Body image

ESRC SCHOOL BRIEFINGS

Fat is not a four-letter word

If you are ‘fighting the flab’ or losing the ‘battle of the bulge’, stop to think about the metaphors you are using. Why do we talk about weight loss in military terms? Dr Lee Monaghan and researchers from Newcastle University argue that the war on obesity “contains all the hallmarks of a classic moral panic”. This ‘rationalised’ war could potentially lead to people discriminating on the grounds of someone’s size and to be intolerant towards the fat.

Dr Monaghan argues that some aspects of this moral panic are based on doubtful science. He wants to provoke debate, not to deny the existence of health issues. It is widely claimed, for instance, that most men in developed nations are overweight or obese on the Body Mass Index (BMI), a ratio of height to weight which does not take account of other fitness measures such as cardiovascular health.

His study considers the ‘McDonaldising’ of men’s bodies – the attempts to bring them under control and standardise them. The BMI as a simple weight to height ratio brands the ‘exemplary male bodies’ of actors such as Brad Pitt and George Clooney as overweight. It is not surprising that many men interviewed by Dr Monaghan described this measure as ‘ridiculous’.

Dr Monaghan’s research shows that men who risk the stigmas of obesity develop various ways of fitting in socially. “The study maintains that fat fighting is largely an exercise in social rather than metabolic fitness in a society where ‘fat’ does not ‘fit in’ with the favoured view”.

Thirty seven men were interviewed, including those from a slimming club. Some gave excuses for becoming overweight, such as genetics, social pressures or family problems which lead to comfort eating. This constitutes an excuse account for obesity where the negative status is accepted but responsibility for past weight-gain is denied wholly or in part.

Others offered justifications for their weight, such as love of food or enhanced masculinity—literally being more of a man. Justifiers denied they were doing themselves harm, or rejected medical definitions of obesity, such as the BMI. Another justification was humorously captured in a T-shirt that read “It’s not a beer belly, it’s a fuel tank for a sex machine”.

Then there were the repentant. This stance is “double-edged: it entails self-derogation in the pursuit of social approval”. Finally there are those who reject weight-loss prescriptions and the stigma of obesity. “This is exemplified by size activists, often women, who describe themselves as Big Beautiful Women.”

Dr Monaghan says such theories are sociologically interesting because “they contest size discrimination and are attuned to the politics and irrationalities of the ultimately individualised war on obesity.” This response does not necessarily deny that there are potential health risks associated with extreme levels of body mass, but reframes them as social and political issues rather than individual medical problems.

Dr Monaghan argues that, for health professionals willing to step outside the weight-centred approach to health and the ‘evil’ view of obesity, there are alternative ways forward. He says that, for example, the Health at Every Size paradigm “offers a more humanistic and ethically responsible approach”.

Further information
Contact: Dr Lee Monaghan
University of Limerick
Email: Lee.Monaghan@ul.ie
Telephone: ++353 61 213346
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