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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.¹ 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



1. There are important differences in terminology that warrant note here. Medicalised accounts tend to use the terms 'obesity' and 'overweight', since these terms refer not only to the size of a body, but also that it is diseased or at increased risk of disease. Critical work, such as that within this special edition, problematises the use of these terms, and where we use them here, 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/ [Grant No. RES-451-26-0768]



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Fat Studies: Mapping the Field

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Think of the Hippopotamus: Rights Consciousness in the Fat Acceptance Movement

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‘Physician Heal Thyself’, Part 2: Debating clinicians’ bodyweight

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Neoliberalism, public health, and the moral perils of fatness

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Bodily sensibility: vocabularies of the discredited male body

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

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

Source: Sport Education and Society

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

Source: Somatechnics

Fat Activist Community: A Conversation Piece

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

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

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Materialising bodily matter: Intra-action and the embodiment of 'Fat'

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Sluts and Riot Grrrls: Female Identity and Sexual Agency

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Association of All-Cause Mortality With Overweight and Obesity Using Standard Body Mass Index Categories

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The Environmental Account of Obesity: A Case for Feminist Skepticism

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Helping People Change: Promoting Politicised Practice in the Health Care Professions

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Weight Science: Evaluating the Evidence for a Paradigm Shift

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Making space for fat bodies?

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Validity of claims made in weight management research: a narrative review of dietetic articles

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