Explaining Obesity: an Inquiry Into the Lives of the Obese

Jeff Murray, University of Arkansas, USA
My Bui, University of Arkansas, USA
Amy Stokes, University of Arkansas, USA

How do obese consumers understand and conceptualize their corporeal experiences? How can an understanding of the experience of obese consumers be used with other perspectives in developing new explanations for obesity? Hermeneutic interpretations of 14 transcribed long interviews were used to provide a response to these research questions. Developing a more empathetic understanding of obesity shifts inquiry from medical discourses to social and cultural ones; this involves reclaiming the obesity topic from the study of physiology and developing it in terms of a body politics. Explanations for obesity from this perspective involve evolutionary, historical, cultural, and interpretive perspectives.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/14673/volumes/v36/NA-36

[copyright notice]:
This work is copyrighted by The Association for Consumer Research. For permission to copy or use this work in whole or in part, please contact the Copyright Clearance Center at http://www.copyright.com/.
Advances in Consumer Research (Volume 36) / 839


### Explaining Obesity: An Inquiry into the Lives of the Obese

#### Jeff B. Murray, University of Arkansas, USA

#### Myla Bui, University of Arkansas, USA

#### Amy Stokes, University of Arkansas, USA

The United Nations’ World Health Organization (WHO) has declared obesity to be the fourth major disease of the new century, alongside AIDS, cancer, and heart disease (2000). In 2003, Dr. Julie Gerberding, the director of The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), argued that the health impact of obesity may be worse than the influenza epidemic of the early twentieth century or the black plague of the Middle Ages (Johnson 2005). For consumer researchers, the phenomenon has become a symbol of over-consumption and it is in this sense that it represents the dysfunctions of our consumer culture. This article reflects critically on the social construction of cultural discourses and therefore contributes to the critical tradition in consumer research (Murray and Ozanne 1991; Murray, Ozanne, and Shapiro 1994).

#### Conceptualization

The dominant paradigm in obesity research assumes that obesity is a serious preventable disease and is therefore part of the domain of epidemiology. By conceptualizing the topic in this way, researchers place the phenomenon in the context of the medical model. The organization of this paradigm is based on two guiding assumptions: the body as a machine metaphor and the energy imbalance thesis. Focusing on the environment completes the epidemiological triangle.

Although the medical model has taught us a lot about obesity as a risk factor, it has turned our attention away from the day-to-day experiences of obese consumers. Developing a more empathetic understanding of obesity shifts inquiry from medical discourses to social and cultural ones; this involves reclaiming the obesity topic from the study of physiology and developing it in terms of a body politics. The phrase “body politics” suggests a critical orientation directed to an institutionalized system of values and practices that discriminate against individuals that deviate from cultural standards. This article is directed by two research questions: How do obese consumers understand and conceptualize their corporeal experiences? How can an understanding of the experience of obese consumers be used with other perspectives in developing new explanations for obesity?

Our explanation for the rise in obesity rates involves three macro level perspectives: evolutionary, historical, and cultural. These are combined with the micro level perspective based on the hermeneutic analyses of our case studies. By beginning with the most macro (i.e., evolutionary) and ending with the micro (i.e., interpretive), we draw attention to the connections creating a meso level explanation. It is this meso level explanation that takes into account the consumer’s day-to-day experience. Weight gain cannot be disentangled from the stories of consumers.

#### Method

Textual data were generated by means of existential-phenomenological interviews (Thompson, Locander, and Pollio 1989). The sample included nine females and five males. Nine of the 14 informants were married and their ages ranged from 25 to 62 with a mean age of 41. The BMI of all informants was over 30. Informants were from a variety of locations in the United States. Interviews were unstructured, focusing on narrative and context when discussing issues related to eating and weight.

#### Key Findings

Significant social and cultural events such as the Great Depression and World War II were found to have influenced many of our informants’ attitudes toward diet and food. The clean-your-plate mentality is one of the consequences of this cultural socialization. In an era of abundance and fast food, this waste-not sensibility was patterned in the life stories of our informants as a contributing factor, passed down from previous generations, to their obesity.

Another key theme that emerges from the context of experience is the negative consequence of dramatic lifestyle changes. Divorce, physical injury, and the significant time constraints caused by attending school and working long hours were found to be common triggers of weight gain. Exhaustion, over-consumption, and eventual obesity, was the result of family circumstances, health issues, and scheduling conflicts that cannot be understood outside of a body politics.