



## Research report

# Food shopping and weight concern. Balancing consumer and body normality<sup>☆</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

The desire to achieve a normal, culturally acceptable body is often seen as the main driver of food-consumption practices adopted by individuals who are concerned about their body weight. In social research into weight management self-control is therefore often a central theme. Turning the focus towards practices and values related to food shopping, this study adds to our understanding of central features in perceptions of normality among people with weight concerns. In a qualitative study 25 people who participated in a dietary intervention trial in Denmark were interviewed and five people were observed. The study shows that the aim of achieving a normal body does not eclipse the importance of enacting values linked to ideas of the 'normal consumer'. Using empirical examples, the study illuminates how consumer freedom is attained in ways that are both complementary to, and in conflict with, practices and experiences of controlling food intake. The paper suggests that freedom and control are composite and complementary ideals of normality for people with weight concerns. On the basis of this insight, the authors discuss the contribution the paper makes to existing studies of weight management and food consumption.

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## Introduction

Obesity is viewed as a deviant condition, both in science and in daily life. Much effort is invested in remedying this condition by turning deviant bodies into 'normal' bodies. The concept of 'normal' has been described as "the most powerful ideological tool of the twentieth century" (Hacking, 1990, p. 169) as it functions to link 'is' with 'ought'. Representations of what is 'the normal' combine descriptions of the typical, or the ordinary, with normative views of the 'right' and 'good'. Such representations often set the terms for political and scientific, as well as lay, understandings.

In this paper we explore how values of freedom and control are involved in defining normality in a group of young people with weight concerns. The aim is to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the way in which people with weight concerns operate in the world and define themselves. We do so through an

investigation of how values related to being 'normal' are involved in the perceptions and practices connected to supermarket shopping. By situating our study in the field of consumption we focus on an arena in which the individual's experience of freedom is central. We thereby bring out the value of freedom in the research field of obesity, which has been very focused on exploring the value of self-control.

## Obesity, control and freedom

Much social scientific research on obesity and overweight suggests that social stigmatisation and cultural categories of deviance and normality are all-dominant influences on the practices and understanding of eating among overweight and obese individuals, who want to lose weight (Germov & Williams, 1999; Lewis et al., 2011; Lupton, 1998; Sobal, 2004; Stearns, 1997; Stinson, 2003). In these studies, the concept of self-control is highlighted as central to the understanding of the strategies which such individuals apply to deal with their bodyweight. In addition, self-control is described as a core value applied in these individuals' judgement of their own and others' capacity to attain the goal of a normal body (Stinson, 2003). The centrality of the concept is underlined in their descriptions of themselves and others with heavy bodies as lazy, morally weak or undisciplined, characteristics which reflect perceptions of fat bodies in society at large (Hopkins, 2012; Lewis et al., 2011). To achieve self-control is thus often presented as the all-dominant concern of

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people with weight concerns (Hopkins, 2012; Robertson, Mullan, & Todd, 2014; Sobal, 2004; Yunker & Allison, 1994).

On the other hand, studies of resistance to dieting and to the dominant narrative of obesity point to concepts other than self-control as central to the analysis of weight concerns. They do so by illuminating the more complex definitions of health and body size that lie behind such resistance (Chapman, 1999; Cordell & Ronai, 1999). These studies show that even though the achievement of a so-called normal body is a central goal, the definition of normality includes other parameters that are seen to involve freedom or release from self-control. Such parameters include social participation and psychological well-being.

In this paper we analyse the way in which values of freedom and control interact with, and are embedded in, the food shopping practices of people with weight concerns. Studies of the way overweight or obese individuals approach food shopping have been conducted in the course of psychological and behavioural experiments on, for example, the impact on food purchasing of social network, health information, and weight management reminders (Au, Marsden, Mortimer, & Lorgelly, 2013; Bevelander, Anschutz, & Engels, 2011; Papies, Potjes, Keesman, Schwinghammer, & van Koningsbruggen, 2014; Saarela, 2013). Studies of the experience of living in a large body, and of body weight stigmatisation, have also dealt with contexts of consumption. These studies have focused on situations involving public exposure of either the body or the activity of eating, such as restaurant dining or shopping for clothes (Christiansen, Borge, & Fagermoen, 2012; Hopkins, 2012; Lewis et al., 2011).

Hopkins (2012) has applied the concept of intersectionality in order to direct attention to ways in which the experience of being obese or overweight is shaped not only by body size, but also by other identities related to, for example, gender, ethnicity, class, sexuality and age. So far, however, little research has been conducted on the way people with weight concerns experience themselves as consumers in the context of food shopping, and on how this shapes their practices and experiences. This is surprising, since consumption is often taken to be central to late modern identity formation (Bauman, 2007; Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991), and since several authors have reported how obese and overweight people feel stigmatised in the context of food shopping (Lewis et al., 2011; Thomas, 2008). By putting the focus on the context of shopping, two aspects of obtaining a normal identity move to the forefront. These two aspects are the attempt to achieve or maintain a normal body and the attempt to practice what is seen as normal consumption.

In this study we explore how values of freedom and control are involved in strategies to obtain normality among a group of “people with weight concerns”. We refer to our informants in this manner, because at the time of our study not all participants were ‘overweight’ or ‘obese’ by medical standards due to their parallel participation in a dietary trial (see details below). The study builds on data obtained from observations of food shopping events and from interviews about shopping. However, before these data are presented, the theoretical framework for the analysis needs to be established. It is within this framework that we shall explore how the values of freedom and control relate to understandings of ‘normal’ consumption and, in particular, how they relate to the act of food shopping.

### Freedom and control as strong, interacting cultural values

In his essay on discursive framings of health, Robert Crawford (1984) points to the conflicting cultural values of self-control and release. In interviews with people about health, he identifies a tendency among some to define a good lifestyle as the promotion of healthy living in terms of discipline and self-control. Others in contrast emphasise living life to the full including not allowing

authoritative voices on health to reduce the pleasures of life such as the joy of eating. Crawford suggests that the root of these conflicting dimensions of health is to be found at a material level, in the basic constituents of capitalist society. Here, the need for the disciplined production of goods contrasts the need for non-restricted consumption of the same goods.

In contrast to Crawford’s work, Rose (1996) does not view the values of freedom and self-control as contradictory. He identifies the root for the instalment of these values in the individual’s self-perception, experience and practice in the formation of liberal societies. Here freedom is the central technique of governance. In earlier phases of liberalism, individual freedom was sanctioned by public authorities and closely connected with the exercise of civility, orderliness and rationality. The readiness to become educated, for instance, in matters of hygiene and health, was fundamental to the perception of individual liberty.

In liberalism’s present phase, the authorities, which previously controlled life through direct force and strict traditions, have largely lost their power. Now the enactment of freedom is, Rose claims, closely dependent on consumption. Through consumption the individual is expected to be able to ‘establish an identity through shaping a meaningful everyday life’ (Rose, 1996, p. 17). Stressing the ambivalent character of the value of freedom, Rose points out that in a consumption-based society, the individual is not only free to choose, but also obliged to do so.

In the writings of Crawford, Rose and others (Bauman, 1992, 2003; Giddens, 1991; Taylor, 2003), control and freedom are values in past and present liberal societies which relate to each other in the lives of individuals in both conflicting and complementary ways. Control from a source outside the individual – in the shape of formal authorities, systemic structures or social norms, is a precondition for individual liberties to unfold. For instance the liberty to pick and choose and to touch products in the supermarket depends upon the existence of social norms and social control mechanisms which sanctions the destruction or theft of such products. As will be clear from the case analysed in this article, when bodies, food desires and eating behaviours exceed existing norms, control from outside may be experienced as both positive and negative in relation to the freedoms associated with shopping. Likewise, the exercise of self-control may be experienced as freedom because of the lack of external control, or it may be experienced as control because of the deliberate renunciation of some freedom in order to fit into authoritatively or socially sanctioned norms.

Concepts of norm and normality are thus closely tied to the individual’s experience of freedom and control. Such concepts function as measures against which individuals may judge their own actions and those of others, indicating when freedom and control are exercised in acceptable or unacceptable ways.

### Freedom and control as constituents in consumption

In line with the arguments of Crawford and Rose, several authors have suggested that in liberal and capitalist societies the consumption of goods is primary to the enactment and understanding of the individual’s experience of freedom. But freedom enacted through consumption, they stress, involves discipline, self-restriction and both social and structural control (Baudrillard, 1998; Bauman, 1992; Falk & Campbell, 1997; Featherstone, 2007; Giddens, 1991; Slater, 1996).

#### *Norms of consumption*

Balancing the relationship between values of freedom and control in modern consumption has been conceptualised in terms of tamed or calculated hedonism (Featherstone, 2007; Sassatelli, 2001, 2009). The ability to “loosen the control on aesthetic and emotional experiences” (Featherstone, 2007, p. 58) and promote desires and

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