Obese people's perceptions of the thin ideal

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

The media play a key role in promoting the thin ideal. A qualitative study, in which we used in depth interviews and thematic analysis, was undertaken to explore the attitudes of 142 obese individuals toward media portrayals of the thin ideal. Participants discussed the thin ideal as a social norm that is also supported through the exclusion of positive media portrayals of obese people. They perceived the thin ideal as an 'unhealthy' mode of social control, reflecting on their personal experiences and their concerns for others. Participants' perceptions highlighted the intersections between the thin ideal and gender, grooming and consumerism. Participants' personal responses to the thin ideal were nuanced — some were in support of the thin ideal and some were able to critically reflect and reject the thin ideal. We consider how the thin ideal may act as a form of synoptical social control, working in tandem with wider public health panoptical surveillance of body weight.

1. Introduction

Body weight ideals have differed throughout history and across cultures, with one's perceptions of one's own body shape and others' body shapes influenced by social and cultural factors (Furnham and Alibhai, 1983; Furnham and Baguma, 1994; Lake et al., 2000). Social class, health, religion, gender and the media have all at times influenced body ideals and weight preferences.

For example, in Greek antiquity, Hippocratic authors promoted exercising the body and the avoidance of gluttony, but were also strongly critical of bodies which were too thin (Christopoulou-Aletra and Papavramidou, 2004). Obesity was seen as undesirable in medieval Japan and considered a demonstration of moral failure in this or previous lives according to Buddhist beliefs. In Christian culture in medieval Europe obesity was associated with two of the seven deadly sins — gluttony and sloth — and seen as a transgression against god (Stunkard et al., 1998). There is also a strong history linking anorexia-like states with religion, spirituality and purity (Brumberg, 1985; Bynum, 1985). In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Tunisian Jewish women prepared for marriage by undertaking a fattening process to achieve the preferred look for brides which was associated with attracting a good husband and bringing him honour (Salamon and Juhasz, 2011). Plumpness was valued in America and Europe prior to 1900 as it was seen as being protective against consumptive illness (Sobal, 2001). Rural Jamaicans have considered fatness as imperative for good health (Sobo, 1997). For Moors living in the Saharan desert the ideal female beauty is to be as fat as possible, with women working hard to maintain their fatness through eating foods they perceive to be the most fattening and seeking to maintain their large buttocks and stomach folds of fat (Popenoe, 2004). In Western society it was in the late Victorian era when people who had enough money to eat began to regularly deny themselves food in the quest to achieve an aesthetic ideal (Bordo, 2003) and create social distinction. By the end of the nineteenth century being plump went out of fashion, and excess body weight came to be seen as indicative of lack of will or as a sign of personal and moral inadequacy, and the shape and size of a person's body a marker of their moral, emotional or spiritual state (Bordo, 2003; Campos et al., 2006). In the early twentieth century

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an increasing number of weight loss strategies and diets became widely available (Sobal, 2001) to help people to try to achieve this thin ideal. Social pressure to conform to body ideals can come from an array of sources including family, friends, and peers to society as a whole (Park, 2005), as well as various media.

In contemporary Australia in particular, body ideal preferences and responses within different population sub-groups are varied. Comparison between Australian Muslim and non-Muslim women found that strength of faith in Islam could influence a woman's interactions with Western body images and body ideals (Mussap, 2009). A study which compared Aboriginal Australian women and non-Aboriginal Australian women found Aboriginal Australian women reported similar body dissatisfaction to non-Aboriginal Australian women, but had larger body ideals compared with the non-Aboriginal women; the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal women living in rural areas had larger body ideals than the women living in urban locations (Cinelli, 2014). In examining socioeconomic status one Australian study found that working-class women had aspirations for their weight that more closely aligned with health recommendations than middle or upper-class women. The middle and upper class women were more likely to be aspiring to the 'thin ideal' (Williams et al., 2011). Comparison between Australian heterosexual and gay men has found the ideal gay male body was thinner compared to heterosexual men, both in terms of what men wanted for themselves and found most attractive in others. In relation to muscularity, heterosexual and gay men shared the same ideals (Tiggemann et al., 2007).

In relation to actual body weight in Australia, and in particular obesity (rather than ideals and preferences), there is variation across different population groups and locations, with obesity more prevalent in the most disadvantaged socioeconomic groups, in rural and remote areas compared to urban areas, and also in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander (National Health and Medical Research Council, 2014).

The media, as key agents of socialisation, play an important role in the transfer of culture and norms throughout society (Robertson, 1987; Schiffman et al., 2005). It is generally accepted that the media are influential sources of messages and images about ideal body types for both men and women (Andersen and DiDomenico, 1992; Field et al., 2001, 1999; Monro and Huon, 2005), and that the media may play a significant role in the ways in which bodies are perceived and valued in modern Western cultures (Grogan, 2006).

In modern Western society, thinness, particularly in women, symbolises and supports dominant cultural ideals such as self-control, self-discipline and competitiveness (Shuriquie, 1999). For men, muscularity is portrayed as the ideal body type (Ridgeway and Tylka, 2005) and it may be undesirable to be insufficiently muscular or too thin (Field et al., 2005). In the media such muscularity in men is often aligned with masculinity and social power (Stibbe, 2012). Fatness is portrayed as an undesirable trait, which may be accompanied by other negative traits such as sloth and gluttony (Harrison, 2000), and as deserving of ridicule and shame (Puhl and Heuer, 2009). Hence these body ideals are not only reinforced by promoting thinness as a desirable trait, but also through media stigmatisation of obesity (Puhl and Heuer, 2009). These ideals are further bolstered through media coverage which suggests that weight loss is easy (Blaine and McElroy, 2002) and through the association of weight control and thinness with healthiness (Davies, 1998) and weight loss with personal responsibility (Ricciardelli et al., 2010). Some argue that contemporary concerns around obesity are actually attempts to regulate and manage 'deviant' populations (such as working class people and women) and are not really interested in health improvement (Evans et al., 2008), and may be in response to anxieties around social changes, such as changes in gender roles (Campos et al., 2006).

Weight loss efforts and programs can be seen as attempts to convert lower-class habitus into middle-class habitus (Darmon, 2012).

Media preoccupation with body weight is a powerful and prevailing normalising mechanism of socialisation which encourages personal responsibility via self-monitoring and self-disciplining. People are fearful of any departure from these body weight social norms (Bordo, 2003) because of the consequences this may have. That is, these cultural forms of ideal body weight are not adopted blindly - people understand that they offer routes to success and achievement (Bordo, 2003) and realise having a body which closely "approximates to the idealised images of youth, health, fitness and beauty" provides a higher exchange-value of for that body and person (Featherstone, 1982, p. 21—22). In this way, the media acts as key tool in modernity in supporting the "transformation of bodies into a location for and expression of codes of behaviour" (Shilling, 2003, p. 143).

Social norms have the important function of determining what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in a society — they are rules that guide society (Macionis, 1993). The thin ideal may be considered the current Western idealised social norm for bodies; whereas obesity is commonly considered a deviant body form (Drury et al., 2002). Social control is the way in which a society maintains obedience and adherence to social norms and how a society eliminates or seeks to minimise deviance (Conrad and Schneider, 1980). The mass media, along with other social institutions such as medicine, welfare, the criminal justice system, the church and education, has a role in social control (Conrad and Schneider, 1980) and may interact with these other forms. These different agents of socialisation contribute to modern forms of governmentality — the "techniques and procedures for directing human behaviour" (Foucault, 1997). In this way social control and government of citizens is undertaken in diffuse ways by multiple authorities which govern different sites, in different ways, and in relation to different objectives (Rose et al., 2006). Governmentality as a concept cannot be separated from Foucault's other notions of surveillance, discourse and technologies of domination and power (Warin, 2011). The methods deployed to manage populations, through the technologies of government, can be via grand technologies, such as the 'Panopticon' or through smaller and more mundane methods and tools (Rose et al., 2006) which reinforce personal responsibility. This encouragement of the entrepreneurial self and the individualisation of responsibility are neoliberal methods of self-government (Crawshaw, 2012).

Whilst there has been much research on the impact of the thin ideal generally (see Grabe et al., 2008; Greenberg and Worrell, 2005; and Groesz et al., 2002 for overviews), and some research into the thin ideal and specific populations such as lesbians and bisexual women (Huxley et al., 2013) and young women (Ahern et al., 2011), to our knowledge there has been very little research into how the thin ideal is perceived by obese people, who are the physical antithesis of thin ideal conformity. In this study we have investigated how obese adults perceive and interpret the thin ideal and its potential impacts. We explore the panopticon and synopticon and contend that they are useful concepts for examining the thin ideal and the impacts this may have on obese people. We consider how the thin ideal may act as a form of social control in tandem with other social control mechanisms. We also discuss resistance to the thin ideal. Consideration of the dialectical relationship between the panopticon and synopticon provides a new theoretical perspective for the thin ideal.

2. The panopticon and synopticon — a theoretical framework

Foucault (1979) used Jeremy Bentham's prison design, the