal, in which it finds only an unsteady stability. Both Merleau-Ponty and Lacan offer *general* assessments, but the phenomenological philosopher and the psychoanalyst must concede that no human has ever lived his embodiment *as a category*. Somehow, the *body* is implicated in embodiment. And bodies differ from one another, and therefore furnish meaningfully different contact with and in the world.

Phenomenologies of fatness

Cooper (2010), Solovay & Rothblum (2010) and Friedman, Rice & Rinaldi (2020) do not cite any overtly phenomenological studies of fatness, though Cooper asserts that Fat Studies is ideologically predisposed to support “the work of people who have direct experience of fat embodiment” (p.1028). A number of projects have examined fatness from a phenomenological perspective or employing phenomenological method. The work of Donald Moss (1982, 1989), who has written about embodiment and conducted phenomenological research on the experience of obese patients in a medical setting, is particularly relevant here. Moss engages and employs Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenological thinkers directly; one of his studies (1989) furnishes an examination of the experience of ‘mineness’ or *ipseity* (Gallagher in Shapiro, 2014) in people surgically treated in order to induce weight loss. An important difference to Moss's approach and my own project is that his work engages the experiences of people whose fat experience is regarded as pathological. This is unsurprising, because the study engages a population whose shared characteristic is not that they are fat, but that they are seeking medical intervention to alter their bodies.

More recent work also employs phenomenology to explore fat experience. Notable examples include Grøn's 2017 ethnographic work that employs Waldenfels' phenomenology to examine persons in weight loss programs in Scandinavia; Hyde et al's (2008) qualitative phenomenological thematic analysis of the experiences of people with obesity in Australia;

Merrill & Grassley's (2008) use of van Manen's hermeneutic phenomenological method to research women's experiences as overweight patients in medical settings; Whitfield & Grassley's (2008) study of nurses' experiences of caring for postoperative bariatric patients; Green, Larkin & Sullivan's use of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis in a study about the experiences of and explanations for diet failure.

Ueland et al. (2019) explored the existential experiences of people living with obesity using a hermeneutic exploratory phenomenological–hermeneutical method, and reported four themes: participants' experiences were shaped by their childhood; participants felt 'captured by food,'; they were depressed by culture; and they experience significant self-judgment. Ueland et al. concluded that experiences of people living with obesity led to feeling objectified and alienated, and urged that clinical health practitioners to adopt a lifeworld perspective, which might overcome this objectification and alienation and promote self-love.

Recent and notable dissertation projects making use of phenomenological methodologies include Kate Cusick's 2019 *Manifestations of Existential Concerns in Obese Individuals*, completed/defended July 2019 at the Michigan school of psychology, Britt Marrit Haga's *Existential experiences of living with obesity – perspectives from the views of individuals and*

health professionals, (2020, Stavanger University), and sociologist Elyse Michelle Neumann's (2022) *The phenomenology of fat men's health*.²

Critical phenomenology

The current project is situated within the field of critical phenomenology. Cheryl Mattingly (2019) offers phenomenology as a philosophical and methodological corrective to critical anthropologists. Radical critical phenomenology, according to Mattingly, serves as “concept critique,” both because it allows for a formal means of examining the assumptions attending to any project and, perhaps more important, because phenomenological research tends to render examples of the “perplexing particular” which undermine theory's tendency to subsume and assimilate examples.

Lisa Guenther (2020), in her introductory chapter on critical phenomenology, explains how traditional phenomenology might fall short of particularizing embodied experiences, and how critical phenomenology can help. Traditional phenomenology has been lauded by critical phenomenologists as offering a means of examining the conditions of possibility for subjective

² Cusick employed Moustakas' Transcendental Phenomenological method and an existential conceptual framework, relying heavily on the work of Irvin Yalom's (1980) work. Cusick interviewed 11 women and 1 man identified as fat (by BMI) to explore her question: “What is the experience of the manifestations of the four existential concerns [death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness] for obese individuals?” Cusick's work is encouraging when it uncovers experience-near textural sub-themes common to these fat people's experience and expressing existential concerns in their particular ways. It is less encouraging when it characterizes the work as uncovering “the essence of obese individuals” (p. i), and its generally unsuspecting promotion of obesity-epidemic assumptions. Cusick recommended that further research be conducted that can examine “how various facets of race, culture, religion, and age (i.e., children, adolescents, etc.) may influence the intersection of obesity and the four [existential] concerns” (p.128), and that the research should include the experiences of more men. Haga's work uncovered the theme of ‘putting life on hold,’ in which participants experienced themselves as deferring active engagement with their lives. Neuman's work is especially relevant for critical phenomenologists in its innovative approach to issues of health and healthist discourse. Her work takes a critical position with respect to healthist imperatives while making an examination of the ways participants navigate, negotiate, resist, reformulate and otherwise contend with health and healthism.

experience, but criticized for failing to recognize that contingent historical and social structures act as ‘quasi-transcendental’ structures to shape our experience (Guenther, 2020). Although these are not transcendental structures in the sense of being necessary or prior to any possible experience, conditioning consciousness *as such*, they “do play a constitutive role in shaping the meaning and manner of our experience” (Guenther, 2019, p.12) As examples of social structures, Guenther offers patriarchy, white supremacy and heteronormativity as examples, but we can also consider, as socially structural, the persistent application of the BMI as a proxy for health or the concept of *physical health*. These historically contingent social structures operate not as “things to be seen but rather *ways* of seeing, and even ways of making the world that go unnoticed without a sustained practice of critical reflection” (p.12). These unseen but operative structures “generate the norms of the lifeworld and the natural attitude of those who inhabit them. We overlook them at our peril, even if our project is transcendental, because they are part of what we must bracket to get into the phenomenological attitude” (Guenther, 2020, p.12) -- Guenther makes the argument that a reevaluation of the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty can account for these contingent structures’ exerting themselves in subjective constitution and ongoing experience. But the thinkers who have contributed directly to the phenomenology of particular, worlded subjects, tend to have been personally and politically marginalized by these same social structures that may go ‘unbracketed’ in some traditional applications of phenomenology. Exemplars of this critical phenomenology are Judith Butler, Iris M. Young, Franz Fanon. Contemporary authors who theorize in the new field of critical phenomenology include Sarah Ahmed and Helene Ngo (2017, 2016).

Feminist critical phenomenology

Critical phenomenology of the body or embodied subjectivity owes a considerable debt to feminist philosophy. I.M. Young (1990) offers phenomenological accounts of feminine comportment that validate Merleau-Ponty's approach—and his principle of indeterminacy—but challenge his and other phenomenologists' tendency to essentialize as normal what is, in effect, historically male embodiment. Butler (1989) makes similar claims, and asserts that Merleau-Ponty is naïve about the extent to which what is historical imposes itself on what he regards as existential.

In her *Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description* (1989), Butler says that feminist theorists seeking an account of embodiment and sexuality have “something to gain and something to fear” (p. 86) from Merleau-Ponty. I will discuss this “something to fear” shortly. First, what is to be gained, briefly, is an approach that give an existential account the body, and possibly sexuality, without endorsing “reifying ideologies which freeze sexual relations into ‘natural’ forms of domination” (Butler, 1989, p. 86). Because it does not situate its subject as a transcendental ego—or a conscious-being *as such*—Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology opens up a space for thinking through the way that different bodies *do* their embodiment, which has important implications for Butler here and in her works on performativity (Butler, 1990, 2011). Butler sees promise in MP's account of the body which is, Butler says:

...an essentially dramatic structure which can be ‘read’ in terms of the more general life it embodies. As a result, the body cannot be conceived of as a static or univocal fact of existence, but, rather, as a modality of existence, the ‘place’ in which possibilities are realized and dramatized, the individualized appropriation of a more general historical experience, (Butler, 1989, p. 86)

What there is to fear emerges in critiques by both Butler and Young (1990). Young offers accounts of embodiment in which this “place of possibilities” is constrained by patriarchy and points out that Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodiment, too, was an account of particular *kind* of embodiment. The body as the “media for the enactment of our aims” functions as such only in a world that *supports* the subject of that body (Young, 1990, p. 147). And the bodies that are supported in this way, per Young, are the bodies of men (and probably also white and European or American). Young (1990) observes: “There is a world for a subject just insofar as the body has capacities by which it can approach, grasp, and appropriate its surroundings in the direction of its intentions” (p. 148). Young gives a description of the socially constructed feminine sense of body, which, in contrast to the body-as-‘I can,’ is marked by an “ambiguous transcendence,” a sense in which the body is *not* at liberty to move out toward its intended ends. Young instead offers a phenomenology of *constrained* capacity that characterizes the embodiment of women living in patriarchal conditions in which their bodies are under threat.

Young also takes issue with phenomenology’s tendency to inadvertently generalize the essence of embodiment based on very specific experiences of the body. She chides Erwin Straus for paying too little attention to the social constraints that may exert limitations on feminine comportment in *The Upright Posture* (Straus, 1966), and Merleau-Ponty for paying too little attention to the ways existential appropriation is delimited by historical conditions.

Butler (1989) goes further, in her method of immanent critique. Her appreciation for Merleau-Ponty’s project is attenuated by what she calls his “anthropological naïveté,” (p. 91), and the “tacit normative assumptions about the heterosexual character of sexuality” (p. 86) that she finds in his work. According to Butler, Merleau-Ponty’s speculations about sexuality—“that the normal extension of sexuality must rest on the internal powers of the organic subject” (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Butler, 1989, p. 91)—contradict his own phenomenological methodology,

smuggling in a view of organic nature ‘subtending’ the sexual, make an unsubstantiated claim about norms in sexual expression, and raise in Butler a suspicion of a heteronormative agenda.

Still, Butler is with Merleau-Ponty through the point that the individual appropriates (sexual) possibilities into a historically specific lived experience. She accepts the formulation that sexuality might be coextensive with existence—more an ambiguous atmosphere than an object of consciousness—that, even in its negation (she gives the example of asexuality) expresses a kind of orientation. She grants that sexuality is “inexorable.” But the fact that it is ever present, like an ‘atmosphere’ that attends to anything properly existential, does not mean that it is natural. In a foreshadowing of her work on performativity, Butler points out that a contingent and culturally specific formation can come to *appear* natural by dint of repetition, reproduction, reenactments.

Butler finds Merleau-Ponty too “loose” in his construal of the historical situation, or situatedness, of existence—that “there is history only for a subject who lives through it, and a subject only insofar as he is historically situated” (Merleau-Ponty quoted in Butler, 1989, p. 90)—and wonders why Merleau-Ponty does not also construe, as she will, “history as the very condition for the constitution of the subject, not only as a set of external possibilities for choice” (Butler, 1989, p. 90). For Butler (1989), the key point that Merleau-Ponty seems to miss, is that, sexuality is itself formed through the sedimentation of the history of sexuality, and the embodied subject, rather than an existential constant, is itself partially constituted by the legacy of sexual relations which constitute its situation (p.91).

Although she does not formulate it in this way, quite, Butler charges Merleau-Ponty with forgetting that histories have a history, that the history that the subject constitutes—in the existential process of appropriating the facts and chance occurrences—already has *its own*

history. The subject who constitutes history by ‘living through it,’ does not arrive to an empty scene. Instead, the subject of existence inherits deeply sedimented forms that form the possibility for any enactment, and is *itself* a historical—and not natural or necessary—production, something that Butler says Merleau-Ponty also leaves out of his account.

Butler also thinks that Merleau-Ponty’s account of embodied sexuality is heterosexist and heteronormative. She points out that his attempt to discuss embodiment while always describing an abstract subject may be an “impossible project,” and concludes that it collapses, in the examples Merleau-Ponty offers, into a historically male-centered caricature. Merleau-Ponty’s discussion of sexuality hinges on a man gazing at a woman, and as such is “spectatorial” rather than experiential. Whereas Merleau-Ponty wants to note that the “body expresses existence,” Butler (1999) shows in his examples we find *female* bodies exuding essences that make her an object of desire (p. 94) This is the “nonreciprocal dialectic between men and women” and “designates the female body as an object rather than a subject of perception” (Butler, 1999, p.95).

Both Butler and Young offer renovations and critiques of the phenomenological approach to embodiment that embrace its key insights but call into question the tendency toward abstraction and universalizing embodiment as a somewhat empty category, leading to theory that excludes certain bodies, minimizes the extent to which historical norms constitute the field in which subjectivity is elaborated and in so doing, perpetuates a view of the neutral body that is effectively a male, European body. It is unclear whether this tendency results from the historical blindspots of the phenomenology’s early proponents—the phenomenologist being insufficiently phenomenological in failing to bracket sets of assumptions regarding the ‘I can’ of the body and about the way a body desires another body as an object, not a subject—or whether there is something endemic to the project of phenomenology that produces this tendency. It is also

possible that these critiques of Merleau-Ponty hinge on a misapprehension of his view of the principle of indeterminacy. Just before the sentence Butler quotes, above--Butler's (1989) political project is primarily concerned with the ways Merleau-Ponty both "liberates and forecloses the cultural possibility of benign sexual variation" (p.86). Young's ambition is to stake out an account of the feminine that eschews essentialist, or at least biologism, without resorting to nominalist rejections of difference. Both thinkers offer problematizing renovations to phenomenology of embodiment, and reveal embedded assumptions and practices that convert what is historical into what is natural (to paraphrase Barthes, 1972). These critiques of classical phenomenology, indeed, these critical phenomenologies, offer promising examples for an examination of fatness capable of contending with entrenched norms of masculinity, body image, and the "I-can" of bodily affordances.

Antiracist critical phenomenology

Critical phenomenology also owes a debt to the phenomenological meditations of psychiatrist and political philosopher Frantz Fanon. We see the anonymous body of the body schema wrenched away, problematized in the traumatic racial encounter described issues of differential embodiment under oppression are nowhere better explored than in Frantz Fanon's harrowing account of being identified by the Other in Chapter 5 of *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952/2008). Fanon's identity as a racialized black subject in a colonial context is *assigned* to him in the constellated gazes and utterances of the dominant, white people engaged in objectifying him. This "suffocating reification" occurs when, despite his efforts to the contrary, Fanon (2008) finds that "the other fixes me with his gaze, his gestures and attitude, the same way you fix a preparation with a dye" (p. 89). Fanon's great shock, symbolized in an encounter with a white family on a train, is the moment that he encounters himself as objectified, assigned meaning, value and characteristics by someone else, and that that meaning *resides on his*

epidermal layer of his skin. In phenomenological terms a ‘meaning’ is the determinant relationship between an intending subject and its object. What Fanon’s testimony demonstrates—indeed, what the testimony of various *particular* embodiments demonstrate—is that a person is thrown into networks of meaning that are not his simply to alter or dismiss. Fanon (2008) observes that this “reconsideration of myself, this thematization,” as a racialized subject, “was not my idea” (p .92). Here we have what has elsewhere been called interpellation - - subjectivity as forced upon one in the assigning call of the other: “Look! A negro” (Fanon, 2008, p. 89). Differential embodiment entails a set of associations assigned to the subject by others but which the subject must assume, navigate, and relate to in some way, in order to proceed socially, to live in the world.

Intersectionality and Performativity

This is not a study of masculinity—that is, it does not have masculinity as its object, nor does it aim to intervene in theories of masculinity. But it is an exploration of experiences of men. As such, I make the tacit claim that there are boys and there are men, and that boys and men are identifiable as such because their situation within “a given set of sociohistorical set of circumstances... has a unity that can be described and made intelligible,” to borrow I.M. Young’s formulation (Young, 1990, p. 142). And the men I interviewed, most of them, remembered being concerned in one way or another with masculinity. Further, fatness and masculinity seemed to inform and complicate one another during important moments of the participants’ childhood and adolescence. For these reasons, in what follows I sketch out a loose framework for thinking about issues of masculinity and also sites of intersection between people who are concerned with being men and with being fat.

In one sense I am regarding masculinity, at the outset, as a word that references what men do, what people say about what men do, and what some boys (imagine, anticipate, assume they)

will do when they are men. Even at this level of non-specificity, though, masculinity signifies as something that boys must in one way or another contend with in order to be men (i.e., persons who are appropriately associated with masculinity, and persons who appropriate associations of masculinity), because masculinity indexes a way, or some ways, of being male, often presented paradoxically as describing a natural state of affairs while at the same time (and incoherently) as an accomplishment.

Attunement to the intersection of masculinity and fatness arose from my own memories of my childhood, as well as in the testimony of others. In my preliminary thinking about the experience of fat boys I consulted archived memoir material (Oakeson, n.d.). Although most of the anonymous contributors identified as girls or women, those who were men or who described experiences of boys produced vignettes in which boys' bodies were singled out for comparison with younger children (i.e., 'baby fat') or with girls or women, usually by pointing out their breasts. Masculinity in these vignettes is presented as an accomplishment or identity category from which the fat boy is excluded on the basis of his body. In one sense, masculinity becomes a focus at the outset of this study because the recollections I am aware of, to date, actively produce narratives in which masculinity is actively construed. Secondarily and more speculatively, I wonder if attempts to resolve questions of masculinity complicated by fatness later figure into the lives of adult men, and whether my interviews might develop, complicate or clarify this and related questions. For this reason I look to research on what has been called "precarious manhood," (Bosson & Vandello, 2013; Vandello et al., 2008), an economic-sociological model which hypothesizes manhood as a status or commodity requiring continual social proof, validation, replenishment, and whose subjects feel as though they are under threat. Lastly, the way in which this study involves participants who are both traditionally marginalized due to their body-non-conformity but who nonetheless also occupy positions of privilege and power—as

persons socialized as men in North America—also motivated me to consider this project in terms of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1990), discussed below.

Importantly, my invocation of the concept of masculinity and predicting possible discussion that mobilizes concepts such as precarity or intersectionality should not inadvertently draw this project into a contradiction in which I present, on the one hand, identifiers such as gender as contingent performatives, while construing masculinity, on the other hand, as a substantive, non-contingent, or natural category. On the contrary, these conceptual models, developed outside of phenomenology, are offered as possible models with which to interrogate the data in this study, or as concept models the study might call into question. My analysis of data may benefit from them, or may reveal problems in the concepts themselves. Even the concept of performativity, whose status is considerably less provisional than the other two conceptual lenses, is offered primarily to frame issues of gender, masculinity (perhaps even fatness) as persistent, formative, contingent.

At the outset of this study, I regard masculinity as a cultural artifact, and as such, one that exerts persistent influence over the members of the cultural settings where it is enacted and entrenched. Judith Butler's (1988) notion of gender performativity is my framework for thinking about masculine gender as "a stylized repetition of acts" (Butler, 1989, p. 519), not an expression of essence or of biological sex. My hope is to remain theoretically nimble with respect to constructions of masculinity, and let the interview data guide me. But a few notes on particular issues at play in this work are in order. These include an account of performativity (Butler, 1989), the question of masculinity as gender but also as a status that might be illuminated by the notion of 'precarity,' and the ways that Crenshaw's (1990) intersectionality helps clarify how fatness and masculinity complicate one another. Therefore, I conclude this literature review with attention to the guiding lenses of performativity and intersectionality.

Butler's essay, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory* (1988) and her book, *Gender Trouble* (1990), both articulate the way in which gender is produced—and, importantly, reproduced—in speech acts, gestures, social interactions, as well as in the networks of expectations in which these are launched. Butler says in the latter work, “gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeals over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (p. 33). It is helpful to recall that Butler borrows from speech act theory, which in turn relied on J.L. Austin's (2009/1955) introduction of the ‘performative’ utterances. A person *does* their gender like a person *does* a promise. A promise is not a speech act that describes a state of affairs. It is not constative. The promise, once spoken, is enacted. The promise, as an utterance, is the act of promising. That is not to say, importantly, that the promise is *invented*. Its enactment relies on a network of expectations and shared understandings such that it has a meaning as an act. There are other examples of performative utterances (“I apologize,” “I now pronounce you man and wife,” “I wish we had dessert”) but the promise is a privileged example, especially when thinking of gender, because the promise also commits its subject to a future act. The promise enacts itself in its performance, relies on a community of understanding, and commits its speaker to behave in certain ways in reference to what has been said/performed.

It is much the same with gender. When I behave in a manner that is consistent with my and my culture's expectations of what a man does, I am not revealing or expressing my sex or my essential masculinity, I am *doing* my gender – that is, I am conforming to expectations for my gender, and in doing so, reproducing them. And there are thus possibilities for enacting gender differently, but, Butler reminds us, there are also penalties for doing so.

Masculinity is performed and substantiated in its re-performances. But here, in considering fatness and masculinity, it is important to remember the stage on which the drama of performativity takes place. There are sets of limits and expectations and affordances that surround these performances, and emphasis on the contingency of gender should not blind us to the persistence of the factors perpetuating norms. Borrowing from Sarah Ahmed's (2007) formulation of race, masculinity is not a property of bodies, but it may shape what bodies *can do*. I perform my gender in my speech acts, my dress, my gestures, but a set of invitations anticipates my arrival. There are penalties for doing my gender wrong (Butler, 1989), and, importantly, there are plaudits for doing it well. In some senses, masculinity is a *command(ed) performance*. Masculinity shapes what bodies can do, and fatness may complicate the way in which gender is performed. In this sense, this will be a study of an intersection between fatness and masculinity. Legal theorist and philosopher Kimberle Crenshaw (1990) deployed the metaphor of the intersection, developed in Black Feminist thought, to "make visible the multiple, interweaving causes of discrimination against Black women and others experiencing overlapping oppressions" (Rice, Harrison & Friedman, 2019). Crenshaw (1990) developed intersectionality to "account for multiple grounds of identity when considering how the social world is constructed" (p. 1245). She observed that experiences of women of color

...are frequently the product of intersecting patterns of racism and sexism, and ... these experiences tend not to be represented within the discourses of either feminism or antiracism. Because of their intersectional identity as both women and of color within discourses that are shaped to respond to one or the other, women of color are marginalized within both. (Crenshaw, 1990, pp.1243-1244)

Intersectionality has been employed widely “to theorize anti-essentialist approaches to subjectivity and group affiliation and others, to explain micro-level experiences of multiply marginalized people or to study macro-level interactions between lived experiences and social structures,” (Cooper, 2016, p. 15), but has also come under criticism because it invites an analysis of social identity—and marginalization—that is fixed or additive. Applied in this way, critics worry, intersectional analyses may not account for the “messiness and fleshiness of identities,” (Rice, Harrison & Friedman, 2019, para. 6) that is preponderant in embodied experience, which “defies compartmentalization by social category” (Changfoot & Rice, as cited in Rice, Harrison & Friedman, 2019, para. 6). Yet, intersectionality can also help us think about how masculinity and fatness interact beyond the sum of individual identity positions. I employ intersectional thinking in the approach to fat male embodiment as an analytic tool for looking at the ways the social category of fatness—to the extent that it is a social category—and that of masculinity may infuse or complicate one another. Intersectionality—especially the intersectionality that is unstable, fluid, and dynamic (Friedman et al., 2020)—helps situate one of the secondary motivations of this study; namely, to elucidate how childhood fatness influences the encounter with issues of masculinity.

To sum up what I have been exploring thus far, fatness is a major issue in the United States, at the most basic level because there is a lack of scholarly consensus on how to delineate the problem and define the terms. It is too often taken up within a normative framework of body image and the health of populations. Where scholars do take up the question critically and qualitatively—as in critical psychology, fat studies, and phenomenology for instance—research often focuses on the experience of fatness among women or without a critical distance from

healthist³ assumptions. The present exploratory research project fills a gap in the literature through the critical phenomenological exploration of the lived-experience male fatness.

Research Questions

In conducting a phenomenological investigation, I am interested in exploring the essential qualities of the lived experience of fatness in childhood. Therefore, I began with a series of basic questions that seem to cluster at the intersection of fatness, embodiment, and masculinity: How is fatness experienced (and remembered or recalled) in men who were fat boys? How do fat male embodied subjects experience their bodies and their difference in terms of relationality and other ontological conditions of existence? Relatedly, How do men experience fatness? Is there one fatness or several? When do fat men or boys *become* fat? How is childhood fatness recalled by adults? What is embodied in this recollection?

A secondary motivation for this project, less phenomenologically restrained and more speculative, arises from my own memories and from accounts of fat boys I had already consulted before the project took form. These issues relate to the establishment of one's experience of fatness and how that experience relates to core features of identity such as agency and masculinity.⁴ Rooted in these issues, my project involves hermeneutic phenomenological interviews to reveal and enhance what has been explicated about the lived experience of fat male

³ Healthism (R. Crawford, 1980, 2006) refers to internalized or endorsed ideals of health that privilege autonomy and control, emphasize individual responsibility, “creates a culture that values strict standards of health such as increased physical activity and dietary restriction” (Neumann, 2022, p.2)

⁴ These questions ask how the experiences of fatness may inform and complicate the encounter with cultural norms of masculinity: How does the differential embodiment of fat male children inform or interrupt masculine identifications emergent in childhood? Do compensatory attempts to claim or recoup masculinity inform post-childhood commitments to traditional (anti-fat) masculinity?

children and adolescents, as recalled by the adult men they have become. I will then analyze the data using a hermeneutic phenomenological thematic analysis that is informed by critical feminist phenomenological theory and certain psychoanalytic techniques. Thematic content can then be offered for dialogue with theoretical literature on phenomenology and fatness in future research.

Chapter Three: Methodology

My questions involve the psychology of men who were once fat boys. Fat is complex and contested: It signifies a social position and an embodied experience, or group of experiences, whose designation and coherence are informed, in part, by anti-obesity health discourse. It is an instance of differential embodiment (i.e., bodily differences from a supposed norm), and thus a potential site of political resistance (Bolen, 2015; Friedman et al., 2020). With this in mind, the method I employ furnishes detailed, experience-near, first-person description suitable for analysis at the level of individual psychological life as well as revealing elements in the lifeworld that mediate the person's experience but may go acknowledged, are operative without being 'figural' in the participant's account of his lived experience. As such, this study calls for an analysis that acknowledges the ideologies, discursive practices, and social forces that construe and constrain fatness, for these constitute the background upon which the subject's lived experience figures. Fatness itself is not a political structure, or it is not only that. And critical phenomenological investigation allows for an embrace of quasi-transcendentals without flattening the lived experiences of fatness and regarding them as mere as epiphenomena of political or discursive structures.

The phenomenological methodology, specifically the concept and operation of Epoché (discussed below), allows for a search for common structures of experience while at the same time privileging what Mattingly, citing Arendt, calls the "perplexing particular," that take into account social structures while resisting assimilation by preexisting conceptual frameworks (Mattingly, 2019).

Overview

This dissertation research relied on semi-structured interviews and employed a hermeneutic phenomenological thematic analysis of interview data, based on van Manen's (1990) methodology. Interview technique and analytic focus were influenced by insights from critical-phenomenology and psychoanalysis. Analysis followed van Manen's focus on lifeworld existentials.

Initial data collection and analysis was based on Max van Manen's (1990; 2014) method, with interviews and analysis supplemented by psychoanalytic technique and assumptions (Fink, 2011; Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Kvale, 1999; Luttrell, 2006; Josselson, 2013). Van Manen's method is appropriate, because it a) privileges a phenomenological approach b) allows observations derived outside of the interview setting, and which may co-constitute the background against which experience is figural, c) encourages collaborative interpretation, and d) because it is hermeneutic, it was well-suited to attending to 'perplexing particulars' or counterthematic material, which I hoped would thicken description and support exploration of material that did not initially conform to thematic treatment.

The following section is divided between methodology, which outlines the issues and questions animating my approach, and procedures, where I give a detailed account of how I conducted the research.

Approach

One of the preliminary themes that emerges in thinking about the research process is the tension between the search for resonances, commonalities or structures of experience shared by all those who participate in a given phenomenon, on the one hand, and the imperative to remain open to surprise, to particularity, a resistance to simple confirmation, on the other hand. It is enough to say this: A study that seeks to understand psychological experiences associated with situations or body states that are common among a group of individuals but contested with

respect to their definition and status—as is the case with a study of fatness—runs the risk of flattening differences, seeking only confirmation of what is expected. This is especially a concern in a study that relies on analytic procedures which are interpretive (analyses of texts which are transcriptions of spoken accounts of remembered experiences are necessarily *interpretive*, in the sense that their meanings develop ‘between’ the interlocutors), and in which the researcher holds first-hand experience.

The notion of *approach* has been described by phenomenological qualitative research theorists as “the total of presuppositions and expectations that guide a research project” (Walsh, 1995, p. 334) and “the fundamental viewpoint toward man and the world that the scientist brings or adopts with respect to his work” (Giorgi, 1970, quoted in Walsh, 1995, p. 334). One’s approach is influenced not only by overtly held theoretical positions and decisions, but also by any latent assumptions, cultural lenses, and artifacts of one’s particular perspective or the perspectives imposed by the identities or subject positions in which one participates. One’s approach refers to all the influences informing one’s perspective.

Giorgi has suggested that acknowledging that one’s assumptions influence the research is important, but warns that an elaboration of approach is “inexhaustible” (Giorgi 1970 in Walsh, 1995). Walsh (1995) conceives of approach as a mode of explicating and enumerating whatever presuppositions can be described, and regarding these as ‘integral component[s]’ of any research effort” (Walsh, 1995, p. 342). For Walsh, explicating one’s approach is a mode of reflexivity.

Walsh has offered some helpful approach-explicating procedures. These include: an acknowledgement of a priori assumptions (including formally acknowledging my interest in the phenomenon as well as what I anticipate will be my results); researcher reflection, in which the researcher offers written accounts on his subjective experience conducting research and performing the analysis, and an explication of implicit assumptions.

My own approach to this research is informed by my identity as a man who grew up as a fat boy in the 1980s Northeastern United States struggled with fat body image issues (and, not irrelevantly, as a cisgendered white man of considerable privilege). My approach is also informed by my experience of weight-loss and the multiple ways I construe fatness. It is informed by my interest in critical reappraisals of fatness's implication in health discourses, and the ways in which those reappraisals challenge previous assumptions that have guided my thinking and decisions, and by the resistance I sometimes feel in the encounter with some new ideas. My approach is also informed by my training in clinical psychology and my work as a psychotherapist informed by psychoanalysis and other disciplines. As such, I may be predisposed to hear certain themes and perhaps overlook certain other items of experience. I am very likely to hear in the interlocutor's account items of their experience that remind me of my own, and remind me of accounts in literature that also resonate with me. My approach also includes my interest in phenomenology, and my discussion, above, of the issues and priorities that emerge in my reading of theory are offered, in part, as an explication of some of my assumptions.

Throughout my data collection and reflection, I have attempted to make note of these points of resonance between what I encounter in the data and my own expectations. I also attempted to listen for what does *not* seem to conform to my expectations--recollections and associations that resist assimilation by my theorizing, parapraxes--and make note of these.

Analysis

Thematic analysis

My method involved thematic analysis of interview material as articulated by van Manen (1990). Themes are experiences of focus, per van Manen (1990); they constitute the "sense we are able to make of something" (p. 89) without resorting to conceptual abstraction, and represent both an openness and a process of invention. Van Manen (1990) also stresses that themes, while

they are not generalizations, are approximate, partial, selective; they are simplifications which give shape to experience, and which therefore necessarily may leave out aspects of experience. Ideally, “a good theme formulation somehow seems to touch the core of the notion we are trying to understand” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 89). Van Manen (1990) states that themes are “like knots in the webs of our experiences, around which certain lived experiences are spun and thus lived through as meaningful wholes. Themes are the stars that make up the universes of meaning we live through” (p. 90). These two metaphors (i.e., knots and stars) help to explain and limit the ambitions of van Manen’s (1990) phenomenological research. Developing themes from interviews helped me identify areas of meaning that ‘clustered’ or knotted together in descriptions of the participants’ experience as fat childhood. As stars, they will help orient me and readers to the particular, salient points or sequences of the experience. The metaphor of the knot proved more salient, and challenging. During analysis and reflective writing on the interview material, I was struck by how frequently a given piece of text was *about* several things, evinced several relevant themes, and was appropriate for inclusion under different thematic headings.

Following van Manen (1990), I followed transcription of first-round interviews with the identification of themes and detailed description, and then attended to lifeworld existentials (van Manen, 1990, p.101), and elaborated thematic content in light of these categories (see Procedures, below). My process, throughout, was iterative, in that I moved back and forth between reading and correcting transcription, listening, reading, note-taking, selecting salient vignettes, reflective writing, checking quotes, re-listening to confirm tone or disconfirm poor transcriptions. Most of the actual activity of analysis involved these repeated readings, listenings, re-checkings. The conceptually important notions, below, of epoché, psychoanalytic listening, and collaborative analysis describe my priorities and disposition to the work of thematic analysis

while listening and relistening, the questioning of my own assumptions, my attunement to surprise while working thematically, and my appreciation for my participants' expertise and perspectives.

Epoché

In conducting this research and analysis I make use of a concept and operation called, in the phenomenological tradition, epoché or bracketing. There is a long tradition of theorizing the explicit meaning of epoché and a recent and lively debate, bordering on the vituperative, about its utility in qualitative research (Giorgi, van Manen, Smith, Zahavi) Epoché is sometimes understood as an operation in which the researcher sets aside, turns away from, theory and experience in order to attend exclusively to the phenomenon of interest. (Wertz, 2018; Giorgi, 2009). Some phenomenological authors have taken issue with this description of bracketing as being technically correct but inviting misunderstandings, because it suggests that what is bracketed is *discarded*. On the contrary, these authors assert, what is held in abeyance is any assertion about the characteristics of an intentional correlate that is not furnished in the immediate encounter or conscious construal of it (Cogan, 2020; Giorgi, 2009; Zahavi, 2019; Wertz, 2018). Construing bracketing/ epoché in along these lines, then, some authors suggest that bracketing is an occasion for elaborating, not suspending, the operative presuppositions a researcher brings to a project (R. Walsh, 2003; R. A. Walsh, 1995, 1996). At least one other author, anthropologist Jason Throop, has made use of the concept of epoché not as an operationalized (and willed) mode of attending/suspending, but instead as an *unwilled* shift in attention, focus, understanding which can arise during immersion in ethnographic research. The common thread that all these positions toward epoché share—and which debates sometimes occlude—is that epoché indexes attempts at remaining open to the phenomena of interest, without

specifying too narrowly what features they might possess and what methodological and epistemological scaffolding they depend upon.

What I intend when I invoke epoché is first, explicating the orientations informing my approach to the research and explicating what assumptions appear in my consideration of the research material, and second, *refraining* from dismissing ideas or phrases that appear in participant testimony before examining the assumptions at work in the selection process. What epoché suspends, in my research, is rushing to conclusions.

Psychoanalytic Listening

In addition to my role as a qualitative researcher, I am trained as a clinical psychotherapist in the overlapping human science and psychodynamic traditions, a student of psychoanalysis, as well as having a keen interest in research communities that bring together insights and approaches between the disciplines of phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and culture studies. Given this, I anticipated that my training as a therapist would doubtless influence the ways in which I engaged in conducting interviews— in how I might consider the importance of rapport, attend to affect states, listen for expressions of defense or avoidance, to name a few examples. Anticipating the ways in which my training and interests would inform my listening— allowing me to elucidate material as well requiring particular bracketing, I sought to formalize some of it, methodologically, as an amendment to van Manen’s method. In this, I was inspired by Wendy Luttrell (2005), Byron Good (2012), and Lacanian clinical technique (Fink, 2011). In an effort to enrich the data analysis, enlist my clinical training as well as problematize too-comfortable a reliance on the reading another’s meanings (or one’s own), and to invite Mattingly’s (2019) “perplexing particular” (p. 416) into consideration, I hoped to operationalize what Luttrell (2005) has called “psychoanalytic listening” (p. 260). Citing work on narrative in psychoanalysis by Rosenwald & Ochenberg (1992), Steedman (1986), and Mishler (1986),

Luttrell (2005) appreciates the tendency in psychoanalysis to privilege the particular ways that individuals produce narrative accounts of their own development, and “how they infuse the life stories with fantasies, images, feelings and other associations” (p. 260). Luttrell (2005) explains that ideas from psychoanalytic theory or clinical technique added data or insight to her project, or inspired revisions to her research process. Notably, Luttrell (2005) introduces “intruding associations,” instances in which interview participants produce memories or apparently off-topic associations which she initially classified as tangential. Luttrell (2005) later reexamined these as offering key insights into her participants’ stories. Relatedly, a chance comment by an interviewee prompted Luttrell (2005) to examine a pattern of reluctance in her interviewing—the phobic topic was mothers, as it happens—which led to key insights about the project. After this analysis of countertransference, Luttrell (2005) returned to the interview material, discovering previous maternal images, as well as expressions of ambivalence regarding mothers that she had previously minimized. (p. 261).

Luttrell’s encounter with “intruding associations” is an example of the ways that suspending expectations can reveal new territory for exploration. This approach to exploring unexpected or apparently impertinent utterances is emphasized in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory as offering privileged access to material that operates for the subject outside of her awareness. Lacanians emphasize the importance of what Luttrell (2005) calls “intruding associations,” but they also listen for subtler interruptions: parapraxes, mixed metaphors, sudden changes in topic, repeated sounds. Lacanian theory holds that therapeutic change arises when the patient experiences some shift at the level of what they are able to say or hear in their own speech, and that the disciplined analytic listening—which includes pointing out these moments of surprise or impasse—facilitates this kind of change (Dulsster, Vanheule, Cauwe, Ingouf, & Truijens, 2019; Fink, 2010, 2011; Lacan, 2006).

Author and Lacanian analyst Darian Leader (2010) helps explain why Lacanians take a special interest in what their patients did not intend to say, in a way that suggests resonances with phenomenology and is relevant for my project. In contrast to the medical model of therapy, in which, he says, expert knowledge is sought and delivered, the Lacanian model “sees the analytic goal as a questioning of knowledge and its effects. Analysis involves an undermining of the appeal to knowledge” (Leader, 2010, p. 237). *Calling knowledge into question* is central to the Lacanian psychoanalytic project because psychoanalysis is concerned with the unconscious, which--whatever its infinitely debatable features--is not *known* in a traditional epistemological sense. In one manner or another psychoanalysis aims to release the patient from the particular ways in which she knows and does not know, to make available to her facets of being that are, at present, unamenable to investigation while at the same time causing trouble. The Lacanian approach does not limit its suspicion to the intentions and conscious constructions of the patient. Fink (2010, 2011) emphasizes that analysts should resist an overemphasis on listening for material that makes sense or resonates with one’s own experience, because this can result in a kind of translation of what is said into terms the analyst already expects or understands. Listening with an ear trained to expect certain formulations or entities can be of great value—the example of *expertise* comes to mind—but can also constrain the process of analysis, or, indeed, of research.

I was inspired by the promise these ideas hold for enhancing data collection, deepening research to reveal thematic content that is latent or repressed, or which merely prompts reexamination. So, in a third moment of which I had proposed as ‘counterthematic analysis’ but which more coherently should be called ‘psychoanalytic listening,’ I took the following steps: 1. I encouraged participants to speak about anything that came to mind, interrupting very infrequently and only very gently—and not very often—redirecting them to the topic of fatness in

childhood. This resulted in long interviews, the ability to assess what sorts of topics the participant prioritized, the opportunity to get a sense of some of the participants' idiosyncratic patterns of thinking and defensive styles, and the ability to examine the vignettes eventually chosen for close analysis as figuring against a ground of these broader accounts and my clinical impressions of them. 2. I attempted to maintain an attitude of receptivity to surprises and to punctuate interview content that I might otherwise dismiss. I invited the interview participant's associations to these, as well as recording my own reflective associations on them. 3. I tried to be receptive to "intrusive associations"—my own and the participants'—in digital and paper notes, in margins of books—and allowed these to inform my listening and interrogations of the interview data during reflective writing process of the analysis.

Collaborative analysis

Van Manen (1990) recommends interviews in which interviewees can be invited to reflect on the researcher's thematizing. Here, "both the interviewer and the interviewee attempt to interpret the significance of the preliminary themes in the light of the original phenomenological question" (van Manen, 1990, p. 98). My method involved engaging interlocutors in a second interview, where possible, in hopes of inviting this participation. I had initially conceived that the second interview might serve as a platform for co-interpreting the initial thematic material; that is, that I would present themes and the participants would comment. As it happened, though, these second interviews tended to center on participants' reflections on the experience of the first interview, as well as ideas and impressions that emerged in the interim. Moreover, the semi-structured and unhurried nature of the *first* interviews allowed me invite participants not only to contribute recollections of their experiences, but also to enlist their views, opinions and interpretations of the material during that first interview.

Procedures

Participants and Recruitment

I recruited a convenience sample of participants from a variety of internet-based lists and networks to which I have access, and by word-of-mouth. I understood that this almost certainly predisposed me to reach members of some communities and not others; for example, I circulated recruitment literature on my personal online social network sites and invited members of those networks to circulate the invitation within their networks. But I thought that preferable, for an exploratory study such as this one, to recruiting from fatness/health/body-diversity-related communities or to attempt to enlist members of different communities and then offer them as representatives of the communities in which they participate.

Recruitment took place via internet message boards, email listservs, social networking sites, as well as word-of-mouth. Sites where I circulated recruitment literature included Facebook—public post on personal page, and groups/listservs: various college alumni association, Bronx Science Alumni, Pittsburgh Dilworth PTA, Johnnies in Mental Health, Assamblea de Pueblo, *das Unbehagen*, as well as colleagues' email lists and social networking pages.

I interviewed 9 people who self-identify as men. Recruitment literature invited men who remember significant experiences in childhood or adolescence involving their being identified as bigger, heavier or overweight. It explained that the study examines childhood and adolescent body experiences involving bigger-body-difference, and that I wanted to speak with men who remembered being overweight, obese-identified or fat, as well as those whose experience was less clearly demarcated in those terms, noting, "I would like to interview you if your body was identified as bigger than others in a way you remember as significant, even if you never considered yourself different, fat, chubby, overweight." Literature included my email address. I documented the recruitment-chain that connects me to each participant, as well as my

observations and my interviewee's statements about his/their identity and community commitments.

Despite the broad inclusion criteria of my flier (see appendix B), and possibly because of my own social location and the composition and reach of my own social network, the men who responded and served as my interviewees bear a number of similarities to one another—and to myself—demographically. They are all between the ages of 30 and 60, all of them were cisgender and all but one are white or white-presenting. I mention the way in which some communities were reached, and others excluded, to acknowledge and highlight the selectivity of my approach, but also to assert that this is a preferable alternative to a selection process that seeks persons who may be actively motivated to participate in my study on the basis of their membership in communities intentionally organized around body diversity. I will address, very briefly, my rationale:

The manner in which this project approached the subject of fatness necessitated a degree of imprecision in recruiting participants, for interview. Fatness figures as a contested category of bodily, social, and psychological status. And my ambition was to study the experiences and recollections of fat-identified persons without first delimiting the ways in which—or agencies by which—a person can be identified as fat. In this project fatness is not considered an attitude or conscious response to a factual state of affairs concerning the body. As we saw above, perhaps most clearly in Fanon (2008) and Young (1990), embodiment is not a private affair, and it would be a mistake to include, at the outset, only those men who actively and consciously construed themselves as having been 'fat,' or 'obese,' or those whose body-difference was remembered as a problem (or as an advantage) for them. In addition to those men who remember themselves as fat, then (and irrespective of how 'fat' signifies), it should be possible, theoretically, to include in this study someone who never actively construed himself as 'fat,' but whose body-size

modulated his social status or self-concept in some way that memorable/retrievable in recollection. (It is not practical to enlist men who have never been made aware of their body-difference.)

It may have been advantageous, in this study, to prioritize seeking out interviews with men from varying social backgrounds, ethnic groups/identities, and communities of interest, because data analysis may suggest productive questions and lines of inquiry for further research, but this interest in diversity should not be misconstrued as an effort to take an interlocutor's analyzed data as representative of the backgrounds, identities, or communities in which he participates. It may be equally advantageous to limit inclusion to men who all share certain identity markers or community engagements. Future research will almost certainly benefit from both such approaches. Given the paucity of research on male embodied fatness, to date, I preferred an imperfectly diverse sample whose data produces themes that may point to structural commonalities and productive questions over a narrowly specified population whose data is inadvertently interpreted as essential characteristics or norms.

No preselection was made with respect to any measurement-based evaluation of body size or other criteria, though, as noted above, demographic information was solicited and recorded after I presented and explained, in detail, the consent form (see exhibit A). Participants were deemed eligible who identified as men and remember being fat as a child.

Informed consent

Men who replied to my invitation to participate in the study received a brief description of the research study and the conditions of their participation along with a description of the potential risks and benefits of participating in the study. Men who were fat children and were raised in North America—which describes the inclusion criteria—may have experienced shaming or bullying that targeted toward their bodies, and these interviews may arouse painful

memories associated with these practices. Further, these men may have had clinical encounters in which their body size was identified by medical experts as a problem, evidence of illness, or a source of shame. I made an effort to distinguish this interview experience from unsupportive encounters of this kind, but the risk of emotional discomfort sometimes associated with unpleasant memories remains present. This was articulated explicitly in the written consent form. See Appendix A. Efforts to provide support were also made in the form of end-of-interview debriefing.

Some researchers have found that benefits of participation in qualitative research interviews may include a sense of purpose empowerment, altruism, self-acknowledgement (Hutchinson, Wilson, & Wilson, 1994), that qualitative research participants may construe participation as enjoyable or cathartic, despite also becoming upset (Carter, Jordens, McGrath, & Little, 2008), that research may benefit participants by giving them an opportunity to feel cared for, to make sense of their experiences, and to affirm their identities (Beck, 2005; Dyregrov, 2004; Exley & Letherby, 2001; Hynson, Aroni, Bauld, & Sawyer, 2006).

The participant had the opportunity to ask questions or express any concerns that they may have had about participation in the study. Consent forms were forwarded for electronic signature when the potential participant expresses that on the basis of his or their questions and our discussion, he remained interested in participating. In addition to other safeguards, materials explicitly stated that participants may withdraw from the study at any time.

Confidentiality was prioritized in the following ways: I saved all transcripts in encrypted files, marked all recorded files with participant codes (rather than names), conducted telephone interviews in private rooms and video interviews on platforms that allowed encryption. (See Appendix C)

Data Collection

Data was collected through interviews conducted on video-conferencing platform, Zoom, or telephone.

Interviews

I invited each interlocutor to participate in two interviews—a principal interview and a follow-up or reflective interview. I interviewed 9 men, in total. 7 of the men met me for a follow-up interview. The two participants whom I have not interviewed a second time both expressed a willingness to meet for a second interview but scheduling the meetings was not possible during data collection period. My interview design was semi-structured and informed by phenomenological (van Manen, 1990, Giorgi, 2009) and psychodynamic interview techniques (Josselson 2013; Kvale, 1999) and inspired by the “psychoanalytic listening” of Luttrell, discussed above. The rationale for two phases of interviewing are addressed above. Interviews were audio-recorded.

Principal Interview: First round or principal interviews were proceeded from the following prompt, or a very close variant thereof:

I am interested in how growing up with weight or body size or body difference was for you. Tell me about your experiences with your fatness, growing up. Please feel free to start wherever you like, and share whatever you remember about your experience, or whatever else comes up for you while reflecting in this way.

Before asking the question I briefly described the project, acknowledged that terms like ‘fat’ or ‘overweight’ can be uncomfortable and asked what terminology the participant preferred, and attempted to hew to his terms.

I encouraged recollection by asking interlocutors to elaborate, repeat or clarify what they had said. I also asked questions aimed to elicit *specific vignettes in which experiences or issues of fatness were prominent, and instances in which they seemed to recede*. This was aided by

questions about existential lifeworld themes (van Manen, 1990): lived space, lived body, lived time, human relation. Examples include:

- *How do you remember your body in the spaces where you lived, went to school, played? (Spatiality)*
- *When and how did you come to learn that you were fat (or overweight or chubby or different)? (Embodiment, temporality, relationality)*
- *From whom did you learn your body was different? (Relationality, embodiment)*
- *What is your first memory of your body? (Temporality)*
- *How did other people treat you in your social world? (Relationality)*

Although I had a list of these questions and sometimes referred to them during interviews, I was influenced by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), who advise that “the more spontaneous the interview procedure, the more likely one is to obtain unprompted, lively and unexpected answers from the interviewees” (p.131). Van Manen (1990), too, emphasizes the importance of remaining open, hermeneutic, in the interview. He quotes Gadamer, “The art of questioning is that of being able to go on asking questions, i.e., the art of thinking” (1975, p.33, in van Manen, 1990, p.98).

Follow-up Interview: The second phase involved collaborative follow-up interview for reflection and interpretation. Participants were invited to participate in a second interview/feedback session. Here, I invited my interlocutor to reflect on our previous meeting and bring up anything that felt salient, important or interesting. Specifically, I oriented interlocutors to the task in the following way: *Thanks for meeting me again. As I mentioned last time, I wanted to check in for a few reasons. First, I want to get a sense of how our interview went for you and whether there were things you wanted to add; I wanted to give you a chance to ask questions; Further, one of my hopes is that you will comment on the way I have developed*

some of what you told me. I then specified questions along these lines. Second interviews were reviewed and examined for resonances and surprises.

The interview content was recorded and then transcribed using transcription software, Trint.

Reflection and Analysis

I next read through interview transcripts, while listening to playback of the interview, to identify potential thematic content and areas of particular interest. I also loaded transcripts into qualitative research software, nVivo, began tagging sections of interviews with inductively generated thematic codes generated either in response to the text, or arising from some association that emerged while listening/reading, or as subcategories of lifeworld existentialism (see below). For example, a section in which Carl recollected an incident in his elementary school gym when he learned that his stomach prevented him from reaching his toes, as other kids were doing at the time, which led Carl to conclude that he was ‘non-standard’ and that there was something wrong with him, was tagged ‘lived body,’ ‘lived others,’ ‘feelings about fat,’ ‘I can/cannot body,’ ‘the exceptional body,’ ‘gym’ and ‘comparison.’ These tags were generated, although I hoped they would allow me to generate a systematic taxonomy of thematic content throughout the interviews, for the most part they served to help me locate and, loosely, group sections together.

After reading the interview transcripts, I located vignettes or statements that seemed particularly revealing or salient to the participant’s experience of fatness as a male child. I highlighted or otherwise marked these as thematic, or as evincing themes. Once thematic content was identified, I engaged in first phase reflections, which I distinguished into three parts:

- General thematic reflective writing, in which themes of fatness and masculinity were described in detail.

- Attention to lifeworld existentials (van Manen, 1990, p.101), and elaborating thematic content in terms of these.
- Comparison, where I brought thematic content into dialogue with other accounts (e.g., the interviews of other interlocutors, popular literature, my own observations and recollections).

Finally, I combined salient vignettes and thematic reflections into a spreadsheet matrix containing salient vignettes. Beside each salient vignette I included my phenomenological summaries and reflective writing, themes evinced, lifeworld existentials, notes and associations. I drew upon these entries when writing the chapters that form the results section, below.

Introduction to the Participants

The following men contributed their time, memory and thinking to this project. I met with each of them for at least 90 minutes and subjected all their interviews to thematic reflection and analysis. All 9 of the participants expressed willingness to meet for follow-up interviews; 7 follow up interviews occurred during the data-collection period.

In the following paragraphs I will introduce each of the participants by the code name I've assigned them, something about their lives, identity and thematic content.

Erik

Erik is a 45-50 year old, white cisgender heterosexual man living in a suburban setting of the Northeastern United States. He works as a professor of developmental psychology and described himself as a behaviorist. He is married with children. I met Erik when he replied to a post containing my flier posted on Facebook or circulated via email. The interview was conducted on the telephone, and his responses seemed to focus on recollections of a cross-country move in early childhood that brought to awareness his body difference, and later a dramatic transformation where he saw himself as overcoming his fatness.

Eddy

Eddy is a 40-45 year old straight white cis man working as a geo-scientist in a mid-sized American city. He is currently divorced with two kids. His interview was conducted over zoom. He was courteous and professional, and appeared physically fit. He spoke about how his father's commitment to physical fitness both inspired him to lose weight but also gave him an ambivalent relationship to his father's attention to him. In Eddy's second interview, he had an epiphany that his divorce may have been a result of his fatness.

Pierre

Pierre is a straight cis man in his mid-50s. He works as a commercial and fine artist in a major city in the Eastern United States. He grew up in Australia in a large religious family. He is single. The interview was conducted on the telephone. His speech was sophisticated, and he seems to have good psychological insight. The interview was characterized by themes of sibling bullying and fatness as presenting challenges to identifying with masculinity.

Carl

Carl is a straight white cis man in his early 30s who works as an entrepreneur. He lives in a mid-sized city in the United States. He is single with no children. He grew up with one brother. The interview was conducted on the telephone. He seemed apprehensive before warming up and was nursing a painful ankle injury that he linked to his having put on a few pounds recently. His interview evinced themes of resistance and acceptance of one's body in comparison to normative ideals. He spoke about his experiences with body differences and weight issues in his childhood and adolescence, as well as sharing at some length his thoughts and feelings about body types, health, personal responsibility, maturity, and modifying one's expectations in hopes of achieving happiness.

John

John is a straight white cis man in his 30s. He works as an art curator in a mid-sized American city. He is married and has one child. He grew up with two older brothers. The interview was conducted over the telephone. John impressed upon me that he had been thinking about his fatness for a long time but had never had the opportunity to discuss his thoughts and feelings. The interview was characterized by a sense of compromise, identifying with fatness as a defense against taunting. Also thematic was an ambivalent relationship to a nickname that both ensured social intelligibility and stability but at considerable psychic cost.

William

William is a straight white cis man in his early 30s. He is married and the parent of twin infants. He works as a teacher of creative writing in a midwestern city in the United States. He comes from a supportive family and was raised by his grandparents. The interview was on zoom. He appeared exhausted, visibly fat, good looking, and scruffy. He has a history of substance use disorder and has spent time in prison. His interview focused on his experience of fatness as a child and fatness as a bar to relationships.

Gregory

Gregory identifies as black, biracial, cisgender heterosexual in his early 40s. He works as a social worker and lives in a major U.S. city, and he is someone I knew personally before this project. We spoke on Zoom. Gregory is warm and cerebral. He originally responded to my flyer invitation, which he received in a group email of my personal contacts, but when we met for an interview he expressed misgivings, because he was not sure that he met inclusion criteria. As he explained, Gregory always thought of himself as 'big,' but only began to experience himself as fat or overweight later, in college. When I asked if he was ever identified by others as overweight, fat, etc., or his body difference ever seemed like an issue, he remained uncertain, explaining that he grew up feeling intensely self-conscious, but when he considers the question

of body-difference or issues thematized in terms of fatness, he felt it was “mixed up with all kinds of other stuff,” including “the biracial stuff and self-consciousness related to that,” which we spoke about at some length. It seemed appropriate to mention Gregory as participant, especially because his uncertainty about attributions became one of the central themes, below. But neither Gregory nor I attempted to resolve questions he holds about his experiences.

James

James is a white cishet man in his early 30s. James grew up in a large, Italian American family in the suburbs of a major city in the Eastern United States. He was working as an entrepreneur in our first interview, but by the time we met again he had moved to a rural area and had shifted to farming. He described rituals in his family as organized around great food, over-eating, and the exchange of diet tips amongst various aunts and cousins. The interview was on Zoom and James appeared tall, bearded, and affable. His interview was characterized by moments of discovering body difference, issues of autonomy, and identification with others.

Preston

Preston is a white cishet man, age 40. He lives in a rural area of the Northeast United States and works remotely as an IT specialist. Preston several times referred to himself as obese, and also disclosed that he had undergone gastric bypass surgery approximately a year before our interviews. We spoke on Zoom, but with cameras turned off – Preston explained that he sat in Zoom meetings for much of his day and he appreciated a break from the camera. Themes elicited in Preston’s interviews included personal responsibility, struggling with acceptance, fatness as a barr to accessing relationships, fatness and identity.

Chapter Four:

Initial Results: A Demonstration of a Phenomenological Method of Analysis in the Case of

John

In this chapter, I introduce the participant, John, and demonstrate how I employed a research method guided by van Manen's hermeneutic-phenomenology to elicit and explore themes pertaining to the essential qualities of male fatness. This section relies on both what has been called a wholistic reading followed by an anecdotal summary as well as a line-by-line, close reading (van Manen 1990, 2016). First, I introduce John and offer some biographical details culled from my interviews with the participant. I then give John's response to the opening prompt (see procedures) and a few subsequent segments of the interview, which I examine closely (van Manen's detailed reading). I attempt to explicate various aspects of his account via reflective writing--highlighting existential themes, querying some of the more curious formulations, and raising questions. I also allow the text to call to mind other areas of John's interviews, which I examined several times before commencing this step. This first wholistic reading serves as a background against which the examined text and my line by line exploration of it becomes figural.

I remain "discovery oriented" (M Van Manen, 1990)—that is, attending to what John says, allowing it to emerge unforced by my expectations, but aware that what epoché offers is not so much a neutralization of expectations as an acceptance that my expectations are, phenomenologically, what I *employ* to read, to receive, to listen, and a framework both for examining these intentional threads as they slacken as well as being surprised by what might emerge. The chief goal of the chapter is to introduce John and his themes, but a secondary ambition is to demonstrate the analytic procedure. A set of themes (embodiment, temporality, identity, relationality, ambivalence, care, masculinity) and questions related to those themes are

expressed in John’s testimony, made figural through the phenomenological method of analysis, and reverberate throughout the following chapters.

Interview selections and analysis

Currently, John is in his 30s and lives with his wife and their infant daughter in a mid-sized United States (U.S.) city, where he works as a fine arts curator and gallerist. He grew up in the Eastern U.S. in the 1980s and 1990s, studied art in undergraduate and graduate school. John recalled a robust social life, childhood and adolescence and described good relationships with his parents, who lived together until John’s father’s death, a few years before our interview. John’s interest in art and intellectual pursuits sustained him and gave him a sense of identity and purpose through adolescence and led, eventually, to professional success. Yet, throughout his life, John has felt intense shame about his body and a kind of social exclusion—despite his apparent social popularity—which he attributes to his difference.

John’s response to the opening prompt forms the first selection for examination, here. Per my protocol, I told John I was “interested in growing up with weight or body size difference and how that was for you. So I want you to tell me about your experiences with your fatness or body difference [while] growing up,” adding that he should “feel free to start wherever you like and share whatever you remember about your experience, or whatever else comes up while reflecting in this way.” And so, he began:

You know. It’s funny. I must have been, like, six when I started becoming overweight. But I don’t really remember *not* being overweight as a child. I think a lot of it was because my oldest brother had given me the nickname Tubbs, as uh, like, when I was like an 18 month-old and the story goes, that he really liked [a character from popular culture

whose name resembles the name I have changed to Tubbs]. He was like five, so it was just like a fun thing to say. So it kind of became a self-filling prophecy. Or some sort of prophecy ... before I was chubby. I mean, I was an infant. And I wasn't even a particularly chubby infant. I was actually a lot like my daughter. I was like a long, lean baby. And, my brothers were both older than me: One was two years older; one is four years older... they were both very thin and athletic. And so I think that's where I sort of first became aware of the difference and. It was just like. I mean, pretty much as early as I can remember, [there was] was just like a lot of teasing and bullying from my brothers around it. And really as early as I can. I can't remember a time of, like, not being ashamed of being fat. And so it feels like such a deep, core part of my identity. – John. Response to prompt question.

Anecdotal summary : John's knowledge about the past is dissociated from memory and feelings. There is a time that precedes John's fatness, but he has no access to it that feels like his experience or memory. But there are stories. Family lore. In John's case, he is given a nickname that anticipates his fatness. There is an irony here. He is given a name that will later signify his body difference. Brothers introduce both difference and also bullying or shaming. Just as he cannot remember not being overweight he cannot remember not feeling ashamed of feeling fat.

Temporal horizons

John responded to my opening question by asserting that he cannot recall a time that he did not feel fat, and then by making reference to this very time—a time before fatness. In the following section I will address both of these aspects of John's testimony, identifying relevant thematic content related to time invoked or implied in each of them.

Remembering. Fatness is older than memory. John said he does not remember “not being overweight as a child,” and later, “I don't ever/ I don't ever remember not feeling fat.” The youngest of three boys, John remembered being different from his two older brothers, who were

“both very thin and athletic.” It was in comparison to his older brothers that John thinks he “first became aware of the difference” of his body, and also of the valences that attached to that difference.

... pretty much as early as I can remember, [there] was just like a lot of teasing and bullying from my brothers around it [John’s body difference]. And really as early as I can./ I can't remember a time of, like, not being ashamed of being fat. And so it feels like such a deep, core part of my identity.

Notice from the outset that, for John, there is no emotionally neutral or ambiguous experience of body fatness. His awareness of ‘the difference’ between himself and his brothers emerged in the context of unfavorable comparisons and bullying. John’s fatness is relational, in the sense that it is grounded in his experiences with others. He is introduced to his fatness by his encounters with his brothers, and concomitant/coeval with that introduction is the assignment of shame. So, when John concludes, in the next line, that “it feels like such a deep, core part” of his “identity,” there is an indeterminacy in the statement—does ‘it’ refer to John’s fatness or to the shame that appeared coeval with it?—that reveals how John experiences himself and his body. His embodiment is shamed. John cannot remember a time when he was not fat because John’s body only ever became thematized, something upon which John might reflect, in its encounters with others, in this case his brothers. It is for this reason that John insists that he always felt fat. Whenever he reflects on his body, he recalls the experiences and attendant feelings during which his body became an issue. When John’s body appears—in memories or in reflection, it appears as a problem and an object of shame. John cannot remember a time when he did not feel fat because, in one sense, there is nothing to remember. When he remembers himself or his body, he

remembers being fat. (Themes: Embodiment and mood. Embodiment and others. Remembering furnishes layered or interimbricated experiences. Others-brothers.)

The body is older than fatness/There is a time before memory. Although he does not remember a time when he was not fat and, moreover, ashamed of being fat, there *was* a time before; John knows that he wasn't always fat. "I must have been, like, six when I started becoming overweight." John relies on family lore and photographs to reconstruct what he cannot recall. According to these sources, he was "a long, lean baby," much like his own daughter, John said. As John attempts to answer my prompt about his experiences with his body difference he draws a distinction between what he *knows*—his fatness has a history that is distinct from/not wholly coterminous with his body; his body is older than his fatness; others experienced him before he can remember experiencing for himself—and what he *remembers*—always feeling fat, different because he was fat, shamed, being fat as far back as he can remember. In this sense, his body is older than his fatness. (themes: temporality of the body. Dissociations between remembering, knowing, experiencing.)

The reflection above emphasizes something important about lived experience: The body antedates declarative recollection or episodic memory. It is older. This may be a different point than the existential-phenomenological observation that embodiment is an orienting precondition of any experience; i.e., that embodiment refers to the existential ground of experiencing. The emphasis here is on a temporal precedence—one that is also evinced in what psychoanalysts call infantile amnesia, the inability to recall, explicitly, experiences from infancy and early childhood. But here I want to emphasize how John's access to his own body is mediated by accounts and testimony of other people, and some archival material like photographs. There may well be a sort of knowledge or density, access or awareness that is sedimented or habituated and

which amounts to a self-referential ipseity and gestural repertoire first elaborated in infancy and then rehearsed and retained, thus recalled, into adulthood. But these aspects of experience are beyond the reach of the interview and John's reflections. (Themes: anonymous body, a complementary series of others' memories and one's own?)

Identity and the Nickname

In this section, I will connect the theme of time with the theme of identity. John's experience of his childhood fatness is intimately connected to the nickname, 'Tubbs.' His brother began calling him Tubbs when John was 18 months old, and the name would prove prophetic—though, as noted above, it was not particularly *descriptive*, at the time. The fact that the nickname preceded the fatness and leads to thinking in terms of prophecy further implicates the complex issue of temporality discussed above. "The story goes," John recalled, that John's brother:

...really liked [a character in popular culture whose name evokes fatness]. He was like, five, so it was just like a fun thing [for him] to say. So, it kind of became a self-filling prophecy, or some sort of prophecy.... I mean, I was an infant. And I wasn't even a particularly chubby infant.

John was marked for fatness, as it were, by the name his brother gave him. In the scene John describes, a young boy assigns his brother a funny sounding name which winds up inflecting the brother's identity and experience of himself throughout his childhood and adolescence. But John did get fat. We can wonder whether the name would have stuck—and whether it would even have been recalled with specific interest—if John's body had *not* grown, as it did, making the name seem prophetic. Can we *also* wonder whether his body grew into the name it had been given, in the sense that it answered a call, rose to the occasion, grew to fill out the dimensions laid out for it by the name? Epoché bars me from dismissing this outright (as,

for example, a false-cause fallacy, or as ‘less likely’ than an explanation sought in caloric intake or metabolism which, recall, must also be held in abeyance, here, and which neither appear or emerge as implicated in the horizon of meanings that make this statement intelligible). Holding the notion of prophecy, and its dismissal, in abeyance in that way, we get a glimpse at something that might be essential in John’s experience of what it is to be fat, this embodied condition which has given him so much trouble. Namely, there is a yearning for explanation; there is the centrality of the role of others which is lashed to the uncertainty as to others’ role; there is the question of responsibility; and there is an uneasiness hovering around these questions. There may also be an awareness that prophecy is a forbidden explanatory concept, something that emerges *as* forbidden, or something forbidden because other commitments (e.g., to rational explanations, personal responsibility) foreclose it. These complex and intertwined elements appear to compose what it is to be fat for John.

Ambivalent identification

In this section, I draw attention to the theme of ambivalence in John’s account of his embodiment and identity through the narrative account of his experience of his nickname and his relationship to it. I am going to cite at length a section of the interview, related to the nickname. I will notice, among other things, there is an ambivalent relationship to the name in which he both identifies and disidentifies with the name. In doing so I highlight the dilemma John faces when he moves toward one or another side of this ambivalence, or seeks to resolve it.

As we see in the next, extended quotation from the interview, John *did* grow into the nickname. He remembers being overweight and self-conscious about it, from age 6 onwards, and he recalls numerous incidents of teasing and shame avoidance. But what comes sharply into focus in John’s account is an ambivalence—beginning here with his discussion of the nickname and elaborating itself as a more general theme:

So, in some ways the nickname Tubbs kind of grew and grew, um, and sort of became something that I really used with like a sense of humor and, in a way, of ownership. And I remember having these like. Again, every once in a while, being like, 'I don't want this, I want to try to stop this,' I just couldn't stop it. ... And I was a popular kid. I was well-liked. I always had a lot of friends. Um. But also there was always a lot of teasing. I remember basically childhood being like just one long, um, just like just constantly living in fear of it coming up/ like someone kind of going on a fat-joke tear and that being, like, really unpleasant. And then, And then, also like using my sense of humor or saying like I like being called Tubbs, sort of like made me special. Like, you know, you couldn't hurt me because I was already like, you know, taking ownership of it and stuff like that. Yeah. I think I probably believed it when I was a kid, too. I mean, now, looking back on it, of course, it was like very silly and I was very hurt by it a lot. And there was like a lot of shame and anxiety around it and...I think Tubbs was an effective tool in the sense that it probably did get me to teased less for being fat. I, I think what I. I don't know, I didn't really take it off the table. I think probably what took off the teasing. Took teasing off the table more than the name was that I could just be really mean and I would just bully people back and I was pretty good at it. I remember one day my brother telling me, like knowing he was in high school and people joked 'are you going to, like, protect your little brother?' And [others] were like, I mean, everyone's very afraid of him. No one's going to pick on him. People were afraid. Yeah, I mean, I could be really mean. I was a bit of an asshole, you know, my shame turned to me a little, scaring me into a bully, I think.

... And it's hard to say, like in retrospect, because, I think. Once I decided I didn't like it hard to, you know, you start rewriting your narrative about never being OK. It probably did do me some good. I mean, it did help me. Like, I had a pretty great childhood, other than, you know, other than some teasing and bullying, I wouldn't say it was like, you know, much worse than anyone else experiences.

... Once in a while, I remember having, like, once or twice ... I remember like going to my mom and just being like 'I don't like this and, you know, I just want to be John,' and she was like , 'OK, I'll tell your brothers to stop.' And, you know, she would like, sit them down, I think, and tell them to stop. And [I remember] them being sort of like, 'are you fucking kidding me? Like, his name is Tubbs! We're not going to stop!' ... I would ask my friends to stop and they would be like, 'Why!? You made this whole/ You said you liked it.' And then I'd be like, yeah, maybe [unclear] like it. And I would just kind of back down and it was just like/ I guess it was hard to stop because to really get people to stop as a young person, you would have had to admit that you actually felt like a shame and hurt by it. And it was like, you know, too much weakness for a kid to show. I mean, basically, it's just like the risk of it.

Anecdotal summary : 1. The name grew and grew . John used his sense of humor to identify with the name; embracing the name made him feel special and protected him, gave him a status as someone whose embrace of the name signaled a toughness or insouciance. John remembers always having a lot of friends and also living in constant fear. 2. But there were times when John took another position, reversing the embrace of the name, appealing to his mother and directly to peers, but these were ineffectual. 3. John abandoned the attempt to eschew the name, reasoning that to do so would require a confession of vulnerability that felt like it entailed too much risk.

This section of the interview is dense and like the previous section admits of analysis of more than one theme. I am focusing for the moment on ambivalence toward the name, but there

is also the broader theme of *compensatory strategies* and the still broader theme of *fitting in* in which those strategies are themselves lodged. There is also the move, toward the end of the section, in which John becomes an object of *fear*, a kind of respect, by becoming *mean*. But what I want to focus on, here, is the ambivalence that John both remembers—and also reenacts—in his recollection.

John recounts his ambivalence—organized in two more or less distinct positions: One a position of embrace or identification and one of cautious disidentification. The name ‘grew and grew,’ as John puts it, suggesting that as time passed—which also coincided with physical growth—he became more closely identified with the nickname. But recall, too, that the name, Tubbs, names a *problem* as well as naming John. Tubbs refers to John’s fatness. (We see above that John associates fatness with being teased and shamed.) So the name-as-problem also grew and grew, which is to say the problems presented by John’s fatness became more prominent and preoccupying as John grew older, and bigger. Prefaced in this way, the rest of the quotation offers an account of the alternating ways that John situated himself, identified, or adequated his body to his social world. Initially, John recalls that he embraced the name, made use of it with his sense of humor and took ownership of it. Later on in the interview, he will expand on these observations, noting, on the one hand, that he honed his sense of humor into a capacity for acerbic wit, pointed and stinging observations that earned him a status of someone to be wary of in his social milieu in high school. He flirted with the conviction that the name secured his status as a “unique, funny guy.”

In fact, John becomes a bully himself, which also offers him protection. And in the wake of that identification with the name, John cultivates an interest in activities that are anti-sports, intellectual, anti-‘materialistic’ (in the sense of being assessed on the basis of their superficial attractiveness), “anti-*body*” By ‘owning’ the name, John protected himself in a kind of counter-

phobic embrace—"you can't be nicknamed Tubbs and care that you're fat." And if John does not care about a name that designates his fatness, he couldn't be hurt by teasing or bullying him—"you couldn't hurt me." But John *did* care. And in the quotation above John then pivots to recalling how his happy identification with the name was difficult to maintain, inconsistent at best, and to recollections of instances in which he attempted to distance himself from, or disidentify with, the name. This leads to vignettes about the resistance he faced, leading to his abandoning the attempt to assume his given name.

John recalled enlisting his mother's help, telling her he wanted to be known by his given name, and securing her promise. "I don't want this; I want to try to stop this." "OK, I'll tell your brothers to stop.' And, you know, she would like, sit them down, I think, and tell them to stop." But John's brothers were intransigent, he notes. "Are you f—ing kidding me!?" they protested. "His *name* is Tubbs. We're not going to stop." Similarly, when John asked his friends to stop calling him by the nickname, they expressed suspicion and surprise, insisting, "You said you liked it?!" Here, John conceded that he *had* embraced the name, previously, and his efforts to escape it desisted.

Importantly, both his brothers and his friends cite *precedent*—the way things have been or already are—to ground their objection to John's request. His brothers appear to mock any effort to change. Perhaps worse, his friends cite John's own previous claims and attitudes to dismiss his request; in doing so, they threaten to characterize his objection to the name as an act of hypocrisy. What are his brothers and friends invoking, here, and *to what* does John concede? Why should John's wish to assume another name—in this case his given name—occasion such resistance from his brothers and friends? How is it that an appeal to precedent supersedes both John's expressed wish and parental authority? Do his brothers and peers *need* John to continue using the name? Why don't John's friends want him to be John? Why do they need him to be

Tubbs? Relatedly, is the intransigence attached to a commitment to keeping the name in place, or to maintaining a status quo? That is, do the brothers and peers need the name or do they exhibit a more general resistance to change? If they need the name, why do they need it? Does the name protect *them* from something they have all said and thought about John, just as it provides a protected position for John (however imperfectly), or from something someone might say about them? It is as though there is an unseen force at work, in these scenes, without which the resistance to the name change is unintelligible. Compare, for example, the responses of the brothers and friends to that of the mother. John's mother hears her son's request without objection or resistance. She doesn't object or challenge him. She has nothing much invested in perpetuating the nickname. She hears his request and offers assistance. The stark contrast between her response and those of John's peers suggest that she is exempted from this 'unseen force' – its logic or density seems to obtain only for John and his peers. (She is exempted insofar as she does not, herself, invoke it or seem moved by it; but in the eyes of those who do rely on it she is superseded by it.)

That her efforts are *ineffectual*, that her parental authority seems in this story to be inert or superseded by the appeal to precedent, only strengthens the sense of this force: Be it a density of the past, a momentum or gravity of the *status quo*, or a matrix of rules and expectations, what I am here calling a force makes it easy for others to dismiss John's emergent request and difficult—too difficult—for John to distance himself from the name. Encountering this resistance – under which the wish to outgrow the name offends the imperative to *be consistent*, or where a fantasy of self-transparency imposes rigid identificatory practices and punishes deviance from them—John the boy abandons his campaign and continues to be known as Tubbs.

Happiness and fear in childhood

In this section, I explore yet another ambivalence, that between happiness and fear which strikes at the core of John's memory of childhood. Throughout the interview, it sometimes seemed as though John's fatness and the complex of shame and difference that gather had the quality of a *secret*. He had avowed that he had "a pretty great childhood, other than, you know, other than some teasing and bullying." But he also recalled a constant sense of fear or concern about his body in his social world. Consider the following excerpt from the larger section, above, which is exemplary of John's testimony and reflective process during the interview:

I was like a popular kid. I was well-liked. I always had a lot of friends [or 'fun,' recording unclear]. Um. But also there was always a lot of teasing. I remember basically childhood being like just one long, um, just like just constantly living in fear of it coming up, some someone, like, kind of going on a fat joke tear and that being, like, really unpleasant.

On the one hand John gives the impression of enjoying much of his time during his childhood. But what does it mean that John 'always had a lot of friends' (or 'fun') and also was 'constantly living in fear'? It is tempting to resort to explanations in which one aspect of the statement contains a defense or distortion (which may well be the case)—e.g., *he wasn't really happy, he's just protecting himself from something too terrible to face* (John himself considers this, later); or *perhaps John exaggerates, invoking the idea of 'constant' fear in order to emphasize the degree to which he felt the fear impacted him—here, in his use 'constant' fear—or* to read John's statement as his response to the pressure of the interview setting. We might also want to read a sequence, emphasizing John's use of the word 'eventually': *I was happy for a while, but eventually childhood became something to fear*. But to embrace that interpretation requires that John's use of 'always' be ignored, which then neglects something complex and

contradictory within John's experience. Epoché enjoins us to hold in abeyance any judgment regarding the existence *or nonexistence* of what is averred in the participant's account. Refusing the temptation to affirm one aspect of the account and derogate the other as a simple logical contrary, a dichotomy or an either/or presentation, we have to ask what sort of experience or experiences support what John said.

I began this reflection noting that John seemed to be sharing something secret, when discussing the vulnerability and disidentification he felt with his nickname and the associated persona that seemed to be the guarantor of his social viability and, perhaps, the happy memories. It is as though the fear was hidden, secreted. As John remembers it, he always had a good time and he lived in constant fear that something would come and interrupt that good time. Of course, it may well be that there were good times and there were bad times, but in looking back from a distance of years both the good times and the bad times can be *spread* over a whole childhood, can be *generalized*. It may also help to think in terms of the figure/ground distinction from gestalt psychology, and oft-cited in explications of phenomenology (see, for example, Ihde, 1986). What emerges here is perhaps something like a figure-ground structure in which a popular, happy childhood can be discerned against a constant threat of taunting. Or, alternately, John can credibly invoke a constant state of worry even against a backdrop of truly happy childhood events. There's a sense in which the figure/ground construct implies a meaningful relationship between what is figural to become visible against the supportive ground, or what Rick Boothby calls the "invisible conditions of visibility" (Boothby, 2015,p.19). In this case John's popularity depended to a certain extent on his determined pursuit of a social identity as someone with an acerbic wit, something of an anti-hero, someone who can credibly dismiss the pursuits of more normative bodies—sex and sports—as trivial in comparison to his own interests—art and intellection; someone so impervious to slight that he embraces the very name

that names what should be—in the normal social order—a source of shame. Someone whose wit and *repartee* are formidable, to be feared. John has, to some extent, *obtained* a happy childhood because he has been able to transform his response to the constant threat into a socially intelligible schtick. He is popular and happy—able to enjoy sociality, highly regarded, if a little feared—*because* of his response to the constant threat. His identity and experience are intelligible (figural)—that is, they make sense and are sustainable—as transformations of a set of conditions John recalls as ‘constantly living in fear’ of the threat of shaming and humiliation. In a sense, John’s popularity *stands out against* but also is *composed of or made out of* the field of constant threat in which it articulates itself or emerges as intelligible experience.

How can might this figure/ground talk, and the exploration of these seemingly contradictory experiences as simultaneous and *both true*, connect to the feeling of *secret* with which I began this section? It may be that John’s secret is that he built a persona around pretending to be impervious to the social reception of his body. That is, that most notable features of his personality emerge as responses, defenses, reformulations of the threats with which he was confronted. Or perhaps the real secret that John kept is the extent to which he did *not* accomplish the imperviousness he cultivated and broadcast.

John’s Insight, looking back

Looking back as an adult, John described the strategies he employed, especially embracing his nickname—and his role in perpetuating it—as “humiliating,” and compared his identification with it to “Stockholm syndrome.” As John sees it, the name stuck with him not only because it assisted in maintaining a socially viable sense of identity (‘unique funny guy’), but because, to escape it—to insist that friends and family give up the name—would require him to confess that living with the name was painful, humiliating, that he *wasn’t* impervious,

insouciant. Here, we find John formulating an insight about himself, or a frame of interpreting his experience. Once it is recognized, it seems to occupy a place of privilege, thematically, in how John experiences himself in relation to his fatness in childhood. The insight contains three moments, with a fourth implied or developed elsewhere. 1. He is saying that being ‘just John,’ growing out of the name, abandoning that social persona he’d cultivated as a counter-phobic defense or compromise formation, required a sacrifice, a confession of vulnerability and 2. That this risk was too great for John, (or the affordances of his world did not support him to safely reveal this vulnerability and thus explore or reveal a different sense of identity or persona). And 3. There is something deeply sad about recognizing that his social success depended upon this compromise. The fourth moment, not explicated here, is the corollary that being able to allow oneself to be vulnerable and abandon the successful but loathsome persona holds some promise, something important, for John. John feels he has organized himself around a (incomplete or incompletable) denial of *care*.

When we met for a second interview, John said that our first conversation had been “Intense.” He appreciated the opportunity to share openly and reflect about his memories and feelings about his body. But he was struck by “the idea that you put a lot of effort for, like, social and emotional reasons into sort of telling the world the way you feel about your/ you’re indifferent to your appearance. And when you open up about feeling bad...it’s kind of like a floodgate effect, like it’s opening/ It’s like that with a lot of emotions that you sort of tamp down. If you really engage with them, there’s a lot there.” John felt that the topics that emerged in our interview surrounding his feelings about his body, which he’d been “telling myself were resolved, aren’t as resolved as I thought they were.” These included feelings about his self-image and his fatness. But, John also gently offered—apologizing if he was straying too much from the topic—that he saw a connection to feelings about his father’s death, of cancer, several years

before the interviews. We went on to speak at some length about John's family and his relationship with his father and about his family's response to his father's disease. At one point John recalled a painful moment: A friend whose parent had recently been diagnosed with cancer had remarked that she regarded John as a role model in navigating his father's sickness and dying. John was struck by an irony in this, because in his current thinking, the good humor and grace he displayed during his father's illness concealed a measure of sorrow which, in concealing it, left something important unacknowledged. John here invoked a "similar mechanism" between this and the way he lived his fatness in adolescence:

I knew my weight was a problem, not making me happy, but it was very important [that] I be perceived as a person who was unaffected by it or handling it well or handling it with good grace and good humor. Yeah. And I think that's what I did with my grief, too.

There is a homology here: John cannot shake off a loathsome nickname because to do so would reveal a vulnerability that was intolerable, at the time; an admission that the name hurts his feelings, that he cares about his fatness. John cannot admit that his 'weight' is a problem (or that he *is* hurt by the antifat sentiments in his world) because to do so would contradict his sense of ease and nonchalance; John, having long embraced this style of presentation, gives the appearance of grace and good humor—being *unaffected and not caring*—in response to his father's illness and death, but also to his sense of himself.

Conclusion:

In John's telling, fatness suffuses his experience of himself. He cannot recall a time when he did not feel fat, and his fat experience formed a "core part" of his identity. Later in the interview, John cited this difference—"being fat"—to explain a variety of issues his life: In early childhood, there are unfavorable comparisons to his brothers; in adolescence, an

ambivalent relationship to how his fatness—and a related nickname—granted him a socially desirable position, but at great compromise.

The themes that become figural in John's testimony were temporality, embodiment, identity, ambivalence, masculinity, and ultimately, care. John has identified and described something about the structure of his experience of himself in relation to fatness, others, and the world—a defense against care—which offered a significant but incomplete social viability, a protection against slights and a way of being that allowed him to gain access to sociality, and more specifically from a position of masculinity. In the following chapters, I will explore these intertwining themes as they are expressed in interviews conducted with a number of men. Though the following chapters are delineated by existential themes (embodiment, temporality, and relationality), each theme is imbricated with the others and is constellated around these notions of care and masculinity. And in my final chapter, I will discuss the possibility that the person who is not allowed to feel, be vulnerable, or care and who resents that fact (here, John) is only intelligible in terms of the self-undermining norms of masculinity.

Chapter Five: Embodiment

The following chapters examine participants' experiences in dialogue with what van Manen (1990) calls the lifeworld existentials— embodiment or the lived body, relationality or the lived other, temporality or lived time, spatiality or lived space. This chapter, for example, attempts to explore experiences of fatness in terms of the lifeworld existential of the lived body. Issues of embodiment abound when men recollect experiences with fatness in childhood. As we saw in our review of the phenomenological interventions of Merleau-Ponty, Young and Fanon, above, a tension arises between the idea of the lived body as an unthematized site of enactment of one's aims and the constraints on such enactments that arise for particular bodies in particular settings. Drew Leder's *The Absent Body* (1990) borrows from Merleau-Ponty (2012) to develop the point that the body emerges as thematic—that is, that it 'appears' for thematizing or contestation— primarily under conditions of illness or duress. The lived body disappears, per Leder, unless it “*dys-appears*,” becomes focal or thematized in dysfunction, as a problem. An exploration of the participants' experiences in light of the lifeworld existential of embodiment revealed themes of the body thematized— as an object of ambiguous meanings or as an image of urgent distress. Fatness for boys appeared to emerge as a problem of ambiguous meanings and then become sedimented as a sometimes absent, sometimes urgently present ('dysappearing') problematic body.

I examine accounts of men's recollections of the ways they came to embody their fatness, describe themselves as fat, identify with fatness, overweight, body-different, or obese. The participants in the study each brought attention to early moments when they were introduced to, or discovered, their bodily difference. I share some of the men's moments of discovering their fatness—first encounters with one's bodily differences in childhood, and also reflections in adulthood that evince their childhood fatness. Fat activist and theorist Audrey Gordon titled her

2020 book, *What We Don't Talk About When We Talk about Fat*. But in exploring these men's accounts of discovering their fatness—each man speaking about fatness, sometimes for the first time—we can ask a more basic question: *What is it that we do talk about, when we talk about fat?* And I pose this question in two ways: *When I asked men about their fatness, what did they say?* And also, *when I asked men about their fatness, what sort of thing or things were meant, intended, or described (whether meant or not)?* Being fat, becoming fat, fatness—these refer to a condition or set of conditions with which the participants of this study found it necessary to contend. What sort of condition, or what sorts of conditions, are these? Analyses of interviews reveal that fatness is *discovered*; that is, that it appears as something with which to contend, and the ways in which it does so vary. And, secondly, the methodological move of *epoché*—to hold in abeyance our assumptions or positing of knowledge about the object under consideration—calls into question what is ordinarily intended in statements about fatness—in the vignettes below, for example, fatness emerges as a field of uncertain meanings, or it is a sudden thematization of the body that emerges as confirmation of some suspected but ignored aspect about the body. This problematizes any engagement with fatness that poses fatness as a simple state of affairs of the body, as it is so understood in the medical and mainstream literature on the subject.

I organize these moments of discovering fatness into two, broad, thematic groupings, or modes of discovery. In the first section, I discuss “ambiguous meanings” (e.g., dawning awareness without clear sense of the network of operative meanings) and in the second, I discuss instances of arrest (e.g., surprise, realization, and disgust). These two sections are separated by “moments of transition” from one mode to the other which, for my participants, appeared to be associated with sexuality or puberty. In the first section, initial moments of childhood fatness are characterized by an ambiguous valence—the child doesn't quite know what being fat *means*; there are negotiations and an uneasy curiosity about a world of meanings that appear to await the

child or be given to the child from the social world. Next, I furnish accounts of encounters with fatness–(re)discoveries–that are disruptive, sudden, and marked by their lack of ambiguity. These are moments of arrest (e.g., looking in the mirror and being surprised by what you see, usually in adulthood). In their aftermath, these shocking moments seem to occasion a meaningful shift in one’s embodiment.

Discovering Fatness

Mode of Discovery 1: Ambiguous Meanings

The following vignettes reveal ambiguities related to the discovery of fatness in childhood. I offer interview material from Carl, James, and William in order to explore a variety of instances of this phenomenon. It should be noted that there were a plethora of other examples to draw from, and I attempted to use those examples that expose the seemingly essential quality of the more general theme.

Example 1

For James, there is a scene at home, which is marked by an uncertain curiosity, a ‘dawning’ of understanding of his body as fat, and also a sense of ambiguity.

Right. Well, the way I always think of it now, especially, is I just kind of remember waking up one day, maybe when I was 15 and it kind of dawning on me that I was fat. I remember this one summer, I think I was in the eighth grade. 15 or something like this. And my cousin was always coming to stay with me in the summer and I was growing up and my cousin, Mallory. She was a year younger than me and she was also quite fat, quite heavy. And my mom decided to go on Weight Watchers for the summer. She was [unclear] excited to lose a bunch of weight through Weight Watchers. And I was like a barely pubescent boy thinking, ‘that’s fine, we’ll eat whatever and I’ll learn how to get skinny or something, I guess.’ But I remember. Just kind of like realizing that I was fat

and not knowing exactly/ knowing that that was not a desirable thing, but not having shame about it or anything like that.

In this vignette, James is discovering his fatness, but it is not a fatness in which the body, in particular, is thematized (which stands in stark contrast to James' later moments of discovery, below.) This discovery is accompanied by an "I guess." There is a "knowing" and "not knowing exactly." When James discovered his fatness, it was something that appeared in the form that is vague, or an ambiguous statement, *I am*, and question, *am I?*

Example 2

Carl, like James, remembered first becoming aware of his fatness when his parents shared with him their concerns about his health. A family physician warned Carl that he was overweight, and he remembers arguing against the confusing diagnosis with his mother. In the following vignette, we find Carl attempting to negotiate meaning so as to protect his mother from the burden of the problem of his fatness, and also to protect himself from the diagnosis.

I remember a trip back from the doctor with my mom where we were riding in the car and, you know, we had gotten this—not so much a diagnosis—from the doctor, but just the doctor was like, 'hey, you're overweight for your for your age. You need to, for your age and your height, so you need to be doing something to take care of that.' And from what I what I remember, that was kind of left up to the discretion of my parents, you know, to figure something out. But, ummm.. you know, I remember riding back from the doctor's office with my mom and really just trying to resist that diagnosis as much as I could. I remember repeating to my mom the phrase like, 'hey, muscle weighs more than fat,' as though [chuckles] like as though it might be, that I was actually extremely muscular, and that was why I was so heavy. And not that, you know, I had extra at 40 extra pounds of fat sitting around my midsection. Umm..and I remember her like, as gently as possible,

but with a decent amount of emphasis, telling me, like, ‘that's true [muscle weighs more than fat]. But that's not the problem here, that you know, you're/ you're overweight, you're too heavy.

The doctor’s pronouncement creates a problem, a dilemma, a question of the body without a clear answer. The idea of being “overweight” seemed to have a social meaning—bad, fat, unhealthy—that wasn’t experienced directly at the time. Overwhelming, in this vignette is an ambiguity of meaning, and the attempt to contend with attributions made by the doctor, and for his mother.

Here, I want to introduce Carl’s embodied experience of discovery, and focus on the outline of the vignette. He is riding in a car with his mother as they consider, together, something that the doctor has said – based on his age and height, he is too heavy. It is notable that the memory is not set in the doctor’s office, the site of diagnosis, but in the car with his mother, where Carl and she are left to consider and contend with this shared object of concern, Carl’s body difference. Carl hopes to dissolve this problem that his mother now faces. So he offers to explain the discrepancy in his age-height-weight ratio; namely, the cliché that muscle weighs more than fat. Looking back, he reflects on the absurdity of his hoping to explain the problem by presenting himself as an exceedingly muscular child. But in the moment he offers the explanation in hopes of lifting the burden that he and his mother now bring with them on their car ride from the doctor’s office. Then, he awaits his mother’s endorsement, or invitation to continue exploring the explanation. But this does not arrive. She acknowledges the truth of the proposition but rejects it as an explanation, here. Carl recognizes the burden of his weight as his mother’s burden—the solution is ‘left up to the discretion of the parents’--and he hopes to lessen her load. He is also maintaining his own resistance to change or denial.

In his mother's refusal to endorse Carl's explanation, she also is refusing to protect him from the problem, his encounter with his body as something that needs to change. She is, instead, invoking what Carl, elsewhere, will refer to as "reality." There is a sense in which, at this moment in his childhood, the possibility of a fantasied muscle-bound body *could* satisfactorily explain away the doctor's diagnosis, provided that explanation is endorsed by someone so influential as his mother—a representative, perhaps, of consensus reality, a broader world. Carl and his mother are hurtling through space in an automobile; alongside them in the car is the specter of the diagnosis, which hangs between them, foreboding, suspended for a moment while they—Carl, his body, the problem—await his mother's decision. And the decision will determine whether it *is* a specter—which, like other ghosts, seems to flee when the grownups show up—or a substantial burden, something that must be borne or confronted.

This ambiguous question of the lived body in the moment of discovering one's fatness raises the following questions: What kind of lived body is one that can become a problem at the pronouncement of a stranger, the doctor, or continue to be unproblematic—muscular, and therefore not fat—on the basis of a mother's endorsement of a child's wishful thinking? How can fatness be a burden, and how is that burden distributed between mother and child? What is Carl's mother refusing to endorse when she rejects the muscle/fat fantasy? What is embodied in this moment of discovery or, more generally, what kind of experience is the experience of fatness? To open up or begin to address these questions, then, we can continue to look at moments of ambiguous discovery.

Example 3

William, offering one of his earliest memories of his body, recalled:

One of my cousins was like, “you got a fat butt,” or something like that, and I remember going to my mom and being like “she said I have fat butt,” and she was like, “she shouldn’t be looking at your butt,” or something like that.

William remembers accepting his mother’s dismissal of the incident. “My mom said that, and I got over it.” Similarly, there were incidents in school in which he was taunted with body-focused language. In one such taunt, other kids would say “what? Are you going to sit on me?” But William wasn’t troubled by these incidents, he said. Despite easily being able to recall teasing or bullying around his body-difference, at times resulting in physical fights, William drew my attention to how his early experiences were *untroubling* to him. And there is an ambiguity that shows itself, here. William was untroubled (accepting the meaning given by his mother) and also seems to trouble others (his cousins and schoolmates). For now, William’s body is a problem for others but not for him; his fatness has meaning(s) that await him, as we will see, but do not affect him at present.

In searching for an explanation for how he could be so untroubled by what seems so troubling for others, he offered that his family (i.e., his parents, his grandmother who raised him, at times) didn’t shame him. What was untroubling at the time would later become painful associations to his fatness when he became an adult. In this vignette, William’s mother provides the sort of protection or mediation that Carl’s mother withholds in the car, above. There are differences, here, of course, but the comparison advances the issue of the body’s—the lived body’s— status in relation to sense-making formulations about it: William’s mother reframes his experience as one in which his cousin has behaved badly and is deserving of censure; in doing so, any issue of William’s exceptionality—his fatness—is deferred or displaced. The logical sequence runs like this: The cousin looked and saw William’s ‘fat butt’; William takes the formulation to his mother, for review; The mother declares that the cousin shouldn’t have been

looking; now, we are all looking at the *cousin*, not ‘the butt,’ and William can go about his day, as it were.

These early incidents appeared to point to a field of meanings whose importance—for William and James—had not become clear. Giorgi (2009) offers a definition of meanings as “the determinate relations established between an act of consciousness and its object” (p. 81). Here, as was the case with John’s nickname in the previous chapter, the interest *others* take in William’s body or body difference precedes his own attention, and then emerges as acts of other people’s consciousness whose object and determinate relations are uncertain. The incidents do register as a sort of question; they arouse enough concern that William appeals to his mother for interpretation, or realizes that bullying words—whatever their broader implications—are invitations to fight. But it seems as though their crystallization of meaning remains ambiguous or tentative, held in abeyance until later in his life when they are rediscovered.

Moments of Transition

The next set of examples from William and James are moments of transition from an ambiguous, *I am/am I?*, to something like, *yes, I am*.

Example 1

William draws a sharp distinction between early experiences of childhood taunting and moments when, as an older boy, he experienced an impediment to his romantic ambitions, which he then attributes to his body. In William’s recollection, the meanings of fatness became clear as a result of a conscious process of questioning his body in relation to other bodies and the attribution of fatness to his sense of embodied self. “It’s weird,” William said, continuing from above:

The first time I, like, looked down, and was like like/ I don't know when that/ I think that was probably around puberty, when I started to want to be with someone else

[romantically or sexually]. And then I started getting rejected and I started looking for reasons. And that [fatness] was the most, outward looking reason. ... When you see, when I would see who the person would decide to start dating, then it would always be definitely not a fat kid. So I would always/ it would always go back to that, for me, again. I think that's kind of like when I actually started, like looking down, and judging myself as fat. Maybe a little bit in elementary [school]? It just wasn't as much. I remember being made fun of, but it didn't matter. Like someone saying that I would sit on them didn't matter because I actually *could* beat them up, without sitting on them [laughs]. It never it never mattered until it came to wanting someone else to accept me. And then that's when I began to like actually like probably judge myself against that, against or judge my body trying to look at it through other people's eyes and why they wouldn't accept me for whatever reason. Yeah.

William is suggesting that there is—as with John in the previous chapter—an ambivalent identification with his fatness. It gave him a sense of identity and at the time, even some power (he could fight his rivals.). Later, he began to recognize the significance of this ambivalent identity. It became less confusing and more a characteristic of his being in the world.

Example 2

James offered another account of a ‘dawning’ understanding, with a greater emphasis on the process of discovering a set of *inherited* meanings—vis-a-vis his body and fatness—while at the same time discovering a sense of agency whereby he might distinguish himself from those meanings. This sense of agency happened for James “all of a sudden” and at the same time as he was able to say, ‘yes, I am (a particular body)’. James recalled:

...like all of a sudden, like I felt like [at] the dawn of puberty... I have sexuality: I have armpit hair, I have a body. Like, I exist in a body and I'm like a conscious being that's,

like, looking around, like, ‘Oh, I can make my own decisions.’ I started having like a critical perspective on life that dawned, at the same time. It dawns at the same time as being a, you know, a particular body. ... I just woke up and realized, ‘Oh. I am a different person, and this is not the body that I would want. This is not me, exactly. This is like my body and this is kind of/ Nowadays, I would use [terminology] like, ‘this is the culture I was born into and the history and the habits’ and, like, I just woke up. I was like, ‘Oh, I’m fat, and that’s not, that’s weird and I don’t want it.’ ... I had a sense of autonomy, all of a sudden. Not that I knew what to do with that, but I knew that I was no longer simply a passive receiver of the culture that I was in.

Here, ambiguity still obtains between the gradual onset of puberty and the realization of fatness all of a sudden (associated with a new sense of self, and sexuality). Yet, there is a sense of individuation in the process of self-discovery. The sets of meanings to which James began to awaken, as it were, in *Weight Watchers* vignette, above, have clarified. James now seems to know what it means to be fat, to be a body in the world among others, and can he act—perhaps for the first time—from that position. In discovering a meaningful position, and being able to act from that position, James comes closer to the capacity to alter or even reject meaning given by others. The vignette is something of a transition between ambiguous meaning and a sense of certainty about one’s fatness revealed in moments of arrest. The next section focuses on these later moments.

Mode of Discovery 2: Moments of Arrest

The following examples of moments of arrest from James, John, Preston, and Pierre feature scenes of abrupt encounter with the body image or the “fact” of fatness, moments of arrest in which something that was unthematized or non-focal—what Leder refers to as the

“absent body” (1990)—is violently disrupted, in a motion that evokes trauma. These moments are examined and compared for thematic resonance.

Example 1

James’ vignette about Weight Watchers (above) and following example were contiguous in the interview, but dramatically different in tone, voice, and character. They seemed to span the gap between instances of ambiguous discovery and instances of arrest. There is a difference, too, in temporal character—James’ early incident comes as a ‘dawning,’ an uncertain and uneasy curiosity, a slow building or gathering of partial insight. Here, there is repugnance and urgency, and no doubts. If the previous vignette was marked by an uncertain identification with fatness that is somewhat vague and not particularly associated with specific bodily characteristics, here there is an unambiguous, *certain*, and bodily articulated attribution of fatness:

So, then, [in] I think ninth grade or tenth grade, I ballooned to about 240[lbs]. ... And I was very fat, I remember, just having sacks of fat hang off. Ugh [expression of distaste] I had, like, skinny, athletic legs. I’m, like, tech-/ like aspects of me are young and healthy and growing and growing taller and stuff. But I’m actually really, really fat. And I remember seeing a picture. I played in a band, and seeing a picture of us playing at the Pub or whatnot. And I was like, this big circle, like a pumpkin. Pumpkin body, pumpkin head. I was like, That is/ that’s gross and I’m too fat. So I started to work on it more actively.

In this example, James sees himself in a picture and is shocked by what he sees, and by the recognition that he *is* that image. What appears to James are signifiers of a grotesque horror show: sacks of fat hanging off bones, human pumpkins. He becomes arrested, frozen in the picture as if captured by it and taken out of time. Yet, at the end of the vignette, he suggests that the crystallization of the body in an image can then be negated or rejected actively, whereas

previously there may have been an absence—similar to what Drew Leder (1990) refers to as the “absent body.” Now the body is at the forefront, figural—or, following Leder, *dys-figural*—and to be confronted and altered.

Example 2

In the previous chapter. John averred that he cannot remember a time when he did not feel fat. Later in the interview, hoping to elicit memories of periods, relationships, or places where the prominence of fatness might recede, I casually asked him to recall a time he did not feel fat. John held firm, saying, “I don’t ever remember *not* feeling fat.”

“What about when you were alone?” I asked, pursuing the issue.

“Even when I’m alone. Yeah. Like, I never, I never, I never like I don’t/ even when I was *thin*. Like, really thin. I don’t think I ever felt not fat.” With this statement, John seems to be suggesting that once he was fat, he would always be fat, but not only that; fatness retroactively changed what it meant to be a body.

“So what does it feel like to be fat?” I asked, in response.

John, then, described a variety of postural strategies, “to hold my body in a way where people couldn’t see me or wouldn’t be able to see me *as fat*. Or I wouldn’t be able to see myself.” John then interrupted himself to ask if I had knew the comic, Jim Gaffigan, and then told “this one joke that I think about at lot, where he’s like ‘*are you ever just walking along and you’re having a pretty good day and you catch your reflection on, like, a car window and it just ruins your day?*’” I expressed my appreciation for this sort of moment. Then I asked John to try to articulate what he was trying to communicate to me with Jim Gaffigan’s joke. What John expressed characterizes what I’ve been referring to as “moments of arrest.”

John likened the aftermath of catching a reflection of himself to being caught or captured by an “intrusive thought.”

If I'm in a good place and I'm thinking about other things and I'm not thinking about my body particularly, and then I catch that glimpse of myself or someone points [it] out, [or] someone says something [or] teases me, when I was a kid. Then you get on that thought loop—and it's really hard to get out of it—of just being like 'I'm fat. I'm ugly. I'm ashamed of myself.'

John reveals that there is something disturbing in this moment of being caught in reflection. What's being disturbed in this disturbance? Perhaps being caught is not just a snapshot of a present moment, but having one's past, present and future caught in the image as well—the past always taking the shape of the present. This would help to explain John's paradoxical sense that he was fat even when he was thin.

I want to briefly attend here to something that I did not notice during the interview; namely, that a moment after John insisted that he always felt—always *feels*—fat, he produced the Gaffigan joke, detailing a violent shift—in attention and in mood—occasioned by an encounter with his image in reflection. But that violent shift itself depends upon there having been a period of comparative *nondisturbance*. This is not an argument against John's assessment of the permanence of his self-appraisal. Instead, it reveals a(nother?) lacuna. When John is in a 'good place,' he is 'thinking about other things;' that is, he is not attending to his body or appraisals thereof. There are different attentional states when the body is not thematized. What is being disturbed is the state of the "absent body," (Leder, 1990) all of the sudden the body becomes figural, and, when it is figural, it is a problem.

John's moment of arrest involves his being captured in an unexpected reflection. James was looking at a photograph; he knew it depicted him, but in the place where he expected to find himself represented, a version of himself he associates with the adult activity of playing in bands in pubs, he instead finds a grotesque displacement, a "pumpkin body. Pumpkin head." But,

before inferring that these moments of arrest are, in their essence, visual, there are other examples: Preston recounted an abrupt shift—in affect, or outlook, or mood—upon discovering the lone size XXXL shirt, which was for him, ordered in connection with a team project at work. Arresting, too, were exchanges Pierre recounted in which his older brother, when the two were changing clothes, said “you’ve got a girl’s body.” Pierre—who did not want to be a girl—felt as though his brother, though cruel, was not incorrect. Later on, Pierre told me he came to understand that there are various body types and that his difference from his brother is not best interpreted as a gendered difference. But at the time, despite his protests, Pierre agreed with his brother. John, too, shared a harrowing moment of disruption. On an afternoon in his 16th year, while hanging out with a group, John overheard two of his close friends, a boy and a girl, talking. The girl was remarking, with appreciation and wonder, at how attractive all of their friends were. How ‘beautiful’ she found the bodies of the members of her friend-group. Her interlocutor offered some agreement, and the two paused in shared appreciation (and self-congratulation?), before the girl quickly qualified, without any malice, “Well, I mean, except Tubbs,” using John’s nickname at the time.

“Well, yeah,” the friend agreed, “except Tubbs.”

John listened in silence, horrified by the confirmation of something he regularly feared but, also regularly, allowed to recede from thought. He is horrified but at the same time he affirms his friends’ assessment. He is arrested but not by his image. He is caught by the judgment that also confirms what he has always thought he was.

Conclusion

Participants’ recollections of fat childhood revealed numerous instances in which the men remember actively construing themselves in terms of their body-difference, which I have called moments of discovery. These moments clustered around two modes: ambiguity of meaning and

moments of arrest, separated by transitions toward crystallization of meaning. Moments of ambiguity revealed attempts by participants to construe themselves in fields of meaning that were at least partially inscrutable. Moments of arrest feature intrusions of already crystallized meaning which interrupt and disrupt participants' lifeworld.

Further, it seems that in all these vignettes, discovery of fatness implicated other people, either in comparison or in reliance of their formulations (protective or not). The theme of others and relationality will be further explored in the next chapter.

Chapter Six: Relationality

The last chapter on the lived body focused on how embodiment of fatness always seemed to involve a discovery of one's body through the social category—familial or community understandings— of “fat.” I emphasized that for the participants in the study, fatness is discovered ambiguously at first in childhood, and then again later in adolescence in moments of arrest (and shock) in remembering one's bodily difference. Both of these modes of discovery are in dynamic relationships with other people. Fatness, as a discovered ambiguous category, is ambiguous because, at first, it comes from the other—usually another person who already knows what fatness means in the social world (or in the case of teasing children, seem to mimic the social world also without understanding what fatness means besides difference, as such.) Discovery of fatness in the mode of arrest is also in dynamic relation to other people through whose eyes, or by comparison, one is shocked by what one sees as one's self image and bodily capacities. This chapter, then, focuses on the relational quality of these discoveries.

It is already evident, in the memories examined above, that questions about fat embodiment evoke stories of encounters with other people. Each of the participants in the study talk about fatness in relation to others in key moments of self-experience and self-assessment. For the participants, fatness depends upon others. Fatness emerged in relations with family, friends, acquaintances, strangers, and within the larger social world; fatness is clearly not discovered, experienced, or lived in isolation. The main relational themes that emerged were comparative dysfunctionality and being *read* by others as fat. The following sections will explore *how* fatness—insofar as fatness can be called an experience or a particular constellation of instances of being—depends upon others.

Relational Comparisons

In this section, I give examples of instances where the discovery of one's body as fat are given in relation to others, and I emphasize those aspects of these instances which evoke the theme of otherness.

Example 1

First, I will offer an evocative moment described by Carl, where he recognizes his bodily difference in relationship to what he cannot do and what others can. This recognition (in the mirror of the other classmates) is then confirmed by being “commented on by other kids.”

I do remember a time in grade school sitting, I think we were all in a gymnasium for an assembly and we were all sitting on the floor with our with our knees up. I was sitting with some other kids, and they were they were doing this thing where they were bending forward and putting their head between their knees. And and I tried and I couldn't; my stomach was too big. It was in the way. [laughs] and umm and I remember that being this thing of like a comment like that with something to be commented on by their kids. And it's just like, “hey, look Carl can't do this. His stomach's too big. It gets in the way.” And I'm sure that was not the first time that it ever seemed like... my body was nonstandard. ...But that's that's the one that comes to mind as a you know, as a moment of realization, like, oh, I not only am I not the right shape, but I can't do things that other kids can do ...because I'm in this I'm in this larger body.

In this moment, Carl seems to be seeing himself as fat, discovering his fatness, in relation to what other people can do, and what he cannot do. As such, it is tempting to examine this primarily as an instance in which Carl's body interrupts him in the enactment of his aims. But also prevalent is the way that other people comment and affirm this difference—in his form and abilities—as a difference that makes a difference (borrowing Gregory Bateson's phrasing). There

are, no doubt, many differences available to notice (e.g., hair color, first names, location in the room). Something about Carl's difference makes a difference, though, both to Carl or to the kids noticing him. The fact that this happens in two steps makes one wonder whether the first (discovering body difference) would have occurred without the second (relationality). In other words, would the recognition of bodily difference register without the confirmation by the others? It depends on them at two levels: first, it emerges in comparison, which of course depends upon there being something with which to compare; and it depends on others' registration and commenting on this difference. Some differences are commented on and affirmed by others such that they register as meaningful differences. These seem to be the differences that make a difference—that become relevant features of one's world. Carl discovers his body-difference as one that arouses attention and limits motility. Or, he discovers a comparative limitation in motility which arouses others' interest and which is attributed—by others and by Carl—to his body difference. That there is no clear causal chain here — *who noticed first? was is the limitation to motility that first aroused interest or was it the body difference that had people already noticing?*—is relevant, because it seems to enshrine or anticipate a state of uncertainty about both others' motives and one's body's status that, in phenomenological terms, may sediment over successive instances like this one into something like an embodied disposition or comportment.⁵

Carl told me that because of his body composition and size—which Carl described as “an XL never an XXL,”—he gravitated to activities and settings in which his (self-avowed) comparative incapacity went unnoticed. He participated in sports, but found he was often too

⁵ This resembles the social psychology construct of ‘attributional ambiguity,’ but it also evokes Fields and Fields’ (Fields & Fields, 2022) work in examining attribution practices as instruments of racialization.

small for the ones requiring someone very strong or large, and too large for ones involving speed and agility. There is a pattern of not-fitting that Carl experienced as a feature of his body; but this early scene—where difference and incapacity are made figural by comparison and others’ commentary—calls that into question.

In Carl’s and some of the other participants’ recollections, the issue of fatness—its relevance in a social setting or interaction—looms, whether it is explicitly referenced or not. As an adolescent, for example, Carl was “always thinking about what other people might be thinking in terms of my size when they saw me. Like, are they thinking ‘this is a fat guy?’” Or, Carl continued, “can I conceal it long enough that they can get to know me and then we’ll ignore the fact that I’m fat? ... Then it doesn’t really have to be an issue.” Carl explained that his fatness was not ‘an issue’ with his close friends. As an adult who identifies as sometimes fatter, sometimes less fat, Carl enjoys the love and appreciation of a romantic partner, but he has struggled to accept that she appreciates his body. Even when this is explicated—as it was when, once, she compared him to a Greek statue— he tends to suspect she is motivated by kindness, not making an honest assessment; he struggles to accept that she loves his body, and thinks rather that she loves him despite his body. Carl is careful to indicate that he *believes* that his partner is sincere, her appreciation real. But his felt response, “how I react to it,” in the moment, is to dismiss it, even comparing it to a scenario in which one person offers to pay for dinner when both partners know it is the other who will be paying for the meal. “It’s a kind gesture, but it’s performative.”

The scenes above trace a trajectory of relational embodiment for Carl. The elementary school scene in which someone points out his difference as a difference that makes a difference, and established both in a comparative incapacity and a calling out or noticing by others. This

served to establish 1. A program of avoiding gestural environments in which Carl's sense of incapacity would become figural, 2. A pattern of thinking, perhaps a fantasy, in which Carl the (unquestioned) fact of his fatness can be overcome so long as other of Carl's attributes can be allowed to emerge, rendering fat no longer an issue and 3. an uncertainty about the origin of the problem and the completeness of the solution (2), such that it hovers around Carl's experiences of others' intentions.

Example 2

In the next example, from Eddy, we find that the attribution of fatness isn't just established in interactions with others, but where an important relationship seems to be complicated by attending to fatness.

My dad tried to incentivize me to lose five pounds by telling me that he would give me a dollar if I lost one pound two dollars for the second pound. Three dollars for the third coat and so on, up to five, and I earned a dollar over and over and over and over and over again by gaining and losing that first pound. And so, you know, in retrospect, I think my mom thought this was the most obnoxious thing in the world. And in retrospect, ... I kind of do, too. I feel like it was a fairly overt way of trying to manipulate a kid who also wanted to earn some allowance. So, then it put me a little more on the spot in terms of really monitoring all the things I was doing for short periods of time, as long as the attention span of a nine to ten year-old is to focus on a task like that. And he would take me with him to the YMCA to play squash or to get some exercise. And I think, for him, it was father/son time.... And it was. I really enjoyed it. But at the same time, looking back on it, there was an ulterior motive there, that was very much, like, I think he was concerned about me being tubby. ... It was his way of trying to help. Right? And, and it

backfired in the sense that this is one of the primary things that I remember about my relationship with him: It's him trying to get me not fat.

Weight loss has not been a focus of this research, but it is relevant, here, that Eddy no longer appears to be or identifies as fat or overweight. He appeared very lean, and remembered how he discovered cycling—something he could do with his father, and something he could do well, even before losing weight—and he competed in the sport in college. During our interview Eddy described a period of time when he and his father enjoyed biking and camping trips, and the emphasis was not on body-change. These sounded like happy memories, and I was surprised by Eddy's conclusion in the quotation above that his father's outwardly successful campaign to urge body change while engaging in bonding 'backfired' because, in retrospect, the pressure to change feels 'primary' in his memory of childhood experiences with his father. (Here, I wondered if he was prioritizing the antifat sentiment as a gentle respond to what he viewed as my expectations, or the demand characteristic of the project.) When I asked Eddy about this in our second interview, he shared that he had been reconsidering his positions with respect to fitness and body acceptance, in part because of recent social movements in body positivity, in activists' raising awareness of common cause between fat-shamed people and other marginalized groups. Also, he shared, his daughter had gained some weight during the Covid-19 pandemic and he felt the need to be very careful to avoid, if possible, transmitting an unwarranted sense of dissatisfaction in response to his daughter's body change.

The other salient detail in Eddy's quotation, above, which I had not noticed or connected to other prominent details of his lifeworld, was his acknowledging that his father's plan for incentivizing his weight loss "put me a little more on the spot in terms of really monitoring all the things I was doing for short periods of time, as long as the attention span of a nine to ten

year-old is to focus on a task like that.” Reading this sentence while also listening to the recording, I have the sense that Eddy is saying that his father’s incentives encouraged Eddy to hone his skills in monitoring himself and his activities as well as focusing on measurable tasks. I *think* he is saying that as obnoxious as it was, his father’s intervention encouraged a skillset that Eddy still employs. There are lots of things to measure and monitor as a geoscientist, of course, and Eddy also shared that one of his abiding joys as a cyclist is the ability to monitor one’s abilities and measure performance. But I could not make any sense of the phrase “on the spot.”

Eddy also monitors his fatness or, in his case, his thinness. Eddy shared that after his weight loss, the specific fit of clothing became of special concern. Eddy noted that while he paid little attention to his pants, he was very careful in his selection of shirts. They had to be fitted enough, he said, such that an observer could not look at his torso and imagine that his shirts concealed any of the telltale signs of fatness for men—belly, love handles, breasts.

When Eddy divulged this, it reminded me of something William and I discussed—namely, that significant weight loss sometimes leaves significant evidence of previous fatness, or of itself, in the form of loose skin. Whereas John, above, averred that he always felt fat, even when he was skinny, William’s observation was that even when he is skinny, or skinnier, he is still fat. With this in mind, I asked Eddy, “Do you see any evidence of your fatness on your body?” Eddy replied that he felt keenly aware of his body and sometimes ‘felt’ fatter after missing a workout, even though he believed it an unreasonable feeling and he paid attention for any evidence of body change that might signal weight gain or fatness. Seatbelts, Eddy averred, offered special opportunity and special concern. “I’m always kind of aware of how the seat belt comes across my lap there and whether there’s a tiny little fold of what might just be skin with no fat underneath it. But it doesn’t matter to me. It’s an awareness that that’s a place where fat would be, and where it might be today.”

But, as to my question about whether he sees evidence of fatness on his body, Eddy answered,

“No,” adding, after a several second pause: *“I look all the time. That’s how I know.”*

Example 3

In the following example from James in his early teen years, there is, again, an instance of a relation to family that is organized around anticipating the other’s response to fatness as not right, something that is “gross.” We have already seen that James grew up in a family where fatness and dieting were very common. But James recalled a stark divide between his father, who was always lean and did not appear to struggle with issues of weight or preoccupations with food, and James, James’ mother and siblings, who were frequently eating conspicuously, or dieting, and struggling with their weight. Here is the vignette involving James and his father.

“I remember one time I was eating peanut butter out of a jar with my hands,” James recalled, and then paused, perhaps to let me get a picture in mind or register that he understood this as an unconventional practice. “Yeah,” James said, concluding the pause, before recalling how his father walked in on him and, alarmed, demanded

“What the hell are you doing eating peanut butter with your hand?!”

“I don’t know,” James recalled replying. But what comes next is of particular interest.

“And I thought: *‘You’re going to yell at me for being fat.’*

Because I was like, Yeah, it is kind of gross. I mean, peanut butter over my hand? It’s gross. And he was like, “use a spoon” or something like he was just kind of like, like just trying to. Tell me to not eat/ not stick my hands in the peanut butter jar, which is totally reasonable, but he wasn’t trying to comment on my weight, though at the time he probably was like, ‘This guy’s getting fat.’

Here, James expects an intervention—or at least censure—by his father which does not occur. He is eating peanut butter in a manner that is both unconventional and potentially unhygienic. Clearly it does not accord with the customs of the home; James emphasizes this in his telling. He is caught in the act by his father, who questions him sharply, “*what the hell are you doing....*”. The scene is one of *getting caught*, which may be characterized by an abrupt shift in what James notices, attends to, prioritizes in the scene. It is not an overreach to say that it is a very different experience to indulge in a forbidden practice alone in the kitchen, and to do so under scrutiny by one’s father. And up to this moment, we are witnessing a scene of being caught, abruptly becoming an object of another’s attention, perhaps shame.⁶ But what happens *next* particularized this experience to James and, perhaps, to fatness or experiences/states of affairs like fatness. Because James makes a curious interpretive or attributional move, here. After being caught in his father’s gaze, he thinks ‘*you’re going to yell at me for being fat.*’ For James, there appears to be a chain of associations between being gross, eating inappropriately, and being fat. What James sees his father witnessing is his fatness. James anticipates censure not for what he has *done*, but for what he *is*.

James’ father, instead, remains focused on his unconventional and messy means of conveyance of the snack. When he enjoined James to ‘use a spoon,’ there is relief. James’ father *wasn’t*, in the end, to upbraid him for his fatness. But *why* is there relief at not being chastised for fatness, only for behaving unhygienically? Why is it preferable to be dirty and transgressive than to be fat? There is room here for debate. It may be that James felt relief because his father did not impugn *anything* about him. He reserves his censure for James’ behavior, not anything about

⁶ An interesting example of this dynamic of shame in the face of the other is found at the final scene of *Lord of the Flies* (Golding, 1987)

James' character or generalized conduct. He does not say 'you are fat,' but he also does not say 'you are gross,' or 'you're always doing gross things; stop it.' He just tells him to use a spoon.

There is also room to explore the possibility that James felt *abandoned* by his father in this moment. If James was struggling with a sense of himself as fat he may have anticipated, with some hope, something like an intervention in which a hitherto-tolerated or ignored problem is no longer allowed to operate without explicitly naming and addressing it *as* a problem and, importantly, offering a coherent way to address it.

James and I did not explore this possibility—in part because our second interview, when I might have brought it up, was almost entirely taken up with discussing a personal tragedy in his family—the death of his older brother—which took place after our first meeting. I do not have notes that clearly support when the question of abandonment emerged in the thematic analysis, though. So, it is also possible that I developed it *after* the second interview and that its content, abandonment, may have been prompted by James loss) But, even in this reading of the scene, it remains of interest that fatness's status can be so contingent upon the relational dynamics in which it is figural or ignored, repressed. The topic of fatness *as* repressed, which at first blush appears absurd—what could be more irrepressible than corpulence?—deserves further consideration, especially as an alternative hypothesis to Leder's absent body framework for living unproblematically in a problematized body. Further research, and research that more directly engages with psychoanalysis could take this up.⁷

⁷ The first depends on being unobserved and the second depends upon being abruptly observed after being alone. Please note that in both of these scenes, the lifeworld existential of relationality—the intentional structure of being-in-relation to others—still obtains. In the second moment, the moment of being caught, the other intrudes upon the solitude of the indulgence of an unsanctioned and transgressive snack. But the other is no less important in the moment before the solitude is broken, because that moment depends on the other's conventions being temporarily held in abeyance or rendered null. Whether the boy is thoughtlessly shoveling peanut

There is a coda to the vignette, above. After relating the scene of being caught, anticipating censure, relief (or disappointment) when censure does not arrive, and James' father's more behavior-oriented injunction to 'use a spoon,' James retains the conviction that his father was probably thinking 'this guy's getting fat.' James' father is not directly commenting on his weight, but in his father's comment, there is a recognition of something more that James hears or expects to hear. And more precisely, James feels like "this guy," an attribution that seems to announce a separation, distance, or difference between father and son. This dynamic couples relationality (as social interaction) and fatness through affects that bind the two together. In the above example, the anticipation of his father's strong affect ("you're going to yell at me")—whether it appears or not—evokes a kind of relational attending, even if aggressively so.

Example 4

The next example is borrowed from the first chapter where I focused on the case of John. John grew into his fatness as an ambivalent identity in relation to a nickname, Tubbs:

So, in some ways the nickname Tubbs kind of grew and grew, um, and sort of became something that I really used with like a sense of humor and, in a way, of ownership.

As I discussed above, John started to identify with the name Tubbs as a way of defending against a worse fate, being identified as a fat person who was sensitive to and vulnerable to taunting and

butter in a state of unconcerned reverie, or whether he is actively delighting in the viscosity of transgression, the intentional relation to the other remains central. In reverie there is a falling away from or a relaxing of the other's conventions and expectations [note the intentional structures, away from and of here]; to delight in transgression, the other is even more obviously relevant; to enjoy transgression—for the peanut butter to taste better because it is eaten in a manner that would bring censure—is to acknowledge the validity of the rules one is breaking. Both of these experiences have the other—as absent—as a condition. So, phenomenologically, we can say that this fairly idiosyncratic instance of unsanctioned or transgressive eating, which is conditioned by the other-as-absent, is a mode of the existential, relationality.

slights. Other people identified him as Tubbs, and in that way (by that name) he was welcomed into the social order where identity is formed.

Nicknames and bullying pervade the stories told by each participant. And in each case, there is a sense of pain and also of ambivalence. Fatness becomes a social position in the world, and I am “that there” for myself is always already I am “that there” for others. Here, again, is John:

If I’m in a good place and I’m thinking about other things and I’m not thinking about my body particularly, and then I catch that glimpse of myself or someone points [it] out, [or] someone says something [or] teases me, when I was a kid. Then you get on that thought loop—and it’s really hard to get out of it—of just being like I’m fat. I’m ugly. I’m ashamed of myself.

Example 5

Gregory was never sure whether to attribute the awkward feelings he felt, and other people’s stares, to his body-size or to ‘the biracial thing.’ Gregory shared stories about growing up as a large, black, biracial boy in Queens with his diminutive, white, Jewish mother. Gregory was always big, he said, bigger than most peers, but he did not primarily think of himself as fat, and he does not recall having been identified by others as fat or obese. Early in the interview Gregory wondered whether he met inclusion criteria, for this reason.

So I think I did kind of feel like kind of, unwieldly. I always had to get like a bigger sized sneakers and things like that, so I just kind of felt like a big kid and I did feel like, you know. Yeah, I just say big is the word, as opposed to fat. You know, it’s really hard to say, Sean, because it gets mixed up with all kinds of other stuff, you know? It gets mixed up with, you know, the sort of the biracial stuff and feeling different as a result of that,

and having self-consciousness related to that. ... My memory of it is kind of jumbled up in and unclear.

To illustrate how things felt unclear, Gregory related scenes of shopping with his mother in the supermarket, which regularly aroused attention from onlookers. Gregory explained that this was “the attention of realizing that someone is seeing you and they are seeing you as different.”

When you're biracial and especially when you don't have two parents to kind of explain that, you know, you are like you're going to get the person [who pauses and stares]. And I do this. You know, you see some kid, you see some brown kid with like a white parent and you're like, 'OK, interesting.' And as the as the person making that observation, that's like literally like it's like a two or three second thing. Maybe it's a little bit longer, you know, and it means nothing, really, ... just that I'm seeing something a little different and I'm intrigued by it. But as a kid... I was sensitive to that. And it's not a good feeling to feel like you're being scrutinized in some way. It feels like something is different about me and that is drawing attention. And I don't want to be different, you know?

As Gregory remembered it, “you go into Waldbaums [a grocery store in New York City at the time] and you see people looking at you.” And while he was careful to acknowledge his own “self-consciousness” and that these scenes in the stores were not sites of trauma, or horror scene— “It wasn't like I felt I was in some demonic possession film, and every face is turning towards you”—there was an atmosphere of unease and uncertainty around these stares from store patrons watching Gregory shopping with his white mother. Under these conditions Gregory's body-size difference did not feel figural, though, of course, there is a resonance here in terms of the unspoken but felt attributions of difference in the gaze of others.

Example 6

Pierre's account of growing up in Christian religious communities in Australia resonated with Gregory's experience that body-difference and other aspects of identity complicated one another. Comparison was also central, here. Pierre's family moved several times during his childhood, he said, and Pierre recalls that he frequently compared his family to others in his church community. Pierre's family was less economically stable than the other families in the community:

I think my feeling of being fat was always about being an outsider as well. And so I would compare myself to other kids. They're skinny. And to even equate that to *oh. They're better people. They come from better stock.* ... The [people] who I was comparing myself with often came from better families or, you know, kind of more stable families... And so I always felt that being fat was somehow akin to being *less than*.

Exclusion from relationship

It seems that for the participants, the experience of fatness was also a point of access or barr to access to other people. This takes a number of forms. In the above examples, fatness was not just a denied access to others but a particular form of access—to the other's disgust, to their attention, to their comments, and to their nomination (in the etymological sense of 'giving or calling by a name'). In other words, it is a mode of access to relationships with others.

Exclusion, perhaps paradoxically, refers to a mode of access to others. The notion of relationality as an existential allows us to consider various manner of relation as modes of relationality. Exclusion is a mode of being in relation. A number of the participants in the study discussed a sense of isolation, specifically from romantic involvement. Here is an example from William:

The first time I, like, looked down, and was like like/ I don't know when that/ I think that was probably around puberty, when I started to want to be with someone else [romantically or sexually]. And then I started getting rejected and I started looking for reasons. And that [fatness] was the most, outward looking reason. ... When you see, when I would see who the person would decide to start dating, then it would always be definitely not a fat kid. So I would always/ it would always go back to that, for me, again. I think that's kind of like when I actually started, like looking down, and judging myself as fat...And then that's when I began to like actually like probably judge myself against that, against or judge my body trying to look at it through other people's eyes and why they wouldn't accept me for whatever reason. Yeah.

Here, William looks down—both in the sense of surveying his body as something that explains the rejection, and in thinking ill of himself—on his body, seeking an explanation for being rejected by romantic interests. William finds himself barred access romantic experience, so he 'started looking for reasons.' Casting his eyes 'down,' he finds his body—which had already been coded fat and different in a hundred schoolyard taunts—awaiting conscription in the service of explanation. The vignette reads as something paradigmatic about fat social undesirability. The rejection happens and then the reasons are sought. Readily available is the body, just lurking there. Notably, There is something is the *attributional* about this process/experience. This is not the lived body as it is emphasized in Merleau-Ponty or Csordas, where the body is a *medium* for experience and understanding. This is a body as an object that explains the lived body's frustration. This body bars the lived body from its amorous ambitions. This is a body that is lived, too, though, insofar as it must be *borne*. Here, the body is summoned from below to serve in explanation for the other's rejection.

The second notable moment in this encounter is William's use of 'judging myself as fat.' He appears to mean both that after encounters like this he began to *esteem* or *assess* himself as a fat person, but also 'judging' in the sense of condemning himself as fat, which is to say unworthy of the other's affection and, perhaps, to blame for the body that makes him unworthy.

Conclusion

A focus on relationality brought out the theme of comparative incapacity which, upon examination, revealed how the other mediates fat experience in multiple ways; first, as offering points of comparison and secondly as the witnesses and commentators who vivify the difference of fatness as a central meaningful difference. Further, an atmosphere of uncertainty as to the origin of the body-difference also characterizes this scene which may link to moments in later life when others' inscrutability evoke feelings of fat attribution. Another theme here is that the presence of the other—as always at least in part inscrutable—arouses questions. In some instances these questions can only be answered or explained by the body as socially undesirable, or as a problem. In the case of the *mistakenly* anticipated fat-naming—James, above—this is also operative, because James has learned to anticipate that the answer to anxious question the other provokes involves his fatness. The above examples help to thematize the lived experience of fatness in relation to others.

Chapter Seven: Temporality. Childhood fatness and time.

In this chapter I will explore some thematic material that emerged when I examined the data in light of the existential dimension of temporality, or lived time, applied to the men's accounts of fatness. Time has already emerged in several ways important, thematically, in this project. In the chapter on John, above, we see how recollection of fatness evinces temporal horizons that raise questions about the relationship between the body and memory. In the chapter on embodiment we found the experience of fatness marked by temporal elements—phases of discovery, moving into a world already populated or ornamented with others' expectations, moments of arrest—which invite a consideration of childhood/adolescent development in terms of the active construals and uncertain meanings, pointing to issues of relationality. Vignettes examined for what they might reveal about relationality are thick with time, too, as the moments of hesitation and ambivalent relief (as with James' peanut butter scene), moments of confirming long held suspicions.

Also relevant is the fact that this study design asked adults to talk about experiences from long ago, to try to share something about the experiences, recall how they thought and felt about things *then*, and then reflect upon these matters from their current perspective. This allowed for glimpses, however cursory or provisional, of how the men recall their childhood fatness in different ways in different times. In what follows, I will sketch out two temporal themes, *the problem of the future for fat* and *solutions that are fixations*.

The problem of the future for fat

Childhood fatness is coordinated by the expectation that it is a *temporary* fatness. Most of the men I spoke with discovered their fatness in different ways at different times in their youth, but most experienced their fatness as state of affairs that either summoned particular explanation,

or intervention, or both. In this sense these fat experiences anticipated more recent comical and critical voices examining fatness as obtaining social legibility only insofar as it is ‘read’ as a pathology or a problem to be dissolved via labor and starvation, regardless of the probability of success of such a program (L. Crawford, 2017; Rothblum, 2018; West, 2016) West observed that the “way we are taught to think about fatness is that fat is not a permanent state. You’re just a thin person who’s *failing* consistently for your whole life” (Glass, 2016, np).

Recall Carl’s ride home from the doctor’s office, where he and his mother had received the diagnoses. Carl paraphrased the doctor in this way: “hey, you’re overweight for your age ... for your age and your height, so you need to be doing something to take care of that.” Later in our conversation, Carl remarked, “there’s really this interesting mixed messaging when it comes to...being diagnosed as overweight.” It is introduced as a problem, as “this thing that you should be worried about. But we don’t have a plan for you to fix it.” And again, “you’re too fat, or you’re too heavy, your weight is a danger to you. So go deal with that.” John, too, remembered feeling a strange sense of *mystery*, or a gap or *aporia*, between the problem of fatness and the promise of a solution. Several of the men describe a strange *aporia*, of sorts, between being told there is something wrong with them and understanding how to fix it. The men differed regarding what to make of it. John appeared to be at a loss for accounting for this odd *aporia*.

Acknowledging that weight management strategies were known and available to him, he wondered why he did not avail himself of them until his 20s. Carl believed that nutritional information has been inconsistent, and pointed out that high-carbohydrates, low-fat diets were considered best during his childhood, in contrast to today. Without positing a reason for the phenomenon as observed by the men—that childhood fatness appears as a problem whose solution is somehow shrouded—I want to highlight its temporal dimension. A child is *told* about

a future in which he will have changed, urged to accomplish this future. Even in a situation where the information (however dubious) is provided, there is a quality of non-experience (experience whose intentional object is a changed body in a future without precedent – most children have not shrunk before) are levels of abstraction, in stark contrast to more densely available experiences that appear more immediately. Weight loss may be an object of perception only with the addition of tools of measurement or a memory already devoted to its project. So an adult man may recall that he was in possession of all information needed to commence a weight loss regimen and *still* feel an odd puzzlement that it somehow didn't *feel* like he knew. Talia Welsh (2014) makes the point that fluctuations in weight are not themselves available to perception, but instead are distributed on a temporal horizon. Further, body changes, rather than experienced, are represented via tools -- BMI indexes, scales, clothing that fits or doesn't. There is a lack of immediacy to the notion of change in body. The change called for or warned against by parents is shrouded, not apparent. There is a manifest nature of fatness, but in calling for change there is a set of conducts gestured to but not explained, or represented but not experientially given.

Preston, who described himself as obese and who had, at the time of our interview, recently undergone bariatric surgery, recalled that his parents—both healthcare professionals—warned him that his fatness may pose a threat to his health. But he also recalled that it “was difficult for me because they also gave me, you know, they let me make my own choice.”

Preston struggled with managing his fatness throughout his life.

Carl's reflections suggest a simpler explanation: Shame rather than aporia. On the one hand he recalled feeling that he wasn't being helped with this problem. Upon reflection, though, Carl allowed that there were “options to get help,” including gyms and diets. But he also

remembered the message that he would “need to participate in this rehabilitation program until your weight goes down ... like it was a punishment. Because I had I had misbehaved. I mismanaged my weight. And so now I knew I was being punished for it with a diet or with an exercise program or whatever, as opposed to I'm in a situation where I need help and I'm going to be aided.” In this sense, the problem without a solution gives way to a (dubious?) solution that is itself a problem.

What is interesting about these examples is that the child does not seem to understand, really, the import of the parents' or doctors' warnings. They are troubled by the comments but the connection between one's agency and the unwanted fate or present reality is opaque. There is a surprise in being called out, followed by a rising awareness that something is wrong, but *a marked absence of awareness of bodily agency*. Young (1990), in her gloss of Merleau-Ponty, observes: “There is a world for a subject just insofar as the body has capacities by which it can approach, grasp, and appropriate its surroundings in the direction of its intentions” (p.148). There is a sense in which these vignettes furnish the body as a problem, and not a location of capacity. (There is something about the body's *ability to act* that characterizes subjectivity and its world.) Similarly, the fat body here encountered is a *bodily problem without an embodied solution*.

It may be important to note, in anticipation of the following section, that the three participants above, Carl, John and Preston's interviews also included considerable discussion about the ways in which each man reckoned with themes of responsibility and acceptance – of the differences between the body they anticipated or were expected to accomplish and the body that is theirs, as well as with limitations thereof. Each of the men has explored adopting new ways of construing the meanings surrounding their body, sometimes with resignation and regret,

sometimes with what sounded a kind of newfound warmth and appreciation. Carl shared his experience of abandoning the ideal bodies that captured him in his youth and against which he suffered in comparison, in exchange for a sense of the body allowing him to meet his goals and responsibilities. John expressed a fondness for his ability to play with his daughter. Preston's reckonings were more challenging and vexed, but he nonetheless appeared to be actively engaged with themes of acceptance.

Solution fixation

If the vignettes above suggested a temporal arc in which fatness begins in something like mystery--a problem of the body without an embodied solution, an impasse against the future and culminating in, or punctuated by, an acceptance and appreciation limitations, what follows thematizes a very different dimension of fat experience in a temporal horizon.

Erik discovered a solution to his fatness in a manner that struck me, and him, as particular. He recalls a moment around age 11, 12 or 13 when he discovered he could alter his posture and, as if overnight, overcome his fatness.

Erik is a developmental psychologist working in the Eastern United States. describes a happy marriage and family life. Erik expressed pride at his wife's and his children's accomplishments as well as their athleticism and physical fitness. His wife and children reflect something that Erik values and feels he has achieved, physical fitness and prowess, which was threatened by fatness in his childhood.

Erik was in third grade when his parents moved the family from an urban metropolis on the West coast of the United States to a nearly rural suburb in New Jersey. According to Erik, nothing about his body difference had aroused any interest or concern until he moved from the city setting to suburban New Jersey. "My body appearance, how my body felt physically, um,

what I was able to do with my body: None of that stuff, at least in my recall, became, was ever an issue when I was in [West coast city]. And yet it was an enormous issue, almost right of the bat, when we moved to New Jersey.” Erik attributed this to his lack of physical fitness and the increased emphasis on sports skills in the peer groups in New Jersey to which he sought access. After the move, Erik remembered that he was “definitely overweight” and “pudgy.” He was called “Fat-so” and comparisons to the Pillsbury Doughboy were made. Erik’s story of discovering the problem of his fatness echoed others’ accounts in some ways, especially in the way that fatness first became figural in comparisons and measures of ability. Soon, though, Erik’s account shifted. After sharing at some length about the move across country, his comparative lack of “conditioning” and athletic prowess—I particularly enjoyed his pointed criticisms of 1980s era Presidential fitness exams—Erik described discovering a *solution* to his fatness, something he remembered but had not shared before:

There was a moment in sixth grade that I was looking myself in the mirror and feeling so disgusted by how my stomach looked that I decided to myself, *that's it. You're sucking in your gut. You're not going to look like this anymore.* [inaudible]

Later, Erik amends the account to note that he was not looking in the mirror but looking *down* at his stomach, from above.

And so I started doing that...Like, I boosted my posture up. I held my stomach in; not with my hands, but just kind of like, you know, you hold it in with the stomach muscles. *And I looked at myself in the mirror. I was like, wow, you're not/ that's not fat anymore.* And so, I've been doing that ever since. So [it has been] thirty-seven years of that behavior. And I will never stop....You would not look at me now and think ‘that's a fat guy’ at all. I mean, I work out. I'm in perfectly fine shape. I have a cardiologist. I know

I'm very healthy. I'm all good. But back then, that was when I made that decision. It was in sixth grade. And to my knowledge, I don't think I have/ I don't think anyone's called me fat since. And it's not like it's hard to do. It's just the way you carry yourself, and I'm sure I'm not the only person who does that. that's something that no one has ever heard. That story.

I was struck, here, by the intensity with which Erik averred he would 'never stop,' the finality of it, by the stark before/after quality to the vignette, and by his announcing that it is something he has never shared. It seemed to have the quality of a conversion story, and to carry an import not *quite* supported by the actual events described. I even wondered initially if I had understood Erik. (When I later asked him if what he described was, in effect, a "new posture," I worried I had failed to reflect an appreciation for the significance of the moment.) I asked Erik to say more about the postural alteration – was it really simply 'sucking in' his 'gut'? Erik confirmed. At one point I asked whether it was volitional, something he could elect *not* to do. "no. Never. Can't do it. Won't do it." A minute later Erik explained: "Oh, I can *relax*. I mean, you know, if I'm exercising, stretching, that kind of thing. ...But it's not something/ I'm not going to walk around looking like that, ever. I would *never*." Sensing the intensity of his commitment, here, I asked Erik what it would be to imagine 'relaxing,' in this way.

"It would be It would be terrible, actually. I think. I can't. I can't. The idea of looking like that is so anathema to me, I would find it so repulsive. I can't stand it. And this is an issue ... the one the one thing that I cannot tolerate in myself, and it's very hard for me to deal with other people, is obesity or being very overweight."

Erik explained that this intolerance stands out as an exception to his being otherwise very accepting in his personal and professional life—he noted, in particular, approval and affinity for

Black Lives Matter and disabilities activism. Fat acceptance and a greater tolerance of diversity in this regard, Erik said, is something that he gets, on “a cognitive level,” but that “it doesn’t matter because that’s one issue of my psyche.” One issue about which Erik said he is “never going to grow up and never going to advance.”

He then concluded with a confessional summing up of his deeply held convictions about fatness: “Like, that’s disgusting.”⁸

⁸ Here, we see a rhetorical strategy in which the speaker pivots from acting as a commentator on himself to performing, for the listener, the character or attitude he is trying to evince. E.g., *I don’t like vanilla ice cream; I’m like, ‘yuck.’* It’s an act of conveying in the present moment what the speaker *would* say or *does* say when confronted with a given stimulus or put in a given situation. First, he explains himself—*because of what I have been through I can’t embrace these ideas, despite my acknowledgement that my recalcitrance is regressive or immature.* Then he puts on display the reaction or response. This does not sound strange if we reverse the sequence – someone says ‘yuck’ and then, upon reflection, attempts to offer an explanation for his disgust. In that case there is a response and it calls for or admits of an explanation or analysis. But here, the explanation/analysis is already offered. What’s the point of saying ‘yuck?’ In Erik’s case, further, he punctuates an erudite explanation with a visceral response. We were talking about the various developmental factors contributing to Erik’s tendency toward rigidity regarding fat acceptance. But something was missing. “That’s disgusting” supplied what had not been explained. It also performs a shift from attending to aspects of Erik—ones that may explain his response to fatness—to aspects of the object, fatness. (It can be compared to a performative utterance, at least in the sense that it alters the reality in which it intervenes—it changed the kind of conversation we were having—or that it creates what it describes, disgust. I am wary of assigning it the status of a performative in the sense that Butler makes use of the concept, though, because it does not seem to have the forced choice and not-quite-conscious elements attending to performativity in successively sedimented discursive/historical practice. But let’s consider: ‘That’s disgusting’ is an utterance that distances the speaker from the object of his disgust while at the same time enacting or perpetuating the disgust that the object arouses; it performs a kind of sleight of hand whereby the disgust is explained by the attributes of the object and not by the history of the speaker-- *that’s* disgusting; it warns the listener that we are now in the vicinity not of opinion but of affectivity—where ideas meet the body and, in this case, make it recoil. Now, if we can imagine this kind of verbal- interactional/interpersonal-affective ‘performance’ replayed or re-staged in various settings and in different configurations something like a social sedimentation of performativity comes into view.).

Here, Erik was describing his position toward fatness—that it is disgusting and anathema in himself and difficult to tolerate in others—as at once a dearly held conviction, and, at the same time, he offers it as an instance of developmental arrest.

I expressed my surprise at his casting the embrace of fat acceptance as a developmental achievement, albeit one he felt certain he would never attain. Here, Erik invoked his knowledge-base in developmental psychology to give an account of his position. Erik noted that bullying and harassment are associated with fat-shaming:

If you experience that as a kid, I don't think that ever goes away...There are a couple of big broad class pathways through development. ...One of the long-term outcomes of having been bullied, harassed, is anxiety and depression and all these kind of negative psychological distress kinds of outcomes.⁹

The *other* outcome, Erik said, is “the path I’m on...

You remember the reasons that those kinds of things happen. You find ways to prevent that from happening. You don't ever want to let go of the things you've done to kind of rise above those experiences. And There end up being a lot of cognitions around like a win versus loss kind of scenario. Like, screw you guys.... I'm successful.

Erik is citing research, if casually, but he is also making an argument to explain his intransigence around issues of fatness and a certain emphasis on win-loss thinking. According to this argument, fatness is associated with bullying and harassment and those predict poor psychological outcomes. He is saying, further, that this vulnerability can be mitigated by

⁹ Erik may have been referring, here, to the findings that people who were bullied in childhood showed increased levels of psychological distress later in life, and that victims of frequent bullying had higher rates of depression and anxiety disorders (Dantchev, Hickman, Heron, Zammit, & Wolke, 2019; Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014; Wolke, Copeland, Angold, & Costello, 2013).

successfully ‘rising above’ the circumstances that exposed one to bullying and harassment (and remaining vigilant), but that a corollary of this protection is a tendency toward cognitive rigidity and a tendency to link fitness to a competition.

To summarize what Erik has shared, we have Erik the scientist attributing the problems of childhood fatness to psychological outcomes resulting from bullying, trauma, threats of violence. We have Erik the child who, at age 12, discovers that he possesses the capacity to overcome his fatness—no one ever called him fat again. We have Erik the insightful adult who identifies this moment of decision, in which his triumph over fatness is paired with a gestural comportment, as also linked to a certain fixity in his thinking on the topic. In his account, he responded to threats to his psychological well-being by removing those threats—that is, by transforming himself such that he was no longer the object of those threats. Never again, he decided, and he *remains* decided, today, in exactly the same manner as he was when he was in sixth grade.

Erik’s account reflects something important about embodiment. Namely, that the shift gestural comportment—flexing and holding his abdominal muscles so as to flatten his abdominal profile—which was so powerfully effective when he discovered it, also inaugurated—augurs toward a future while also establishing the coordinates of possibility within that future—a sort of paradigm of agency by which Erik now lives and against which he judges himself and others. In Erik’s experience it was not very difficult to accomplish this solution, which is also relevant.

What is not clarified in this discussion is what it is that makes Erik’s characterizations of fatness so visceral and passionate. For him, fatness is “anathema,” “disgusting.” Here, there is a viscerality that is not quite justified or explained either by Erik’s own account—that escape from vulnerability makes one committed never to be re-exposed.. And this unexplained aspect may be

linked to the way in which causal relations are swapped, above. In Erik's telling, *bullying* or threats thereof pose a threat to well-being. And these threats are overcome by sucking in one's gut (as well as more conventional commitments of regular exercise). But what is anathema and disgusting is not the cause of the injury, bullying, but its target, the fat body. (Unless, of course, what Erik finds disgusting is a refusal to 'suck it up' and take the not very difficult steps—in his experience—of weight reduction and management. But this may be a corollary.)

Here, it is helpful to consider that there are different aspects of the body in psychological life, or perhaps different bodies. For Erik, there is a "body of consciousness" (Olkowski, 1982) whose contours can be manipulated (and from the inside!) so as to bring it into conformity with the field of expectations he has entered in arriving in a new social setting. This is a success, and the benefits it accrues to Erik include a sense of agency or dominion over the body and the social setting in which it obtains intelligibility and agency.

But what of the disgust? Is the disgust fatness prompts, here, an embodied response to the threat fatness poses against Erik's sense of self and success? If so, then posed against the 'conscious body'—the body over which Erik achieves conscious control—there is another body. There is a body that Erik associated with social exile and with motile incapacity, and while this is a body to which Erik avows he can 'never' return, it is also a body that is with him, always, threatening to exclude him from the life he has achieved by sucking it in. This body threatens to return when he relaxes. This is the anathema body—the body that is excommunicated, accursed, but also given up in sacrifice, another meaning of anathema. The visceral contractions of disgust Erik displays in response to the topic of fatness may dramatize not so much the finality of his

commitment to the embodied project of rejecting fatness as his response to the proximity of that body.¹⁰

At one point I asked Erik to tell me what it is to be ‘fat.’ “It’s to be out of shape,” he answered. And “it is to be not very well conditioned. It’s to be,” and here paused before saying Sloppy. It’s sloppy, and it shows. It reflects, like, you’re not really caring about yourself, I think...I find it personally disgusting. Like, I think I said earlier, it's the idea of getting fat and that is really anathema me. It's uh... Aside from, like anything they would have to do with harm coming to my family. It's one of the things that I would I would absolutely put it like a top 10 things I want never, ever to happen to me, ever.

It may be that fatness presents itself to Erik as such a cursed destiny, of course, because it has *already* happened to him.

Conclusion

This chapter as explored testimony about what sociologist Neumann (2022 calls ‘embodied negotiations,’ which refer both to processes of meaning making as well as the body’s capacity to be taken up and also resist these thematizations, over time. Fatness can emerge as a problem of the present demanding a future that is unrealizable, prompting an atmosphere of confusion or mystery. This can be remembered, in adulthood, as an atmosphere of insufficient support or of puzzlement. Fatness in these instances presents as an uncertainty about the future.

On the other hand, the case of Erik reveals a fixation around a gestural modification that achieves a solution to fatness and inaugurates a sense of agency and intolerance around the body.

¹⁰ That body is excommunicated (anathema), but of course excommunication need not entail exile. The excommunicated are cast out of community in the sense that they may no longer partake of the sacrament. But they live among us. They do not go away. They remain as the accursed, and take on special signifi- cance as cautions against ‘relaxing

It crystalized a sense of himself future as well as enshrining a cursed past that regulates his present life and judgements by threatening an intolerable future. Here, fatness is taken up in a mode of certainty about the past that perpetually acts upon the present.

Chapter Eight: Discussion and conclusion

The interviews and analyses explored in the previous chapters revealed a number of themes related to childhood fatness for boys and the men recollecting them. In this concluding chapter I will return to some of the major themes and read them against notions of masculinity—and to a lesser extent, health—which, although they were not explicated thematically in the interview data, subtended all the interview as ‘latent threads’ (Brooke, 2023).

“Otherwise Healthy...”

John was one of the first of the participants I interviewed, and in working with the interviews during analysis I was struck by the following comment, which he made—just after I had commenced recording our talk—while he was explaining his interest in this project:

I think if you're, kind of, an otherwise healthy and somewhat successful man, no one really gives a sh-t what you have to say about how your body image makes you feel. So, I thought about it a lot, but generally there's not, like, anywhere to talk about it.

When I first heard John’s comment, it seemed unremarkable: A bit curmudgeonly, implying a bit of vulnerability but mostly annoyance. Returning to it, though, after the analyses, it seems simultaneously to harbor something unifying about all the men of this project, as I will explicate, below. Importantly, too, the statement frames the issue of masculinity, which has subtended all the interviews and seemed to operate as a “latent thread” (Brooke, 2023) throughout the project, and makes possible a discussion of the research results in connection with some—admittedly less phenomenologically restrained—observations about the men who were the participants and the issue of becoming and being men. In this section I will treat the above statement as way to frame, retrospectively, a few aspects of this project. Looking at this

comment closely will allow me to say something about (a.) the men whose testimonies I solicited, gathered, examined and analyzed both for their explicit thematic content and also, at times, for their unspoken commitments or implications, (b.) the view—expressed by all of the participants—that childhood experiences of fatness posed significant challenges to them, and that responding to these challenges informed how they experience themselves and others, how they live as adult men in the world, as well as (c.) the thematic material that emerged when the men’s testimony was subjected to the hermeneutic analyses. Examining this statement closely, in light of the preceding analyses, also allows for a brief exploration of issues of masculinity, including (c.) the idea that that fatness may hold different meanings and implications for people who are men than it holds for persons socialized as women or who hold non-binary gendered positions, (d.) the curious absence of the *body* in John’s statement, and the themes of absence and distancing the body that may be especially relevant for masculinity, (e.) the idea—supported tacitly or explicitly by most participants—that fatness is not something men often discuss, which has until recently also been reflected by an absence in the literature, and which alludes to another theme. Finally, (f) this section will also acknowledge the *complaint* in John’s statement, and offer research of this kind as a partial response to an implied exhortation.

When John says he is ‘otherwise healthy and somewhat successful,’ he could be describing any of the men in this study. That is, the men I interviewed would meet criteria that John and many others intend by these terms. As I mentioned above, despite my somewhat broad inclusion criteria for this study (but probably because of my own social location and the networks along which my flyer circulated), the men who responded and served as my interviewees bear a number of similarities to one another, demographically. They are all between the ages of 30 and 60 years old, most of them cisgender and all but one are white or white-

presenting. Each of them is college-educated—among them is a scientist, a poet, a curator, two social workers, an entrepreneur, two professors, a IT specialist—and all were employed at the time of the interviews. As such, any one of them might be called ‘somewhat successful.’ Most of them, moreover, mentioned no explicit health issues presenting significant distress or functional impairments complicating their lives (with two exceptions). They are healthy and successful. Or, if they experience their fatness as a threat to health (as most of them do), then they are ‘otherwise healthy.’

But when John describes himself and others like him as ‘otherwise healthy’ and ‘successful,’ he also introduces a few important issues -- about fatness’ role in healthist discourse, and also about how he feels his status as a man prevents him from meriting compassionate attention to issues surrounding his body image and the feelings he has about it. First, he is announcing that health and fatness *concern* one another, and probably that the latter poses a threat to the former. Second, he is saying something about privilege, as I will discuss below.

I offered my rationale, above, for exploring fatness while actively holding in abeyance the tendency to regard fat or fatness as an indicator of poor health. But, of course, the men I spoke with in this study are not, themselves, critical phenomenologists, and while each of them expressed deep, particular, insights into the meaning of their experiences with childhood fatness, most of them also endorsed commonly held notions regarding fatness and health: These include the idea that fatness poses a threat to health; that a person is personally responsible for the maintenance of their health; that bodily health and well-being are related; that fatness is a property of the body and results from certain activities or inactivity; that fatness can be managed with food and exercise, and when it is not so managed, it indicates some failure on the part of the

person whose fatness is in question. As one participant put it, “there’s a certain shaming ... you have put yourself in this position because of your behavior. You've eaten too much or you've not exercised enough.” As adults, the men generally endorse the somewhat neat, obesity-discourse formulations that fatness refers to a bodily state, implies a failing of effort or will (or a disease), and can be remediated by alterations of habit or caloric intake. That is, they endorse the conviction that the solution to fatness is known and, in principle, within their ken and their field of possibility, as it were, if not within their particular grasp at the moment. The men express the view that, to extent to which they have allowed themselves to deviate from norms of non-fatness, they have also imperiled their health (and their success, for that matter). But they are ‘otherwise healthy.’

The analyses in the foregoing chapters, we have seen that the problem of fatness in childhood—in the first mode of discovery—does not resemble this neat and causal formulation. Instead, where fatness first emerges as a problem, it appears within a horizon that does not include that problem’s solution. Even in those instances where the problem of fatness is introduced as a problem requiring remediation as, say, in encounters with doctors—who, surely, would have communicated something weight loss strategies endorsed by the culture or medical community—there is, in these vignettes, and air of ambiguity, a distance form or aporia between problem and its solution. Boys are confronted with grown ups’ worries, doctors’ warnings. They are told that they must change something about themselves, or they otherwise intuit that need to change. They may be explicitly advised to change their behaviors. Why, then, are each of the instances I examined marked by what I have called an air of ambiguity, a shrouding of the answer to the question fatness presents? Earlier, I entertained the idea, borrowed from Talia Welsh (Welsh, 2013, 2014), that these aporia may emerge from the temporal nature of the

demand for body change—there is a quality of non-experience to change called for but not yet undertaken. But I think there is also a relational and developmental dimension that contributes to this quality of ambiguity (which obtains even when presumptive change-mechanisms appear available).

The intensity of the demand from the adult world, the demand from the future, is mediated by the primary others who deliver the message, or protect the boy from its impact. There may be a developmental period—linked to quality of attachments or the provision of parental protection—during which the child’s encounter with the problem of fatness is more or less entirely mitigated by the meanings provided by caregivers. This was the case, for example, when William is untroubled by taunting. When Carl strains to enlist his mother’s endorsement for his far-fetched formulation—that perhaps he is simply very muscular, and that could explain away the doctor’s warning—it is poignant, because it is a protection that she *could* provide for him. In that scene Carl is hurdling toward a future in which his mother’s mediation can no longer protect him from the Doctor’s measurement-based assessment. Here, the doctor represents the knowledge-community esteemed by Carl’s broader culture. And, whereas Carl might have reliably anticipated his mother’s nurturing support for his slightly grandiose formulations in the past, here she sides with the culture. In scenes like this the parents accidentally oscillate between providing a space or environment of support for the what has been formulated as a developmentally appropriate childhood grandiosity and moments when that grandiosity cannot be supported, either because by its nature grandiosity must inevitably fail to obtain an adequate mirror, or because other concerns—health, safety, fatigue extra-dyadic desire—intervene (McWilliams, 2011). When the men furnish accounts from this time that are dense with a sense of ambiguity, a sense in which the meanings and relations between meanings seem somehow

tentative, there is a quality of provisional-reality, a reality that obtains its density or actuality only when mediated by proximate others. This may account for these results.

Or, the strange quality of ambiguity that inheres in these memories may arouse questions, indeed may call into question, what relational interdependencies are abandoned or ignored by these adult men—and by this researcher, in my ‘natural’ attitude, i.e., in my everydayness. What justifies such confidence in the independence of a fact’s truth value and its endorsement by an important other or a consensus? It is beyond the scope of this project (and beyond the capacity of this researcher) to impugn the apodicticity of assumptions of rationalism (or what has been called secondary process), principles of non-contradiction and causal relations. But a discomfiting tension emerges when we consider the way fatness obtains meaning in these moments of childhood—meanings marked by ambiguity, tentatively understood, contingent upon others’ interpretive practices, appearing, sometimes, with a demand without a plan, or even as a curiosity rather than a problem—and compare this with obesity-discourse injunctions adopted in contemporary policy-initiatives. As we see in Rothblum (2018), these policies have no claim to success. They have not resulted lasting weight loss in many people. Now, one may be tempted to connect the findings in my analysis – fatness presents a problem without a solution, ambiguity – to these policy initiatives, and assert that what is marked by aporia in childhood, somehow shrouded, must be *filled-in* by education in adults with obesity. (Recent reformulations of dominant obesity policy have deemphasized a tendency to blame individuals for the intransigence of obesity by emphasizing obesity as disease, which may in effect be a partial effort to reframe the problem as one of knowledge.) This, I think, would be a misreading of the (admittedly tentative) results of this exploratory study, and it also confuses fatness, a complex and relationally elaborated formulation of embodiment with obesity, a ratio of bodyfat to weight.

If the aporia of this stage of fatness are, moreover, a function of development phases in which a child is negotiating a transition from more immature thinking characterized less by rationalist assumptions, as I have suggested that they might be, shouldn't we see more success in these policy initiatives?

I cannot resolve these issues here, but to return the men of this study, it is enough to point out that, as adults, they appear to have resolved the sense of ambiguity about the meaning of fatness in exchange for a set of propositions or identification with climate of belief that extols and exalts scientific reasoning, believes in a set of causal relationships between personal conduct and fatness. There is an embrace of the fatness-health relationship and a centering on personal responsibility. This was as true for the participants who consider themselves currently fat or obese as it was for those who no longer identify as fat. There is, in short, an endorsement of notions associated with traditional masculinity ideology (Borgogna & McDermott, 2022; Levant & Wong, 2013).

As I mentioned above, John's statement about being an 'otherwise healthy' man also invokes the idea that he lives in a world in which some people's 'feelings' merit attention and compassionate response, while others' do not, and the selection criteria for whose feelings matter has to do with privilege. In this sense to be otherwise healthy, successful and a man—and we can add that he is, along with most of the other participants, white and cisgender—is to be regarded as someone whose identifiers of privilege are thought to protect him from significant suffering, suffering about which to “give a sh-t.” Although this logic has been deployed troublingly and violently in incel communities and by Fox News pundits who assert that privileged men—white men—are in fact the most de-privileged and threatened within the contemporary identity-political climate in the United States (Venker, 2012; Wilson, 2022), these are not views John

endorses. Nor is it necessary to endorse this reverse-discrimination rhetoric to specify the *particular* problematic John is expressing: No one gives a sh-t about his feelings about his fatness, and this has to do with his privilege. This leaves John with a dilemma and indicates the *intersection* at which the phenomenon of interest of this project resides – fatness and becoming a man and, further, a man who enjoys significant protections and privilege associated with their identity. John’s dilemma, nested in this complaint, is that he has suffered significant distress, injury, dysregulation, sadness, mourning, and resentment associated with what he calls his body image—and which we have analyzed as a complex embodied pattern of responses to comparisons and threats, defensive appropriations; but he is not supposed to suffer in that way. Hence, there is not “anywhere to talk about it.” And the talk of male privilege and identity politics may obscure a simpler point (in the way that one train can hide another); namely, that, for John, there is something about identifying as a man that requires a repudiation of the vulnerabilities John gestures toward in his comment. There is something about repudiation of vulnerability, sometimes in exchange for a sense of responsibility, sometimes for a normative, hardened body, that seems to hover about all the experiences of these men and their contentions with fat embodiment.

But, perhaps what is most crucial in John’s statement is not the identification with privilege—which then narrows the space in which there is to talk, as he formulates it. What is crucial, that is, what is at the crux—or central intersection—of masculinity and fatness for these men involves the ways fatness appears to interrupt efforts to embrace conventional masculine priorities, including self-reliance, independence, a repudiation of vulnerabilities, social desirability based in the mastery over the will and the errant body. In phases of ambiguity, the fat body is experienced as at once a reflection of the expectations of the future, or the values of a

community of proximate others, and at the same time as linked to a refuge—via a primary other—from those expectations.

Similarly, what I have called moments of arrest, above, can be understood, or read, as representing instances that rupture or undermine masculine ideals of self-sufficiency and closure. Consider the moment that James looks at a photo of himself playing in his band and, instead of a boy or young man, sees a pumpkin—“pumpkin body; pumpkin head.” James approaches the photograph—a band shot from the pub—expecting to see someone who plays in a band, someone who belongs on a stage in a pub. And whereas a number of possible morphological assemblages might have satisfied that expectation, completed that circuit of intentionality, James encounter with his adolescent body in the photo is somehow *so* disconfirmatory as to prompt comparisons outside of the human realm. James is confronted with a pumpkin—two pumpkins—because his adolescent body will not conform to the demand that the photo show a *man*. Pierre’s inability to bring his experience of his body in conformity to what it meant to be a man, his tacit endorsement of his brother’s charge—“you’ve got a girl’s body”—offers another moment of arrest in which the *body* as it appears or is made legible can not be brought into conformity with ideas or images of masculinity. In these moments of arrest, efforts to bring the body into conformity with a stylized image of masculine embodiment are stymied by the body’s errant betrayal of these masculine ideals or norms.

The problem of fatness for the otherwise healthy and somewhat successful man, then, is that something about fatness, or the lived body in its various expressions and elaborations, runs afoul of the ideals of masculinity, at least as it is somewhat narrowly construed in terms of traditional masculinist ideals. The men enjoy positions of privilege as traditional beneficiaries of patriarchal hegemony. Or they would, if their body’s didn’t repeatedly and variously lacerate the

surface of their masculinity with the particular, unassimilable persistence of their interruptive bodies. The dimension of interruption, here, in which aspects of the body are especially attended to or thematized by the men or their others, stymying the ‘falling away’ of the body described by Leder (1990) and others, is fatness. Fatness, here, is a mode of errancy in which the body refuses to absent itself in conformity to a conventional understanding of embodiment, which entails a body that falls away, forms an anonymous background, throbs in anonymous support of the enactment of one’s aims. The fat experiences explored in this research appeared amenable to analysis by I.M. Young’s (1990) engagement with the phenomenology of embodiment, insofar as she emphasizes the “ambiguous transcendence” and “inhibited intentionality” (p.35) of bodies under conditions of threat or where expectations of limited capacity were prominent. But, importantly, in the examples my participants offered, the fat body’s refusal to be assimilated into the enactment of aims does not refer, as might be supposed by the phrasing, to the body’s weight, or size, or functional limitations sometimes associated with large bodies. There *were* stories of this kind, but the most prominent embodied disruptions of fatness emerged in encounters not with bodily limitations in space, or encounters with gravity, but with the various threats to social intelligibility or conformity to norms of masculinity of the communities in which the boys lived.

When John says “I thought about it a lot,” but has found nowhere “to talk about it,” he expresses another view avowed by the men; namely, that fatness is not something generally understood as an acceptable topic for discussion by men. Several of the men observed during interviews that they were sharing remembered material that they had either never communicated before, or never thought about. Not all of the men in the study expressed, as John did, the idea that contending with fatness resulted in important and difficult feelings (though most did), or

linked these consciously to the normative expectations of his cultural milieu. But all revealed that experiences with fatness in boyhood posed challenges. All have in one way or other thought about, or been caught up in concern, in reference to fatness. And all appeared to regard the topic as one whose direct examination offended some unspoken norm about being a man.

Finally, when John says that “no one gives a sh-t what you have to say” and “generally, there’s not anywhere to talk about it,” he speaks for all the participants, insofar as they have lived with under-elaborated questions and preoccupations—thoughts and feelings—about issues of fatness. This dissertation offers a partial response to the implied *call* here. That is, this dissertation—along with the notable recent work of Neumann (2023), Haga (2020)—represent exploratory efforts to provide a framework, *somewhere to talk about it*. In the most obvious sense, the participants talked to me, and as I have mentioned, several of them found themselves sharing hitherto unexamined material. Some likened the interviews to therapy and discovered that the interviews aroused a desire, or need, to engage in further explorations. (Where appropriate, referrals were offered.)

Fatness is often understood in the literature as a positive property of the body divorced from relational experiences. In such a medical paradigm (which divides relationality and the body) ethical questions of responsibility and justice become weighted towards a more rigid individualism. In such discourses, it becomes difficult to ‘talk about’ experiences of fatness that are complex, laden with meanings that are established in accumulated relational encounters. In discourses that uphold fatness as a problem of the body and the will, as it were, the only *response* to fatness is action (exercise, medication) and inaction (restriction). Not talking. Here, we can see another dimension to John’s complaint. Fatness does not absorb or dissolve into healthist or masculinist discourses, is not assimilated. A strength of a project that examines a group of people

who are ‘otherwise healthy’ and multiply privileged is that it places in stark relief the extent to which fatness presents a great deal to talk about even amongst a group not otherwise disposed to discuss it and even under conditions conventionally understood as providing protections against suffering and vulnerability. As a research project and attempt at scholarship, this dissertation also constitutes a preliminary exploration of *how* to talk about it.

In what follows I offer a summary of the chapters, come remarks about limitations and recommendations for future research.

Chapter Summaries

In Chapter One, I introduced the problem of obesity in the United States. Fatness, thought in medical terms as obesity, is recognized as a major health concern, indeed an epidemic, in the United States. At the same time, researchers don’t seem to agree on what fatness is, or how to engage such an “epidemic.” Fatness is multi-faceted and a contested category, referring alternately to a ratio, observable attributes, and the lived experiences of fat-identified people. BMI, widely regarded as a measure of fatness and also as a proxy for health, has come under criticism. Moreover, research has challenged anti-fat health initiatives as ineffectual, urging a reconsideration of the emphasis on will-power and personal agency in health policy. Moreover, medicalized discourses too often ignore or neglect the lived experience of those people categorized or once categorized as fat.

In Chapter Two, I explored a number of alternatives to this mainstream and medical understanding of obesity, focusing on literary accounts, critical psychology, fatness studies, and feminist phenomenology. I then showed that there is a gap in the phenomenological literature on male fatness that this study is seeking to fill, and (in Chapter Three) I detailed the method and methodological approach to phenomenological research that I employed.

In my first chapter of analysis, Chapter Four, I demonstrated my method through the case of John. What became focal in the discussion with John was an ambivalent identification with fatness centering around a nickname, foreshadowing the themes of embodiment, relationality and temporality that I emphasize in later chapters.

In chapter Five, I traced the ways that embodiment was evoked in the participants' responses to my prompts about fatness. Analysis of participant testimony revealed a prominent theme of 'discovering' fatness, in two distinct modalities. In the first, participants discovered their fatness in childhood as ambiguous moments where fatness was attributed *to* them, and they struggled to make meaning out of that initially enigmatic messaging. Then later, the participants discovered their fatness again as affectively laden interruptions, or what I referred to as "moments of arrest." These moments of arrest were characterized by the recognition of what the attribution of fatness meant, and the difference attributed to it.

In chapter Six I explored the way that experiences of fatness obtain meaning in a social world, a world with others' intentions and interpretations. The participants discovered their fatness through an attribution of another (being read as fat), and in comparison with others. This dynamic of self-discovery and -identity in sociality was linked not only with social attributions, but to relationality as such. That is, instances of exclusion were also modes of relationality.

In chapter Seven, vignettes of childhood fatness were examined with a focus on the existentials of lived time. Fatness presents problems in lived time insofar as it presents as a problem without a solution. Alternatively, an instance of overcoming fatness inaugurated a sense of agency—and a wariness of body diversity.

This study's main contributions are that it furnished accounts of fat experiences of boys and examined them in from an existential-phenomenological framework.

In emphasizing the lifeworld existentials of embodiment, relationality, and some aspects of temporality, we can see how experiences of fatness emerge as and recede, mediate and complicate social interactions.

Fatness is often understood in the literature as a positive property of the body divorced from relational experiences. In such a medical paradigm (which divides relationality and the body) ethical questions of responsibility and justice become weighted towards a more rigid individualism. In such discourses, it becomes difficult to ‘talk about’ experiences of fatness that are complex, laden with meanings that are established in accumulated relational encounters. In discourses that uphold fatness as a problem of the body and the will, as it were, the only *response* to fatness is action (exercise, medication) and inaction (restriction). Not talking. The understanding of complex social dynamics such as prejudice and discrimination that pervade discourse surrounding fatness should take into account embodiment in an existential sense.

Further findings and limitations

This exploratory study allows for the following provisional conclusions, which can be used to frame recommendations for further research:

Boys become fat in more than one way. The testimony of the men and my analyses allows us to address one of my research questions, *When do fat men or boys become fat?*, Boys become fat in a few distinct ways: 1. They experience themselves as different and discover this difference has a name. This phase of ‘discovery,’ which appeared marked by uncertainty (but not trauma or distress), and was remembered in adulthood with some confusion or mystery hanging about it. Further research with a clearer developmental framework may confirm what seemed to be the case here; namely, that this mode of discovery occurs in pre-adolescence and is influenced or moderated by the quality of relationality in the boy’s world. 2. Instances of affectively charged—and not at all uncertain—discoveries of fatness appeared to occur in older boys and depended for

their resonance on a) a clear understanding of fatness as an unwanted attribute, feature, or state of affairs, b) Some discord—in comparative capacity, in social desirability or sexual ambition and c) having already discovered fatness earlier. These later instances are often accompanied by self-rebuke and an assignment of negative character-assessment.

Being fat depends upon other people. The men I interviewed assigned themselves a great deal of personal responsibility for their body difference. Given this, what may sound like a truism deserves explicit mention here; namely, that fatness appeared to be discovered in, and sustained and moderated by the relationships and social networks in which the boys lived. This was true in cases where parents or ‘first others’ introduced the boys’ body-difference as a problem, and also in the ways that fatness appeared to recede, where fatness seemed *not* to obtain meaningful significance, as in cases of close personal relationships. In those instances fatness receded.

Fatness oscillates and lingers

This points to another important finding, that fatness oscillates, gathers and loses its density across different settings and at different times. Experiences of fatness in childhood adhere to the bodies of the men who remember them, as we see in the case of Eddy, who monitors his body continuously for evidence of a fatness, and who chooses clothing that could not conceal fatness, and thus reveals positive evidence of fatness’ absence.

Relatedly, *being fat under conditions of anti-fatness arouses questions about attributions of others’ motives.* That is, fatness provides an always uncertain explanation for feelings in adolescence of difference, unstable identity. Given the extent to which childhood and adolescence is understood to be marked by processes of change—including biological development and cultural rites of passage—fatness *may* complicate patterns of social interpretation.

The fat experiences explored in this research resembled or appeared amenable to analysis by I.M. Young's (1990) engagement with the phenomenology of embodiment, insofar as she emphasizes the "ambiguous transcendence" and "inhibited intentionality" (p.35) of bodies under conditions of threat or where expectations of limited capacity were prominent. The fat body is coded as a problem early and often in fat boys' recollections, which appeared operative in their own experiences of their bodies and to mediate remembered states of embodiment. The experiences of the men of this project were often marked by commitments to change, alter or escape their fatness, or memories of doing so.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is the lack of diversity among the participants. This issue can be attributed to the process of convenience sampling. The participants in the study were largely white, middle-class, urban-dwelling men, which I have already explored as a *feature* of the work, but it is also a limitation. Moreover, the culturally specific context of the men and the work—Northeastern United States in the early 2020s—should be acknowledged and regarded as a limitation: The textured layers of meaning of fatness these men encountered, appropriated, resisted and reformulated should not be expected to emerge and operate in the same manner in another cultural setting. Further, the priorities these men exhibited, the strategies they employed to make sense of, ignore, embrace and avoid topical material should also be regarded as reflecting their cultural context and thus a limitation. Future research would benefit from analyzing a more diverse sample, which would enable a cross cultural comparisons. Given the ways in which fatness's intersection with masculinity, addressed above, appeared to call into question norms of masculinity as perhaps impossibly disembodied, a more robustly feminist or queer theory orientation may enable exciting analyses.

An aspect of the study that became a limitation is that I did not prioritize developmental periods or engage closely with the developmental research, which could enable greater specifications of my findings.

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Appendix A: Consent Form

DUQUESNE UNIVERSITY PITTSBURGH, PENNSYLVANIA

CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

TITLE:

Embodied fatness in boys: a critical phenomenological study

INVESTIGATOR:

Sean Leadem, MA
PhD Student
Clinical Psychology
Duquesne University
917.535.4437

ADVISOR:

Roger Brooke, Ph.D., ABPP
Professor of Psychology
Director, Military Psychological Services
Department of Psychology
Duquesne University
Pittsburgh, PA 15282
Phone: 412-396-6563
Home page: www.rogerbrookephd.com

SOURCE OF SUPPORT:

This study is being performed as partial fulfillment of the requirements for the doctoral degree in clinical psychology at Duquesne University.

STUDY OVERVIEW:

This is a study of the experiences and recollections of adult men who were identified (by self or others) as overweight, fat, or obese during childhood or adolescence. In a series of interviews, this study will examine the various ways that being fat in boyhood influences life experiences in adulthood.

PURPOSE:

You are being asked to participate in a research project that is investigating childhood experiences of men who grew up feeling, or being made to feel, that they were fat or overweight. It is a study of psychological experience, in that it examines the ways that being a fat-identified kid may have influenced how, as an adult, men think and feel about a variety of issues.

Qualified participants will:

Recall feeling overweight, or being identified as fat or overweight by others, in childhood or adolescence.

Self-identify as a man or have been identified during childhood as a boy.

Be conversant in the English language. Language proficiency is an issue in this study, as I am fluently proficient only in English. This study's reliance on analysis of narrative

accounts, and the impracticality of employing translation services, make it necessary limit inclusion to English speakers.

PARTICIPANT PROCEDURES:

If you provide your consent to participate, you will be asked to allow me to interview you. The interviews will be audio/video recorded and transcribed. Interviews will take place in person or on a video conferencing platform on two separate occasions, and should take approximately 1hr-1.5hr to complete. Additionally, I may I request your permission to contact you by telephone or email in order to clarify, further, things we talked about.

During the interview, I will ask you to answer questions about your experience of being/feeling fat or overweight in your childhood. I will ask an initial question, and will encourage your recollection and reflection with further questions and prompts. During the second interview, I will check in with you about lingering thoughts of feelings after the first interview, then invite you to read and comment on some of the themes I developed on the basis of your first interview.

RISKS AND BENEFITS:

People who grew up feeling fat in the United States (and elsewhere) may recall a wide range of experiences, some of which were challenging or difficult. Some memories and associations may be unpleasant, and there is a risk that speaking with me about them may remind you of these experiences. I am concerned with your well-being, and during our interviews, I will invite you to check in about how you are feeling, and I will remind you that we can stop the interview, or address the feelings you are having, at any time. In the event that we determine you need extra support, I will provide contact information to crisis care and facilitate your making contact.

Possible benefits include an increased sense of purpose that arises from contributing to research and an increase in self-acknowledgment.

COMPENSATION:

Participants will receive a gift card of \$20 value.

There is no cost for you to participate in this research project.

CONFIDENTIALITY:

Your participation in this study, and any identifiable personal information you provide, will be kept confidential to every extent possible. Your name will never appear on any research instruments. All written and electronic forms and study materials will be kept secure. All materials will be stored on a private, password-protected computer, backed up on a similarly password-protected personal drive. Any in-person interviews will take place in private offices maintained by the Duquesne University Department of Psychology. Recorded video and audio files will be stored in password protected files on a private computer, backed up on a personal drive. Video and audio recordings will be destroyed at the completion of the research. Transcribed interview material will be retained, but will not contain your name, and any specifically identifying information will be altered or removed from publications or presentations that arise from this research.

RIGHT TO WITHDRAW:

You are under no obligation to start or continue this study. You can withdraw at any time without penalty or consequence by telling me that you no longer want to participate. If data are already collected you may request that it be removed from use in the study, whereupon it will be destroyed.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

A summary of the results of this study will be provided to at no cost. You may request this summary by contacting the researchers and requesting it. Part of the process involves sharing some of the results and asking for your reflections and interpretations. The information provided to you in a final summary will not be your individual responses, but rather a summary of what was discovered during the research project as a whole.

FUTURE USE OF DATA:

Any information collected that can identify you will have the identifiers removed and be securely archived for possible use in future related studies, and/or provided to other researchers. For example, journal articles published after the completion of this dissertation may rely on information collected in interviews, though it will be de-identified.

COVID-19 CONSIDERATIONS:

I understand that the researcher(s) running this study have put in place the following guidelines to address concerns related to COVID-19:

I have been invited to interview via encrypted teleconferencing platform. If I (participant) specifically request an in-person interview, then physical distancing, sanitation, mask and any other guidelines outlined by CDC and local health authorities will be observed.

VOLUNTARY CONSENT:

I have read this informed consent form and understand what is being requested of me. I also understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, for any reason without any consequences. Based on this, I certify I am willing to participate in this research project.

I understand that if I have any questions about my participation in this study, I may contact Sean Leadem, 917.535.4437, leadems@duq.edu. If I have any questions regarding my rights and protections as a subject in this study, I can contact Dr. David Delmonico, Chair of the Duquesne University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects at 412.396.1886 or at irb@duq.edu.

**This project has been approved/verified by
Duquesne University's Institutional Review Board.**

Filling e-signature in the provided field indicates your voluntary consent to participate in this project.

Appendix B: Recruitment Flyer

please contact Sean Leadem, doctoral student at Duquesne University:

Invitation for participants in a dissertation about men's memories of childhood fatness:

Were you 'overweight' or fat growing up? Do you identify as a man? I'd very much like to talk to you.

I am looking for interview participants in my dissertation research study, which examines the experiences and recollections of adult men who were identified (by self or others) as overweight, fat, chubby or obese during childhood or adolescence. I am hoping to explore, with you, the ways that being fat-identified in childhood influences experiences in adulthood. For me, being fat was difficult and posed numerous challenges, but that doesn't need to be your story. If you identify as a man, and you grew up in some way 'fat'-identified (or chubby or 'carrying a few extra lbs' or husky or 'obese' or hefty), I would love to speak with you.

Interviews should take approximately 1 to 1.5 hrs. Participants will receive a gift card of \$20 value (a nominal acknowledgment, in no way equitable compensation). Participation is completely voluntary and consent can be withdrawn at any time. The study is approved by Duquesne University's Institutional Review Board (###2021/02/6).

I am the principal investigator and can be reached at leadems@duq.edu. Please do not hesitate to write.

Sean Leadem, MA
PhD Candidate
Clinical Psychology
Duquesne University
917.535.4437

Appendix C: IRB Protocol

Duquesne University Institutional Review Board Protocol Summary Form

Embodied fatness in boys: a critical phenomenological study Sean Tyrrell Leadem, MA

1. Statement of the research question:

Research Question: How is the differential embodiment of ‘fatness’¹¹ experienced and recalled in men who were fat-identified boys?

- How do fat male embodied subjects experience their bodies and their difference in terms of time, spatiality, and other ontological conditions of existence? Is there one male fatness, or several? What is the relationship between fatness and the body?
- Does the embodiment of fat male children inform or interrupt masculine identifications emergent in childhood? Do compensatory attempts to claim or recoup masculinity inform post-childhood commitments to traditional (anti-fat) masculinity? Do compensatory attempts to claim or recoup masculinity inform post-childhood commitments to traditional (anti-fat) masculinity?

2. Purpose and significance of the study:

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of men whose childhood was marked by fatness. Fatness figures as a contested category of bodily, social, and psychological status. Medical and public policy discourses systematically—but, in light of recent research, overconfidently—construe fatness as obesity and conflate obesity with poor biological health/disease (Burkhauser & Cawley, 2008; Dodgen & Spence-Almaguer, 2017; Nuttall, 2015; Pi-Sunyer et al., 1998; Tomiyama, Hunger, Nguyen-Cuu, & Wells, 2016). Psychological and psychiatric literatures that are uncritical of this conflation tend not to acknowledge that fat experience both exceeds and is shaped by anti-fat health discourses (Campos, Saguy, Ernsberger,

¹¹ I use the term ‘fatness’ to refer to the condition and experiences of people whose bodies are designated as measurably or comparatively larger than the norm and to distinguish from ‘obesity,’ a pejorative term which implies excessive weight and which carries implications of health risk or pathology and is, further, tied to the body mass index, whose explanatory value has been called into question (Dodgen & Spence-Almaguer, 2017). Current positivity and acceptance movements give preference to the term ‘fat’ as reclaimed from a discourse of shame (Cooper, 2010). I regard these overtly activist literatures as appropriately critical of ‘obesity-epidemic’ positions toward body-difference, but I also want to refrain from inadvertently silencing or occluding experiences that do not conform to these literatures’ commitments. Given this, and given that some interlocutors and readers experience the term ‘fat’ as a pejorative, I may revise terminology.

Oliver, & Gaesser, 2006; Cooper, 2010, 2016; Friedman, Rice, & Rinaldi, 2019; Monaghan et al., 2018; Rothblum, 2018).

Previous empirical phenomenological literature either has focused on the experiences of women (Cusick, 2019; Grøn, 2017), or has not sufficiently bracketed notions of health (Moss, 1984, 1992), pathology, and other medical constructs (Moss, 1984, 1992). Critical fat studies literature offers productive alternatives to obesity-discourse perspectives, but that literature also has furnished few studies of about men, and has been criticized for overlooking aspects of fat experience that do not support a counter-hegemonic political agenda.(Cooper, 2010, 2016)

The study of fat experience calls for an approach that is at once phenomenological—that is, committed to the particularity of lived experience irrespective of its conformity to conceptual or theoretical expectations—and critical—acknowledging and addressing the discursive practices and social forces that are operative even when they are not consciously figural (Guenther, 2020). My study will address previous gaps in literature by examining experiences of fatness while a) bracketing obesity and health discourse, b) bringing data into dialogue with critical phenomenology of embodiment, c) privileging what Cheryl Mattingly (2019) has called the “perplexing particular,” the instance or the case that can call theory into question and d) focusing on persons socialized as men.

3. Research design and procedures:

The research design employs a hermeneutic phenomenological thematic analysis of interview data. I rely on van Manen (1990) for the general research methodology, which I renovate with input from critical-phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and person-centered ethnography (Fink, 2010; Guenther, 2020; Steinar Kvale, 1999; S Kvale & Brinkman, 2009; Levy & Hollan, 1998; Luttrell, 2005).. I will conduct two semi-structured interviews of 5-10 participants (5 to 20 interviews). Participants will be asked to meet with me on a video-conferencing platform for approximately one hour per interview (phase 1). In some circumstances interviews may be conducted in-person—in private offices maintained by the Duquesne University Department of Psychology--or on the telephone (please see section 10 for Covid-19 considerations). Second interviews (phase 2) will be conducted approximately 1-2 weeks from initial interviews, depending on participants’ availability.

4. Instruments:

The principal instrument is a semi-structured interview protocol (see appendix A). Phase 1 interview questions are aimed to generate data pertaining to existential themes (temporality, communality, corporeality), specific recollected vignettes, and associations arising therefrom. Phase 2 interviews are aimed to generate data that thickens thematic content from phase 1, and elicits unanticipated thematic content.

5. Sample selection and size

- A. Eligible participants are legal adults who identify as men, remember being fat-identified during childhood, and—given this study’s reliance on analysis of narrative accounts and

the impracticality of employing translation services—are conversant in English. Members of identified vulnerable populations (e.g., children, prisoners, pregnant women) are excluded.

- B. Other demographic factors may be examined during analysis but do not serve as selection criteria.
- C. Number participants: 5 (minima) to 10 (maxima), totaling 5 to 20 interviews.

6. Recruitment of subjects

Recruitment will take place via internet message boards, email listservs, social networking sites, as well as word-of-mouth. I will post recruitment literature and manage communication with potential recruits directly, in most cases, via my email address, leadems@duq.edu. In instances of word-of-mouth recruitment recommendations, I will ask intermediary-recruiters to invite potential participants to share their email addresses or phone numbers, whereupon I will contact participant directly, either with written script #1 (uploaded separately) or phone script #1 (uploaded separately). Alternatively intermediaries can provide my contact information to potential interview participants, and they can reach out to me directly

In all instances of recruitment, prospective participants will be informed of the overview of the study, the participant procedures (2 interviews), the risks and benefits, the right to withdraw at any time, confidentiality, and the compensation offered (a \$20 gift card).

Recruitment Materials include written recruitment flyer/announcement and telephone scripts, uploaded for IRB approval separately from this protocol.

7. Informed consent procedures

Initial recruitment literature will briefly indicate that consent will be obtained prior to interview #1, and will explicate the right to withdraw. The Consent to Participate form (Appendix B), which explicates rights and procedures, will be forwarded (via electronic mail or conventional mail) prior to interview, reviewed verbally with researcher prior to interview, and returned with electronic signature.

Information about risks and benefits, compensation and other conditions will be indicated in recruitment materials, and in consent forms. Prospective participants will have the opportunity to review consent forms and raise questions via email or telephone prior to consenting / participation.

The Consent to Participate in Research form (uploaded to Duquesne's IRB Mentor page, entitled Leadem Dissertation IRB-Consent Form) explicates the unconditional right to withdraw and procedures for withdrawal.

8. Collection of data and method of data analysis

Data to be collected include participant recollections, reflections and associations arising during interview on the topic of childhood embodied experiences. Additionally, participants'

affect and comportment may be observed and documented in researcher's notes, and non-verbal behavior changes that may occur in connection with delivery of verbal data.

Interviews will be recorded on encrypted video conferencing software and, where possible, on backup audio recording devices (e.g., digital or tape recorder).

Analysis proceeds in three stages: 1. *Thematic analysis* of first interview. 2. *Collaborative analysis* of first interview, during phase 2 interview. 3. *Counterthematic analysis*, in which content that appears non-relevant is identified for examination and analysis (See Appendix A).

9. Emphasize issues relating to interactions with subjects and subjects' rights

Prospective participants will be provided an overview of the research study and informed that there is no obligation to participate, and of their right to withdraw at any time. When consent is obtained, participants will again be informed of their right to withdraw and the procedure -- informing me of their wish no longer to participate. Once consent is given and data are collected, confidentiality will be prioritized in the following ways: Interviews will be transcribed by the PI, a CITI certified undergraduate research assistant, or TRINT audio transcription software (data deidentified before introduced to software); I will save all transcripts with pseudonyms/participant codes, rather than participant names; ,label all recorded files with participant codes (rather than names), conduct interviews on video platforms under encryption (Duquesne University-maintained Zoom). Consenting participants will also receive a summary of results, upon request, when research is complete. Data and notes will be stored in protected files. Participants will be informed that video and audio-recorded data will be destroyed after completion of the research. Transcribed material will be de-identified (names replaced with pseudonyms; other and identifiers removed) and preserved for future research. See Consent to Participate form.

Note: Two points, in the interest of beneficence: Consent materials acknowledge that men who grew up fat-identified may recall a range of experiences, some of which were challenging or difficult, and there is a risk that this interview will elicit memories of these experiences. I then indicate that I will invite participants to monitor their emotional state, pause or discontinue the interview at any time, and that contact information for crisis care will be provided. Further, before commencing interview, I will briefly describe the project and will ask the participant how he describes his body during boyhood and attempt to hew to his terminology (except when to do so would draw me into speech that may be misconstrued as injurious or insensitive).

10. COVID-19 Considerations

Precautions being taken to ensure subjects and researcher(s) remain healthy and safe during the COVID-19 pandemic, including, but not limited to:

All participants will be invited to interview via encrypted teleconferencing software (Duquesne University Zoom). In the event participant requests in-person interview, CDC and local health authority guidelines will be consulted and physical distancing, sanitation, face-covering and any

other guidelines will be observed, and interviews will be conducted in private offices maintained by Duquesne University's Psychology Department.

In the event that participants need to travel for interviews, up-to-date guidelines (from CDC and PA) regarding safety and travel will be provided by researcher for participants' consideration.

It is expected that most or all interviews will be conducted via encrypted teleconferencing platforms.

Interviews will be recorded by teleconferencing software under encryption and digital audio equipment, and stored in protected (non-cloud-based) files, by researcher.

Appendix (of IRB protocol)

Semi-Structured interviews protocol:

Interviews. I plan to invite each interlocutor to participate in two interviews, separated in time by a span of two weeks to a month, where possible. My interview design is semi-structured and is informed by phenomenologists (van Manen, 1990, Giorgi, 2009), and psychodynamic interview technique (Josselson 2013; Kvale, 1999) Interviews will be audio-recorded.

Phase 1 Interviews: The *phase one* interviews will be semi-structured and will proceed from some variant of the following question:

I am interested in how growing up with weight or body size or body difference was for you. Tell me about your experiences with your fatness, growing up? Please feel free to start wherever you like, and share whatever you remember about your experience, or whatever else comes up for you while reflecting in this way.

(Before asking the question I will briefly describe the project and will ask the interlocutor how he describes his body during boyhood and attempt to hew to his terms.) I plan to encourage recollection by asking interlocutors to elaborate, repeat or clarify what they have said. I will also ask questions aimed to elicit *specific vignettes in which experiences or issues of fatness were prominent, and instances in which they seemed to recede*. This may be aided by questions about existential lifeworld themes (van Manen, 1990): **lived space, lived body, lived time human relation.**

Examples:

How do you remember your body in the spaces where you lived, went to school, played? (spatiality)

When did you discover that you were fat/overweight/chubby/different? (corporeality, temporality, communality)

From whom did you learn your body was different?(communality)

What is your first memory of your own body? (temporality, temporality)

How did other people treat you in your social world? (communality)

Although I will have a list of questions, I am influenced by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009), who advise that “the more spontaneous the interview procedure, the more likely one is to obtain unprompted, lively and unexpected answers from the interviewees” (p.131). Van Manen (1990), too, emphasizes the importance of remaining open, hermeneutic, in the interview. He quotes Gadamer, “The art of questioning is that of being able to go on asking questions, i.e., the art of thinking” (1975, p.33, in van Manen, 1990, p.98).

Interview content will be transcribed, and I will read the transcript. During the *phase one* interview, and afterwards, during transcription and reflection, I will attend closely to the speech of the interlocutor.

Phase 1 Reflection. I will next read through interview transcripts to identify potential thematic content. After reading interviews transcripts, I will attempt to locate those phrases, vignettes, or

statements that seem particularly revealing or salient to the interlocutor's experience of fatness as a male child. I will record these as thematic, or as evincing themes. I will produce a list of thematic content.

Once thematic content is identified and listed, I will engage in first phase reflections, which I distinguish into 4 parts:

A. General thematic reflective writing, in which themes of fatness and masculinity are described in detail.

B.. Attending to lifeworld existentials (van Manen, 1990, p.101), and elaborating thematic content in terms of these.

C. Comparison, where I will bring thematic content into dialogue with other accounts—e.g., the interviews of other interlocutors, popular literature, my own observations and recollections.

D. Critical, counter-thematic reflection, in which I identify key aspects of the transcribed interview that provoke my curiosity on the basis of their seeming out of place, conflictual, marked by a slip, or otherwise curious.

Phase Two Interview: The second phase involves collaborative follow-up interview and interpretation. Interlocutors will be invited to participate in a second interview/feedback session. Here, I will present a selection of thematic content for reflection, commentary and interpretation by the interlocutor. Specifically, I will orient interlocutors to the task in the following way: *Thanks for meeting me again. As I mentioned last time, I wanted to check in for a few reasons. First, I want to get a sense of how our interview went for you and whether there were things you wanted to add; I wanted to give you a chance to ask questions; Further, one of my hopes is that you will comment on the way I have developed some of what you told me; lastly, I want to invite you to listen and comment on few of the things you said that puzzle me.* I will then specify questions along these lines.

Phase Two Reflections: Interlocutor's interpretations, reflections and associated responses to my questions and the presentation of both the thematic content and the curious content will be transcribed. I will then select portions of these responses to provide greater detail and raise unforeseen questions.

Analysis and Dialogue: Finally, I will combine thematic reflections from phases 1 and 2 into a summary for each interlocutor. I will compare these accounts, and the comparative account will form the basis for my identification of thematic content. These will then be brought into dialogue with theory and research literature that bears upon the thematic content.