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Fat-calling: Ascriptions of fatness that subordinate

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Abstract:

Calling someone fat is not only cruel and unkind—it also subordinates them. While the sharpest and most immediate harms of fatphobic bullying are emotional and psychological, these vary according to the resilience of the target. What one person can laugh off, another feels deeply, perhaps for years. But 'fat-calling' does not only have individual harms—it also perpetuates a subordinating social structure ranking fat people as inferior. Despite recent work on obesity and fatphobia, the conversational dynamics of ascribing fatness to someone else (rather than oneself) are relatively unexplored, especially in philosophy. This paper argues that fat-calling assigns its target a subordinate discourse role, constraining their subsequent conversational behaviour and permitting further discriminatory behaviour from interlocutors. And these conversational norm-changes alter the initial permissibility conditions of future conversations to the detriment of fat people. This is not to say that fat-calling is morally equivalent to slurs and hate speech—but it does show that it leverages similar conversational mechanisms to entrench injustice.

1. Are you calling me fat?

There are many ways to call someone 'fat'. Some have positive connotations, like 'husky', 'curvy', or 'dad bod'. Others are less positive, like 'podgy', 'fatso', or 'obese'. But even the nicest euphemisms still call attention to someone's weight. With all these options for calling someone fat, when should we do it? If we don't want to contribute to the mistreatment of fat people, the answer is *very, very rarely*.

And fat people are treated extremely badly—as problems to be cured, eyesores to be removed, or weak-willed gluttons to be pitied. This paper will argue that the relationship between calling people fat and treating fat people badly is viciously reciprocal. Fat-calling reinforces the pernicious social norms and roles that are used to justify the mistreatment of fat people, and those norms make it more permissible to keep fat-calling. Fat people are subordinated, and fat-calling both perpetuates and exacerbates this injustice.

Recent work on fatphobia and sizeism has provided compelling accounts of fatphobic attitudes and biases—our *thinking* about fatness (Manne 2024; Nath 2024a&b). But my

concern here is *talk* about fatness. Or to be more precise, talk *to* fat people. I argue that in addition to its (variable) emotional and psychological harms, fat-calling constitutes a subordinating speech act. This connects work on fat oppression with analyses of other forms of oppressive speech (e.g. Langton, 1993 on pornography; McGowan, 2009 on hate speech; Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt, 2018 on slurs).

Other authors have explained how media discourse (especially about the supposed 'obesity epidemic') promotes fatphobia (Farrell, 2011; Rinaldi et al., 2019; Hyrkäs & Myllykangas, 2024). Rather than concentrating on heavily publicised declarations of 'war' on fatness (and fat people), I show that ordinary conversational contributions can subordinate by enacting fatphobic norms. Fat-calling assigns a subordinate conversational role to the target, making their weight *salient* to the discussion. This role constrains the permissible behaviour of the target and makes their mistreatment (within and beyond the conversation) more socially permissible than it was before. This is modelled on one-on-one conversation. Much of what I say will generalise easily to larger conversations involving several people, but less easily to non-conversational speech like billboards, news reports, or film scripts. Examining these requires further research.

In a fatphobic society, pointing out that someone is fat will insult, humiliate, and *other*—it tells them that they are lower status merely because of the size of their body. And, thanks to (racist and sexist and ableist) body-ideals, we are (almost everywhere) living in a fatphobic society (Farrell, 2011; Greenhalgh, 2015). Bullying and shaming harm their target, even if the speaker is trying to 'help' them to decide to be thinner (as Callahan, 2013 proposes). The most obvious harms of anti-fat comments are emotional and psychological—the offence, the humiliation, the hurt. But these are contingent on the resilience of the target. Some people manage to shrug off what others feel keenly for years. And yet, even if no psychological harm occurs, fatphobic comments may be normatively harmful if they contribute to the subordination of fat people.

Fatness is not the health problem that political and popular discourse have made it out to be. Once other variables are accounted for, it is fitness, not fatness, that most strongly correlates to health—not that poor health justifies subordination (Manne, 2024). Nor is fatness simply the consequence of laziness or weak will; genetics and social context are much more important than 'diet culture' recognises (Nath, 2024a). Dieting itself leads to worse health outcomes than fatness and often *makes people heavier* (Reiheld, 2021), while moderate fatness has positive health outcomes for some illnesses. And even if fatness *did* always have negative health outcomes, this neither justifies nor legitimises the virulent anti-fat rhetoric prevalent in the media (Manne, 2024, 89), nor health policy aimed at 'nudging' fat people to try to become thinner (Nath, 2024a). So, calling people fat to make them thinner is ineffective, unjustified, and potentially more harmful than fatness itself.

There are some instances in which comments on people's weight may not be fatphobic. For example, *sudden* weight gain (and loss) *is* often correlated with health problems. But most weight gain is gradual (although when we see someone intermittently, their weight fluctuations may *appear* to be sudden). And in some contexts (informed by fat activism), saying that someone is fat may be neither insulting

nor humiliating but rather an expression of solidarity—although such contexts are few and far between. More often, people comment on fatness either to bully, or "to help others make healthy choices and get thin bodies" (Greenhalgh, 2015, 23). The prospect of enduring such comments makes a range of activities—using public transport (Farrell, 2011), going to the doctor (Rinaldi et al., 2019; Reiheld, 2020; Manne, 2024), attending school (Greenhalgh, 2015), shopping (Gordon, 2020), and eating or exercising (Arroyo & Harwood, 2014)—more difficult for fat people than for thin people. Not because of fatness itself, but because of the social cost one pays for being fat.

For readers who find this idea—that casual comments about people's weight are subordinating—confronting, I share this intuition. It is displeasing to think that I have said and done many fatphobic things throughout my life. But rather than indulging in an exculpatory 'myth' like the idea that 'normal' weight signifies good health (Greenhalgh, 2015), we should try to improve our future actions, while acknowledging that fatphobic society makes it hard to avoid saying or doing fatphobic things.

§2 offers a definition of 'fat-calling' in relation to terms already common in fat studies. §3 shows how fat-calling subordinates fat people by assigning a subordinate discourse role. §4 argues that this influences the norms governing future conversations, contributing to the subordination of fat people in a fatphobic society.

2. Defining fat-calling

The term *fat-calling* is not new (Bouris, 2016 is a potential originator; Gordon, 2020 also claims it). But the term is not commonly used in philosophical nor fat studies scholarship, so here I develop a preliminary definition. In its paradigmatic form, as described by Gordon (2020), fat-calling might mirror street harassment (of which gendered catcalling is one variety—see Gardner, 1989; Vera-Gray, 2016). Fat people (and most frequently, fat women) endure unsolicited comments about their weight in public spaces (Gordon 2020). This is not restricted to the word 'fat', as there are many ways to ascribe fatness, including euphemisms such as 'heavy', pathologizing terms such as 'overweight', and through implication such as 'Do you really need to eat that?'. Such harassment is often designed to humiliate, insult, and offend.

However, another widespread form of fat-calling tends to have more benevolent intentions. Frequently, the fat-caller is not a rude stranger, but rather a close acquaintance. Doctors tell patients to lose weight instead of investigating their illnesses (Greenhalgh, 2015; Manne, 2024; Reiheld 2021; see also Nath, 2024a). Parents call their children fat, supposedly concerned for their health—friends and colleagues also engage in this 'concern-trolling' (Manne, 2024), or 'thinsplaining' (Nath 2024b). I take this to be fat-calling (the target is called 'fat'!), even though it diverges from a strict parallel with catcalling. Greenhalgh (2015, 23) scorns the supposed 'good intentions' of such speech, arguing that in addition to being "catty or cruel", the speaker enjoys "feeling morally superior about his or her own choices and body" (see also Gordon, 2020). But the concerned parent might be motivated by genuine worry for their child—so I don't want to speculate too much about the mental states of fat-callers. This all

points towards a kind of cognitive dissonance. The speaker is doing something nasty—calling someone fat!—but people usually don't think of themselves as nasty.

The dissonance seems to be resolved by what Greenhalgh calls 'biomyths'; associating fatness with weak will and health problems enables the fat-caller to rationalise feeling self-righteous in their fat-calling (see also Farrell, 2011). It might be unpleasant for the target but is 'for their own good'. Such biomyths permit fat-callers to feel superior about both their own body *and* their willingness to pass judgement on other bodies. This dynamic could be cynically misinterpreted to generalise to *any* moral advice: 'You think I should gamble less? You're just saying that to feel superior because you don't gamble!'. But giving non-problematic moral advice can be tricky, and unlike other similarly structured advice, this 'concern-trolling' does not target harmful behaviour (Eller 2014; Manne 2024).

Fat-calling can thus manifest as both street harassment from strangers and everyday comments from familiars. These are sometimes aimed at humiliating the target, and other times aimed at 'helping' them. Greenhalgh (2015, 35) calls the former "biobullying", the shaming of fat people as 'bad biocitizens' legitimised by fatphobic ideals (Reiheld, 2020 identifies the 'disciplinary' function of anti-fat microaggressions). On the other hand, "biopedagogical fat-talk" in the vein of 'concern trolling' informs people of their 'weight status' and suggests that they increase their status by becoming thinner.

Greenhalgh deliberately adopts an expansive notion of 'fat-talk' encompassing not only spoken utterances but also written and visual communication (Rinaldi et al., 2019 and Gordon, 2020 also discuss non-conversational communication). This also includes ascriptions of thinness that reinforce fatphobic ideology: "Wow, you've lost weight; you look fantastic!" (Greenhalgh, 2015, 35; Arroyo & Harwood, 2014; see also Holroyd, 2021 on oppressive praise). A 'good biocitizen' (Greenhalgh's term) or 'good fat' (Manne's term) recognises that they are fat, and therefore low status, and tries to change *themselves* rather than society. They exercise, diet, and *starve* to conform to fatphobic body standards. Manne's work on misogyny notes that it is not only negative comments that police gender—praising 'good women' who conform to sexist ideology also enforces the rules of patriarchy (Manne, 2017). Praising 'good fats', who try (and sometimes succeed) in losing weight will have a similar function. This incentivises fat people to police fatness (including their own). They can gain status and win praise by becoming (or trying to become) less fat. This oppressive role of praise is unfortunately commonplace, as Holroyd (2021) shows, when praise is unjustly apportioned to entrench stereotypes (such as praising men, but not women, for being good parents; see also Khader 2024).

I think that Greenhalgh is right that fat-talk deserves an expansive sense, as there are many ways that talk about fatness supports fatphobia. However, it is more expansive than fat-calling. *Calls* are, if not purely conversational, more directly communicative than a feature-length film or an art installation. Lance & Kukla (2013, 459) describe calls as "communicative transactional forces" that alter normative relationships between the speaker and listener, and the wider "discursive community". While 'You've lost weight!' might reify thinness and vilify fatness, it does not call the target fat—it calls them thin! Fat-calling is then a more restrictive term than Greenhalgh's

'fat-talk', as it is interpersonal and ascribes fatness (rather than thinness—see also Reiheld, 2020's discussion of cautionary compliments).

A narrower definition of fat talk comes from Nichter & Vuckovic (1994), who describe fat talk as *self*-ascriptions of fatness. Similarly, Arroyo & Harwood (2014, 176) define it as "ritualistic conversation about one's own and others' bodies (e.g., "I'm so fat!" "No you're not. I'm the one who is fat!")". But fat talk in this narrower sense does not call *someone else* fat, so does not alter normative relationships in the same way as paradigmatic fat-calling. And it is this altering of normative relationships that is supposed to be distinctive of *calls* (Lance & Kukla, 2013; more on self-ascriptions of fatness in §4).

So, I define fat-calling as conversational ascriptions of fatness to someone else. I take this to describe paradigm cases of fat-calling. The extent to which the normative harms of fat-calling I identify generalise to other fatphobic speech and media, such as newspapers calling celebrities 'fat', negative portrayals of fat people on television, or non-verbal microaggressions (see Reiheld, 2020) will depend on the extent to which conversational rules apply to these other communicative forms.

A distinction I use in later sections: *direct* fat-calling is the ascription of fatness to another person in this conversation. The bully calling their target 'fatso' to their face, the mother commenting on their daughter's weight gain, the doctor erroneously prescribing weight loss rather than conducting further testing (while prescribing weight loss is sometimes appropriate, its 'over-prescription' leads to misdiagnoses—see Greenhalgh 2015; Gordon 2021; Manne 2024; Reiheld 2021). *Indirect* fat-calling is the ascription of fatness to someone outside this conversation; when two people comment on the weight of a celebrity, or a group of children snicker about the fatness of a passer-by. I will argue that despite their differences, both direct and indirect fat-calling enact subordinating norms and so constitute subordinating speech acts.

3. Fat-calling as subordination

Speech can subordinate. Given the close connection between fatphobia and sexism, I begin with feminist defences of this claim (although fatphobia is also rooted in racism, ableism, and classism, see Farrell, 2011; Manne, 2024; Nath, 2024a&b). I focus on a specific function of subordinating speech, arguing that fat-calling assigns its target a 'subordinate discourse role', constricting their subsequent conversational behaviour—and so subordinates fat people (invoking Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt's 2018 analysis of slurs). It does not change fat people's status from equal to oppressed—fat people are already oppressed (Eller 2014; Nath 2024b). But oppression can come in degrees—a group can be more or less oppressed—so I will argue that fat-calling subordinates by making an already oppressive situation *worse*.

Frye (2000) describes oppression using the metaphor of a bird cage (see also Haslanger, 2004; Matsuda, 1993; McGowan, 2009; Eller 2014 applies this to fat oppression and Nath 2024b adopts a similar definition). Individual wires cannot constrain a bird by themselves, but many interwoven together can trap it. Even in the absence of overtly racist laws, racist attitudes, norms, and practices that do not constitute oppression by themselves combine to constrain the choices of people of colour. Each racist action

or utterance that encourages further discrimination adds another piece of wire to the metaphorical 'birdcage'. Some pieces are very small, others are very large, but none on their own can trap the bird. It is their combination that creates the cage.

Recently, Khader (2024) has argued that this under-describes the wrongs of oppression. While oppression *sometimes* wrongs via constraining (as I argue fat-calling does), it also wrongs by shaping desires. Patriarchy wrongs women both by (in some contexts) preventing women from voting, *and* by shaping desires such that some elect to undergo risky cosmetic surgery. This framework offers promising insight into fat oppression, which has shaped the desires of nearly everyone, whatever their weight, to want to be thinner. Some of the harms of fatphobia, like medical misdiagnoses, are imposed upon fat people. But others, such as dangerous gastric bypasses, seem freely chosen. Eller similarly describes the internalisation of oppressive beliefs, "deforming" the desires of fat people (Eller, 2014, 238; see also Nath, 2024b, 197).

More will hopefully be said about how best to conceptualise fat oppression, although there is not space for this here. Given the systemic mistreatment of fat people in many contexts, I suspect most analyses of oppression will be compatible with the claim that fat people are oppressed (as Eller 2014 and Nath 2024b argue).

3.1 Subordinating speech

Langton (1993, 303) argues that subordinating speech *ranks* its target as inferior, *legitimates* discriminatory behaviour against them, and *deprives* them of important powers. A paradigmatic subordinating speech act might be a legislator's utterance in apartheid South Africa: 'Blacks are not permitted to vote.' This ranks Black citizens as inferior regarding voting, makes some discriminatory behaviour legitimate (such as prevent Black citizens from voting), and deprives Black citizens of an important right (to vote).

Philosophers have argued that ordinary utterances can also subordinate. McGowan (2004) argues that everyday conversational utterances change conversational rules. In saying 'Let's meet at 12!', I make some utterances *permissible*, such as a reply of 'See you then!', and other utterances *impermissible*, in that they are unintelligible in the current context, such as a reply of 'Why are you refusing to meet with me?'. Permissibility within a conversation is tracked by what Lewis (1979) dubbed the 'conversational score'. Just like permissible moves in a game of baseball depend not only on the rules of the game but also the score in *this game right now* (how many strikes has the batter made?), permissible contributions to a conversation depend on both the background rules governing conversation and what has been said so far in *this* conversation.

So, ordinary conversational contributions like 'Let's meet at 12!' change the set of permissible utterances available to conversational participants. The conversational score is thus constantly updating with each new utterance, and so permissibility is constantly changing. McGowan (2004) calls utterances that change the score 'conversational exercitives'. This follows Austin (1962) who uses 'exercitive' to describe speech acts that change permissibility, like a judge passing sentence or a legislator banning Black citizens from voting. But unlike formal exercitive utterances which can only be performed by certain speakers, *anyone* can change conversational permissibility (McGowan, 2004).

Sometimes these changes in permissibility are oppressive. In a later paper, McGowan (2009, 399) describes a hypothetical workplace conversation:

> John: So, Steve, how'd it go last night?
> Steve: I banged the bitch.
> John: [smiling] She got a sistuh?

Derogatory terms like 'bitch' might normally be inappropriate at work, so would be impermissible in this conversation. But Lewis notes that the rules governing conversational permissibility are more dynamic than those for baseball. While incorrect play in baseball simply doesn't count, we *accommodate* incorrect play in conversation. If we have been talking about philosophers and I say 'I have to go, I need to take Plato for a walk', this might seem unintelligible, and thus impermissible. Plato, of course, no longer walks among us. But my utterance can be accommodated via the presupposition that I have a dog named Plato who very much enjoys walks. So, if you reply 'What breed is he?', I can safely assume that you are talking about my dog and not the philosopher. My utterance adds its explicit content *and* the presupposition required to accommodate it to the conversational score. This accommodation is ordinarily automatic, and helpful. It enables me to convey information about my pet ownership without having to explicitly assert it. There is much more to accommodation (see e.g., Witek, 2019), but this is enough for our purposes.

So, when Steve says 'I banged the bitch' when this would normally be *im*permissible, accommodation kicks in automatically. Both the fact that Steve had sex with his date *and* the presupposition that it is (here and now) permissible to use degrading language for women is added to the conversational score. Adding the presupposition makes the incorrect play *count as* correct from this point forward. John could challenge this ('Hang on, that's no way to talk about women!'), but until he does, the rules have changed in a way that ranks women as inferior (as they are now permissibly targetable with derogatory language) and legitimates further derogatory comments. Steve's utterance has then *subordinated* women. It is not clear that this also deprives women of a right, as in the paradigm example of the apartheid legislator. But as Langton (1993, 310) notes, speech may fall short of the paradigm yet still subordinate. Steve may not intend to change permissibility conditions, or contribute to gender oppression, but he does so anyway. Similarly, even well-meaning fat-calling may subordinate fat people without the speaker intending to do so.

The 'locker-room' talk McGowan describes may only be *somewhat* subordinating. Other kinds of hate speech, such as dehumanising slurs like *inyenzi* (cockroach) and *inzoka* (snake) used to target Tutsis before the Rwandan genocide, might be *very* subordinating. Tirrell (2012) argues that utterances of such terms did not only shift permissibility to permit further derogation, but also physical violence. It is not that a single utterance of a slur instantly permits genocide, but rather that the accumulation of small changes in permissibility licenses escalating changes in behaviour (Tirrell, 2012). As the Rwandan example suggests, given enough time and frequency, subordinating speech can make violent action more permissible. This can also occur at the local level, such as when verbal bullying escalates to physical violence.

Where permissibility conditions already allow for discriminatory behaviour, such as Jim Crow era U.S.A. or early colonial Australia, subordinating permissibility conditions can be *reinforced* through compliance. Just as norms governing queuing are reinforced when each late arrival joins the end of the queue, norms permitting racist behaviour are reinforced when people conform to them (I say something similar about ableist speech in Cousens, 2020). This is not to say that modern-day U.S.A. and Australia are free from discriminatory norms—far from it! But for now, something like a "norm of racial equality" prevails—most people do not want to be thought of as racist, even if they harbour racist thoughts (Mendelberg, 2001).

So, speech can subordinate by making discriminatory behaviour more permissible *or* by reinforcing existing discriminatory permissibility conditions. However, there is no straightforward slide from a handful of subordinating utterances to genocide. Racist speech that shifts norms in the wrong direction is (hopefully) balanced or countered by egalitarian speech shifting norms in the right direction—although the grip of egalitarian norms can be tenuous (Saul, 2018). This highlights a dissimilarity between fat-calling and other forms of oppressive speech: there does not seem to be a 'norm of weight equality' where people do not wish to be thought of as anti-fat. Instead, there is a 'prescriptive standard *people shouldn't be fat*', and even many of those who object to bullying fat people still hesitate to condone fatness (Nath, 2024b, 22, 214). Government pronouncements against obesity lead the way, but everyday comments from those around us join a chorus of fatphobic utterances reinforcing fatphobic norms permitting further anti-fat behaviour. And while perhaps not genocidal, 'weight-yoyoing', eating disorders, medical misdiagnoses, and surgical 'cures' cost lives.

This is rather compressed, but here are the main takeaways. Speech can subordinate by changing permissible behaviour to the detriment of a disadvantaged social group. This includes formal authoritative utterances such as the South African legislator's as well as more ordinary utterances like McGowan's workplace example. Some changes to permissibility are extremely consequential, such as the supreme court judge who, through a ritualised speech act, overturns *Roe v. Wade* and enables the banning of abortion. Other moves have a much smaller impact, such as Steve's gendered slurring, but this still changes local permissible behaviour to the detriment of women, and so contributes to the wider 'activity of gender oppression' (McGowan, 2009).

I will argue that one of the important ways that fat-calling contributes to fatphobic oppression is by changing conversational permissibility to constrain fat people's speech options in a context where they are already oppressed. Each token fat-calling utterances thus adds a tiny piece to the 'cage' of fatphobic oppression (and helps to perniciously shape preferences, if we incorporate Khader's view).

3.2 Discourse roles

This section outlines one way that harmful speech changes permissibility: by assigning a *subordinate discourse role*—borrowing from Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt's (2018) analysis of slurs (and my analysis of catcalling in Cousens, 2024). Conversations are governed by many different rules. Some come from the language we are speaking, such as the rules of grammar. Others come from general conversational rules, such as turn-taking. Some

rules only apply some of the time—swearing is permissible in conversation with my friends, but not my parents. And some rules only apply to some people—a teacher can prohibit talking for their students, but not the school principal.

Some of these rules are bundled together into *discourse roles* that can govern 'correct play' for a conversational participant (Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt, 2018). In a primary school, students have a very constrained role. They must defer to the teacher, refer to them with an honorific, may not talk back, and must remain polite. The teacher, on the other hand, may use the student's first name, can give them instructions, and can reprimand them. These rules together describe the *role* of the teacher, and the student, in a conversation. They are informed by background social roles—it is the person with the social role of 'teacher' who may occupy the *discourse role* of the teacher, and the same for the discourse role of the student. The social roles are much wider in scope than discourse roles. Teachers have various educational and pastoral responsibilities, must undertake first-aid training, and so on—while discourse roles only include the rules that govern conversational contributions. Importantly, the norms that make up these roles are often relational. Students must defer to teachers. Teachers defer to the school principal. Teachers might talk about a student's grade to their colleagues, but not to the parents of other students. These roles thus structure normative relationships between people (which is also what *calls* do, according to Lance & Kukla, 2013).

In a classroom context, these discourse roles are assigned by default. When a teacher enters the room, they are already supposed to follow the norms governing a teacher's conversational behaviour. Other discourse roles are not always active, but instead can be *enacted* with an utterance. For example, a teacher and the parent of one of their students might play on the same local sports team. In most of their conversations, they are governed by the rules for team-mates, speaking casually and on equal footing. But if the parent asks the teacher 'How is Jemima doing in maths?', they do not only ask a question but also enact the teacher/parent social roles (which lurk in the background) as discourse roles. Now, these roles are more salient than their sporting roles, and it is the rules for how teachers interact with parents that govern the conversation going forward (although individual relationships can moderate these roles—for example, the teacher might be more formal with some parents than others, or in some contexts such as parent-teacher interviews).

This can be extremely complicated, as conversational participants often have several potentially salient social roles. For example, the parent of the student might also be the school principal, and so would have three distinct social roles that they navigate between when talking to the teacher (principal, parent, and teammate). In smaller towns, this becomes more pronounced as people interact more frequently with each other. Different utterances might bring one or another of these roles into the foreground, enacting it as the current discourse role governing permissible conversational contributions. Utterances that assign a speaker a discourse role thus alter the conversational score, as they change the set of permissible utterances available to each speaker. After the parent asks how their child is going in maths, the teacher is supposed to respond *as a teacher* and not *as a teammate*, even though they still occupy both social roles.

But while there are power imbalances at play here, these are not *subordinate* discourse roles. One might be 'subordinate' in the sense that the teacher is the principal's subordinate in the educational hierarchy (and so the principal has a higher 'discourse status', Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt, 2018, 2889), but not in the sense that teachers are *subordinated*. On the other hand, background social roles include those for subordinated groups. Just as certain utterances can enact background sporting or educational roles for the teacher/parent conversation, other utterances can enact background racial or gender roles in conversations where they were not previously salient.

For example, a conversation between two coworkers might start with both on equal footing (one is white, one is Black; the conversation occurs in a majority white country). But if the white co-worker utters a racist slur targeting Black people, they make their background racialised social roles *salient*. The racial groups of each participant are *now*, although weren't before, part of the conversational score, and so 'correct play' changes accordingly. Conversation between equal-status participants was previously permissible, but now an imbalance is 'in play'—and so the unequal background social roles now inform conversational behaviour. In other words, they have been enacted as discourse roles (comprised of norms such as having to defer or be overly polite to white interlocutors, etc.). And the reverse can happen—Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt (2018, 2890) describe a (fictional) conversation from the film *In the Heat of the Night*, set in 1960s Mississippi, where a white police officer interrogates a Black man suspected of murder. Unbeknownst to the white officer, the suspect is a homicide detective. When this information is made salient ('Just what you do up there in Pennsylvania, to earn that kind of money?' 'I'm a police officer'), the subordinate discourse role that had previously been in play is replaced by a more collegial one (although as the film demonstrates, 'Black police officer' is a fraught intersectional role).

Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt argue that this means that slurring utterances are subordinating speech acts. In slurring the target, the speaker assigns them a subordinate discourse role (informed by their background social roles)—and in doing so, they assign themselves the related dominant role. This means that it is a conversational exercitive (McGowan, 2004), as the utterance changes the set of permissible conversational contributions for each speaker—the target of the slur now being expected to act more politely, or deferentially, than before, with the slurring speaker entitled to act more assertively. Precisely how permissibility changes will depend on the social roles of each participant. In McGowan's example, Steve's slur does not assign a subordinate discourse role to John—but if he was speaking to Joan (a female co-worker), it would assign one to her. When discussing permissibility, I mean to describe what is conversationally permissible and am not making a normative claim about what *should* be conversationally permissible or *is* morally permissible. While the discourse role might end with the conversation, the pernicious effects of assigning it can linger long after the participants go their separate ways (Cousens, 2024; Popa-Wyatt, forthcoming).

And so, paradigmatic slurring utterances subordinate their targets by assigning them a subordinate discourse role informed by a subordinate social role that is part of a wider activity of oppression (non-paradigmatic slurring speech, such as reappropriated uses of slurs, will work somewhat differently—see, for example, Herbert, 2015 and Popa-

Wyatt, 2020). This restricts permissible behaviour for a subordinated social group, and so a slurring utterance constitutes an act of subordination.

3.3 Fatphobic subordination

Fat-calling assigns its target a subordinate discourse role and in doing so restricts their permissible behaviour in a context where fat people face discrimination. That fatphobic societies discriminate against fat people is (hopefully) uncontroversial—even those who think that being fat is a moral failing and health risk (e.g., Callahan, 2013) should agree that such discrimination occurs, although probably think that it is justified. From the size of seating on public transport to demands that fat people lose weight, there are many examples of ways in which existing in public is made harder for fat people.

But fatphobia also *ranks* fat people as inferior. As Greenhalgh argues, "fatness today is not primarily about health; more fundamentally, it is about morality and political inclusion/exclusion" (Greenhalgh, 2015, viii). Weight is used to categorise people, invoking "social norms to which that person might feel obliged to conform" (Arroyo & Harwood, 2014, 178-179). Some categories (especially for those who are not fat) are 'good biocitizens', who are entitled to full participation in public spaces and the esteem of their fellows (Greenhalgh, 2015). But fat people are 'bad biocitizens', who may be shamed, excluded, and discriminated against for their fatness.

This is not a 'fat-or-not' dichotomy—there are various 'fategories' into which fat people might fall, such as 'small fat' or 'superfat', each category with overlapping norms governing the permissible behaviours of those within the group and the discriminatory actions with which they may be permissibly targeted (Gerhardt, 2021). As Manne (2024, 11) says, fat bodies are "not only ranked on weight but also on *value*". Being fatter begets more discrimination than being less fat *but still fat*. It is also possible to be *too* thin, despite thinness being prized by fatphobic ideology. For women, being 'too thin' is often pathologized with terms like 'anorexic' acquiring a non-diagnostic lay-meaning. For men, being 'too thin' is sometimes associated with lacking a 'masculine', 'muscular' physique (as though women do not have muscles). Somewhat ironically, people deemed 'too thin' may more often suffer poor health than people labelled 'too fat'—perhaps because the threshold for being 'too thin' is more extreme than the threshold for being 'too fat', especially when the overly-simplistic and inaccurate body mass index (BMI) is used (Gordon, 2020; Humphreys, 2010; Manne, 2024; Reiheld, 2021).

Regardless of this variety of ways to be fat, being fat is a social role, "a social identity we have constructed" (Nath, 2024b, 225). There are stereotypes, expectations, and norms that inform the treatment of fat people and their beliefs about the treatment they will receive from others (although though how to think about social 'facts' like these may take us into contested ground in social ontology; see Jenkins, 2023 §1.2 for a recent overview of some potentially helpful work). Fat people have low status; it is socially acceptable to assume that they are "lazy, undisciplined, and noncompliant" (Nath, 2024b, 196). There are ways fat people are supposed to behave—exercising to lose weight, wearing unrevealing clothing, avoiding public transport with small seats, and so on. This includes a range of conversational rules. Fat people are supposed to apologise for taking up 'too much' space, to refrain from ordering dessert, to defer to

thin people's advice about how to lose weight, and so on. Together, these rules governing how fat people are 'supposed' to behave makes up the 'social role' of a fat person—and importantly, this is a low-status or subordinate social role (note that the above mostly describe what *not* to do, constraining fat people and thus contributing to the metaphorical 'birdcage' of fat oppression).

The precise make-up of the norms that bundle together into social roles will be somewhat hard to pin down. Even a relatively straightforward social role, like *teacher*, will admit contextual variation. Some things—being an educator, conveying knowledge, not having sex with students, and so on, will likely form the 'core' of the role. But others—wearing tweed jackets with elbow pads, or buying supplies for class with one's own money, will only be part of the social role of a teacher in some contexts. 'Why don't you just buy some crayons for your students?' might be an intelligible thing to ask in the U.S.A. where this is a common thing for teachers to do (despite low wages) but would be somewhat strange to ask of a teacher in Finland where it is expected that the school, or the state, will fund basic educational resources. Similarly, the social role of a primary school teacher and a high school teacher are not quite the same. So, the precise set of norms, stereotypes, and expectations that are brought to bear when someone is assigned the discourse role of a teacher will be a bit blurry around the edges. But the core components of the social role are no less binding for that. There might be some contexts where the social role of 'teacher' does not include wearing tweed jackets, but none where it includes having sex with students.

This is also instructive for fat-calling. Some elements of the social role of *fat person* will not apply in every context, nor for every fat person. Fat women, for example, are fetishized, often targets for sexual assault, and treated as 'easy' targets for men (Manne, 2024)—according to sleazy pick-up culture, they are supposed to be grateful for *any* male attention. So, a sexualised fat-call targeting a fat woman will enact a different total set of norms and expectations to a more neutral fat-call targeting a man. It will include norms governing the behaviour of fat people in general, as well as some specific to fat women, such as the expectation that a fat woman propositioned by a thin man should respond enthusiastically.

This could be visualised as a Venn diagram, one circle labelled 'fat people' and another 'women'. The first will have some 'core' norms governing the 'appropriate' behaviour of fat people, the second some 'core' norms for women, and there will be an overlapping area with some additional norms specific to fat women. Social rules like 'should not order desert' might be a core norm for fat people, and 'should defer to men' might be part of the circle for women. Fat women would then be burdened by additional rules, such as 'express gratitude when a thin man propositions you'. The social role of fat person would be characterised by the whole circle labelled 'fat people', even though some parts of this only apply to some fat people or in some contexts. We could then add circles for queer identities, racial and ethnic backgrounds, and more. Fat oppression is complex and intersectional.

Hopefully, future analysis of fat-calling will further explore its intersectionality. While my discussion of fat-calling echoes the heteronormative paradigms of catcalling, more can be said about its relationship with queer and nonbinary targets (as well as the differences between fat-calling men and women, see Gordon, 2020). And much has

been, and should continue to be, said about the relationship between fatphobia and racism, as well as ableism (Farrell, 2011; Greenhalgh, 2015).

Direct fat-calling—ascribing fatness to someone within the conversation—thus taps into a background social role. Fat people are supposed to 'shrink', to hide their bodies, to strive to avoid inconveniencing thinner people. Calling someone 'fat' enacts this background social role as a discourse role, making body-weight salient and changing permissible conversational behaviour. Before, the target was a conversational participant; after the fat-call, they are marked as a *fat* conversational participant and are expected to act accordingly. Some of the changes to permissibility directly constrain their behaviour—topics on which they should not opine, food they should not order, thin people they should not proposition, and so on. A few things—like promising to exercise more—become *more* permissible after fat-calling. Some may only be part of the social role (and thus the enacted discourse role) some of the time—such as hook-up norms for fat women. Refusing to follow these rules—such as by ordering dessert, or not responding gratefully to a man who deigns to flirt with you—invites criticism, or even violent reprisal.

'Permissibility', in this sense, means roughly 'intelligible'. Compare 'You've put on some weight, you should exercise more' with 'You've lost some weight, you should exercise more'. Telling a fat person that they need to exercise more 'makes sense' according to the logic of fatphobia. But telling a thin person they need to exercise more (in virtue of their thinness) does not. Of course, many fat people exercise and are fit, and many thin people do not exercise and are unfit (Manne, 2024). Telling a thin (but sedentary) person to exercise might make a lot of sense—but not once fatness is made salient.

Other permissibility changes from the fat-call affect the fat-*caller's* future utterances. It becomes conversationally permissible to advise the target on ways to lose weight, to suggest that they order salad, or to criticise their revealing clothing. While we might mostly capture this by utterances that are made *more* permissible ('You should exercise more!'), others become *less* permissible ('You look great!'). This new dynamic—constraining the permissible behaviour of the target and permitting the speaker to say things that might, without weight being salient, seem quite rude—matches the social structure of fatphobic oppression. So, just as with slurs, fat-calling assigns a subordinate role to the target and a dominant role to the speaker. Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt call the securing of this dominant role a 'power grab', when the slurring speaker gains an unjustly superior position within the conversation (Popa-Wyatt & Wyatt, 2018, 2895). They argue that this is emotionally appealing, and the allure of such power incentivises bigoted speakers to utter slurs.

In addition to the normative constraints on the future actions and conversational contributions of fat people, assigning a subordinate social role imposes a *practical* constraint: having fatness made salient can compromise fat people's executive functioning. Nath (2024b) summarises studies finding that making weight salient leads fat people to spend more time trying to be likeable, fighting intrusive negative thoughts, and dealing with increased stress and anxiety. Negative stereotypes and expectations are then likely to be internalised (Eller, 2014), in turn mis-shaping the preferences of fat people (to again borrow from Khader, 2024's explanation of

oppression as preference-shaping). There will be some exceptions to this—for example, fat-calling in a sexual situation with the enthusiastic consent of the target may be less likely to contribute to internalising anti-fat norms; nor (I think) will it subordinate in the same way as direct fat-calling if the target can withdraw consent, changing permissibility again by removing the subordinate discourse role (this aligns with self-ascription of fatness in §4.2).

One does not need to be thin to fat-call—one typically only needs to be thinner than the target. So, a smaller fat person could fat-call a fatter person and in doing so assign a specific subordinate discourse role (perhaps one that correlates to 'infinifat' rather than 'medium fat', or a shameless 'bad fat' who does not know their place rather than a 'good fat' who does). This in turn gives the speaker a dominant discourse role—a moment of power in virtue not of thinness simpliciter, but of *relational* thinness, which might be particularly appealing when one's body is often used against them. As Greenhalgh (2015, 36) argues, "we are all encouraged to be biocops who engage in biopolicing", even if we might soon be fat-called ourselves.

So, fat-calling ranks the target as inferior (on the value-hierarchy of fatness by assigning a low-status social role as a discourse role), licences further discriminatory behaviour (permitting subsequent insulting and 'instructive' comments), and removes 'rights' (in a weak sense, i.e., making some conversational contributions impermissible). It has the shape of Langton's (1993) notion of a subordinating speech act, even if it falls short of the paradigm. This section has not intended to examine every possible variety of fat-calling, but rather to show *how* it subordinates: through assigning a subordinate discourse role that restricts conversational (and extra-conversational) permissibility for a member of a subordinated social group, while giving the speaker a related dominant role.

4. Other kinds of fat-calling

Direct fat-calling assigns the target a subordinate discourse role, making background social roles salient and changing the permissible conversational contributions available to both the fat-caller and their target (as well as permissible extra-conversational behaviour). In this section, I argue that indirect fat-calling can similarly subordinate, and that a somewhat different analysis is needed for self-ascriptions of fatness—'fat talk' in the narrow sense of Nichter & Vuckovic (1994).

4.1 Indirect fat-calling

While direct fat-calling ascribes fatness to another conversational participant ('You're so fat!', 'Are you sure you'll fit into that?'), *indirect* fat-calling ascribes fatness to someone beyond the conversation. This can include discussion of a celebrity's weight—Farrell (2011, 121-122) describes the correlation between positive and negative media coverage of Britney Spears with her weight—or (negative) comments about a friend or acquaintance ('They've gotten heavy!'). Such comments do seem to reinforce fatphobic norms and standards, ranking people based on their weight and encouraging further negative comments just as with direct fat-calling. However, unlike direct fat-calling, the speaker does not assign the target a subordinate *discourse* role as

they are not part of the conversation. It might appear that indirect fat-calling does not subordinate as described in §3.

However, there are lots of ways that we can subordinate with our words—and not all require the presence of the target. Langton's South African legislator might say 'Blacks are not permitted to vote', and in doing so subordinate Black citizens, even if there are none in the room (perhaps unsurprising if the 'room' in question is the House of Assembly in apartheid-era South Africa). Similarly, it seems that using slurs is pernicious even if no one from the targeted group is around (Camp, 2013). This may be because slurs are used to signal bigoted in-group affiliation more than to convey derogatory semantic content (Nunberg, 2018). Speech can then subordinate its targets even if they do not hear it. My explanation of indirect fat-calling will be similarly structured: it shifts norms in a way that contributes to the subordination of fat people, even when no fat people hear it.

Consider again McGowan's example of gender-oppressive speech. The two participants are both men, and yet the utterance of 'I banged the bitch' is supposed to be an oppressive speech act. It updates the conversational score to record that it is, here and now, permissible to verbally mistreat women. When the conversation ends, so does its 'score' and related permissibility facts—so it might appear that permissibility will reset, and the changes disappear before any women can be harmed by these new conversational norms. But the subordination of hate speech can reach beyond the conversation in which it is uttered.

This is because the utterance is both a move in the conversation itself (an exercitive speech act) and *at the same time* constitutes a 'parallel act' or move in the activity of gender oppression (McGowan, 2019). Permitting the verbal mistreatment of women is both a conversational move and an oppressive move. While the conversation ends, the activity of gender oppression continues (and continues, and continues…); the changes made to the norms governing *this* activity linger. So, while Steve's utterance might be worse if it was said to a woman (especially if the woman is a junior colleague, see Cousens, 2020), it adds a little piece to the 'cage' of gender oppression regardless of who hears it.

Unlike baseball, conversations do not start with a neutral score. When a conversation begins, there are many norms, rules, and expectations already 'in play', informing correct behaviour for participants. When the teacher enters the classroom and speaks, they are already bound by the rules governing classroom conversation. While they might swear at home, they (probably) will not do so in front of their students. No utterance is needed to enact these norms as part of the conversational score. I call these the 'initial permissibility conditions' of a conversation (Cousens, 2020). Unlike general conversational rules (McGowan, 2009 calls these 'g-rules'), the initial permissibility rules for each conversation will be different. While many conversations share many rules, the precise set of norms 'in play' changes based on the context, the participants, and other factors external to the conversation itself. And unlike localised situational rules tracked by the conversational score (McGowan's 's-rules'), initial permissibility conditions do not need to be enacted by a conversational contribution. A sporting analogy might be the Tour de France—a 24-day long bicycle race. Even

though each day of cycling runs like a normal race, after the first day competitors begin with different (and unequal) time advantages.

Unsurprisingly, in oppressive social contexts, the initial permissibility conditions governing conversations will often be unequal. While there is nothing innately harmful about a teacher-student conversation beginning with unequal discourse roles and their associated rules already in play (although this is abused by some teachers), it *would* be bad if, for example, women begin conversations with men with a subordinate discourse role already in place. In some contexts, this seems to be the case—for example, gendered defaults about who speaks first in meetings, who is asked to make the coffee, or whose medical advice is respected.

These initial permissibility conditions are not inert and unchanging. They are both descriptive and prescriptive (Cousens 2020, 2024). They *describe* the expectations that participants have for 'correct' behaviour in the conversation and *prescribe* that behaviour as participants are supposed to conform to those expectations—i.e., to 'play correctly'. The teacher and student expect that the teacher will refrain from swearing, and the teacher does refrain from swearing in part because swearing is not considered appropriate in this context. But as expectations change, so does conversational behaviour—and vice versa. If the teacher encourages informality ('Call me Sara!'), this updates the conversational score for this conversation, and the initial permissibility conditions of future conversations.

This most obviously includes those with the same participants. When the teacher and student meet again, the permission to use the informal first name will (typically) still be in play, even though this is a new conversation. And it can include conversations with only one of those participants—for example, the student might refer to some teachers formally, but not others ('I asked Sara *and* Ms Fayed, they both said the same thing!'). Enough of these small permissibility changes and they are expected to apply even when they have not been explicitly stated. If all the teachers in the school ask to be called by their first name, when a new teacher arrives, students would expect to be permitted to use their first name. And this would also shape the teacher's actions, thinking that they will come across as stuffy and strict if they enforce the use of an honorific.

So, the norms enacted by locker-room talk that ranks women as inferior and legitimises further discriminatory comments will 'carry over' from one conversation to the next (Popa-Wyatt, forthcoming). When this is replicated across a great many locker-rooms (and other spaces), such norms can become part of the initial permissibility conditions of new conversations. For example, the more frequently that women are subjected to catcalls, the more that other forms of verbal mistreatment become permitted (via accommodation). At some point, women begin conversations with derogatory comments against them already permitted. Women would then (and sometimes do) begin conversations with a subordinate discourse role already active, expected to act subordinately and with demeaning comments about women considered acceptable (Tirrell, 2018 calls this a 'non-neutral entry' to the conversation).

Imagine piling up grains of sand, one at a time, with each grain representing one instance of gender-oppressive conversational score-changing. There is not a specific number of grains at which this becomes a *pile*, or a dune, or a beach. But it builds up,

and the more there is, the harder it is to remove it. Of course, there are many other things influencing gender-oppressive norms beyond individual conversational contributions, all of which help to set the initial permissibility conditions for conversations in a patriarchal society. And anti-sexist comments (and actions, and policies) can remove some of the sand. But if the pile gets big enough, women start conversations with a mountain to overcome (admittedly, this strains the metaphor a little).

Indirect fat-calling has the same effect. One instance at a time, it adds to the total set of norms governing our behaviour (as does direct fat-calling). Each individual utterance might have an imperceptible effect, like adding a single grain of sand to an already large pile, although some (such as a front-page newspaper article about a celebrity's weight gain) might add several buckets. And even when the target of the fat-calling is not present, they will later have to clamber over this ever-increasing mountain regardless of whether they were there when it was piling up.

When participants in an indirect fat-calling conversation move into new conversations, the changes in permissibility (e.g., that it is permissible to derogate fat people) 'carry over' with them. This helps to shape the (subordinate) social role of fat people as permissible targets for derogation, which in turn informs the discourse role assigned via fat-calling (a vicious cycle). It also helps to shape more general norms about how we are supposed to talk about fatness, such as in media reporting about obesity, although fully spelling out the relationship between individual fat-calls and the norms of media discourse goes beyond the scope of this paper.

Direct fat-calling enacts a subordinate background social role as a discourse role and assigns this to the target (while the speaker is given the related dominant role). Indirect fat-calling assigns the speaker *and their interlocutor* the dominant social role as a discourse role, with the related subordinate discourse role untethered. So, the indirect fat-caller and other participants can all enjoy the 'power grab' of a dominant discourse role and the elevation of their status that comes with it. This makes it permissible (via accommodation) for both participants to continue to criticise the target, comment on their weight, and say other demeaning things about them (and other fat people). With enough conversations assigning roles in this way, fat people might begin conversations with the subordinate discourse role of 'fat person' already in place, with criticism of their weight permitted by default (which may seem to be the case in fatphobic contexts). And, as Tirrell (2012) vividly explains, linguistic mistreatment paves the way for other forms of mistreatment. So, while indirect fat-calling may not assign a subordinate *discourse* role, it still contributes to the 'activity of oppression' of fat people, changing the rules governing the initial permissibility conditions of conversations to the detriment of a disadvantaged social group.

Various kinds of *positive* comments about thinness will likely have some of the same effects. 'Don't worry, *you're* not fat!', or 'You've lost weight, well done!' reinforce fatphobic norms (Arroyo & Harwood, 2014, 193; see also Holroyd, 2021 on oppressive praise). They make weight salient, and rank fat people as inferior by reassuring someone that they are *not* part of the group marked for social stigmatisation. Such comments function to police fatness, mirroring 'fat abuse'. One punishes people for being fat, the other rewards them for not being fat. However, positive fatphobic

comments do not necessarily assign subordinate (or dominant) discourse roles, and so they will function to support fatphobic ideologies in a different way. There are many ways that fatness (and thinness) can be ascribed and denied, including through compliments or (oppressive) praise. Whether such comments constitute subordinating speech acts requires further investigation.

4.2 Self-ascription of fatness

Fat-calling is the ascription of fatness to someone else, but people also call *themselves* fat—conversations between friends often include utterances such as "I'm so fat!", "No you're not. I'm the one who is fat!". These are referred to as *fat talk* in a narrow sense (Nichter & Vuckovic, 1994; Arroyo & Harwood, 2014—contrasted with Greenhalgh's expansive notion of fat-talk in §2—and while not technically fat-calling on my definition, a relevantly similar phenomenon). Does fat talk self-subordinate?

I think it does, although not in quite the same way as direct and indirect fat-calling. Fat talk utilises what Goffman (1967) calls 'interaction pairs'. 'How are you?' is supposed to be followed by 'Fine, thank you', even when the speaker is *not* fine. A compliment is supposed to be followed by thanks, an invitation with an acceptance (or reluctant declining), and so on. 'I'm so fat!' is supposed to be followed with reassurance that the speaker is *not* fat. Why is reassurance needed? Because being fat, according to the norms underpinning this ritualistic fat talk, is undesirable. The initial self-ascription of fatness ('I'm so fat!') makes the speaker's weight salient, and in doing so assigns themselves a subordinate discourse role. But as the pattern of conversation is supposed to go, their interlocutor then removes that role ('You're not fat!')—presumably, this is what the speaker is angling for. Self-ascribing fatness can also be a defence mechanism against fat abuse by demonstrating to potential bullies that the speaker is a 'good fat' who knows their place at the bottom of the weight hierarchy (Manne, 2024).

This conversational ritual presupposes that being fat is a bad thing—and acting in accordance with conventional conversational patterns *strengthens* them (Cousens, 2020). So, fat talk plays a role in the wider activity of fatphobic oppression, reinforcing the notion that being fat is bad. Even though *this* assignment of a subordinate discourse role is temporary as it invites the paired response removing the subordinate role, the fat talk makes the assigning of *future* subordinate discourse roles easier by normalising the subordinate social (and conversational) position of fat people. So, fat talk subordinates in a similar way to indirect fat-calling, making equal participation in future conversations more difficult for fat people. This also suggests a role also in shaping the preferences of fat (and thin) people—ritualistic fat talk rehearses a social default of fatness-as-bad which might be easily internalised and influence the decision for fat (and thin) people to diet or undertake risky surgery (recalling internalised fat oppression from Eller, 2014 and oppression as preference-shaping from Khader, 2024).

Unlike paradigmatic fat-calling, fat talk does not (once the paired response is given) leave the speaker in a subordinate role for long—and so it does not constrain their future conversational contributions *as much* as direct fat-calling. The brief assignment of subordinate status is undone—but the strengthening of anti-fat norms is not. 'Don't worry, you're not fat!' still presumes that being fat is bad—otherwise, why would the fat-talker worry about being fat? While they might *now* be freed from the yolk of

fatphobic norms, thanks to their interlocutor's reassurance, in any future conversation where they *are* marked as fat, the norms against ordering dessert, speaking authoritatively on exercise, or propositioning thin people will be stronger than they were before. This is not an especially significant strengthening of harmful norms in the scheme of things—a few grains of sand scattered on a very long beach—but it still contributes to a pernicious social situation. So, while fat talk in a narrow sense and fat-calling both subordinate, they do so in different ways.

There are other possible paired responses for fat talk; perhaps in some contexts (or in some friendships), the paired response for 'I'm so fat!' is a different kind of reassurance—'Don't worry, keep dieting and you'll be thin soon!'. In these cases, the subordinate role assignment *would* linger in more similar fashion to the paradigmatic fat-call. The speaker who self-ascribed fatness places themselves in a subordinate discourse position, constrained by the rules and norms governing how a fat person is supposed to behave (outlined earlier in §3.3—depending on the context, this could include what food they should order, to whom they should defer on certain topics, or how they should talk about their appearance)—and the reassurance that they might one day be thin does not remove that discourse role. However, it is likely to be the version of the discourse role of 'fat person' for a 'good fat'—low status, but not as low as a 'bad fat' who does not know their place (Manne 2024). This kind of self-ascription of fatness might seem to subordinate more than the fat talk in Nichter & Vuckovic's (1994) central cases—but if it is the best that the speaker can hope for in a fatphobic conversation, they have an understandable reason to self-ascribe fatness in this way.

And so, a fat person engaging in fat talk subordinates themselves, albeit less directly and immediately than fat-calling. The subordinate social role they self-assign is typically removed from the conversational score swiftly, but they nonetheless reinforce pernicious views about the value of fat people and strengthen the conventions governing this (somewhat) subordinating practice. And self-subordination is certain conceptually possible. Many women are involved in anti-abortion campaigning, advocating for (and in some cases passing) legislation that deprives them of important rights. If this is subordinating when done by male legislators, we should say the same when it is done by women. Fat talk might be less constraining than fat-calling; a smaller piece of the overall oppressive structure, to return to Frye's metaphor. But it may still play an important role in the preference-warping power of oppression, reinforcing (and perhaps helping to internalise) the belief that fat bodies are bad bodies.

Some additional considerations present themselves, although fully exploring these must be left for future work.

It is not only fat people who engage in fat-talk. Arroyo & Harwood (2014) note that these conversations are ritualised, and people who are not fat can partake in this ritual. As fatness is stigmatised, it is unsurprising that people seek reassurance that they are not part of this marked social group, even when they are not fat. So, a person of average weight might say 'I'm so fat', and in doing so hope to receive the paired response telling them that they are not. This would not be '*self*-subordinating', but it would still reinforce fatphobic norms by presupposing that fat is bad.

Additionally, while I take fat talk to be subordinating, not all self-ascription of fatness is 'fat talk'. The paradigmatic utterance of 'I'm so fat!' might be fat talk, which, as with

positive messaging about thinness, implies "that being heavier is unattractive and that members of the "fat" group have negative characteristics" (Arroyo & Harwood, 2014, 193). But in body-positive contexts, 'I'm so fat!' might *not* be paired with a reassuring response that the speaker is not fat. If those words were uttered at a fat activist workshop, it might seem odd for someone to reassure the speaker that they are not fat. In that context, fatness is not a negative characteristic. The discourse role activated by ascriptions of fatness there would not be a subordinate one—while fat people would remain subordinated within wider society, in the conversation at hand the norms demanding that fat people (for example) apologise for their weight are not in play. The discourse role of 'fat person' does not *need* to be subordinate.

This suggests a promising possibility of *reclaiming* fatness. Some slurs have been (or are being) 'reclaimed', so that they lose some of their sting (Herbert, 2015; Hom, 2008; Popa-Wyatt, 2020). If fat activists are successful in changing cultural norms that rank fatness as inferior, then fat-calling would no longer subordinate (at least not in the same way). Just as slurs such as "queer" are reclaimed, in part, by social norms recognising that there is nothing morally wrong with being queer, social norms could change to recognise that there is nothing morally wrong with being fat. However, thanks (in part) to the pathologization of the 'war on obesity', this is a particularly difficult reclamation project. So, self-ascriptions of fatness in some contexts will not subordinate, and fat activism can widen the scope of such contexts.

5. Conclusion

Most of the time, direct fat-calling will constitute a subordinating speech act. It assigns the target a subordinate discourse role, and the speaker a related dominant role, subtly shifting the norms governing future conversations to the detriment of fat people. Indirect fat-calling and fat talk can have similar normative effects. But if the background fatphobic norms constituting the 'activity of oppression' of fat people change, then there may be more contexts where fat-calling is neutral, rather than subordinating. Until then, maybe it is best that we keep judgements about other people's weight to ourselves.[1]

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