

# **Fatness and libraries: Amplifying the voices of fat librarians in DEIA work**

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# Notes on terminology

- Fat = neutral descriptor
- Anti-fatness, anti-fat bias, weight stigma
- Avoiding “fatphobia” (Gordon, 2023)

# Notes on content

- In-depth interviews with fat librarians
- Diversity and complexity of experiences and perspectives
- Focus on fatness with intersectional analysis
- Brief mentions of weight changes and restrictive eating

# Why fatness?

- Widespread discrimination with minimal protections
  - Institutionalized anti-fatness
- Intersections with gender, race, disability, and more
- Researcher positionality

# About the study

## Interviews

- IU IRB #14067
- Spring 2022
- Conducted via Zoom
- 31 participants
- Average interview duration:  
37 minutes

## Participants

- 45% non-white
- 32% male, non-binary, or other
- 45% queer
- 32% disabled
- 52% currently working in academic libraries

# Select themes

- Challenges of navigating normative spaces
- Bodies under surveillance
- Performing professionalism
- Complexity of visibility

# **Navigating normative spaces**

# Navigating normative spaces (1)

“The world is not normalized for bodies of my size, so whether it be physical things or people receiving me, **it’s abnormal.**”



# Navigating normative spaces (2)

- Ergonomics in the onboarding process
- Wide variety of workspaces: offices, service desks, classrooms, stacks, etc.
- Fat-inclusive (not fat-centered) strategies

# Navigating normative spaces (3)

“These aren’t **fat** people – they’re just **really big.**”

# **Bodies under surveillance**

# Bodies under surveillance (1)

- Public bodies in public work
- Intimacy of library work
  - Communal, familial
  - Feminized
  - Service-oriented

# **Bodies under surveillance (2)**

“That’s happened to me so often in the past with various people that it’s like, you know what? **She means well. I’m just going to suck it up and go on.**”

# **Bodies under surveillance (3)**

- Public bodies in public work
- Intimacy of library work
- Presumptions of complicity

# Bodies under surveillance (4)

“In the back of my mind I’m thinking, why do you not like your body? **Does that mean you don’t like my body too? It’s definitely harmful.** I think for them, people who are really into and actively want to be a part of diet culture, that’s probably a huge bonding moment and team-building experience. But for me, it’s just, **this is not why we’re here and not everyone’s that into it, so why are you making such a big deal of it at work?**”

# **Performing professionalism**



# Performing professionalism (1)

“It’s hard to pinpoint how I’m aware of my body in terms of my job because I’ve just been conditioned to be **aware of the space that I’m taking up.**”

# Performing professionalism (2)

*“I worry, okay, people are going to see me sweating. They see that I’m not thin. **They’re going to be like, oh, there’s a fat sweaty person.**”*

# Performing professionalism (3)

“So you tend to get into some really strenuous work on the floor, and you get really hot and sweaty. And then you go to help a customer, and I am always aware of, do I smell? **Am I making someone uncomfortable?**”

# Performing professionalism (4)

“When it comes to my own body, I feel the need to walk briskly or make more movement so that I don’t seem **like the slow seal walking across the library.**”

# Performing professionalism (5)

“I did have a colleague that I was actually really close with, but **it seemed like he did not like fat people**. He would see a lot of librarians, and they were larger, and he just kind of had the assumption that they were lazy or that they didn't do anything.

**So I felt like I needed to kind of fight that by being extra active, not sitting idly for too long.”**

# Performing professionalism (6)

“I don’t like doing reference. And the sad thing is, I love doing reference. **I love patron services, but I feel like it’s very unprofessional at this size.**”

# Performing professionalism (7)

“I am conscious of what I look like in a pair of pants, in the way a top falls. Does it cover my belly? Does it come down low enough where I think that I look unprofessional? **Because I am concerned with looking professional.**”

# Performing professionalism (8)

“When you’re shelving or you need to get down to the bottom shelf, **I feel on display**, you know? My clothes bulge, I’ve got to make sure my skirt’s covering my bottom, things like that. I would never go to work a full day without wearing leggings because I feel like somebody’s going to see my big legs because – the need to cover, the compulsion to cover. **I feel a compulsion to cover.**”



# Performing professionalism (9)

“If my job didn’t involve climbing through storerooms to find old boxes and things like that, I might wear other clothing. But for now, I need to wear **clothing that I can wash** and not dry clean because if I get something dirty, it needs to be able to be laundered. I also said, **you don’t pay me enough for me to be wearing a suit from Talbots every day at work.**”

# Performing professionalism (10)

“So for me, I can do t-shirt and jeans, but I feel I’m taken more...not as serious.

**Sometimes I feel like I’ve got to dress up to be worth it.** I just feel like with my body size, I can’t just adapt and wear certain things.”

# Performing professionalism (11)

“Sometimes I feel...how is my body going to get me there? I know my brain will get me there. **But in the interview room, how is my body perceived? Is it perceived as a leader? Or is it perceived as a jolly fat children’s librarian?”**

# Performing professionalism (12)

“If I’m sending out a mass email, I’ll often have [my boss] read over it because I’m aware of the fact that I’m too wordy because **I don’t want people to perceive me as being short, blunt, rude – the mean fat girl stereotype.** Or dumb! I want to know that I’m saying enough that they know I’m thinking enough that they know **I’m not a dumb fat person.**”

# Performing professionalism (13)

**“I take extra care with my appearance.** And I’m not sure how directly it’s tied into being in a fat body, but I like to be sure everything is perfect, that I’ve covered every single thing. The lengths that I go to to provide materials is probably a little bit more extensive than it needs to be just so that no one can come back and say that I didn’t. **So I feel like I overprepare or I overserve in order to not be seen as lazy.”**

# **Complexity of visibility**

# Complexity of visibility (1)

“Unfortunately **being fat is something I can't hide.** It's something that I am. And it's something that I have embraced, but at the same time, I don't want to. I'm not proud about it. **I'm just trying to be myself.**”

# Complexity of visibility (2)

“I think I’m more aware of **how much bigger I am** when I’m on the health sciences campus – I definitely feel there’s **a lot more judgement** on that campus. When I get up and present, I do *feel* that...I recognize that when I’m standing up there **talking to all these super fit people about how to find health information**, like, I am much bigger than they are.”



# Complexity of visibility (3)

- Approachability
- “Fat, fit, and fem: Exploring performative femininity for fat female librarians”  
(Versluis et al., 2020)

# Complexity of visibility (4)

“If you’re short and you’re obese and you have acne and your teeth aren’t nice, people are going to tend to go to somebody else. **I just think that approachability, part of it is your appearance. It also is your personality and your attitude: you do with what you have when you can.**”

# Complexity of visibility (5)

“If I have a meeting so I have to dress up, I’m **much less approachable if I’m in a suit and tie**, or even just business casual. If I’m just wearing a tie, people are much less likely to come and ask me questions than if I’m dressed closer to the way they’re dressed...I tend toward black suits with white shirts and very conservative ties, so **I can come off very much so like a mafioso or a bodyguard just because I’m big and square and I have a presence.**”

# Complexity of visibility (6)

“I want to say it makes me more approachable because I feel like, especially as someone who identifies as fat, I tend to feel like we are – for lack of a better term – **less pretentious** than others, so we’re **more approachable.**”

# Complexity of visibility (7)

“Actually, size does matter in this in that it’s one of my distinctions, that **I don’t look like anyone else**. So there is an advantage in the way that **they know who I am because of my size**. They may not remember my name, but they’ll remember *oh, that’s that librarian* because **I am distinctive. I am above average**. So that does add approachability because **I am identifiable**.”

# Complexity of visibility (8)

“I think there are some ways that the **really feminine presentation coupled with the fatness puts you in this maternal category**, and there’s some ways the very androgynous approach kind of puts you in sort of a **sexless, non-threatening blob person category**. It’s a very different vibe in each case, but I think it does make someone seem **more comforting** to some students a lot of the time, for them to be **visibly imperfect** in some way.”

# Complexity of visibility (9)

“I think that my size makes me **more approachable to other fat people, to other marginalized people.** I think **disabled people** feel more comfortable coming to me. I think that people who are what I term “**visibly queer,**” people who don’t necessarily pass in their queerness, because **they just see somebody else who is othered in some way.** And that, I think, can be a **comforting sight.**”

# **The role of fatness & fat librarians in DEI/A work**



# **Fatness & DEIA in libraries (1)**

- Put fatness (or body size) on the list
  - Accessibility audits
  - Collection development policies
  - Diversity statements and action plans
- Create opportunities for self-identification
  - Questionnaires
  - Open forums or town halls
  - Library-supported affinity groups

# Fatness & DEIA in libraries (2)

- Advocate for yourself and other fat folks
  - Center your experience when it's safe and relevant to do so
  - Cite your sources
- Listen to fat people

# **Fatness & DEIA in libraries (3)**

- Avoid body talk in the workplace
- Weed your wellness programming
- Invite more voices

# **Fatness & DEIA in libraries (4)**

- Expand accessibility
  - Furniture and spaces
  - Time
  - Dress codes and norms
  - Travel and professional development

# **Fatness & DEIA in libraries (5)**

“What do you need to feel comfortable and confident to do your best public work?”

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# Questions & Discussion

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