



Article

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

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Abstract

This paper focuses on the experiences of self-identified fat women employees. Combining the works of Karen Barad and Sara Ahmed, we offer a feminist new materialist analysis of the production of difference in organizations related to size as an entanglement of bodies, discourses, organizational materials and affect. We show how our participants predominantly became shameful and a ‘bad fit’ within their jobs through the intra-action of their large bodies with obesity discourse and organizational materials such as chairs and workwear. Yet we also illustrate how some material-discursive entanglements offered situations where shame was circumvented, instead producing our participants as acceptable within their organizational context. Our research contributes to discussions on embodied normativities in organizations by taking these issues beyond the discursive realm and highlighting the importance of materiality and affect in ‘fitting in’ at work. We offer new theoretical pathways to explore differentiating practices by looking at shame as part of collective and affective histories of marginalization.

Keywords

affect, difference, fat embodiment, feminist new materialism, gender, Karen Barad, Sara Ahmed, shame

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Introduction

Critical management research has shown how contemporary ideas about embodiment shape disciplinary practices categorizing certain bodies – e.g. those considered masculine, white, cisgendered, able-bodied and slender – as ‘normal’ or ‘suitable’ while brandishing others as ‘abnormal’ or ‘unsuitable’ within the workplace (e.g. Acker, 2006; Fotaki, 2013; Holvino, 2010; Tyler & Cohen, 2010). In this paper, we refer to these processes as differentiating practices as we seek to understand how the politics of difference plays out in workplaces with regard to fatness.¹ Our study is based on in-depth interviews with 22 Dutch working women who self-identify as fat, full-figured or obese. In order to provide a rich understanding of the differentiating practices these women are confronted with, we draw theoretical insights from the works of Karen Barad (2003, 2007, 2008) and Sara Ahmed (2004a, 2004b, 2014). Both offer new avenues of thinking about the ways in which inequalities based on bodily markers of difference are co-produced by discourses, affect and materialities.

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

Literature on normative embodiment in organizations has traditionally focused on discourse and rhetoric (Fotaki, Metcalfe, & Harding, 2014). Yet, as some scholars have shown, bodies are not only subject to discursive power, they are also a socio-material reality (Dale & Latham, 2015; Harding, Gilmore, & Ford, 2021). Similarly, scholars such as Fotaki and colleagues (2014) have argued that the materiality of the human body itself is often glossed over in discursive approaches to embodiment. With Levay (2014) we would add that the fat body as a particular type of material embodiment is largely overlooked in current organization studies research. But this is not all. Research has indicated that non-human bodies – such as organizational objects – participate in organizational practices too (e.g. Nyberg, 2009; Orlikowski & Scott, 2015a, 2015b; Symon & Pritchard, 2015). Our research adds to scholarship on the body, health and gender in organizations by addressing differentiation from a feminist new materialist perspective, focusing on the materiality of fat embodiment, organizational materials, discourses and the affective flows produced by these entanglements. We show how this approach can help combat a plethora of differentiating practices, specifically also those that are understudied. We will do this by adopting insights from Karen Barad (2003, 2007, 2008) and Sara Ahmed (2004a, 2004b, 2014) who each, from their own perspective, extend queer feminist perspectives to understand the workings of power. Together they provide tools for understanding the socio-material life of differentiation in relation to (fat) embodiment, something that is largely lacking in organization studies scholarship to date.

Previous scholarship has argued that fat bodies are queer bodies, as they disrupt the normative order and are often considered “out of bounds” (LeBesco, 2001). Yet, fat bodies are not protected from discrimination under (Dutch) law, and their marginalization therefore often remains invisible or legitimized by organizational practices related to “health”. Our study asks what role materialities and affect play in the differentiating practices that fat women encounter in the workplace.

Barad's work offers analytical tools for understanding the entanglement of discourses and human and non-human actors. This framework allows us to take both human agency and the agency of materials into account when analysing differentiating practices. Barad hints at the political potential of their theory when they write 'Particular possibilities for acting exist at every moment, and these changing possibilities entail a responsibility to intervene in the world's becoming, to contest and rework what matters and what is excluded from mattering' (Barad, 2003, p. 827). Yet at first glance, Barad's focus on immanence seems to complicate theorizing power asymmetries that result from socio-material entanglements. If analyses stay 'in the moment', how are we going to understand systemic power differences? And what role does affect play within entanglements that produce power asymmetries? With its focus on how emotions materialize bodies, Ahmed's work on affect is explicitly political and offers critical tools to understand how bodies become included and excluded. On a theoretical level, our focus on the socio-material will thus allow us to unpack a more expansive set of dynamics that structure differentiating practices in organizations. On a practical level, this will give us insights into concrete steps that may be taken to make organizations more size-inclusive; this aligns with the feminist tradition of taking political action. A materialist approach such as ours opens up wider possibilities for doing so by looking at the entanglement of discursive, material and affective realities.

We begin by outlining existing literature on embodiment to understand the role of size within organizations. We then delineate the usefulness of Barad's analytic framework for teasing out the agentive power and co-construction of human and non-human actors in relation to differentiation. Subsequently, we discuss Ahmed's insights on how affect is wrapped up in differentiating practices, materializing the body in particular ways. We then move on to discuss our methodology and the analysis of our interview materials. Here, we show how our participants predominantly became a 'bad fit' with their jobs and organizations through the entanglement of their large bodies with everyday organizational materialities, as well as instances where entanglements provided possibilities to circumvent becoming a 'bad fit' within their workplaces. Subsequently, we provide ideas for extending the debate on normative embodiment in organizations, both theoretically and practically, by focusing on the role of both materials and affect within the differentiation practices we describe.

Fat Embodiment Within Organizations

Organization studies research that focuses on gendered embodiment and/or health has previously touched on the importance of employees' size (e.g. Johansson et al., 2017; Kelly et al., 2007; Levay, 2014; Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Meriläinen et al., 2015; Thanem, 2009, 2013; Trethewey, 1999; Waring & Waring, 2009). Johansson et al. (2017), for example, indicate that managers who are passionate about their own healthy and fit bodies and lifestyles tend to morally condemn fat people. This dovetails with the findings of Trethewey (1999), Haynes (2012) and Meriläinen and colleagues (2015) who show how fit bodies are conflated with non-fat bodies and become the norm for professional embodiment, also in organizations where health is not formally managed. Thanem (2013) similarly illustrates how employees who do not conform to normative fit and slender embodiment become subject to marginalization and relentless discipline. With the exception of Mik-Meyer (2008, 2010), Levay (2014) and van Amsterdam and van Eck (2019a, 2019b), however, little research has taken size as an entry point to analyse how differentiating practices take shape within organizations. Mik-Meyer (2008, 2010) shows how managers and health consultants in Danish organizations explicitly construct size as an important organizational concern. Bringing together research from different disciplines on embodiment, health and organization, Levay (2014) argues that size has become a way to legitimize power differences in organizations, producing fat employees as objects of organizational control, marginalization and discrimination. Our own

earlier work (van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019a, 2019b) supports these claims with empirical findings, demonstrating how fat women employees are often stigmatized and constructed as unprofessional, lazy and unintelligent.

Aforementioned studies thus show that a legitimate professional body needs to be slender, a norm that is more strictly applied to women than to men (Haynes, 2012; Johansson et al., 2017; Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Following Orbach (1987), several scholars have argued that ‘fat is a feminist issue’ because the intersection of size with gender renders fat women more vulnerable to stigmatization and negative appraisal than thin women and men of all sizes (e.g. Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Saguy, 2012). The focus on women’s size can also be read as part of a more general quest to control women’s bodies (e.g. Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Tyler & Cohen, 2010). Although aforementioned studies do not explicitly analyse the affect or emotions that circulate around embodied normativities in the workplace, they demonstrate that the affective responses of managers and co-workers to fat workers position them unfavorably. As visibly fat employees, the women in our study thus conduct their everyday lives within the affective flow based on obesity discourse, which relies heavily on rhetorical strategies of shaming, blaming and individualization (Levay, 2014; van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019a, 2019b). Yet through the emphasis on the discursive aspects of these differentiating practices, both the affective and material aspects herein become muted: how affect and organizational materials are implicated in processes of differentiation remains largely unknown. We now turn to Barad’s work on material-discursive entanglements and Ahmed’s work on affect in order to surface the material and affective aspects of differentiating practices related to fat embodiment within organizations.

Material-Discursive-Affective Entanglements

To understand how materials, bodies and discourses interact to create social hierarchies in organizations, we adopt analytic insights from Karen Barad (2003, 2007, 2008) and Sara Ahmed (2004a, 2004b, 2014). We have chosen to combine these two theorists because they each, from a critical feminist standpoint, conceptualize exclusion as formed in a relationship between materiality and discourses. Their grounding in feminist research implies that they are both concerned with power structures and an intersectional understanding of exclusion, which make them well-suited to examine experiences of marginalization and embodiment in organizations. We have previously proposed that body size is an important category to include in intersectional analyses (van Amsterdam, 2013). In this article, we build on and contribute to this argument by drawing on Barad’s and Ahmed’s insights on materiality.

Barad is fundamentally concerned with the ways in which matter ‘kicks back’ and how matter is part of entanglements that produce phenomena. In the article ‘Posthumanist performativity: Toward an understanding of how matter comes to matter’ (2003), Barad argues that language and discourse have been awarded too singular prominence in representational analyses, at the expense of theoretizations of matter. Barad argues that discourse and matter – nonhuman (i.e. objects) as well as human (i.e. bodies) – do not exist as meaningful separate and separated entities, and that it does not make sense analytically to separate them. If we want to understand questions of becoming, they argue, we must look at the productive power of *intra*-actions between the material-discursive, the entanglement of matter, objects, discourses and subjects. The concept ‘intra-action’ highlights the ways in which the material-discursive realms are entangled, and, in turn, rejects the more common term *interaction*, which ‘presumes the prior existence of independent entities’ (Barad, 2003, p. 815). As Harding and colleagues (2021, p. 13) write about intra-action, ‘Rather than envisioning distinctions between entities. . . they are blurred at the edges, bleeding into and participating in each other’s performative constitution’. This also means that subjects and objects

are never fixed in time or space; rather, they are continuously materializing in context specific ways; they are always ‘becoming’.

Importantly, Barad bases their conceptualizations on queer feminist perspectives in order to address power differentials: ‘. . . how different differences get made, what gets excluded and how these exclusions matter’ (Barad, 2007, p. 30), is the outcome of intra-actions between human and non-human agents. Most organization studies scholars use Barad’s work to come to grips with technological advancements (e.g. Nyberg, 2009; Orlikowski & Scott, 2015a, 2015b; Symon & Pritchard, 2015). In focusing on materiality without examining the power structures involved, these studies depoliticize Barad’s work, negate its queer feminist genealogy, and forgo its critically feminist potential (Harris & Ashcraft, 2019). However, organization studies scholars such as Harris, McFarlane and Wieskamp (2020), Ford, Harding, Gilmore, and Richardson (2017), Harding and colleagues (2021), Visser and Davies (2021) and Dale and Latham (2015) provide preliminary steps to redress this deficit. The latter use Barad’s framework to understand how embodiment is entangled with non-human materialities such as technology, producing the basis of discrimination for disabled people. They write: ‘we need to explore how organisational processes are involved in the “cuts” that form (both material and social) boundaries and differences, and produce inclusions and exclusions, inequalities and hierarchies, subjects and objects’ (p. 179). Barad’s framework thus offers the necessary tools to analyse how material agency – the capacity of matter to actively participate in phenomena – gets enacted within differentiating practices. Yet it provides little concrete foothold to expand these political aspects of inclusions and exclusions related to embodiment.

Combining Barad and Ahmed’s work allows us to attend to both the material and affective qualities of differentiation as this relates to the fat body in organizations. Therefore, we now turn to Ahmed’s work to analyse how bodies materialize in specific ways – as included or excluded – through the circulation of affect. Ahmed argues that emotions are one of the ways in which the body materializes, thus providing a bridge between the material and the discursive and offering possibilities for collective politics and social alliances (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 117). Although language and the discursive figure more prominently in Ahmed’s work than in Barad’s, both draw from and aim to extend Judith Butler’s theorizing on performativity (Ahmed, 2014; Barad, 2008). Overall, Ahmed’s work can be read as an articulation of how bodies materialize and are shaped as a part of social collectivities through the circulation of affect or emotion. With this, Ahmed’s ideas about materiality allow us to analyse how bodies become part of an ‘us’ or a ‘them’ through the circulation of affect.

Ahmed conceptualizes this materialization of the body as taking place within ‘affective economies’. With the term ‘economy’, a process of circulation is implied: here, she borrows from Marx to argue that emotions work ‘as a form of capital’ where ‘affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation’ (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 120). Emotions and affect thus travel between people and are profoundly social. In these affective economies, Ahmed argues, emotions are not binarily ‘within’ or ‘without’ bodies, but indeed ‘create the very effect of the surfaces and boundaries of bodies’ (Ahmed, 2004b, p. 10). Thus, Ahmed outlines that emotion and affect are a central part of differentiating practices that shape social collectives, as affective responses and assignments (e.g. ‘you should be ashamed’, ‘I’m afraid of him’) work to ‘give others meaning and value’ (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 28). Feelings and emotions thus play a fundamental role in shaping differentiating practices, as they continuously create and recreate the boundaries of the collectives different bodies can legitimately be a part of. As Pouthier and Sondak (2019, p. 3) write, attending to affect is important for understanding ‘the challenges and possibilities of emancipation from oppressive and discriminatory bodily norms’.

This resonates with the work of Pullen, Rhodes and Thanem (2017) and Fotaki, Kenny and Vachhani (2017) who – as part of the ‘affective turn’ in organization studies – call for an increased

attention toward the work affect does within and around organizations, and specifically how it may be used to unpack how ‘real people with real bodies might experience and challenge’ organizations on an everyday basis (Pullen et al., 2017, p. 112). Affect, defined here as social emotions informed ‘by a variety of lived experiences and visceral feelings’ (p. 2) saturates organizational life. Fotaki and colleagues (2014, p. 13) argue that ‘affect can provide new and fruitful lenses for the critical analysis of organizational life’, and Pullen and colleagues (2017, p. 122) call for an examination of how ‘lived experience’ informs the circulation of affect in this context. Fraser, Maher and Wright (2010, p. 204) point to Ahmed’s work as being particularly helpful to understand the theme of fatness as a social category today because of its emphasis on processes of ex- and inclusion as opposed to individualization of emotional states.

Using the lenses of both Barad and Ahmed, we thus add to the existing scholarship on embodiment within organizations by surfacing the role of materiality and affect in differentiating practices that fat women employees encounter.

Methodology

Data collection

This paper forms part of a larger research project in which we explored the experiences of self-identified fat, obese or full-figured people living and working in the Netherlands (see also van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019a, 2019b). We emphasize the importance of doing research *with* rather than *on* marginalized groups. This research project evolved out of an epistemological commitment and concern for a marginalized group whose experiences are rarely included in organization studies. The first author interviewed 14 self-identified fat women and the second author interviewed 8. An important ethical consideration involved the way we approached and selected our participants. Because identifying someone as ‘fat’ is often perceived as offensive, we needed an approach in which we did not categorize people ourselves, while also making clear that we did not want to reproduce the dominant negative stereotypes surrounding fatness. After reflecting on this issue, we decided to focus on people who *self-identify* as fat, large, full-figured, overweight or obese. We posted announcements in a closed Facebook page for full-figured women called *Wondervol* (Wonderfull), placed a call in the Dutch Obesity Network monthly (a foundation that offers biomedical information about being obese) and reached out to participants via a plus size blogger.

Most of the 22 women we interviewed in total reached us via the *Wondervol* Facebook page. This is a group of 1,500 members who share experiences and information about living in a large body, for instance about fat stigma, work, romantic relationships, activism or general body positivity. Thus, most of our participants have experience with reflecting on their body size with others and might therefore be more able to articulate their thoughts and experiences compared to others who do not participate in such an online community. In the announcement we emphasized that we recognize how fatness is often negatively portrayed in the media. We expressed an awareness of harmful effects of such stereotyping and added that we wanted to hear from those who live in or with large bodies, because their stories rarely get told. Due to our reliance on self-identification, we did not recruit a heterogeneous group of participants in terms of gender and race or ethnicity: all of our participants identified as women and most were part of the Dutch ethnic majority. Two of our participants had a minority ethnic background: Afro-Surinamese and Antillian-Dutch. We also did not recruit a homogenous group in terms of occupations, job sector or rank. However the diversity in occupations (see Table 1) allowed us to see that fatness acts as a marker of difference both in highly visible occupations (e.g. opera singer, comedian) as well as in more back-office roles (e.g. information analyst), and both in high-wage occupations (e.g. accountant, head principal) as well

Table 1. Participants.

Name*	Profession	Age	Duration of the interview
Jill	Debt counsellor	53	50 min
Katy	Secondary school teacher	37	60 min
Laura	Elderly caregiver	24	80 minutes
Rifka	Back and front office worker	22	55 minutes
Mell	Owner beauty salon	33	60 minutes
Sandra	Youth counselor	46	50 minutes
Alice	Shop assistant	22	90 minutes
Kara	Photographer	28	90 minutes
Jenny	Information analyst	47	60 minutes
Susan	Care-giver	39	60 minutes
Wendy	Opera singer	52	120 minutes
Claire	Service employee	25	55 minutes
Carinda	Medical researcher	34	70 minutes
Maxime	Head principal at a primary school	43	120 minutes
Monique	Project leader	26	80 minutes
Ingrid	Project manager	30	60 minutes
Nora	Actress, public speaker and comedian	50	90 minutes
Hannah	Student counselor	50	50 minutes
Constance	Caregiver	40	140 minutes
Nancy	Pedagogical staff member	45	150 minutes
Kathleen	Accountant	30	120 minutes
Tamar	Former IT tech and communications specialist	41	160 minutes

*Pseudonyms.

as in low-wage occupations (e.g. caregiver, shop assistant). We argue in line with Ford and colleagues (2017, p. 1557) that our objective with this qualitative project is ‘not generalization from a sample but theorizing from “knowing subjects”.’

Interviews lasted between 50 and 160 minutes. The general aim of the interview was to explore how participants’ size mattered in their daily work. During the interviews, the type of questions we asked were, for instance: *When and how does your body size become an issue at work? How do others in the organizational environment respond to your body? Do you have examples of the physical environment that enabled or limited your body in your daily work?*

Data analysis

All interviews were conducted in Dutch, fully transcribed and coded in NVivo. This enabled us to approach the material-discursive entanglements in the ‘spoken word’ of our participants. As Barad shows that discourse and material are mutually constituted, ‘matter cannot register in and for itself alone, or un-discursively’ (Iedema, 2007, p. 938), but research into organizational materialities ‘can only be approached through the discursive, so studies must infer from the spoken word how human and non-human actors intra-act’ (Ford et al., 2017, p. 1557). Although analysing materiality through spoken word is somewhat limited by its focus on the linguistic, neglecting other modes of meaning-making such as ‘image, design, and technology’ (Iedema, 2007, p. 931), we also paid attention to the bodily aspects in the interview, such as tone of voice, rhythm of speech, silences,

body postures and gesticulation. A challenge we faced concerned the Dutch-to-English translations of our interviews, and vice versa, sharing our results in English with our Dutch participants. For instance, the term ‘fat’ in English sounds similar to the Dutch term ‘vet’ (meaning: greasy), which can be perceived as a highly insulting term to refer to someone’s body. In order to produce a culturally sensitive account, we did a back translation and had a bilingual speaker check our work.

Our data analysis was an abductive process: we re-read Barad’s and Ahmed’s texts alongside the transcripts, bringing together theory and data while together reflecting on the ‘becomings’ that resulted from the material-discursive entanglements. This involved two stages. First, we selected the fragments in which materiality became particularly relevant in our participants’ accounts of being a fat woman in the workplace. This first stage revealed the agentic role of different types of chairs, clothes, doorways, badges, food, make-up, computer screens and the materiality of bodies themselves (e.g. sweat, size, smell, movement) in co-constituting the ways in which our participants could participate in their workplace. Particularly the materiality of clothes and chairs and their intra-actions with fat bodies featured prominently in all our participants’ accounts, which is why we decided to select and zoom in on these material agencies. The second stage involved intense exploration of the fragments by focusing on the ‘hotspots’ (MacLure, 2013, pp. 172–173), that is, we approached the data through looking at where data ‘glows’, where it creates disconcert or a sense of wonder. Sitting down with our data, we discussed among the three of us which parts of the material-discursive entanglements that we found in our data evoked particular feelings or emotions. We thus had to go beyond the transcripts, to also include the experiences and affects that circulated during the interviews as we recalled them through our fieldnotes (see also van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019b). The third author in particular interrogated the first and second author about the reasons for choosing certain fragments, and which feelings or emotions it had invoked in our participants or ourselves. After (re)reading the transcripts and fieldnotes, reliving the interviews, and thoroughly discussing our experiences, we found that the fragments in our data that had a heightened affectivity were all in some way related to the way our participants became a ‘bad fit’ with their jobs and organizations. This heightened affect points to where our participants indicate feeling humiliated, insecure, uncomfortable and afraid. Together we carefully considered the instances where our participants literally and symbolically became a ‘bad fit’ in the organization through material-discursive-affective entanglements. This became our first theme. Yet, we also recognized how entanglements sometimes offered fat employees opportunities to fit in and become acceptable. Reflecting on this ‘disconcert’ in the data, we coined this as our second theme.

Results

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

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

As we show in earlier publications (van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019a, 2019b) our participants were often stigmatized or excluded from workplaces because their fatness is seen as a sign of incompetence or ill-health. Megan, for example, recounted how size normativities impacted her chances on the job market, as she was denied an internship at a photography studio: ‘The manager

simply told me, well you are too fat to intern here, because this is physically demanding work.’ After several attempts at finding a job, Amy started mentioning her health status in job interviews: ‘I come straight out and say I don’t have a medical record (. . .) They won’t ask directly but they’ll assume – this one won’t be able to do the job.’ Previous research (e.g. Levay, 2014; Mik-Meyer, 2008) substantiates how the conflation of fatness with ill-health informs norms around embodiment in organizations and thus structures who gets acknowledged as a good fit and who does not.

Importantly, these differentiating practices are not merely structured by discourses about health; materiality and affect play an important role in co-constructing these realities. Josie’s words indicate the circulation of affect:

When you are fat, people automatically think you’re unhealthy (. . .) The association with laziness is there too. Fat people are considered dirty, they’re not motivated, and it is all their own fault. (Josie)

Although shame and disgust are not explicitly mentioned here, these affects ‘stick’ to the normative associations of fatness with ill-health, laziness, dirt and individual responsibility. As Ahmed (2004a) notes, ‘emotionality involves movements or associations whereby “feelings” take us across different levels of signification, not all of which can be admitted in the present. . . “what sticks” is also bound up with the “absent presence” of historicity’ (p. 120). Historicity here refers to obesity discourse through which normative associations and negative affects regarding fatness – shame in particular – have been endlessly circulated over the past decades (Levay, 2014). Shame circulated in the interviews mostly in non-verbal ways: participants often lowered their eyes and voices when discussing the negative assumptions their fat bodies evoked and we felt the atmosphere tense during these exchanges.

Normative assumptions and affects related to fat embodiment cannot be disentangled from the materiality of the fat body that makes it extra visible as nonnormative (van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019a). Many participants described how embodied normativities emerged through their encounters with the material-discursive realities of everyday work life. Rifka, who had different jobs in the service sector, talked extensively about how rare it is to see someone of a larger size performing service-related work in shops, cafés and restaurants. The norm, according to Rifka is ‘. . . around size 38, 40 [European sizes]. If you carry size 42 or up, society thinks you are plus size, so good luck finding a job’. This resonates with the findings from Haynes (2012), Mavin and Grandy (2016) and Trethewey (1999) that indicate the pressure on working women to be slender. To illustrate the normative assumptions employers have about size, Rifka referred to her experiences with job application interviews: ‘they give you disapproving looks, like they are disappointed [. . .] That is why I always add a picture to my CV. Then they know in advance I am fat.’ Here, it seems that the histories of experiencing disapproval and disappointment in previous job application interviews produced the particular material reality of the photo on the CV, which acts to disrupt the circulation of these affects during a new interview experience, illustrating that ‘the past and the future are enfolded participants in matters iterative becoming’ (Barad, 2007, p. 181). Rifka’s narrative furthermore dovetails with Carinda’s, who noted in her interview that ‘people dress their arguments up as being about health while they are actually talking about appearance’. This aligns with Johansson and colleagues (2017) who note that health is used to legitimate appearance norms in organizations. Importantly, discourses around appearance and health are entangled with the materiality of fat embodiment, producing fat employees as people who *are* not fit and *do* not fit.

Clothing often came up in the interviews as an important agentive force that co-produced these differentiating practices. Mostly, the entanglement of a fat body with work clothes produced participants as unfit for their jobs, or a bad fit with the organization of their employment. Participants described that their sizes are not only harder to find; the clothes that are available in larger sizes are

often more expensive or only suitable for non-professional occasions. Especially those who were obliged to adorn corporate wear or who were confronted with a particular dress code found their size becoming problematic. Kara, who worked a side job at a hospital, and Alice, a shop assistant, describe how they emerged as a bad fit within their jobs through intra-action of their fatness with ill-fitting clothes at their place of work:

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

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

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

Well, it is compulsory. But the sweater that we have is very ugly. And then I feel uncomfortable. It does look good on them [non-fat employees] but it looks pretty bad on me. It makes a difference in your work. Like, here I am in my sweater. You have to look presentable but that won't happen for me because this sweater looks like a tent. That is the way it is made. (Alice)

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

The effects of the encounter between material realities are thus inevitably tied up with normative ideas about embodiment. The preferred slender embodiment within organizations can be seen as part of a broader interest in controlling women's bodies in organizations and beyond (e.g. Tyler & Cohen, 2010). It is furthermore entangled with constructions regarding a 'professional' appearance (Haynes, 2012; Johansson et al., 2017; Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Ford et al. (2017, p. 1566) argue that the work attire of a given workplace may be seen as a type of visualization of the larger ideals and social hierarchies that mark this space. Accordingly, '... business wear forms a visual discourse encapsulating norms, histories, cultures, economics, class, gender and so on. ... the norms encapsulated in the suit inform wearers how to look, how to act and how to take the identity of "leader".' This dovetails with Just, Kirkegaard and Muhr (2019) who show that uniforms are markers of belonging within a particular job or sector. They conceptualize the uniform as 'a figure of affective attachment' and warn that a person who does not wear the uniform appropriately jeopardizes their belonging (p. 126). The corporate wear that Alice and Kara describe similarly represents and enacts norms about appropriate behaviour and appearances required within their jobs and pushes toward a homogenized 'professional' appearance that is inverted for these fat women; they stand out because they can't fit. Fitting into clothes thus becomes an integrated part of performing work-ability and belonging; the clothes mark the extent to which their body may be considered acceptable. These norms intersect with gender ideals too: women are pushed towards more

self-governance in terms of appearance because their bodies are historically constructed as out of place in organizations (Haynes, 2012; Johansson et al., 2017; Mavin & Grandy, 2016). Accordingly, when Kara and Alice's bodies defy embodied norms about size by not fitting into the work clothes offered by their employers, they emerge as 'a professional liability' (Mavin & Grandy, 2016, p. 1100).

Seating arrangements were also highlighted by the participants as a challenge to their belonging. Many participants indicated that they struggled with fitting comfortably into office chairs and always looked carefully at the seating present at business meetings or other work gatherings. They recurrently voiced concerns about armrests that would make it painful or difficult for them to fit and spoke of the sturdiness of seats. Jane for example, mentioned this issue during her interview:

All the things I have to take into account that other people never think about. . . . When you go to dinner with clients at a restaurant with very small chairs, like those fragile folding chairs, then you sit down very carefully. You don't want the client to sit across from you while you are lying on the ground. Those moments can be really confronting. (Jane)

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

The central role of objects such as seats in differentiating practices also became apparent when our participants talked about having to take flights for their work. Tamar stated that her size is an issue in her search for a new job, as she is aware that she does not 'fit in everything (. . .) planes for example, those seats are just too small.' For this reason, she does not feel that she can apply for a job that involves frequent travelling. Similarly, Jane explicitly outlines the economic consequences of the particular material-discursive entanglement of her larger body at work:

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

In this example, the fat employee becomes not only different, but indeed an economic burden through the intra-action of Tamar and Jane's size with small airplane seats and obesity discourse that constructs fat people as unproductive and financially risky for employers (see Levay, 2014; Mik-Meyer, 2008). Here, the encounters with the materiality of 'regular' seats makes it clear that fat bodies take up different kinds of space than bodies that are not fat, which are assumed to be the norm. Through Ahmed (2004a, p. 119), we see here how bodily space becomes aligned with social space through the intensity of the affective circulation of tension and anxiety that Jane describes. The literal, material not 'fitting in' becomes entangled with the normative idea that fat bodies do not belong at the workplace, and this entanglement produces Jane and Tamar as different from their

‘normal’ colleagues. As illustrated above, normative assumptions regarding size include the idea that fat people take sick leave more often and are less able to perform strenuous physical work. According to our participants, this makes it difficult for them to find new employment. This echoes research that shows how size functions as a basis for various forms of discrimination in the workplace (Levy, 2014).

As a part of Jane’s anxiety over ill-fitting airplane seats, she describes feeling ‘rather tense’ when entering a plane. This signals the anticipated shame of (possibly) not fitting in the airplane seat. The affective implications of the relationships between airplane seats, large bodies and work-life also become clear in Jill’s story about one particular flight she took for her job:

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

In this example, through the material circumstances – the cancelled flight, the alternative small airplane that needs weight balancing, and the ill-fitting airplane seat – Jill becomes both symbolically and practically Other. The difference of her body is brought into view as she is placed among other bodies that look radically different from hers. She sticks out, she is made singular. The fact of Jill’s high weight compared to other passengers might not be an issue to be humiliated by had the separation of bodies been isolated to a material, practical circumstance. However, because the material and the discursive cannot be separated, ideas about the non-desirability of a fat body inform the intra-action between fat and thin here, and expose Jill as different from the other passengers. Jill’s humiliation works as a form of shame aligned with negative meanings surrounding size as being too much – taking up too much space; adding too much weight; costing too much – and consolidates these. This resonates with scholarship that explores space as a gendered issue. Tyler and Cohen (2010) for example show that organizational space is gendered: dominant gender norms make it difficult for women to legitimately take up space within organizations. Ahmed (2004a) expands this theorization of space by relating it to affective intensities produced by embodied normativities. She writes that ‘fear works to restrict some bodies through the movement or expansion of others’ (p. 127). We posit that a similar argument can be made for fat subjects in organizations: our participants emerge as a bad fit through the entanglement of their bodies with organizational materials, norms regarding both gender and size, and related affective economies.

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

Becoming acceptable: entanglements that allow fat employees to fit

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

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

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

On the one hand, Katy's experience bears the potential of becoming a bad fit because of her size. The labour involved in 'looking hard' to find a suitable black skirt echoes Hannah's points about the lack of accessibility of professional clothing for fat women, as well as Rifka's and Kara's problems with gaining access to clothes that fit them in the professional environments they have been part of. On the other hand, Katy also points to the ways in which clothes – especially uniforms – may work to make her body similar to her colleagues instead of different. The identical outfits that the waiting staff all wear, regardless of shape and size, make them a group. This allows them, as Ahmed argues when describing community and collectivity, to 'align' their bodies towards each other (2004a, p. 119). Clothes can thus also be considered active agents in dissolving or erasing difference – if, that is, they are accessible and are designed to accommodate bodies of different sizes and shapes. If, as we have argued, differentiating practices revolve around 'fitting in', the uniformity of a uniform – developed with diversity and comfort in mind – can signal that all bodies belong. Indeed, as Ahmed notes, there is an intimate relationship between comfort (both one's own and other's comfort with one's body) and fitting in: 'to be comfortable is to be so at ease with one's environment that it is hard to distinguish where one's body ends and the world begins. One fits, and by fitting the surface of bodies disappears from view' (Ahmed, 2007, p. 159). Katy draws our attention to the ways in which clothes can allow her to blend in and become acceptable. Sarah and Jane, on the other hand, indicated how they used the materiality of their outfits (bright colours and cupcake print) to resist the shaming and invisibilizing of their fat bodies (see also van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019a).

Participants furthermore mentioned how make-up and other beauty practices and products are also entangled within the flow of agency, opening up space for fat women to become acceptable. Jane mentioned always making sure to have manicured hands, smart hair and impeccable make-up during work activities. Her narrative shows the agentive capacity of such materialities in opening up possibilities for becoming acceptable, in spite of the material-discursive entanglement of her fat body with obesity discourse that pushes towards exclusion:

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

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

The examples presented in this theme illustrate the work materialities can do to align fat women's bodies with legitimate others in their organizational context. Barad's new materialist perspective allows us to see that human and non-human materialities are entangled with discourses and 'help constitute one another' (Barad, 2007, p. 239). Shame seems to be at the heart of these material-discursive entanglements regarding fat embodiment; positions of becoming shameful and circumventing shame change according to the specific intra-actions, and are often folded into each other. They predominantly produce fat women employees as a bad fit with their jobs and organizations, but sometimes also provide opportunities for our participants to challenge or resist normative assumptions about size in this context.

Discussion

In this paper, we set out to explore differentiating practices in organizations related to size from the perspective of self-identified fat women. In line with Levay (2014) we have argued that size is an important but understudied marker of difference in modern-day organizations. Drawing from the works of Karen Barad and Sara Ahmed we illustrate how this 'fitting in' is not just a matter of symbolically or discursively fitting into the job or the culture of the organization; fitting in or belonging are thoroughly material and affective issues as well.

Differentiating practices beyond the discursive

Our first contribution lies in adding a material dimension to theorization on embodied normativities and related differentiating practices in organizations. Extending earlier work in management and organization studies that focuses mostly on the discursive aspects of embodied difference (e.g. Johansson et al., 2017; Levay, 2014; Meriläinen et al., 2015; Trethewey, 1999; Waring & Waring, 2009), our study shows how materials co-produce the basic premises of who 'fits in' at different workplaces. Through the use of Barad's (2003, 2007, 2008) analytical framework, we have shown how everyday organizational materials, such as chairs, clothing, airplane and office seats as well as the fat body itself, can become agentic actors within material-discursive entanglements that produce our participants' fit within their workplace. Ahmed's (2004a, 2004b, 2014) ideas about affect furthered our analysis by showing that through affects such as shame, humiliation and insecurity, fat bodies become aligned with each other as 'a bad fit'. We furthermore show how everyday objects can work to produce otherwise marginalized fat bodies as acceptable. While earlier work in management and organization studies mainly used Barad's theory to understand the role of technology in organizations (e.g. Nyberg, 2009; Orlikowski & Scott, 2015a, 2015b; Symon & Pritchard, 2015), our work highlights how Barad's concept of intra-activity can be put to work to critically analyse difference in organizations. Our framework offers a rich understanding of differentiating practices by incorporating an analysis of material agencies and affective flows. This makes it

possible to address underexplored markers of difference such as body size, as well as gain a more comprehensive understanding of the production of inclusion and exclusion in organizations.

Gender intersects with size in the differentiating practices we showcase, not only because professionalism for women is largely constructed around ideals related to their appearance (see Haynes, 2012; Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Trethewey, 1999) but also because the issues our participants highlight around ill-fitting clothes, chairs and airplane seats in essence revolve around the possibilities to legitimately take up space. As Tyler and Cohen (2010) argue, dominant gender norms marginalize women employees through the symbolic and performative organization of space. At the intersection of size and gender it becomes clear that taking up space needs to be considered beyond the discursive realm as material and affective. Fat women's bodies are considered excessive in terms of space, both literally and symbolically. Their bodies are queer bodies (LeBesco, 2001) since their material presence disrupts the organizational order – for example by not fitting into chairs and work wear – and this, in turn, produces shame. We want to highlight this socio-materiality of bodily shame, taking Probyn (2004, p. 329) literally when she writes that shame is felt 'in the rupture when bodies cannot or will not fit the place – when seemingly there is no place to hide'. This dovetails with Ahmed's ideas around space and affectivity. She states that normative embodiment allows '... bodies to extend into spaces that have already taken their shape. Those spaces are lived as comfortable as they allow bodies to fit in; the surfaces of social space are already impressed upon by the shape of such bodies' (p. 148). We therefore argue, in line with Barad's onto-epistemological stance, that space should be theorized as a material, affective *and* discursive reality that structures belonging and as such should be considered in future research on embodied differences in organizations. The theoretical contribution of our work lies in surfacing the critical feminist potential of material and affective analyses to gain a more refined understanding of the workings of power in relation to embodiment in organizations. In the next section, we will discuss the theoretical implications of the circulation of shame for the possibilities of affective and material becoming of fat women in organizations.

Marginalized bodies and shame

Our research indicates that affect is crucial to the differentiation that our participants experience in relation to their fat embodiment. We argue that shame is a particularly pertinent affect to theorize differentiation in relation to embodiment (see Dolezal, 2015). Indeed, shame is at the heart of the prevalent obesity discourse; it relies on neoliberal ideas around individual responsibility regarding bodies that are constructed as deviant (Levay, 2014). Because shame is often assumed to inspire weight loss, it is naturalized at both individual and structural levels. Shaming bodies of size therefore becomes socially acceptable, often even encouraged (see Johansson et al., 2017; Mik-Meyer, 2008). Our research shows that the circulation of shame shapes how our participants feel and has consequences in terms of their place within the organization. As Ahmed argues, shame bridges publicness and the self: 'shame feels like an exposure – another sees what I have done is bad and hence shameful – but it also involves an attempt to hide, a hiding that requires the subject to turn (. . .) towards the self' (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 103). This turn towards the self, we argue, makes it hard to speak about shame. This also intersects with gender: women's bodies are subjected to judgement and scrutiny in organizational settings (Mavin & Grandy, 2016; Trethewey, 1999), which increases the pressure to 'hide' (Tyler & Cohen, 2010). Our participants often did not speak about shame explicitly in relation to their experiences at work, a move that would involve turning outward. They talked instead about feeling insecure, uncomfortable or humiliated, and their actions were often shaped by the anticipation of possible shameful encounters. We argue, in line with Pullen and colleagues (2017) that previously experienced histories of not fitting in were evoked, leading our

participants to avoid situations that could produce shame. Affect thus builds momentum (Pullen et al., 2017, p. 106): when a person has a history of being marginalized because of their size, small objects, gestures or comments can evoke that history and accumulate negative feelings. This resonates with Ahmed's (2004a) argument that emotional responses to discrimination and exclusion are based on histories of marginalization: 'those moments of interpellation get repeated over time, and can be experienced as bodily injury; moments which position queer subjects as failed' (Ahmed, 2014, p. 147). Yet a certain history 'may operate by concealing its own traces' (Ahmed 2004a, p. 119) thereby making it invisible for those who do not share this history. This also aligns with Barad's (2007, p. 236) ideas about temporality: 'the past is never left behind (. . .) the past and the future are enfolded participants in matter's iterative becoming'. This leaves us with the task to question the histories related to embodiment that are made significant in organizational contexts and how these feed into differentiating practices through their material and affective becomings. This is especially relevant in organizations, where objects are often regarded as neutral and emotions tend to be put aside as 'private'. Our research thus contributes to the ongoing theorization of normative embodiment in organization studies scholarship by adding insights on the co-production of difference through the material and affective realms.

Moreover, even though we could *feel* the circulation of shame in the interviews, our participants rarely mentioned shame explicitly when talking about their work. This could partly be due to the difficulty of articulating affect (Fotaki et al., 2017). But perhaps speaking about shame can be experienced as shameful in itself too. This could be amplified in organizational contexts because expressing emotions is coded as feminine and private, and therefore regarded as inappropriate here (Lewis, 2014). Theoretically this is interesting because, in feeding silence, shame seems to consolidate unequal power structures. It eclipses possibilities for speaking out and forming social collectives that can disrupt exclusion and marginalization. Yet our study shows that there are also material-discursive entanglements that circumvent shame. Here, the agency of workwear and other organizational materialities becomes enacted differently in intra-action with discourses about obesity and gender, and the fat bodies of our participants; these entanglements produce situations where shame is not the outcome, instead producing our participants as acceptable. More research is needed to unpack the potential of different affective economies that may indeed move people to disrupt dominant practices within organizations that feed marginalization and exclusion. As Dolezal (2015, p. xv) writes, 'shame and overcoming shame (which is often centered on the body), has an important role to play in terms of the validation of subjectivity, both personally and politically'. A limitation of this study is our reliance on linguistic data (e.g. interview transcripts); future research could further look into post-qualitative and affective methodologies to better address and represent material agencies and affective flows (e.g. Gherardi, 2019). Below we discuss practical possibilities for moving beyond body shame and size discrimination in organizations.

Moving toward inclusivity

As Pouthier and Sondak (2019) show, there is emancipatory potential in affect. Their research provides insight into possibilities for interrupting oppressive bodily norms through affective encounters that focus on communal laughter, compassion and the recognition of mutual vulnerability. This begs the question what interventions are possible in organizations that enable these 'affective pathways to freedom' with regard to size. We think addressing body shame related to size in organizations is pertinent but needs to be done carefully. Similar to Pouthier and Sodank, our previous work on poetry (van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019b) shows how art provides possibilities towards this end. Yet the organizational climate and safety herein are crucial prerequisites for talking about and

feeling through embodied normativities and the differentiating practices these produce. Below, we address how organizational materials could play a role in the political project towards creating a size-inclusive climate in organizations.

The narratives of our participants indicate that the costs of finding suitable clothing and buying (multiple) airplane seats can provide obstacles to perform well in their jobs or inhibit their chances of promotion. Some feel like an economic liability to their employer, not because they have to take sick leave more often than their non-fat co-workers as dominant obesity discourse suggests (Mik-Meyer, 2008; van Amsterdam & van Eck, 2019a), but because their size needs to be accommodated in special orthopaedic chairs, tailor-made uniforms or corporate wear, and particular (spacier) airline seats. The economic burden of finding suitable (thus expensive) clothing that looks professional is carried on an individual basis by our participants. Following the reasoning used in disability scholarship and activism (e.g. Garland-Thomson, 2005; Grue, 2011) we contend that it is not the individual fat employee who is at fault here, but the material circumstances through which these differentiating practices emerge. As Colls and Evans (2014, p. 733) write, we should be 'redefining obesogenic environments not as environments that make bodies fat, but as environments that make fat bodies problematic'. Our focus on materials as differentiating agents shows that fat employees do not have equitable access to fitting clothing and seating. This puts them at a disadvantage in the context of their employment. A materialist perspective provides a good starting point for making organizations more equitable: arguably objects and other organizational materials are more easily changed than organizational discourses. Our research offers several practical starting points for doing so. Employers could, for example, critically assess their seating arrangements to secure that every employee has the opportunity to use a chair that accommodates their particular bodily needs. A similar argument can be made related to workwear policy. Employers should ensure that everybody has equal access to suitable and affordable clothing. Furthermore – akin to policy arrangements related to disability – official organizational policies should specify the willingness to fund extra costs related to airplane travel or other material needs employees may have based on their specific embodiment. If organizations are invested in creating inclusive work environments, our suggestion is that they start by cultivating practices that literally and figuratively allow more room for bodies of different sizes and shapes.

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Note

1. Participants identified themselves differently: e.g. 'large', 'fuller-sized', 'big', 'full-figured', 'obese' and 'fat'. In this paper we use the term fat in its descriptive sense in order to disentangle it from the negative moral connotations it has in everyday use. We refrain from using medicalized terms such as 'obesity' and 'overweight' because we want to avoid reproducing this medicalization of fatness.

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