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Editorial

# Obesity discourse and fat politics: research, critique and interventions

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## EDITORIAL

### Obesity discourse and fat politics: research, critique and interventions

#### Challenging the dominant narrative

Since the WHO (1998) lamented the so-called ‘obesity epidemic’ over a decade ago, there has been much rhetoric and concern about fatness/weight/obesity across an increasing range of national contexts.<sup>1</sup> Alarmist claims about an ‘obesity time-bomb’ are continually recycled in policy reports, reviews and white papers, each of which begin with the assumption that fatness is fundamentally unhealthy and damaging to national economies (UK examples include: AMRC 2013; Foresight 2007; HOC 2004). This rhetoric and the associated moral panic have been amplified by a dramatising mass media (Boero 2012; also, see Boero in this issue) and have in no way dissipated even though certain ‘sceptics’ maintain the ‘crisis’ is coming to an end (Gard 2011; for a critique, see Lupton 2013). Recent examples of what Saguy and Almeling (2005) call ‘fat panic’ are not difficult to find. In February 2013, shortly before we finalised this special issue, the AMRC (2013, 7) released a well-publicised report, *Measuring Up*, which reiterated the dominant view: fatness is ‘a problem of epidemic proportions’ that ‘must now be tackled urgently’. Similar to earlier manifestations of fat panic (see McPhail 2009, for example), these public health concerns intersect with broader political economic anxieties about poor *national* fitness, with the UK labelled as ‘the “fat man” (*sic*) of Europe’ (AMRC 2013, 3). This document, like others before it, legitimises calls for various interventions to tackle the ‘problem of obesity’ (e.g. intensified surveillance inside and outside of the clinic, including injunctions that healthcare professionals must attend to their own weight); interventions which aim to literally reduce the number of bodies of ‘size’ and the size of individuals’ bodies (Evans and Colls 2009).

This dominant ‘obesity epidemic’ narrative and rhetoric – what John Evans et al. (2008) term ‘fat fabrications’ – not only emerges in policy reports but also in academic literature, including papers written by respected contributors to this journal. For example, Bagwell (2013) and De Vogli et al. (2013) are concerned respectively with public health efforts to ‘tackle’ and ‘control’ the ‘obesity epidemic’. Such studies, similar to sociological publications on obesity rates (Crossley 2004) and geographical work on so-called ‘obesogenic environments’ (Smith and Cummins 2008; for critiques see Colls and Evans forthcoming; Evans, Crookes and Coaffee 2012; Guthman 2011; Kirkland 2011), are useful insofar as they draw attention to the ways in which social, political and economic factors shape and constrain people’s life chances and consumptive practices. However, we disagree with the common research and policy emphasis on body size/weight/fatness as a proxy for health as well as the *assumption* that diet and/or physical activity unequivocally explain trends in obesity regardless of other *possible* contributors (e.g. endocrine disruptors, sleep debt, smoking cessation and side effects from medication) (see Keith et al. 2006). Specifically, we question the creation of a

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we do so with caution – using them when we are referring to academic or policy work which

labels bodies as such, or branches of social science that challenge obesity science on its own terms. We are critical of these biomedical terms and the pathologisation of bodies on the basis of size. More often within the social sciences the term ‘fat’ is used by writers in order to distance themselves from biomedical categories and for fat activists, it is used as part of a political strategy to reclaim the word, transforming it into a marker of pride thereby countering its use to stigmatise particular bodies (Cooper 2010).

2. Not all of the papers in this special issue were presented as part of this seminar series, and there are some presented that are not included here. Most presentations from the seminar series are available as audio/video files for download from the website:  
[http://www.dur.ac.uk/geography/research/researchprojects/fat\\_studies\\_and\\_health\\_at\\_every\\_size/](http://www.dur.ac.uk/geography/research/researchprojects/fat_studies_and_health_at_every_size/)  
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Related Research Data

Fat People of Color: Emergent Intersectional Discourse Online

Source: MDPI AG

The 'Fat' Female Body

Source: Palgrave Macmillan UK

Obesity Epidemic Entrepreneurs: Types, Practices and Interests:

Source: SAGE Publications

What to do with the “Tubby Hubby”?“Obesity,” the Crisis of Masculinity, and the Nuclear Family in Early Cold War Canada

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‘Physician Heal Thyself’, Part 1: A qualitative analysis of an online debate about clinicians’ bodyweight

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Bodily sensibility: vocabularies of the discredited male body

Source: Informa UK Limited

Big Handsome Men, Bears and Others: Virtual Constructions of ‘Fat Male Embodiment’

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Human vulnerabilities, transgression and pleasure

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‘Change4Life for your kids’: embodied collectives and public health pedagogy

Source: Taylor & Francis

Big Girls Having Fun: Reflections on a ‘fat accepting space’

Source: Edinburgh University Press

Fat Activist Community: A Conversation Piece

Source: Edinburgh University Press

Medicare's search for effective obesity treatments: diets are not the answer.

Source: American Psychological Association (APA)

Putative contributors to the secular increase in obesity: exploring the roads less traveled

Source: Springer Science and Business Media LLC

Discussion Piece: A Critical Take on the Obesity Debate

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'Gluttony or sloth' : critical geographies of bodies and morality in (anti)obesity policy.

Source: Blackwell

Is A Weight-Centred Health Framework Salutogenic? Some Thoughts on Unhinging Certain Dietary Ideologies

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Obesity/fatness and the city

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All the News that’s Fat to Print: The American “Obesity Epidemic” and the Media

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Fat is a Sociological Issue: Obesity Rates in Late Modern, ‘Body-Conscious’ Societies

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‘Look Good, Feel Good’: The Role of Food in the Construction of Gendered Bodies

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The epidemiology of overweight and obesity: public health crisis or moral panic?  
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Ideology, obesity and the social determinants of health: a critical analysis of the obesity and health relationship  
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Materialising bodily matter: Intra-action and the embodiment of 'Fat'  
Source: Elsevier BV

Measuring fatness, governing bodies : the spatialities of the Body Mass Index(BMI) in anti-obesity politics.  
Source: Wiley

Embodying Neoliberalism: Economy, Culture, and the Politics of Fat  
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Learning About What It Means to Be Fat in the North American Mass Media  
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Extending the obesity debate, repudiating misrecognition: Politicising fatness and health (practice)  
Source: Springer Science and Business Media LLC

Education, Disordered Eating and Obesity Discourse  
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Introduction: Questioning Obesity Politics  
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