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In the flesh: a poetic inquiry into how fat female employees manage weight-related stigma

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ABSTRACT

This paper engages with the question of how fat female employees manage weight-related stigma at work. We use poetic inquiry to show the reader *how it feels* for our participants to be stigmatized based on their size. We interviewed 22 women who self-identify as full-figured, fat, overweight, or obese. The results consist of six poems, five of which were written by us, the researchers. These ‘tri-voiced poems’ (Leavy 2010b) illustrate the spectrum of affective responses and stigma management strategies that our participants talked about, ranging from feeling anxious, super-smart, impeccable, and funny to rebellious and confident. The sixth poem was written by one of our participants and voices her first-person experiences and perspective. Our aim is to do justice in our writing to the emotions that circulated in the interviews and to make a political statement with regards to the stigmatizing practices in organizations related to size and health.

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Fat employees; stigma; affect; obesity discourse; poetic inquiry

Introduction

This paper explores how self-identified fat, full-figured, or obese¹ women manage weight-related stigma in the context of their employment. This endeavour relates to the concept of ‘flesh’ in two important ways. First of all, fat people are considered to have excess flesh. Dominant obesity discourse constructs fatness as a result of too much eating and too little exercise (e.g. Saguy and Riley 2005; Warin 2015). Fat individuals are therefore often considered to be irresponsible and lazy (e.g. Throsby 2007; Kwauk 2012). According to many scholars fat stigma or weight-related stigma² is a consequence of the dominant obesity discourse and underlying neoliberal ideology that demonize fatness and put the responsibility for so-called excess flesh squarely on the individual (e.g. Guthman 2009; LeBesco 2011; Ayo 2012; Monaghan 2017). Fat stigma also connects with employment in several ways: fat people are less likely to be hired and they earn less than their thinner peers (Puhl and Heuer 2009). Many also face marginalization and discrimination at work related to their size (Puhl and Brownell 2006; Levay 2013). As such, fat employees’ excess flesh seems to exclude them from qualifying as legitimate organizational bodies (Kelly, Allender, and Colquhoun 2007; Johansson, Tienari, and Valtonen 2017; Amsterdam and van Eck 2018). Yet there is little qualitative research that focuses on the experiences of fat people in relation to employment (Levay 2013). Because size intersects with gender, the ways in which fat men and women are being confronted with fat stigma varies, as do their possibilities of managing this stigma (Nash and Warin 2017; van

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Bell and McNaughton 2007; Bergman 2009; Saguy 2012; Amsterdam 2013). This paper engages with the question of how fat women experience and manage weight-related stigma at work.

The second way in which this paper relates to the concept of 'flesh' is methodological. Rather than providing purely reasoned and disembodied insight into the question of how fat people manage weight-related stigma at work, we try to show the reader *how it feels* for our participants to be stigmatized in this way. To this end we use poetic inquiry (Stein 2003; Furman 2006; Prendergast, Leggo, and Sameshima 2009; Leavy 2010a; Aramitage 2014; Wiebe 2015). In contrast to conventional representations of qualitative data, this paper presents six poems in the results section. Five of these were written by us, the researchers. These poems aim to voice the feelings, perspectives, and actions our participants talked about in relation to the role their fat embodiment plays in the context of their work. One was written by a participant in reaction to our poems and voices her experiences in her own words. Together, these poems thus aim to reflect the lived experience of the self-identified fat women we spoke to as well as the narrative and embodied strategies with which they manage weight-related stigma at work (Goffman 1990; Puhl and Brownell 2006). In doing so, we rise to the challenge of 'writing differently' that Grey and Sinclair (2006) call for. They argue that

Good writing is suggestive and pungent, it evokes feelings – relief, recognition, drama, disdain, horror – and bodily responses – the flush of recognition and the sharp intake of breath, the tingle as we feel that this might be showing us something we hadn't thought or experienced before. (2006, 452)

Through the presented poems, we aim to evoke fleshy experiences like these and create empathic understanding of fat women's experiences at work.

Excess flesh in organizations

As we argued before, there is little research in organization studies that examines the experiences of fat employees. However, there are several areas within this field that clearly show the marginalization, (symbolic) exclusion and condemnation of fat bodies in the context of employment. One such area concerns studies that explore workplace health promotion programmes (e.g. Zoller 2003; McGillivray 2005a, 2005b; Kelly, Allender, and Colquhoun 2007; Thanem and Wallenberg 2015). Zoller (2003), for example, shows how female employees constructed self-control as one of the main elements of health and denounced fatness as a moral failure. She identifies health promotion as a normative endeavour that draws on healthism discourse and justifies stigma. In a similar vein, Kelly, Allender, and Colquhoun (2007) argue that employees at a big IT company are impelled to become 'corporate athletes' through the workplace health promotion programme that was instituted there. Amongst other things, being fit and not fat emerge as important characteristics of this ideal worker embodiment.

One of the few qualitative studies that does specifically focus on the overweight body in an organizational context is that of Mik-Meyer (2008). She argues how body size and weight have become central organizational concerns through the formulation of the 'unhealthy body' as the focus of recent managerial regimes. The interviews with managers and recorded talks between health consultants and overweight employees – who were specifically targeted as objects of concern – show how fat employees are constructed as problematic because of their size. This resonates with findings from quantitative sociological studies that show the difficulties fat employees encounter in finding a job and getting a promotion (Puhl and Brownell 2001; Puhl and Heuer 2009).

Another area in which the fit and slender norm in organizations emerge, concerns studies that focus on the (gendered) embodiment of managers and leaders (Trethewey 1999; e.g. Thanem 2013; Meriläinen, Tienari, and Valtonen 2015; Mavin and Grandy 2016; Johansson, Tienari, and Valtonen 2017). Johansson, Tienari, and Valtonen (2017), for example, discuss 'managerial athleticism' as a particularly regulative regime. Their research shows how male and female managers who are passionate about their health enact their managerial identity through particular exercise and eating behaviours. Similar to the leaders and executives that Thanem (2013) and Meriläinen, Tienari, and Valtonen

(2015) studied, the participants of Johansson, Tienari, and Valtonen (2017) construe a fit body as the norm, and produce fat bodies as unviable and illegitimate within the organizational context. Gender ideology functions in concert with healthism discourse as an important power structure that shapes the possibilities of employees with regards to their embodiment³ (Levay 2013). Trethewey's (1999) study exemplifies this point. Her research with 19 professional women illustrates how they define a professional body as a fit body. She writes that 'a fit (as opposed to a fat) body quite literally indicates that a woman is disciplined and in control' (430). A more recent study by Mavin and Grandy (2016) similarly shows how women elite leaders seem fascinated with their own and other women's bodies and appearance. They explicitly mention weight management as a tool to project professionalism 'if you can't lose weight ... it is a damnation on your professionalism and your career standing' (1110–1111). These studies show that although the systemic power structures related to size impact both men and women (e.g. Kelly, Allender, and Colquhoun 2007; Thanem 2013; Meriläinen, Tienari, and Valtonen 2015; Johansson, Tienari, and Valtonen 2017) size intersects with gender to produce interesting differences in how fat men and fat women are perceived (Nash and Warin 2017; van Bergman 2009; Amsterdam 2013). Women often face more stringent norms and discipline related to their size than men, because women's worth is often primarily measured in terms of their appearance (Brewis and Sinclair 2000; Jyrkinen 2014). Beauty and health discourses thus seem to conflate on the issue of size. The condemnation of fat bodies within the context of work therefore seems harsher for female employees.

In sum, extant research shows the prominence of embodied ideals regarding size in many organizations, and points towards the systemic power structures underpinning fat stigma. Yet the experiences and voices of those who are arguably affected by this most remain largely unacknowledged. This paper aims to create a space for these voices and experiences. In particular, we intend to evoke in the reader a sense of the lived experiences of fat women at their place of work.⁴

Managing the flesh: stigma strategies, power and affect

We used Goffman's (1990) insights on stigma as a starting point for thinking through the everyday practices that our participants engage in at work to manage fat stigma. Goffman (1990, 12) writes that stigma 'reduce(s) the person in our minds from a whole and usual person, to a tainted, discounted one'. He offers an account of stigma that implies a move beyond the individual: he does not see stigma as a quality or an attribute of a person, but rather as a particular relation between a stereotype and a person or attribute. Nonetheless, his work offers a little foothold to critically interrogate power structures that produce stigmas and related inequalities and this is reproduced in much work on stigma in organizations (Toyoki and Brown 2013).

Moreover, while prevailing theories of stigma provide a thoroughly descriptive and individualized framework of stigma strategies, they seldom disclose how power is involved. According to Link and Phelan (2001, 377), however, 'stigma exists when elements of labelling, stereotyping, separation, status loss, and discrimination occur together in a power situation that allows them'. Scholarly work in the field of Fat Studies reiterates the importance of power in relation to stigma. Much writing within this field critically interrogates systemic power structures such as obesity discourse, healthism discourse and neo-liberal ideology that underlie fat stigma (e.g. Saguy and Ward 2011; Barlösius and Philipps 2015; Monaghan 2017). We address these power structures in another publication in which we analyse the identity work strategies that our participants used to cope with fat stigma in the context of their employment (Amsterdam and van Eck 2018). The current paper focuses on the affective dimension of our participants' experiences that seems to get lost easily in conventional academic prose. Through the poems we present here, we aim to evoke in readers a sense of how idea(l)s related to size operate within organizational life as a systemic power structure that produces stigma and the impact this has on the lived experiences of fat employees.

Hereby, we also relate our work to the recent 'affective turn' in organization studies (Fotaki, Kenny, and Vachhani 2017). In everyday usage of the term, affect is seen as a private experience, a reflection

of the inner realm of feelings and emotions. Yet scholars who theorize affect have argued the importance of conceptualizing affect also as social and political (e.g. Ahmed 2004; Ahmed 2013; Massumi 2015; Sharma and Tygstrup 2015). Ahmed (2004, 2013), for one, argues that emotions, feelings or affect should be considered cultural practices that place value on bodies. Difference is created by aligning certain bodies (e.g. slender ones) with each other in a particular context, thus creating social collectives. In the case presented here, the 'affective economies' of fear and disgust work to marginalize fat people and produce them as 'other'. Instead of asking who emotions belong to, Ahmed is thus primarily interested in what emotions *do*. She writes 'we need to consider how they [emotions] work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective' (Ahmed 2004, 119). Building on Ahmed's work, Sharma and Tygstrup write that affect moves in different directions, and between multiple actors and therefore cannot be reduced to an individual experience:

There is incoming affect: that which strikes me. And there is outgoing affect: my reaction, my being affected [...] But there is more to it: the mechanism of affectivity doesn't stop here. When somebody is affected, this somebody is likely to change agency as well, producing new agency, affecting the environment in turn. (2015, 14–15)

By engaging in poetic inquiry, we use the affective responses that circulated in the interviews to produce affect in the reader. Our poems could thus be said to work on the individual, the social and the political level, producing affect and circulating it.

Pullen, Rhodes, and Thanem (2017) advocate the analysis of affect for political purposes, to create change. They argue that much scholarly work leaves the lived experiences of workers unexamined. According to them, even scholars who write on affect, tend to reduce it '... to a matter of undifferentiated, latent and disembodied tendencies that have little bearing on, or grounding in, the lived, let alone mundane, multiplicities of human experience' (Pullen, Rhodes, and Thanem 2017, 111). Burford (2018, 240) argues that poetic practices enable these political purposes: 'poetry can be a way of staying present, attentive and attuned to other ways of being – which is itself a profoundly political act'. It is precisely these lived and embodied experiences of fat women at work that we aim to illustrate through the poems we present here. In other words, we aim to write with resonance in order 'to facilitate an emotional, bodily, or in other ways sensory connection between the text and the reader' (Meier and Wegener 2017, 193).

Feeling the flesh: methodological reflections on poetic inquiry

Data collection

This paper is developed based on a larger research project that explores the experiences of fat individuals in the context of their employment but also in their daily lives outside of their employment (see also Amsterdam and van Eck 2018). For this project we conducted in-depth interviews with 22 women who self-identified as full-figured, fat, overweight or obese. But how do you approach and select participants based on a qualifier that is laden with negative moral meaning in everyday usage? We talked at length about the question of how to contact participants without doing harm. We took our ethical concerns about approaching people for this research very seriously also because we are not part of the target group ourselves: both of us self-identify as slender and are often labelled as such by others. Finally, we decided that we as researchers should not categorize who would qualify as 'fat' but focus on self-identification. This meant that we did not approach people directly or influence the heterogeneity of our sample in terms of social class, ethnic and religious identity, occupation, etcetera.

We first placed an announcement for our research in a closed Facebook group called *Wondervol* (Wonderfull) that aims to provide an online space for full-figured women to connect and share information. The group has 1500 members who share experiences and information about living in a large body, such as body positive messages, tips for dressing, fat activist blogs, personal dilemmas and psychological advice. In the announcement, we explained that we as researchers recognize the

myriad negative stereotypes surrounding fatness in the media and wanted to talk to people about their thoughts and experiences on the subject. We placed a similar announcement in the Obesity Network monthly. The first author interviewed 14 and the second author interviewed eight self-identified fat women. At the time of the interviews, the participants worked in a wide variety of sectors and positions, ranging from the public service sector (schools, hospitals, municipalities) to the private sector (accountancy, entertainment, IT) and from lower positions (e.g. front office employees, waiters) to higher up in the organization (managers, directors, senior staff, and business owners). The interviews lasted between one and three hours and were carried out between October 2015 and May 2016. The interviews were transcribed and anonymized. Each participant was given a pseudonym.

In the interviews we talked about many issues related to fat embodiment, ranging from our participants' experiences within the Dutch health care system to self-perceptions and interactions with family over their size. We specifically zoomed in on the work context, in order to explore how size matters for our participants in their professional lives. Although some participants expressed reluctance to talk about their experiences at first, most of the conversations unfolded into very meaningful and emotionally charged exchanges. Often we came out of the interviews feeling deeply moved by the stories of our participants. We were angry about the injustices they had recounted, felt sad about the deep emotional impact of stigmatization some had experienced and felt joy and love in their stories about resilience, humour and strength. Yet when we started writing up our research, we felt disappointed because there did not seem to be any space for representing the affective qualities of our data. As Darmer (2006) writes '... the academic form and language creates a form of reality, which is emotion-free. Thereby, making it difficult to express and write about emotions ...' (554). At this point, we started to think about writing differently in order to do full justice to the stories of our participants and the interactions we had with them in the interviews (cf. Grey and Sinclair 2006). This is when we took up poetic inquiry as a methodology.

Poetic inquiry

Although some argue that the use of poetry in research is not a 'new' research practice but 'an ancient method to understand the world' (Sameshima et al. 2017, 23), it is not yet widely received as an accepted research method. The meta-analytical study by Prendergast, Leggo, and Sameshima (2009) reveals that the use of poetry is starting to grow in the social sciences, but is still a relatively recent phenomenon. The traditional, masculine, or what is seen as 'serious' ways of academic research, perceives the use of emotion in writing as something embarrassing that needs to be 'cooled down' (Furman 2006, 302; Phillips, Pullen, and Rhodes 2014). Especially in the field of organizational studies, emotions tend to be suppressed to provide only rational insights (Darmer 2006; Furman 2006). Every organization, however, is also an emotional place, where people as emotional beings interact and 'communications occur with words, rhythms, silences, hands and bodies' (Spence 1995; in Grisham 2006, 491). A Special Issue of *Management Decision* (J. James and Weir 2006) explicitly links the world of management to poetic scholarship to include emotions in organizational research. We agree with Darmer (2006) that poetry can be considered as a way of writing alongside other academic writing styles to delineate how emotions are implicated in organizational contexts and marginalizing experiences. Furthermore, as Aramitage (2014, 37) argues, poetic inquiry provides 'a method to explore the silent and hidden worlds of organizations that might often go unsaid'.

Poetic inquiry can be broadly defined as 'a form of qualitative research in the social sciences that incorporates poetry in some way as a component of an investigation' (Prendergast, Leggo, and Sameshima 2009, p. xxxv). According to this definition, poetic inquiry can be employed in different stages of the research. Poetic inquiry can be used as a way of data analysis to help understand, or get a new understanding of the data (e.g. Richardson 1994). Also, or additionally, poetic inquiry can be used as a form of data representation to help 'readers resonate and connect with findings; new ways of

revealing deep understandings of human experience ... and new ways of working with people in vulnerable situations to name “what it is like” (Pendergast and Galvin in Wiebe 2015, 160). In this article, we have made use of both functions of poetic inquiry in order to grasp and do justice to the affective dimension of our participants’ experiences.

First, as a form of data analysis, poetic inquiry provided the opportunity to attune to the emotions that circulated in the conversations with our participants. In that sense, poetic inquiry helped to do justice to the feelings – such as fear, shame, guilt, joy, anger – that were apparent in the conversations with fat employees as this was something we could not achieve through adhering to conventional research practices. Being open to the sensory experiences is what Strati (1999 in Warren 2008, 563) refers to as ‘imaginative participant observation’. As Warren (2008) writes, this means that researchers ‘become valid sources of data in ourselves via our own aesthetic experiences; refining our capacity to empathize with others and *imagining* what it might be like for them’. Stoller (1997) makes a similar case for being sensually immersed in the research setting. This sensual immersing – through the process of poetic inquiry – required us to stay close to the rhythms, emotions and words of our participants. This indicates how poetic inquiry is different from more traditional ways of analysing data where participants’ narratives are ‘explained, justified, ripped apart and poked with a long stick’ (Raele 2018, 267). As Prendergast (2006, 370) states, the process of poetic inquiry is reflexive in that ‘the researcher is interconnected with the researched, that the researcher’s own affective response to the process informs it’. Being slender researchers ourselves, poetic inquiry enabled us to relate to our participants’ experiences in a more reflexive, responsive and ethical way (McCulliss 2013, 131).

Secondly, as a form of data representation, poetry can touch the sensory, bodily experiences in the reader (Prendergast, Leggo, and Sameshima 2009). Leavy (2009, p.63) reminds us that poems have the capacity to create ‘sensory scenes’ whereby feelings are pushed to the forefront – in this way ‘a poem can be understood as revealing a snippet of human experience that is artistically expressed as in a heightened state’ (Leavy 2009, 64). This indicates how poetry can become ‘metaphorically’ generalizable (Stein 2003) in the sense that poems can recreate experiences by engaging the reader through various senses. Poetic inquiry as data representation thus enabled us to express affective experiences and let the reader feel what it is like to be a fat employee. We believe that the strength of poetic inquiry is that, compared to academic prose, it can better represent the ways we experience life as it is connected to the rhythmic, chaotic and affective dimensions of participant’s lives (and our own). In addition to the affective possibilities of poetic inquiry, most scholars who use poetic inquiry also have a political goal by using poetry to critique systemic power structures and marginalization. On the one hand poetry resists dominant (masculine) forms of academic writing, and on the other hand poetry can help expose how power impacts experiences (Leavy 2010b; Burford 2018). Fotaki, Metcalfe and Harding (Fotaki, Metcalfe, and Harding 2014) argue that ‘Writing from and with reference to the body involves using women’s corporeality to recreate their own subjectivity through language as a move against the masculine rhetorical structure that has defined it over time.’ We thus argue that poetic inquiry is well suited to resist masculine norms, both within academia and beyond. This different language is needed because the marginalized perspectives are not easily captured in the logics of domination. In correspondence with the famous words of Lorde (2012) ‘The master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house’ we argue that in order to effect change women and other marginalized groups need to ‘... have a language and means of symbolization of their own with which to speak differently about organizations and organizing’ (Fotaki, Metcalfe, and Harding 2014). This is what we aim for with the poetry presented below.

Data analysis and representation

The focus of the five poems we wrote is to capture the lived experience of our participants, and these could thus be considered ‘participant voiced poetry’ (McCulliss 2013). However, we must

acknowledge that our writing is obviously also informed by our affective responses from the position of slender researchers, our interpretations of what was shared and insights we gleaned from the literature on embodiment, fat stigma and obesity discourse. Therefore, it may be more accurate to categorize our poems as 'tri-voiced poetry': they include the voices of our participants, ourselves and the literature (Leavy, 2010b).

In line with Prendergast (2015, 683) our process of writing poems 'unfolded organically'. Often, right after an interview, when the emotions of what the participants shared were felt most intense, we started jotting down bits and pieces of a potential poem. After transcribing the interviews, we read and reread our transcripts while underlining words and sentences that stood out: because they moved us, inspired us or resonated with us. While collecting all these fragments we tried to 'see language through the lens of the poem' (K. James 2009, 62). Sometimes we left the initial words of the participants intact, sometimes we added our own interpretations, analyses and affective experiences to the poem or fused the words of several participants to express a more generally expressed sentiment. The process thus involved 'repurposing, recycling, and remixing' (Moore 2018, 46) of the words and feelings of our participants and our own interpretations of and responses to these, to reflect the affective reactions of our participants and ourselves that were produced in the interviews. To illustrate this we present an extract from one of our interviews with Jenny to show how the beginning of a poem emerged:

Interview fragment:

When a cat is fat you can call it a fat cat. But when it is about a person then all of a sudden you are not allowed to say that. My colleagues are now used to hearing me say the word fat, but at first, they were quite shocked like 'why do you say that?' But that is just the way it is, it is no value judgment but a descriptive term, just like blond or red haired or tall. Fat is not necessarily bad. And I want to break that assumption. Fat people exist in our society and we are not going anywhere. We are not going to hide and we are not going to stay unemployed at home. We want to be part of this society just like any other person. (Jenny)

Poem fragment:

I AM FAT
that's just how it is
I don't care what others think
all I want to say is this:

Fat people exist
and we are not going anywhere.
We are not going to hide
Or stay unemployed at home.

When reading through the entire transcript of the interview with Jenny, the above fragment was one of the fragments that immediately stood out because it *moved* us emotionally. Her words impacted us emotionally because they felt powerful and empowering. She actively rebels against the associations of fatness and claims space for fat people 'to exist', while taking part in a society that tells her otherwise. But also, the emotionality in her voice during this part of the interview stood out: her voice grew louder, the rhythm of her words was fast-paced and more pronounced. This seems to underline Jenny's determination and the impact her words had on us. Looking at this fragment 'through the lens of a poem' (James 2009, 62), we left most of her words intact but more clearly showed the rhythm of her speech, in order to do justice to the affective power it had on us. Furthermore, this fragment indicated a pattern that came up in more interviews – the subject position of the confident/rebellious fat employee who tries to reclaim fat identity in a positive way. We therefore expanded this initial fragment into a full poem by taking on the words and ideas that were presented by some other participants in their interviews such as those of Wendy who stated 'I am not lazy, I am active, I am present, I believe that I look good, actually' and Sarah who said 'I try to show that even when you are different from the standard, you can make a career, look nice, be fashionable; you're allowed to have dreams'.

After writing the poems, we reviewed each other's poems and sent them to our most involved participants. We asked them if and how the poems resonated with them (or not). We received exclusively positive responses. One of the responses we received via e-mail read:

The first thing that strikes me is the shape of the poems when centered on the page > I see the shape of curvy bodies in them. I find it hard to say something about the content. I recognize something in each poem, but at the same time it is also the story of someone else. If it would be my story, it would be a mix of the poems, I think. So it is good to see that you have been able to distinguish clearly between different ways of thinking. The sentence that stays with me is: 'it's not me, it's you'. That sentence is still buzzing. In a certain sense, it also works liberating. (feedback received by participant Maria)

Also, to our surprise, two participants responded to our poems by creating their own poetry as a reaction to ours. One of these women kindly gave her permission to use her poem in this paper. In her feedback, she wrote:

These poems analyze all the different aspects (feelings) obese employers have to deal with every day. The last poem seems to be of a person finally being able to accept him/herself after many years of struggle. Navigating through all the bigotry is not only very tiring but forces us obese people in many cases to wear a mask. No real freedom. (feedback received by participant Kate)

Both participants mention that the poems represent 'different aspects' or 'different ways of thinking' that they encounter themselves at work being a fat employee. Maria's feedback also illustrates the political impact of poetry as some of the words felt liberating to her and stayed with her. Furthermore, although we did not ask for this, Kate wrote 'an additional poem' in response to our poems. We felt a mixture of emotions when we read the poem: surprise, humility, gratitude, and a deep sense of connection with Kate and our other participants. We also felt a renewed energy to circulate the poetry and advocate against fat stigma. All this shows how poetry can evoke affective responses and how these can accumulate and advance change. Affect clearly circulated through our exchange of the poetry (Ahmed 2004): emotions moved between us and our participants in the interview setting; from the poems to our participants; and back to us again through their responses. Moreover, following Sharma and Tygstrup (2015) we argue that our agency and that of our participants changed.

The first five poems presented in the results section are presented as the identity positions, or subjectivities, we identified in our data through which our participants relate to fat stigma: the anxious fat employee; the super-smart fat employee; the impeccable fat employee; the funny fat employee; and the confident/rebellious fat employee. As a note of caution, we want to stress that these subjectivities should not be read as categories that can be chosen by individual fat employees. Rather, the poems represent 'a set of available embodied and relational ... performances' (Schippers and Sapp 2012, 30) that were taken up by our participants in various ways and depending on the context. In other words, the poems aim to reflect how our participants feel, but also what they *do* in reaction to weight-related stigma. All poems should be read against the backdrop of obesity discourse, healthism discourse and neo-liberal ideology that circulate in the workplaces of our participants.

Results: six poems on managing fat stigma at work

Moreover, the first five poems represent the different positions that our participants took up to deal with fat stigma in the context of their work. Sometimes, stigma made them anxious, yet at other times participants positioned themselves as confident or rebellious as a reaction to stigmatization. They engaged in a variety of behaviours such as anticipating stigma, avoiding certain social situations, compensating by working extra hard and/or by putting extra effort into their appearance. Some participants also mentioned using humour to compensate for their perceived 'failing'. Some (in addition) used humour to critique prevailing stereotypes about fat people. The last poem, that does not have a title, was produced by one of our participants as a reaction to our poetry. This poem summarizes her feelings related to the weight-related stigma she experiences.

The anxious fat employee

I look at myself
 through your eyes
 and I cringe...

A body failed?
 written on me for all to see.
 impossible to hide
 If only my outside could resemble-
 how I feel small and vulnerable
 inside

I create an antenna
 to constantly anticipate,
 and avoid the worst

That I know,
 I should wait in front of the office door
 and let you go in first.

Because what if I don't fit?
 My fat is bad
 could that be true?

I build a wall around myself
 so that no thoughts or comments
 can get through.
 Then maybe
 if I become invisible
 I can appear.

The super-smart fat employee

My weight counts,
 in the way I am perceived-
 dumb
 lazy
 failed
 pasted as marks
 onto my work identity.

 But ...
I am not one of them

I show you my credentials
 LOOK! here is my title.
 I check a report an extra time,
 can't afford any mistake.
 I take over my boss's work,
 whenever she's away.
 I give my utmost best,
 in every meeting that takes place.

These are the labours I face

I need to compensate for my failed body
 I need to legitimize my presence

I need to prove that
 I am
 bright, unique, skilled
 I need to prove that
 I have
 the right to be here.

The impeccable fat employee

My body works against me
 so I have to compensate
 because I deviate
 Visibly ...

This is me

I have to put in more effort:
 Neat shirts, nice shoes,
 sharp make-up
 Or I will be
 put
 down

by judging looks

Because my body evokes
 these all-consuming stereotypes
 Fat people are lazy,
 not presentable

I face this daily

My grooming efforts resound
 how every single pound
 weighs in on perception
 of what I am, what I can do

But this is not me,
 it's you

The funny fat employee

Hahaha
 Laugh Out Loud
 What a hoax
 endless jokes

'Cause I am funny
 what else to be?
 The funny fatty
 that is me

I mock myself
 so others won't
 To take the sting out
 so my colleagues don't

laugh AT
me

Do you want some cake?
Of course, I have to think about
my figure
Then we can have a conversation
about my weight

instead of a snigger

So I use humour to compensate
and to avoid the painful quips
but also to resist fat-phobic ideas
and to get a grip

on being stereotyped, marginalized,
ridiculed and despised ...
at work

The confident/ rebellious fat employee

I am happy the way I am
I actually think that I look good
I carry my confidence with pride
and I don't think that I should

diet

I will not comply
with that expected behaviour
I think it's a sham
and doesn't do me a favour

Fat is not bad
it is just a descriptor
It shouldn't determine
what *you* think of *me*

I am healthy, active,
smart and I look nice
I am good at my job
why can't you see?

I AM FAT
that's just how it is
I don't care what others think
all I want to say is this:
Fat people exist
and we are not going anywhere.
We are not going to hide
Or stay unemployed at home.

We can make a career,
look nice, be fashionable
We're allowed to have dreams
and be awesome

Participant produced poem:

Navigating through these emotions
 day after day again
 Who can see me silently suffering?
 For there's no one to whom I could explain

How much energy I spend
 hiding my feelings of shame
 to feel the pains in my overweight body
 to avoid being noticed and
 o yes..

I can be anxious, smart, confident
 impeccable or even be funny
 But the truth is
 I can never be me

Discussion

The poems presented here show the myriad of reactions to the fat stigma that form part of the lived experience of the self-identified women we talked to. We see these reactions, both expressed through affect and behaviour as a spectrum of possibilities that participants moved through. Thus, the poems do not present certain 'types' that fix fat employees in a particular identity, but attempt to give insight into the complex and various ways in which our participants reacted to fat stigma in the context of their employment. Important to note is also that these reactions were fluid, constantly shifting and greatly dependent on the (work) context in which they emerged. We also contend that these experiences are not merely individual affective responses (cf. Sharma and Tygstrup 2015). As researchers asking participants questions about their experiences, we were part of the context and what Ahmed (2004) would call the 'affective economy' related to fat embodiment which aligns our slender bodies with ideas about health and good citizenship and produces the bodies of our participants primarily as objects of fear, disgust and ridicule.

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge the ways not only our affective responses but also our slender bodies were implicated in the relations we formed with our participants and the poetry that we created based on our interactions. We have written this poetry from a particular position – as white, slender, heterosexual women – at a specific time – a time in which healthism and obesity discourses are dominant (cf. Richardson 1994). This provided challenges for the study in two ways. First, the power relations between us and our participants created difficulties in gaining trust and ensuring a safe environment for them. Many expected critical or hostile responses towards their fat bodies. Secondly, because we do not identify as fat ourselves, we cannot presume it possible for us to completely understand 'what it is like' for our participants. However, by using poetic inquiry we attempt to capture the voices of our participants at multiple levels: the individual, the social and the political. We do not aim to simply reflect the inner realm of our participants but show how their affective responses are part of an affective economy that goes beyond their personal experiences and also includes us as researchers, the context, and aligns them and us as part of particular social collectives (Ahmed 2004, 2013). Moreover, in the presented tri-voiced poetry (Leavy 2010b) the voices of our participants are inherently intertwined with our own voices, and insights from the literature on obesity discourse and gendered embodiment that speak to the contextual elements that shape these experiences.

Against the backdrop of obesity and healthism discourses and the underlying neoliberal ideology, we notice how feelings of anxiety, shame and fear were expressed most often by our participants. These formed the basis of behaviours such as anticipating, avoiding, hiding, and compensating. Anticipation of fat stigma indicates how the histories of previous stigmatizing encounters co-

produce affective responses of our participants (cf. Pullen, Rhodes, and Thanem 2017). Ahmed also writes about the cultural histories embedded in affective responses: 'How the object impresses (upon) us may depend on histories that remain alive insofar as they have already left their impressions.' (Ahmed 2013, 8). Many of our participants thus fear being confronted at work with weight-related stigma because this has happened to them before. Consequently, they try to avoid or prevent stigmatizing encounters before these can take place, for example by making themselves less visible in organizational spaces and encounters. This also illustrates the intersection of size with gender. Many organizational scholars have argued that hegemonic masculine social structures make it difficult for women to legitimately take up space (e.g. Kelan 2010; Tyler and Cohen 2010). We would therefore argue that the cultural histories invoked by fat stigma have a gendered element to them as well.

The intersection of size with gender again emerged when our participants talked about compensating. The need many participants feel to compensate relates to the stereotype of the dumb, lazy and unkempt fat person (LeBesco 2004; Puhl and Heuer 2009; Levay 2013; Mavin and Grandy 2016). On the one hand, compensation in terms of work performance and appearance can be considered a way in which our participants conform to the notion that their fat body is making them a 'failed' employee – a notion that is arguably more deeply felt by women because they are historically more likely to be judged on their bodies than men. Yet at the same time stressing their accomplishments and neat looks can be read as a way in which participants attempt to counter stereotypes. By putting extra effort into their work performance and appearance, participants try to show others that fat people are indeed capable of delivering outstanding output and can look professional. The poems 'the anxious fat employee', 'the super-smart employee' and 'the impeccable employee' highlight these affective responses and behaviours and suggest how these implicate the everyday working lives of fat women.

The poem 'the funny fat employee' illustrates how humour is used by some participants to take the sting out of possibly stigmatizing situations and/or critically interrogate systemic power structures related to fatness. It seems that the subject position of 'the funny one' is one of the few positive identity positions available for fat people, since it relates to the stereotype of the jolly, good natured person of size. Hole (2003) tries to explain the relationship between the fat body and comedy by analysing television series from an intersectional perspective. According to her, the fat female body can be considered a threat to patriarchal power structures – 'the fat female body when looked at is frightening – her eroticism is also maternalism; her desires are her own, not his' (Hole, 2003, p. 321). Therefore, media relocate the fat female body from 'to-be-looked at' to 'to-be-laughed-at', as an attempt to release the fear as laughter (Hole, 2003, p. 321). We see a similar dynamic taking shape around fat women in the workplace: they become objects of ridicule. Some participants expressed that they feel pressure to be charismatic and funny to compensate for their 'failed' bodies. Yet, while our participants use humour to make fun of themselves and their bodies to prevent others from doing so, some participants (simultaneously) use it to denounce fat stigma. As Lang and Lee (2010, 47) argue 'humor provides a means to test the openness, accessibility, and riskiness of sensitive issues'. Thus humour seems to be an acceptable way of creating dialogue around fat stigma and critiquing stigmatizing practices and is sometimes used as such by our participants. This is also related to the last poem 'the confident/rebellious employee' that aims to delineate how some employees reframe fatness to liberate themselves from disciplinary demands that tell them they are 'failed' employees and compel them to be less visible. Here, we see how resistance to dominant obesity and healthism discourses takes shape and how more positive meanings surrounding the fat body are at times articulated and performed by participants.

The last poem is a participant voiced poem and differs from the other poems in the sense that it only indirectly includes the voices of the researchers and the literature because it was written by one of our participants as a response to the five poems we produced as researchers. It illustrates the feelings of shame and pain she experiences around her body because of fat stigma. This echoes the experiences of many other women we spoke to. The last verse of this poem explicitly references our five poems. It starts out with an acknowledgement of the spectrum of affective responses 'I

can be anxious, smart, confident, impeccable or even be funny'. Yet the last line 'but the truth is, I can never be me' suggests how – for this participant – this spectrum does not do justice to her lived reality where feelings of being denied a genuine self seem to dominate. This indicates how weight-related stigma can put constraints on the identity or subject positions available for fat people and the negative affective responses that can emerge from these limitations. As with the other poems, this poem thus serves a political purpose. It aims to show readers what it is like to be a fat employee, and critiques the norms regarding size and gendered embodiment that circulate in many western organizational contexts.

Concluding remarks

With this paper, we intended to show the affective and political possibilities of poetic inquiry in analysing and representing the experiences of fat employees. We posit that poetic inquiry is uniquely positioned to address some of the shortcomings of more traditional qualitative organizational research methodologies, such as the lack of attention to the lived experiences, especially of marginalized workers (Pullen, Rhodes, and Thanem 2017), and the disembodied masculine forms of writing (Furman 2006; Phillips, Pullen, and Rhodes 2014). We chose to write differently and aimed for our poems to resonate with the readers, to let them understand the concerns, issues and suffering of others, so that they are in a position to actively change the current status quo (Fotaki, Metcalfe, and Harding 2014; Prichard and Benschop 2018). Thus, we hope to live up to the possibilities that Darmer sketches for poetry as a means of articulating data. He writes:

... poetic field reports stand a chance of capturing the heart and soul of the reader, making it a pleasure and an emotional experience reading the reports, which at the same time forces the reader to reflect upon the report, as poetry comes with no prefabricated interpretations that the reader are to learn, but challenges the reader to make his own interpretation of the field report at hand. (Darmer 2006, 559)

Yet as Meier & Wegener argue 'Achieving resonance can be an ambition, but it is never a given.' (2017, 194). We therefore leave to the reader the task of valuing and interpreting the work we present here. As Leavy (2010b, 185) has argued, in research-driven poetic works the question is not 'is it a good poem?', rather 'what is this poem good for?'. The most important question thus becomes how the poems presented here impact readers. How do they experience these poems? What sensations, emotions and reflections do the poetry evoke? What can be learned from the poems? How do they change the readers' agency (Sharma and Tygstrup 2015)? In order to stimulate the circulation of affect beyond the academic context, we have created a website where we have made our poems freely available for people to engage with and react to.⁵ We specifically invite HR managers to use the poetry to start a dialogue about size within their organization, with the political aim of changing current fat phobic structures that underpin fat stigma.

In summary, through poetic inquiry we have tried to evoke a sense of the lived experiences of a group that often remains silent and unacknowledged in organization studies scholarship: fat employees. Our aim was twofold: to do justice to the emotions that circulated in the conversations between us and the women we spoke to and to make a political statement with regards to the stigmatizing, marginalizing and exclusionary practices in organizations related to size and health. This way, we hope to open up space for deconstructing obesity and healthism discourse and underlying neoliberal ideas about responsibility, productivity and economic costs. We feel an urgent need to rethink the current status quo, for the health and well-being of our participants but also others who are affected by systemic power structures related to gender, size and health.

Notes

1. Participants identified themselves with different terms: e.g. 'fuller-sized', 'full-figured', 'obese' and 'fat'. In this paper, we use the term 'fat' to refer to these groups. In contrast to everyday usage in which the term bears negative moral value, we intend to use 'fat' as descriptor devoid of medicalized meaning as is reproduced on

the terms 'overweight' and 'obese'. Like the word 'queer', fat has been reclaimed as a positive identity marker by fat activists and fat studies scholars (e.g. Rothblum and Solovay 2009). Our choice thus also reflects this political standpoint.

2. For the purpose of this paper we use fat stigma and weight related stigma interchangeably to denote the stigmatization that befalls those who are categorized as fat, large, overweight or obese.
3. Size also intersects in important ways with class, race and ethnicity. For an overview of the intersections of body size with various other axes of signification, see for example Nash and Warin (2017), Amsterdam (2013), Fikkan and Rothblum (2012) and LeBesco (2004).
4. In this paper, we focus specifically on the affective particularities of dealing with fat stigma at work. Although gender is an important factor in the experiences of our participants, an in-depth exploration of these issues is beyond the scope of this paper. For more insight into the intersection of size with gender in our data, see Amsterdam and van Eck (2018).
5. The website can be visited through <http://www.poetryatwork.me/portfolio/size-work/>.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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