Roger Chabot
Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

Heather Hill
Western University, London, Ontario, Canada

IMAGINING A FAT FUTURE: PHYSICAL AND FIGURATIVE FITTING IN LIBRARIES (Paper)

Abstract
Weight stigma can be considered the last acceptable form of discrimination. This work examines the reasons why fat concerns should be undertaken by the discipline of LIS and the profession of librarianship. In imagining a fat future, we offer a call-to-action for fat scholars to centre their fat epistemology and to take up the methods of the discipline of fat studies. In conclusion, we offer an introduction to our research agenda in this area.

It's just after 8am more than half a decade ago. I am a casual assistant at The D. B. Weldon Library. I have in my hands a print-out of latest list of user requests. It's my job to go up to the stacks and grab them off the shelves. As I pick items off shelves in call number order, I make my way to the far end of the second floor. A supporting cement wall has interrupted the evenly spaced flow of shelves, forcing the last two rows of books to be unusually close together. A book with a call number in the ranges of these last two rows beckons menacingly. I grimace as my fat body enters between these rows of shelves, hating myself for being unable to breeze through this space like my thin co-workers. I squeeze my body in between them, my bulging stomach, butt, and shoulders pushing back books from their neatly aligned presentation, like a boat making a wake in water. Of course, the book I'm looking for from my list is on the bottom shelf. Due to being constricted, I find it difficult to bend over to read the spine labels on the lower shelves without further disrupting the organized shelves around me. I do manage to find the book and slither my way back out to the main hallway, where with a small sigh of relief, I continue onwards, leaving behind the small devastation my body caused to the shelved books.

-Roger

Introduction

It is relatively easy to ideologically construct the space in libraries as merely the neutral "leftovers" when all the important elements have been put in. Yet, the presence of space in libraries is always a choice. After all, someone had to design it, to shape it. Consequentially, this impacts the library as a place—understood as where the physicality of the layout meets human meaning. The early 2000s saw a revitalized interest in scholarship on the library as space and place. Notably, Buschman and Leckie's (2007) edited collection of essays examined how libraries' space and place intersected with ideas on civic, public, and democratic spaces. More recently, an invigoration of social justice concerns has brought attention to space and place has where it meets accessibility concerns, as well as feelings of societal and communal belonging. In both these trends, authors interrogate the "complex interplay of the actions and beliefs of library

users and library staff, library governance, particular ideologies, political manoeuvres, power relations and a host of other factors" (Leckie 2004, 233-34) that shape the library as space and place.

Within this area of research in Library and Information Science (LIS), however, one avenue related to space, place, and belonging has been largely neglected, namely, the concerns of fat people. This neglect is especially concerning, given the scholarly attention to other matters of accessibility and social justice in the recent years. This neglect begs the question, is the library a space and place that fat people fit in, both literally and figuratively? Herein we argue that, indeed, libraries are a space where the needs and experiences of fat people need to be addressed by Library and Information Science, especially by the profession of librarianship. We begin by first outlining why fat concerns should be urgently addressed in LIS. We follow this up with a brief literature review examining the few works done on fatness within LIS, as well as in the allied field of higher education to reiterate the trends that we view there to exemplify the little work that has been done in this area. In the second half of this extended abstract, we outline a path forward by invoking the epistemologies, methodologies, literature, and activism of the field of fat studies. We imagine a fat future for LIS and for libraries-at-large by articulating a call-to-action and a research agenda to address fatphobia and weight stigma in libraries.

Why is fat a concern for LIS?

Fat issues are of a particular concern to LIS because of the heightened responsibility that libraries have as civic democratic spaces (Chabot 2021). The idealization and configuration of space and place within libraries must remain a vital concern. Libraries (in the West and Global North) are also situated within fat-hating societies whose ideals permeate the entire culture. Brewis and Wutich (2019) call weight stigma "the last socially acceptable discrimination" (78). This leads us to question in what ways are libraries perpetuating this discrimination? Do library spaces and collections reinforce this weight stigma? Do library spaces reinforce and reproduce ideals and moral beliefs that underpin thin privilege? Library leaders and staff members may be ignorant of the struggles and shame that fat people face in navigating and using spaces and services designed for those that are thin. They may be ignorant of special needs for library furniture, for bathroom fixtures, for shelf and hallway clearances, and the need for spaces to sit and rest. In addition to the literal space concerns, interpersonal considerations regarding fat and fat people should also be brought to the fore. Is one's library work culture a fatphobic one? Are library staff members actively making fatphobic microaggressions in their interactions with fat co-workers and fat library users? Because fat hatred is engrained into Western culture, it can be easy to forget that "[w]hen you are fat in a fat-hating society, the scales don't just measure your weight. They measure your worth" (Brewis and Wutich 2019, 79). Libraries must cease being a place where fat people feel worthless. Finally, LIS has made strides in recent years attending to other social justice concerns such as anti-racism and decolonization. Scholars and activists are continuing to bring awareness to the library's role in perpetuating white supremacy and its many insidious facets. Fatphobia is a constituent part of these challenges (Strings 2019). Bahra (2018) writes about how the normative forces of whiteness and thinness are intertwined, that fat individuals must pursue and adhere to both those forces "to gain access to the privilege of being human" (193).

Literature review

Within LIS, fat concerns have only been touched upon occasionally, revealing a notable gap in scholarship dedicated to these concerns. Some exceptions include Angell and Price (2012) who examine the way a fat studies bibliography is represented in the Library of Congress Classification. They found that most of the literature is classed in Class R, which is medicine. Their findings highlight a consistent critique made by fat studies scholars: the medicalization and pathologizing of fatness. Versluis, Agosto, and Cassidy (2020) examine the experiences of fat female academic librarians who experience a negative "double-whammy" in regard to navigating their identity in academic spaces. They have to manage both the construction of academic librarians as not being "real academics," but they must also confront their fat bodies and identities and how they are perceived. Most recently, Chabot (2021) engaged in a discourse analysis of online library furniture catalogues to highlight the implicit fatphobia therein. They postulated that the potential for fatphobic furniture in library spaces can easily translate into a limiting of the library as a democratic and learning space.

Additional work has been undertaken outside of LIS as well, in contexts adjacent to libraries. This research centres fat experiences in academic and scholarly spaces, and how these spaces have a negative impact on fat people's identities as scholars and learners (Brown 2012), how these institutions are attempting not only to shape minds, but also bodies. Hetrick and Attig (2009) speak to the violence perpetuated against fat bodies through rigid and unmoving classroom furniture. Brown (2018) reports how students questioned "their right to belong on campus, especially when they felt they were being judged as bodies rather than as learners" (14). Research examining the experiences of fat faculty members and staff employees in higher education demonstrate that, due to their weight, they are perceived as less credible, knowledgeable, and competent (Fisanick 2006; Tischner and Malson 2008). They are body shamed, verbally abused, and face weight-based microaggressions (Hunt and Rhodes 2018). The problems that are faced by fat people in higher education, it is suspected, are to be replicated in library spaces as well given their characterization as spaces of public spaces learning.

Imagining a fat future: A call-to-action and research agenda

As we imagine a fat future for libraries, we call on the discipline, and especially fat people within the discipline, to make ourselves fit in libraries, to smash and break the figurative furniture of fat phobia with our voluptuous girth. We encourage fat scholars to centre their fat embodiment in their work, to own their fat epistemology, to bring forth that they know "the most about being fat people" (Pausé and Taylor 2021, 11). When so much of the research and societal discourse about fat people has been stripped from them, it is vital that "fat people are recognised as important knowledge producers" about fatness (Cooper 2021, 33).

Where this epistemology meets LIS, it is to continue to examine and critique the ways in which libraries and information organizations continue to perpetuate fatphobic spaces, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviours. People who enjoy thin privilege simply do not know the experiences of fat individuals moving in, living, and using our library and information spaces both literally and figuratively. We must help people become aware of the profound challenges that fat individuals face. Beyond centering one's fat self, we also call for LIS to attend to the body and how it interacts with library environments, how it moves and takes up space.

The methodologies and scholarship of the discipline of fat studies are well suited to enact this call-to-action. Fat studies is a discipline with its origins in the early 2000s and is related to other critical social studies. Solovay and Rothblum (2009) define fat studies as a "field of scholarship marked by an aggressive, consistent, rigorous critique of the negative assumptions,

stereotypes, and stigma placed on fat and the fat body" (2). Critical to the fat studies discipline is the centering the fat person and the fat experience (Owen 2008). At its core, fat studies is aimed towards manifesting fat liberation through fat activism. Fat studies methodologies are dominantly qualitative and are attentive to texts and meaning (Brown 2016) through media, discourse, and policy analyses, as well as to exploring the direct experience of individuals through critical ethnographic practices (Cooper 2021).

Speaking more directly to our own contributions, we present the undertaking of an empirical study examining the experiences English-speaking, fat library workers have working and using libraries. We are collecting these experiences via two paths. The first is through semi-structured interviews. We recognize that discussing the traumas experienced being a fat person may dissuade some from participating in an interview, so participants can instead choose to provide a written narrative of one or more memorable incidents. We would like to characterize the different ways in which library workers experience fat phobia in libraries, from interacting with their work and the public spaces, as well as their interactions with co-workers and their user base. We hope that this research project will offer concrete findings by which to influence library design, anti-discrimination education, and information services provided to fat individuals.

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