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‘Why Is the Chubby Guy Running?’: Trans Pregnancy, Fatness, and Cultural Intelligibility

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ABSTRACT *Since the late 2000s trans pregnancy has received increasing public and academic attention, and stories of the ‘pregnant man’ have become a media staple. Existing research has critiqued such spectacularization and the supposed tension between maleness, masculinity, and pregnancy that underpins it. Extending that work, this article draws on interview data from an international study of trans reproductive practices and analyzes participants’ experiences of being, and expecting themselves to be, perceived in public space not as spectacularly ‘pregnant men’, but as fat men. As a starting point we take the experience of one participant whose heavily pregnant participation in a five-kilometer race prompted the question: ‘Why is the chubby guy running?’ Using Judith Butler’s concept of the cultural intelligibility of gender, we ask why the question asked was not: ‘Why is the pregnant guy running?’ We further consider the degree to which pregnant trans people manage their unintelligibility within the matrix of pregnancy, fatness, and trans/gender and how this reveals the limits of gender intelligibility itself.*

1. Introduction

Over the course of the past two decades the possibility and practice of trans pregnancy has entered the public sphere in the West as never before. Increasing numbers of trans men, trans/masculine, and non-binary people are conceiving and undertaking pregnancies, often where and when changes in legislation, insurance/healthcare coverage, and increased reproductive options have made this a possibility.¹ Alongside this, the media spectacle of the ‘pregnant man’, most notably Thomas Beatie who appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* whilst pregnant in 2008, has illuminated the existence of trans people who want to and can get pregnant despite the supposed incommensurability of this with their masculine/male identity. Academic work has been critical of this spectacularization,² however, the central focus of research on trans pregnancy has been on improving healthcare services relating to fertility, conception, and perinatal care for trans users.³ While this work is vital to ensuring that trans people can access inclusive and appropriate care during their pregnancies, there has thus far been less focus on developing theoretical and philosophical approaches to trans pregnancy.

This article will contribute to redressing this by examining a previously neglected aspect of the lived, embodied experience of being pregnant whilst trans. Drawing on interviews with male, trans/masculine, and non-binary people, we explore participants’ accounts of being perceived as fat, rather than pregnant, during their pregnancies. We take as our starting point an experience recounted by Gage:

I ran a 5k when I was thirty-nine weeks pregnant, which was kind of hilarious because I passed ... My best friend from childhood and I were running, and we were sort of laughing because people would look at me, but it was almost like a fatphobic, 'why is the chubby guy running?'

Our aim is to begin to theorize what it means, and how it matters, that a pregnant trans person would be read or pass as fat rather than pregnant, and/or that they would anticipate other people perceiving them as fat; in other words, how it is possible to ask, 'Why is the chubby guy running?'

To approach this, we frame the issue through Judith Butler's concept of the cultural intelligibility of gender.⁴ Questions of the (un)intelligibility of gender formations are echoed elsewhere in trans philosophy literature on social or gender 'kinds'.⁵ Robin Dembroff discusses whether genderqueer could become a 'critical gender kind' with the potential to destabilize dominant, binary gender kinds, but questions whether this would be possible 'in a way that is intelligible to others'.⁶ Dembroff and Wodak further link misgendering to the undermining of trans people's social intelligibility.⁷ These deployments of 'kinds' clearly have some compatibility with 'intelligibility' but are more focused on critiques of the bases on which people are sorted into kinds. Our enquiry does not necessarily involve incidences of *misgendering* or 'mis-kinding', nor are we offering discussion of whether a pregnant person should occupy the kind 'man'.⁸ Rather, what Butler's theory allows us to explore is whether the *intelligibility* of fat male bodies relative to the *unintelligibility* of pregnant male or trans/masculine bodies produces the perception of someone like Gage (by himself and/or others) as a 'chubby guy'.

The analysis addresses four key recurring motifs identified in the interview data: incidents where participants were assumed to be fat rather than pregnant; changes in body shape and the (re)distribution of fat during pregnancy; discussions of what participants wore while pregnant; and how participants navigated and mitigated competing experiences of fatphobia and transphobia. Contrary to popular understandings of trans pregnancy as spectacular, the participants' experiences indicate that pregnant trans bodies are often invisible or actively refused recognition in public space, and that changes in body shape during pregnancy do not necessarily feminize pregnant people.

The interview data also allow us to consider the limitations of Butler's 'cultural intelligibility' and explore the alternative frames of 'visibility' and 'passing' that potentially allow for a fuller understanding of how pregnant trans people strategically manage their appearance whilst pregnant in response to stigmatization. We complicate this question with a more nuanced account of the modifier 'chubby' when paired with 'guy', and the implied antithesis between 'chubby' and 'running'. Work in the field of Fat Studies has questioned the intelligibility of fat masculinity given the role fat plays in producing, or rather preventing the production of, legibly gendered, and in this case adequately sporty, masculine bodies.⁹ This in turn necessitates an exploration of why, if both masculine pregnancy and fat masculinity are culturally unintelligible, one is 'seen' in public while the other is not?

Finally, the analysis here responds in part to Fiona Woollard's call to 'draw on the knowledge from a range of pregnancies for a full understanding of what it is like to be pregnant'.¹⁰ It also heeds Talia Mae Bettcher's vision of trans philosophy as 'primarily constructive, positive, illuminating, and orienting',¹¹ and Perry Zurn's delineation of 'trans curiosity' as 'making the familiar strange, searching out subjugated knowledges, and

cultivating a life of purposeful experimentation and authentic engagement in the project of self-creation in community'.¹² Our aim in analyzing this small aspect of trans pregnancy is to better understand not just lived experiences of trans pregnancy, but a spectrum of relationships between pregnancy, gender, embodiment, and intelligibility.

2. The Study and Methods

The interviews drawn on in this article were conducted between 2018 and 2020 for the research project 'Trans Pregnancy: An International Exploration of Transmasculine Practices of Reproduction'.¹³ During the project, 52 semi-structured interviews were carried out with participants in the UK, the US, Australia, and the EU to explore experiences of conception, pregnancy, and (where applicable) childbirth.¹⁴ While we did not ask directly about weight or fatness in the interviews, 37 participants referred to changes in body shape during pregnancy as 'gaining weight' or 'getting fat', or recounted experiences of being perceived as fat whilst pregnant. The analysis in this article focuses on this data.

The 37 participants broadly reflect the demographics of the larger cohort. Ages at the time of interview ranged from 21 to 49 years, the majority in their 30s (62%, $n = 23$). Ninety-five percent ($n = 35$) of participants were white, 67% ($n = 25$) identified as middle class, and most lived in urban locations. Participants used a range of terms to define their sexuality including gay, queer, pansexual, bisexual, and heterosexual, and 73% ($n = 27$) were in relationships with cis, trans, or non-binary partners. In terms of gender, 21 (57%) identified wholly, or with qualifiers, as male or as a trans man (for example, as a genderqueer trans man) and the remaining 16 (43%) as combinations of trans and/or masculine, non-binary, genderqueer, or greygender. Participants also indicated their pronouns; most used he/him or they/them, although a small number also used she/her or she/they. To protect participants' anonymity, pseudonyms are used and no further identifying information will be given. The salient details, for example of participants' desired gender presentations, are evident from context and more useful in this respect than knowing how a particular individual may identify.

Given the sample size, and the under-representation of racially minoritized and working-class participants, we cannot make any generalizable claims about experiences of trans pregnancy. It is also beyond the scope of this article to discuss other aspects of fat and trans pregnancy such as the barriers both fat and trans people experience in accessing fertility treatment and appropriate antenatal care, the ways such pregnancies are cast as 'risky', and how fat and trans people are rarely imagined to be reproductive or 'fit' for parenthood.¹⁵ The aim of the analysis is rather to examine when and how 'fatness' figures in the participants' experiences of pregnancy, as a means to ask broader questions about the cultural intelligibility of gender. To start, then, we need to set out what is meant by 'cultural intelligibility' and how it applies to trans pregnancy.

3. Cultural Intelligibility and Trans Pregnancy

The concept of cultural intelligibility we are drawing on to further understand the experiences of our participants is that theorized by Judith Butler.¹⁶ For Butler, cultural intelligibility is 'assured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender and sexuality', making

gender intelligibility a prerequisite for subjecthood.¹⁷ Cultural intelligibility is secured through adherence to what Butler calls the ‘heterosexual matrix’:

That grid of cultural intelligibility through which bodies, gender and desires are naturalized ... a hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility that assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality.¹⁸

The question then is: what happens to those ‘gendered beings who appear to be persons but who fail to conform to the gendered norms of cultural intelligibility by which persons are defined’?¹⁹ Butler suggests these beings *do* ‘appear’, but ‘only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities’.²⁰ In *Bodies That Matter* Butler names this as a ‘domain of abject beings’:

The abject designates here precisely those ‘unlivable’ and ‘uninhabitable’ zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject.²¹

By Butler’s logic all queer, trans, trans/masculine, or non-binary persons fall foul of the heterosexual matrix, and are relegated to the abject domain of unintelligibility. The pregnant trans person is similarly positioned – by the logic of the matrix it is only possible to be a pregnant woman, or a non-pregnant man.

This model of cultural unintelligibility is multiply manifested in dominant discourses of trans pregnancy. It has been presented as an ‘oxymoron’²² and ‘unthinkable’, particularly in popular media where it is positioned as rare, always new, and beyond social comprehension.²³ It is evident in historical and ongoing requirements in some jurisdictions that trans people be sterilized before legal recognition of their gender can occur, or as a routine part of medical transition.²⁴ Legislation relating to fertility treatment and birth registration also continues to position all pregnant people as cisgender women and to use accordingly gendered language, a situation Toze describes as the ‘medico-legal denial of the pregnant man’.²⁵

In the context of increased advocacy and legal cases taken by trans people seeking recognition of both their pregnancy and their gender, these cultural, legislative, and medical framings can be understood as political acts of misrepresentation and misrecognition, reinforcing both cisnormativity and the unintelligibility of the pregnant trans body. Research and case studies of trans pregnancy, including our own, indicate that this unintelligibility produces extremely negative and exclusionary experiences for pregnant trans people. Many trans people make the choice to conceal their gender identity when accessing perinatal care in order to avoid poor treatment, thus reluctantly making themselves intelligible as pregnant women.²⁶ This begins to demonstrate how Butler’s theory can be applied to the lived experiences of those positioned as unintelligible. It offers a way to connect unintelligibility with harmful effects and the violence of norms that regulate, reward, and punish gender (un)intelligibility. However, the application of this concept to the everyday poses some questions about how unintelligibility manifests itself on the bus, in the office, at the shops. Whilst seemingly operating as a fixed logic, references to how persons ‘appear’ or are recognized (or not) point to social encounters in which intelligibility can be affirmed or refused.

Butler seems to suggest something like this when they ask how decisions are made at the limits of intelligibility, and 'how we do or do not recognize a certain norm manifested in and by the body of that other'.²⁷ A question here might be whether by 'the body' Butler means 'sex' and the materialization of bodies as legibly sexed bodies.²⁸ If we are to apply 'cultural intelligibility' to an encounter one of our participants had on the bus where they were assumed to be male and thus not offered a seat (where a pregnant woman would be), we can be fairly certain that no verification of that participant's 'sex' has taken place. Rather, their intelligibility as a man was read from other, gendered, features of their appearance.²⁹ We think it is fair, therefore, to interpret Butler's invocation of 'the body' as meaning that intelligibility, whilst working at a symbolic level, can also become 'visible' through embodied expressions of gender.

4. 'You Look Like You Are Fat'

In the following section we outline in more detail the experiences of the participants who discussed fatness in relation to their pregnancies to establish which gender formations became culturally intelligible. Gage, who anticipated the reading of himself as the 'chubby guy running', was far from the only participant who was read as a fat man, or assumed that was how they were being read, during their pregnancy:

I didn't have to come out walking down the street because when you're a man that's pregnant you don't look pregnant. You look like you are fat. (Luke)

They [strangers] just like, saw me as a big dude I think for the most part. (Dylan)

I do sort of feel like at work I just get read as a fat man. (Matthew)

There are several notable features of these accounts. Firstly, they all concern the perceptions of strangers or acquaintances in public space, and they all assume or imply that those perceptions are based on visual cues given off by the participants. There are repeating motifs indicating visibility – repetition of how participants 'looked', how they were 'read', or what strangers 'saw'. Participants assumed they would be read through cisnormative frames where pregnancy is an exclusively female embodiment. Given participants' assumptions are based in their experiences of moving through the world as pregnant, these accounts again demonstrate the cultural unintelligibility of trans pregnancy.

When 'trans pregnancy' is absent as a frame through which participants' gendered embodiment might be read, some participants became unsure if they were being read as male or female. For example, Mo says:

People don't read pregnant trans people as pregnant in the world, which actually had always been a source of comfort to me because it was a way of escaping the scrutiny. Both without boobs and dressing in a more masculine way, people just don't see a pregnant trans body as pregnant. I'm sure they're just reading me as either a fat dyke or a fat dude, depending on how I'm passing in any given situation.

That Mo was sometimes read as a 'fat dyke', but not a 'pregnant dyke', suggests the unintelligibility of queer female pregnancy, as well as male/trans pregnancy. It illustrates how pregnancy is bound to notions of biologically-essentialist, heteronormative

femininity, and the way, as Epstein puts it, that ‘bodily experiences of pregnancy, childbirth, and breastfeeding are constructed as the ultimate in femininity’.³⁰ Mo also suggests that how his gender is read, or whether he ‘passes’, may differ in different spaces/times, but that being read/passing as pregnant *and* trans had not been his experience.

We might suppose that participants were read as (non-pregnant) men due to the presumption that pregnancy is incommensurable with maintaining a masculine gender presentation,³¹ and because ‘man’ is a culturally intelligible form of personhood, one readily available, and as Mo notes, not as scrutinized as the more abjected alternatives. However, this poses two important questions. Firstly, how do we understand the potential slippage between being ‘read’ or ‘passing’ as a man and being ‘culturally intelligible’ as one? By the strict logic of the heterosexual matrix these participants are unintelligible, but does that apply if in practice they are read as male in public? We will return to this question in the discussion. The second relates to how they were not just read as men, but as *fat* men, and it is to the relationship between fatness and gender intelligibility that we will now turn.

5. The Gender Unintelligibility of Fat

The question ‘Why is the chubby guy running?’ refers not only to the intelligibility of the ‘chubby guy’ as opposed to the ‘pregnant guy’, but to what is question-provoking about a chubby guy *running*. As Norman suggests, fitness and sportiness are strongly associated with prestigious formations of masculinity from which fat men are excluded; they are demasculinized making their cultural intelligibility tenuous.³² The juncture of fatness and gender is complex and ambiguous and requires further consideration to draw out the significance of pregnant trans people being perceived or perceiving themselves as fat. In their research on fat trans people’s gendered embodiment, White found that ‘fat was intimately linked with successful “passing”’ and that fat can be both an obstacle and a resource in the production of intelligible gender.³³

This was reflected in our study where participants talked about the feminizing *and* masculinizing properties of fat and fat (re)distribution during pregnancy. Tucker was one participant that found pregnancy weight gain in feminine-coded parts of the body (hips, belly, chest) demasculinizing:

basically, a lot of it has to do with size, like the more fit I am, the more people read me as masculine or as a man. When I gained weight [during pregnancy], that almost never happened.

Other participants found different configurations of fat affirmed their masculinity. Neil, for example, said that:

as I got bigger, as my stomach area got bigger, the chest looks a lot smaller and I loved having what I called my big gut, because the silhouette for me was really pleasing because it was much less accentuation on my chest area.

For them the contrast between belly and chest produced a shape in line with their desired gender presentation. Gage on the other hand attributed his ability to pass as male, even after he had to stop binding his chest, to the fact he had not had chest surgery. He suggested, ‘folks with top surgery have a harder time passing when very pregnant because

you look sort of disproportional, whereas I just looked chubby'. For him the 'disproportional' pregnant belly produced a clearer reading of the body as pregnant and therefore female, while the larger chest that Neil found feminizing, for Gage contributed to his presentation as a 'chubby guy'.

While the pregnant belly is not 'fat', several participants reported that on a body that is otherwise legible as male, the pregnant belly read as a specific type of fatness – a 'beer belly':

I think people thought that I had gained weight. In fact, a couple of my friends said that it actually made me pass more because it looked like a beer gut or whatever. (Shawn)

Sometimes people identified me as trans, or as pregnant, sometimes people think that I have a beer belly. (Tobias)

It really did look like a beer belly. Really did like ... cause it was all there, and nowhere else. (Will)

I looked like a short guy with a beer belly. And you know, there's so many short guys with beer bellies in [town], so it was pretty good. I felt like I was flying under a radar to a certain degree. (Neil)

The beer belly is a particularly gendered and typically 'male' fat distribution (not to mention middle-aged, white, and lower class in a Western cultural context). The fact that some of the participants felt it helped them to pass demonstrates the fluidity of the relationship between fat distribution and gender intelligibility.

Body shape was not the only resource available to participants to pass as fat men while pregnant. In relation to fat femmes, Allison Taylor notes that 'the boundaries of culturally intelligible fat fem(me)ininity are circumscribed by larger structures, like the fashion industry'.³⁴ Similarly for the pregnant trans participants, what they wore whilst pregnant was determined by the availability of suitable attire. In the absence of adequately masculine maternity wear,³⁵ many of the participants wore what Tucker described as 'bigger and bigger men's clothes. Just giant things'.

Some participants bemoaned the narrow range of clothes available in larger sizes; specifically they struggled to find 'professional' or smart clothes and were restricted to anything with an elasticated waist, namely sweatpants, or in James's case,

giant fat man board shorts ... It was tragic ... It doesn't help that clothes for really overweight people are really ugly, which is terribly unfortunate for overweight people in general. But there was nothing that I could wear that was nice.

Pete also felt like sweatpants were not quite his style:

I'm not the type of person who feels comfortable going out in sweats. I've gotta wear jeans or at least look presentable, so I felt like such a slob ... I felt very unattractive and tent-like. My dapper dressing style is gone.

These participants' statements illustrate the role of clothing in making the fat male body intelligible largely in terms of its 'tragicness', 'ugliness', and 'slobbishness'. Furthermore, through their choice of clothing, constrained though it may be, the participants demonstrate some intentional management of their masculine intelligibility. However, whilst

wearing ‘giant’ men’s clothes may allow participants to affirm a particular form of masculine legibility, it also reaffirms the invisibility and unintelligibility of male and trans/masculine pregnancy.

What this discussion indicates is that pregnancy does not necessarily produce legibly feminine bodies that can be successfully (re)located in a heterosexual matrix of intelligibility. Research on cis women’s embodied experiences of pregnancy also reflects the destabilizing effects of pregnancy on gender legibility. Meredith Nash, for example, shows how in early pregnancy women are also often read as fat rather than pregnant.³⁶ Moreover, many of the women in Nash’s study felt pregnant embodiment defeminized them because they could no longer embody slender hetero-femininity.³⁷ This construction of pregnant women as ‘unfeminine’ is also reported by Johnson who found women spoke about ‘pregnancy-as-transgressing-idealized-feminine-beauty construction, in that the pregnant body was constructed as being “fat” and less attractive’.³⁸ The complex interconnections of gender, fatness, and pregnancy can thus apparently make women feel more or less feminine, and men and trans/masculine people feel more or less masculine and vice versa.

This failure of fat to produce consistently culturally intelligible bodies lends credence to the positioning of fat embodiment as unintelligible and fat bodies as abject. Fat Studies scholar Le’a Kent states that ‘in the public sphere, fat bodies, and fat women’s bodies in particular, are represented as a kind of abject: that which must be expelled to make all other bodily representations and functions, even life itself possible’.³⁹ This sense of the abject as the constitutive outside or other required for ‘bodies that matter’ to materialize is the aforementioned sense in which Butler uses the term.⁴⁰ Kent similarly posits that this ‘cultural process of abjection ... makes the idea of a *fat person* almost unthinkable’,⁴¹ or in other words, culturally unintelligible.⁴² As we have seen, Butler’s model of (un)intelligibility hinges around *gender* intelligibility. Fat unintelligibility may at first appear to operate under a separate logic, however, as has been demonstrated and as White argues, ‘gender intelligibility is absolutely reliant on particular configurations of muscle and fat’.⁴³ Thus, fat produces unintelligible subjects precisely because those subjects’ gender is unintelligible, therefore fat bodies are produced as abject by the same heterosexual matrix that produces the pregnant male/masculine body as abject.

6. The Limits of ‘Intelligibility’

We have established that both fat and gender formations that violate the logic of the heterosexual matrix are unintelligible. However, this does not address the previously raised question of why or how the ‘chubby guy’ becomes visible, possible, or even legible in ways that the ‘pregnant guy’ does not. Does that legibility emerge because some variants of unintelligibility (trans pregnancy) are somehow more unintelligible than others (fatness), or are they just rarer? Is unintelligibility an absolute state or is it contextual, more apparent in certain settings than others? Does intelligibility/abjection operate as a hard binary, or more of a spectrum allowing some forms of abjection to appear to be closer to intelligibility? Could the invisibility afforded by deep unintelligibility be protective, or would more intelligible abject figures avoid the violence meted out to the less intelligible? We will explore these questions about the operation and limits of ‘intelligibility’ for theorizing trans pregnant experience by returning to the earlier discussion of slippage between ‘intelligibility’, ‘visibility’, and ‘passing’. These concepts offer alternative answers to the

question of why the chubby guy is running than those offered solely by Butler's 'cultural intelligibility'.

6.1. *Visibility*

Where Butler suggests that unintelligible gendered beings 'appear' as abject, this does imply some sort of visible presence.⁴⁴ 'Visibility' is a trope often imbued with positive connotations when related to 'raising the visibility' of marginalized communities as a means to improve their inclusion in society. In relation to trans visibility, this notion has been heavily critiqued, particularly in the aftermath of the 'transgender tipping point' of the mid-2010s.⁴⁵ However, there is still a relationship between cultural intelligibility and visibility worth exploring given that while one may not be culturally intelligible as a fat man, one can certainly be visible as one in ways the research participants suggest one is not, or cannot be, as a pregnant man or trans/masculine person.

In relation to this kind of everyday visibility the concept is perhaps of some use in understanding experiences which cannot solely be attributed to one's symbolically 'abject' or unintelligible state. For example, one participant, Benjamin, said:

I expect quite a bit of body shaming. Because I was always a very slim person, but then, like with pregnancy ... I was always kind of taking comfort of the thought that people will not know on the streets that I'm pregnant, so in terms of security I will not have to worry about anything intentional. I mean, accidentally, of course that can happen ... but now I think it's coming clearer to me that people will look at me as very fat, and what that means and then, yeah, not necessarily something I'm looking forward to.

Here Benjamin is relying on the visibility of fatness to keep his pregnancy invisible and protect him from intentional harassment or discrimination resulting from being visible as a pregnant man. However, in turn he must accept an alternative form of harassment, 'body shaming', an example of Nordmarken's observation that 'legibility does not always mean friendliness'.⁴⁶ Visibility here operates as the medium through which the effects of abjection/unintelligibility will be experienced by the abjected. In terms of Butler's model of cultural intelligibility, both Nordmarken and participants like Benjamin remain abject throughout changes in their outward appearance; however, the way in which they are visible to others (or not) impacts their experiences of stigmatization in public space.

This kind of invisibility of trans pregnancy in everyday life seems to be at odds with the intense media visibility it has sporadically enjoyed since 2008. To understand this type of visibility it is useful to draw here on Gailey's notion of hyper(in)visibility⁴⁷ which she develops to elucidate how:

fat women and queer people, and increasingly fat men, are hyperinvisible in that their needs, desires, and lives are grossly disregarded, yet at the same time they are hypervisible because they are the target of a disproportionate amount of critical judgement.⁴⁸

Pregnant men and trans/masculine people can also be said to experience this kind of hyper(in)visibility, for example in the way they are invisible in medico-legal discourse and often in healthcare settings, but are simultaneously the subject of intense and negative

debate in national media. Lampe *et al.* highlight the fallacy in assuming that this hypervisibility will ultimately counteract the hyperinvisibility, arguing that:

even when aspects of empirical reality defined as nonexistent by dominant gender frames become visible in the social world, social authorities – like the media ... – may create room for such phenomena without dramatically transforming the existing inequitable system itself.⁴⁹

We argue that it is useful to think about visibility in shaping the everyday experiences of pregnant men and trans/masculine people, but that by itself increasing, or decreasing, the visibility of trans pregnancy will do little to shift its abject status. Considering the comfort Benjamin takes in not being visible as a pregnant man further brings to the fore the reasons why visibility may be undesirable and indeed unsafe. A further question here might be whether intelligibility, as opposed to mere visibility, would imply the absence of violence.

6.2. *Passing*

Like visibility, ‘passing’ has a particular resonance with trans experience and the participants frequently framed the instances when they were read as fat rather than pregnant as ‘passing as fat’. More broadly ‘passing’ for trans people means being able to be read in public as their gender. In practice, as T.J. Billard notes, this implies ‘for a transgender person to pass, they must appear to a stranger to “look cisgender” ... thus the *acceptably gendered* appearance of a transgender individual is of central concern to their passing’.⁵⁰ While we do not have the space here to engage with debates in Transgender Studies about the politics of passing, the concept offers some alternative ways to think about our participants’ experiences in relation to cultural intelligibility.⁵¹

Passing can suggest a certain amount of intentionality, and as an active process it is something that can be achieved. As such, some participants reported deliberately trying to disguise their pregnancies. For example, Dante said, ‘I was eight months pregnant. I was real big, but I had carefully layered, so [people] couldn’t really tell if I was just kind of fat or if I was pregnant’. Here Dante relies on the higher likelihood of being read as fat than pregnant to ‘pass’, and presumably to avoid any violence or harassment being read as a ‘pregnant man’ in public might attract.⁵² Most of the participants’ passing as fat was framed by them as more of a happy accident than an intention. Pete, for example, attributes not feeling emasculated by pregnancy to the fact that ‘even when I was carrying, I was passing. I just looked very heavy’.

We might ask how this troubles Billard’s statement that successful passing involves creating an ‘acceptably gendered’ appearance. We have argued that fat often disrupts ‘acceptably’ gendered embodiment,⁵³ and not only physically, but more symbolically in signaling a failure of masculine control over the body, an ‘unmanliness of passivity’ or ‘moral laxity’.⁵⁴ Despite this, it appears that passing as fat is a technique participants use, or make use of, to mitigate against the unintelligibility of trans pregnancy. Fat is perceived by the participants as less transgressive than being pregnant and they are evidently willing to embrace or tolerate this form of gender unintelligibility. It is illuminating to observe how participants often play down the significance of fat by positioning it in their speech with the qualifier ‘just’:

They *just*, like, saw me as a big dude. (Dylan)

They're *just* reading me as either a fat dyke or a fat dude. (Mo)

I *just* looked very heavy. (Pete)

I *just* looked chubby. (Gage)

I think I *just* look fat. (Emma)

I *just* get read as a fat man. (Matthew)

You're *just* a man, a large man. (Jay)

I thought you were *just* fat. (Lewis)

No man or trans/masculine person could currently be 'just' pregnant in this way, indicating how passing as fat allows some participants access to a less violently opposed form of gender unintelligibility. Thus, passing as fat, whether intentionally or not, works as a form of protection and 'stigma management' for participants.⁵⁵

Recognizing the active way participants use fat to navigate their cultural unintelligibility, we can also draw on Pfeffer's concept of 'inventive pragmatism' to theorize what passing does in this context.⁵⁶ Inventive pragmatism refers to 'strategies and actions that might be considered clever manipulations of an existing social structure in order to access social and material resources'.⁵⁷ We have used this concept elsewhere to understand how men, trans/masculine, and non-binary people manage and 'work' the process of conception, especially when interacting with donors and fertility clinics.⁵⁸ Understanding passing as fat as a form of inventive pragmatism makes sense of why men and trans/masculine pregnant people take advantage of the relative safety that passing as fat confers on them. It thus distances the practice from connotations of passing as deception and explains why participants would accept being read as something they are not, especially if it allows them to continue to pass as a (cis) man.

This inventive pragmatism is also viable for many of the participants because, as Dylan notes, 'dudes don't really get the brunt of fatphobia I find. Like maybe people were thinking it, but I didn't feel scrutinized'. Given that the majority of participants were white and middle class, the threat of fatphobia, and indeed the stigma of fatness, was significantly less than it is typically for racially minoritized, feminine, or working-class people. Even so, some of the participants were aware that they might or did experience fatphobia. Gage, for example, acknowledges that the intent of the question 'Why is the chubby guy running?' is 'almost like a fatphobic, "why is the chubby guy running?"' – it is specifically aimed to be discriminatory.⁵⁹ Other participants chose to out themselves as pregnant rather than endure the fatphobia. James said, 'I had this massive belly already, so ultimately when I made the big announcement was because I was having a family lunch, and I didn't want them all to think I had put on [weight]'. Aside from any internalized fatphobia at work here, James was in a position to be able to tell family about his pregnancy in a way he might not have control over in another context.

7. Conclusion

Over the course of this discussion we have developed the question 'Why is the chubby guy running?' as a way of thinking through the embodied experience of trans pregnancy. We

have considered why the ‘chubby guy’ is running and not the pregnant guy and argued that it speaks to the cultural unintelligibility of trans pregnancy. We have similarly examined why it is a guy, and not a ‘gal’, who is running and shown how pregnancy does not necessarily feminize/womanize bodies, despite cisnormative constructions of pregnancy as feminine. Finally, we have asked why a chubby guy running is a question and explained this in terms of the construction of fat masculinity as failed, abject, and culturally unintelligible. Through these discussions we have been able to develop a more expansive account of how pregnant bodies are gendered and offer new perspectives on ‘what it is like to be pregnant’⁶⁰ that have not been previously explored within the fields of Trans Studies, Fat Studies, or Applied Philosophy.

Our analysis further allows us to recognize the limitations of Butler’s theory of cultural intelligibility. While it can be shown to shape experiences of trans pregnancy, it seemingly fixes them as unintelligible with limited possibilities for resistance or subversion. It does not easily accommodate multiple or competing variants of abjection, such as fatness and transness (or class, race, disability, etc.), or offer any tools to theorize how they are related. Furthermore, it throws into doubt the desirability of intelligibility for trans pregnancy if intelligibility does not translate into safety or acceptance. Frames of visibility or passing perhaps offer some alternatives for understanding how it is possible to manage one’s position within unintelligibility. While this may not promise intelligibility, it can, as our participants demonstrate, offer some respite from the violence, both symbolic and physical, that often follows being recognized as trans and/or gender-nonconforming and pregnant.

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NOTES

- 1 Obedin-Maliver and Makadon, “Transgender Men.”
- 2 See Raun, “Trans”; Verlinden, “Transgender Bodies”; Halberstam, “Pregnant Man”; Lampe *et al.*, “Continuity and Change”; Pearce and White, “Beyond.”
- 3 See Hines *et al.*, “Special Issue”; Obedin-Maliver and Makadon, “Transgender Men”; LGBT Foundation, “Report.”
- 4 Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Butler, *Bodies That Matter*; Butler, *Undoing Gender*.
- 5 See Dembroff, “Beyond Binary”; Dembroff and Wodak, “He/She/They/Ze”; Kapusta, “Misgendering”; Killmister, “I Am a Man”; Kukla and Lance, “Telling Gender.”
- 6 Dembroff, “Beyond Binary,” 12.

- 7 Dembroff and Wodak, "He/She/They/Ze," 378–9.
- 8 In this respect our approach is closer to Kukla and Lance's ("Telling Gender") discussion of gender ascriptions. It is also unclear whether fatness would, or could, constitute a 'kind' in and of itself. Killmister ("I Am a Man," 920) states that 'it should be clear that not all ways in which human beings might be grouped constitute human kinds. For instance, people with blonde hair, or people over five feet tall, are human categories, but they are not human kinds'. It is the ability of Butler's approach to open up multiple intersecting modes of embodiment beyond gender as producing intelligible genders that drew us to it for this analysis. However, further discussion of either/both 'fat' or 'trans pregnancy' as kinds would certainly be interesting to explore.
- 9 See Luna, "Gender Nonconformity"; Norman, "Dere's Not"; Taylor, "Fashioning"; White, "Fat/Trans"; White, "Embodying"; White, "Fat and Trans."
- 10 Woollard, "Mother Knows Best," 163.
- 11 Bettcher, "Trans Philosophy," 651–2.
- 12 Zurn, "Trans Curiosity," 15.
- 13 The research reported in this article was supported by ESRC grant ES/N019067/1. Ethics approval for the study was granted by the University of Leeds Research Ethics Committee, the University of Westminster Ethics Committee, Flinders University Social and Behavioural Research Ethics Committee, and the University of South Carolina Institutional Review Board.
- 14 Interview participants were recruited via social media and community networks and events. Inclusion criteria were (a) identifying as a man, trans/masculine, or non-binary, (b) having undertaken at least one pregnancy, (c) living in Australia, the European Union (including the United Kingdom), the United States, or Canada, (d) being at least 18 years of age, and (e) having conceived after coming out or beginning a social and/or medical transition.
- 15 See LaMarre *et al.*, "Fat Reproductive Justice"; Lee, "You Will Face"; LGBT Foundation, "Report"; Lind *et al.*, "Gender"; Parker and Pausé, "Pregnant with Possibility"; Pfeffer *et al.*, "Medical Uncertainty"; Toze, "Risky Womb"; White, "Fucking Failures."
- 16 Butler, *Gender Trouble*; Butler, *Bodies That Matter*.
- 17 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 17.
- 18 *Ibid.*, 151, n. 6.
- 19 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 20 *Ibid.*, 17.
- 21 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 22 More, "Pregnant Man."
- 23 Toze, "Risky Womb," 204. See also Lampe *et al.*, "Continuity and Change"; Pearce and White, "Beyond."
- 24 More, "Pregnant Man," 320; Toze, "Risky Womb," 195.
- 25 Toze, "Risky Womb," 201–2.
- 26 LGBT Foundation, "Report," 9. See also Stroumsa *et al.*, "Power and Limits."
- 27 Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 58.
- 28 Lloyd, *Judith Butler*, 73.
- 29 See also West and Zimmerman, "Doing Gender," 127.
- 30 Epstein, "Butches," 48.
- 31 MacDonald *et al.*, "Disrupting"; Pfeffer, "Masculinity and Pregnancy."
- 32 Norman, "Dere's More," 410–11.
- 33 White, "Embodying," 113. See also Koehle, "Gendering."
- 34 Taylor, "Fashioning," 292.
- 35 For critiques of the hyper-femininity of maternity clothes, see Earle, "Bumps and Boobs," 248; Epstein, "Butches," 52.
- 36 Nash, "Weighty Matters," 308, 311.
- 37 *Ibid.*, 314.
- 38 Johnson, "Discursive Constructions," 250. See also Ryan, "Gender of Pregnancy," 120.
- 39 Kent, "Fighting Abjection," 135.
- 40 Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 3.
- 41 Kent, "Fighting Abjection," 136.
- 42 Colls, "Materialising"; Owen, "Monstrous"; Sanader, "Exceeding."
- 43 White, "Fat and Trans," 84.
- 44 Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 17.
- 45 Gossett *et al.*, *Trap Door*.

- 46 Nordmarken, "Becoming," 44.
 47 Gailey, "Hyper(in)visible"; Gailey, "Undesirably Different."
 48 Gailey, "Undesirably Different," 20.
 49 Lampe et al., "Continuity and Change," 881–2.
 50 Billard, "Passing," 467 (emphasis in original).
 51 Ibid., 469.
 52 See also Ryan, "Gender of Pregnancy," 128.
 53 White, "Fat and Trans," 81.
 54 Koehle, "Gendering," 86.
 55 Billard, "Passing," 466.
 56 Pfeffer, "Normative Resistance"; see also Riggs et al., "Negotiating Conception."
 57 Pfeffer, "Normative Resistance," 578.
 58 Riggs et al., "Negotiating Conception."
 59 This is a different kind of fatphobia from that experienced by some of the other participants who were (by their own definition) fat prior to getting pregnant and who struggled to access fertility treatment due to BMI limits, or were subject to unsolicited weight-loss advice in antenatal classes.
 60 Woollard, "Mother Knows Best," 163.

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