Theorising Gender, Theorising Fat: the Material-Semiotics of the Obesogenic Environment For Professional Women Weight-Cyclers

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This paper reframes the dominant neo-liberal discourse of fat bodies as an outcome of personal consumption failure, by examining the life-narratives of two professional female weight-cyclers through a material-semiotic lens. In doing so it examines the consumption practices around the emergence of the body as obese within the obesogenic environment.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Enduringly, Western cultures in late modernity have inextri-
cably linked fat and the female body (Rail 2012). In her seminal
feminist work, “fat is a feminist issue”, Orbach (1978) posits that the
cultural climate of pervasive gender inequality makes women fat.
Drawing on Freudian theory, Orbach theorised that female obesity
can be explained by an unconscious desire to resist gender inequality
and sexism in contemporary society. She posits that fat, for women
within a culture of sexism, carries benefits vis a vis the desexualisa-
tion of the body and the commensurate ability to become invisible as
a sexual being, allowing women to become more visible to men as
equals, colleagues and friends. However, despite this intervention,
35 years later, the prevailing cultural, medical and policy view today
remains, located as it is within dominant neo-liberal discourses of
choice and responsibility, that being fat is largely due to individual
lifestyle and consumption failures. That is, fat remains an individual
matter, rather than a cultural or environmental one.

Countering this, recently studies using the concept of the “obe-
sogenic environment” (Townshend and Lake, 2009) have emerged,
which present a more distributed, material-semiotic explanation of
the emergence of fat bodies. The term “obesogenic environment”,
has emerged within urban studies and occupation health, and refers to
“an environment that promotes gaining weight and one that is not conducive to weight loss” within the workplace or community
(Swinburn et al., 1999). In other words, the obesogenic environment
refers to a physical environment that helps, or contributes to, obesity
(Powell et al. 200). Obesity, from this perspective, is not viewed as
an individual responsibility, or due to failed individual consumption
choices, but is viewed as a normal physiological response to an individ-
ual’s interaction with their environment.

In the light of this, this paper seeks to revisit the relationship
between fat, gender, consumption and the material environment,
challenging this focus on individual responsibility by longitudinally
studying the life histories of 2 professional women. Both women are
categorised by extreme yo-yo dieting (or weight cycling) involving
several life course weight loss/gain cycles of 50+ lb. Yo-Yo dieting
or “weight cycling” (Friedman et al. 1998) is seen as part of a path-
ological continuum of purge/binge cycles, with bulimia at the extreme
end, characterised by a very short lived purge/binge cycle, with purg-
ing taking place on the very day of binging (Goncalves 2014). Yo-yo
dieting, at the other end of the continuum, extends the time cycle
with less extreme binging and purging (i.e. not involving vomiting,
but dieting), and can encompass several years within one cycle. The
specificity of yo-yo dieting allows an understanding of what might be
seen, using an individualist framework, as sustained success at
weight control and sustained failure at weight management, cycling
within one individual over time, and as such, we suggest, can offer
an interesting account of both states (i.e. quasi-sustained thinness
and fatness), and also, of the associated transitions. This allows
exploration of what happens to change states so dramatically and
quasi-sustainably, and the commensurate lessons that can be learned
by academics interested in consumption, marketing and health.

Professional women were selected due to the literature out-
lined above, firstly that fat is certainly gendered female, and impacts
upon women in very specific ways, and secondly, that professional
women work within a context where to be fat runs counter to a suc-
cessful identity project, the role of female executive. Within the well
documented, general cultural backdrop of dominant idealised norms
of female thinness and self-control (Bordo 1993, Sawicki 1991) it
seems that women in professional roles feel the pressure to conform
even more keenly, and are especially subject to cultural norms re
desirable thinness (Rodgers 2012). Research has shown weight
gain affects women’s chances for professional success (Haskins and
Ransford 1999, Rothblum 2005), slimmness is associated with profes-
sional women being in control, being effective, being a high achiever
and having the necessary “executive presence” (Goudreau 2012).
Growing numbers of high-achieving professional women have been
reported to suffer from eating disorders in order to counter pressures
to perform authentic professional role identities (Barnett 1986) and
an enduring link between subscribing to the superwoman ideal and
eating disorders has been made (Messinger and et al 2007). Older wom-
en, a category into which high achieving, director level executive
women are likely to fall, are increasingly becoming subject to intense
pressure to conform to beauty norms, and look young for their age
through surgery and weight control (Bordo 2003). Exacerbating this,
as De Brun et al (2013) argue, professional women’s participation
in the workforce and higher levels of disposable income, with in-
creased commuting times and often long working hours, creates life-
styles with related impacts on food choices and physical activities.
In particular, increased demand for energy dense convenient foods and
reduced physical activity are evident (McCarthy & Collins, 2008).
Women, in general, have been noted to be more susceptible to com-
fort eating activities (Woodruffe 1997), and in often stressful profes-
sional roles, the consumption of comfort food has been found to be
used as a coping mechanism (Tanoisky-Kraff et al., 2008) leading
to positive calmness effects and encouraging further overeating of
energy-dense foods, which are associated with weight gain (Adam &
Epel, 2007). This behavioural response, which induces physiological
changes, has been observed more often among high stress females
(Tomiyama et al., 2011).

This paper then, seeks to develop a theoretical framework, based
on a material-semiotic approach, to fat and femininity within the
construction and maintenance of a professional female identity, that
counters individualistic accounts of obesity and offers understanding
of the consumption practices around the emergence of the body as
obese within the obesogenic environment, which has the potential
to inform both academic understandings of these processes, and also
social and health-related marketing and consumption practitioners.

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