



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers

Faculty of Social Sciences

2010

On being 'fat': obese and overweight Australians respond to news depictions of obesity and overweight

Richard Warwick Blood
University of Canberra

Kate Holland
University of Canberra, Kate.Holland@canberra.edu.au

Samantha Thomas
University of Wollongong, slthomas@uow.edu.au

Asuntha Karunaratne
Monash University

Sophie Lewis
Monash University

Publication Details

Blood, R. W., Holland, K., Thomas, S., Karunaratne, A. & Lewis, S. (2010). On being 'fat': obese and overweight Australians respond to news depictions of obesity and overweight. Annual International Communications Association Conference (pp. 1-24).

Research Online is the open access institutional repository for the University of Wollongong. For further information contact the UOW Library:
research-pubs@uow.edu.au

On being 'fat': obese and overweight Australians respond to news depictions of obesity and overweight

Abstract

There is scarce research into the ways in which overweight and obese people interpret news media coverage of obesity and the so called obesity epidemic. This paper reports on a qualitative study using a purposive sample of 152 overweight, obese and morbidly obese people living in Melbourne, Australia. Most participants felt the news tended to portray them in negative and stereotypical ways. Characteristic portrayals identified by participants included obese and overweight people as: morally irresponsible and a burden on society; objects of ridicule and derision; and the subject of dehumanising images. Participants were highly reflexive and their personal experience as an overweight or obese person was an important mediator of their views about particular versions of reality constructed in the news media, and the significance of obesity for society. The research will inform future health communication strategies which will be played out against the backdrop of continuing news coverage.

Keywords

obesity, fat, overweight, obese, being, australians, respond, news, depictions

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Blood, R. W., Holland, K., Thomas, S., Karunaratne, A. & Lewis, S. (2010). On being 'fat': obese and overweight Australians respond to news depictions of obesity and overweight. Annual International Communications Association Conference (pp. 1-24).

On being ‘fat’: Obese and overweight Australians respond to news depictions of obesity and overweight

Overweight and obesity have been identified as major public health issues by many governments in developed countries who, in response, have initiated public health interventions. In 2002, the World Health Organisation (2002) declared obesity a “global epidemic” and, in Australia the Commonwealth Government has identified obesity as a national health priority.

Despite the urgency with which the issue has been portrayed in public health, medical, government policy and, in turn, mass media discourses, there is scarce research into the ways in which overweight and obese people interpret and respond to the increasing attention given to the issue and, in particular, their experiences as media audiences. This paper is part of a larger on-going project into the lived experiences of overweight and obese people in Australia and explores how overweight and obese people (calculated on the basis of the Body Mass Index) understand and react to news media depictions.

It is important to explore the ways overweight and obese people read news media messages because of the insight it can provide into the kind of factors that impinge upon the media’s role as a vehicle for the dissemination of public health campaigns and health messages. All public health interventions and campaigns – whether via the media or otherwise – are played out against the background of news and other media coverage. Additionally, media portrayals may have an impact on people’s self-perceptions and decision-making about their weight and health issues, both because of the way in which they feel about portrayals and the impact they perceive such portrayals have on how the general public thinks of obesity.

Our research draws upon a range of conceptual influences and is informed by an extensive review of studies into the representation of overweight and obesity in various media contexts. The primary aim of our inductive methodological approach is to develop a grounded understanding of our participants’ comments.

Conceptual framework

Conceptually, the paper is informed by a weak version of social constructionism which provides a useful way of understanding discourses of overweight and obesity as well as the role of the media in

constructing social reality. From this perspective obesity can be seen as an object that is constructed by contested discourses and the news media can be seen as an important vehicle through which these discourse are publicized and debated.

We follow Crossley (2004) and accept that obesity is a social construction but this does not (and should not) prevent us from researching and analysing the social dynamics of obesity, nor its material reality. Obesity is both a material and a discursive phenomenon; both socially constructed and physically/psychically embodied experienced. Its social construction and its material reality are not separate phenomena but closely related, in the same way that the social and biological cannot be totally divorced because each mediates the other. Material considerations such as class inequalities work on, and through, biological bodies (Monaghan, 2006). In this sense, we adopt a critical realist approach to obesity, which recognises both the material, intrapsychic and discursive/social aspects of obesity.

Media representations of overweight and obesity

Previous research has identified a number of features of the news media's reporting and portrayal of overweight and obesity; most notably, a fundamental contest between news items that frame individuals as responsible for causing and addressing the problem and those that frame social and systemic factors as responsible. Systemic frames assign responsibility for the obesity 'epidemic' to government, business and the social environment generally. Rich and Evans (2005) suggest this frame is especially prevalent in the popular media as well as being the position adopted by many public health experts. Individualising frames attribute blame and responsibility to individual factors, such as diet and lifestyle.

Research has identified other important features of news media coverage. In their analysis of US media coverage of obesity, Saguy and Riley (2005) identified four main groups as being at the forefront of framing contests over the nature and consequences of excess body weight: anti-obesity researchers, anti-obesity activists, fat acceptance researchers, and fat acceptance activists. Those in the fat acceptance camp embrace a body diversity frame in their framing of obesity, while those in the anti-obesity camp frame it as a risky behaviour over which people have a moral and medical responsibility to manage and bring under control. They suggest that, at times, both camps draw upon medical discourse to frame obesity as an illness. The fat acceptance movement can be seen as framing obesity in terms of political rights, whereas the anti-obesity claimants frame it as a medical problem/issue. It is common for fat acceptance activists to compare fatness with forms of identity such as race, gender and

disability when asserting the fatness as body diversity frame (Saguy & Riley, 2005). Fat acceptance researchers seek to emphasize the genetic and biological bases of obesity. From the perspective of the risky behaviour frame, fat acceptance is equated to the acceptance of bad behaviour that knowingly contributes to ill health.

Saguy and Almeling (2008) compared and contrasted the frames employed in scientific publications on weight and health, and press releases and news reporting on these publications. They found that news reports are more likely than science to label obesity an ‘epidemic’ and more likely to air specific controversies if the scientific studies on which they are reporting did so. They also found that news articles moralised beyond the science on which they were reporting and tended to assign blame for obesity to food choices and sedentary lifestyles. The news media uses poetic license to paint a picture of sloth and gluttony and is more likely than science to invoke individual blame. Interestingly, both scientific and news discussions were more likely to refer to individual behaviour modification solutions, with policy level solutions more likely to be discussed in reports on obesity among minorities, the poor and, especially, children. The news tends to report studies that lend themselves to dramatization and there is an absence of scepticism on the part of news reporters in regard to the science on which they report.

Research has also identified a focus on extremes in the media’s reporting of overweight and obesity. Oliver (2006), for example, reports that the number of Americans who might technically be considered overweight or obese is not as large as the “extremely fat bodies” typically shown in media reports on obesity (p. 625). Obese people are usually faceless in media reports, which often show images of ‘fat spilling over a waist band’ and Evans (2006) suggests that no face is shown in order to preserve anonymity and to avoid shaming people. The face implies a self, where what is at issue is the body (p. 263).

In summary, a number of studies have found that obesity is framed in the media as a moral issue and often with a sense of moral panic. A range of journalistic practices, such as selective reporting of studies with the most alarming findings, conflating statistics on overweight and obesity, lack of scepticism toward claims of sources and a focus on extremes, have been implicated in the creation of this moral panic. In our analysis we consider whether these techniques, practices and framing decisions are identified by participants in our study in their reactions and comments about media representations of overweight and obesity.

Research questions

The study is guided by these research questions:

What meanings do overweight and obese people take from news media representations of overweight and obesity?

What kinds of knowledge do overweight and obese people draw upon in articulating their views about the media's treatment of overweight and obesity?

How do overweight and obese people interpret various messages about overweight and obesity that they are exposed to in the media and society more broadly?

Can people's responses to media representations be understood as a form of resistance?

Method

The data analysed in this paper are drawn from 152 semi-structured interviews with overweight and obese people. Interviews were conducted between April 2008 and April 2009 in Melbourne, Australia and were recorded and transcribed for analysis with the consent of participants. On the basis of the BMI participants were classified as overweight (BMI = 25 to 29.99), obese (BMI = 30 to 39.99) or morbidly obese (BMI = >40). Some participants had undertaken lap banding surgery in an effort to reduce their weight.

Our purposive sample includes 89 people who are obese, 54 people who are morbidly obese and 9 who are overweight, which reflects our primary interest in the experiences of obese people. 108 participants were female and 44 were male. In terms of demographics 95 participants had a tertiary level education, 21 had another type of qualification, 19 had secondary level education and 17 had no formal qualification. 48 had less than \$50,000, 61 had a household income of \$50,000 to \$100,000, and 41 had more than \$100,000.

In analysing the interviews we focused on identifying regularities in the language used by participants and the meanings they derive from media representations of overweight and obesity. Through a process

of reading and rereading interview transcripts, and listening and re-listening, we examined both what the texts said and what they talked about at a more general level of understanding. Themes in people's responses to questions about forms of media representations were identified. We also sought to identify the kinds of factors informing their readings of the media and any patterns in relation to the demographic status of participants. Specific statements were analysed and categorised into clusters of meaning and quotes from participants are used to illustrate the prevalent themes that emerged.

Responding to news media representations of overweight and obesity

Participants identified the types of items they felt were characteristic of the news media's reporting of overweight and obesity. Responses ranged from comments about the visual dimensions of media reports, to the content of actual stories about overweight and obesity, the value judgements made about overweight and obese people in these depictions, and the aspects of overweight and obesity that participants suggested are neglected as a result of the privileging of a few standard story types and visual depictions.

The majority of participants who commented on news portrayals said they felt the news tended to portray overweight and obese people in negative and stereotypical ways. In explicating this perceived negativity, participants drew upon their general perceptions and made reference to specific types of stories, and the visual imagery used in stories. Participants identified a number of characteristic portrayals of obesity and obese people: morally responsible and a burden on society; objects of ridicule and derision; and dehumanising and stereotypical images.

Participants were highly reflexive and their personal experience of living as an overweight or obese person was an important mediator of their views about the particular versions of reality constructed in the news media, especially the realities of being overweight and obese as they saw them, and the significance of obesity for society. The dominance of skinny people in the media, one interviewee said, gave a false sense of reality:

You know, what you see on the news is not reality. It is little fragments of what people want you to think is reality, but when you look out your window, that is not what real life is like.
(Female, 49, university education, morbidly obese)

Several participants recognized that news is constrained by commercial imperatives and news values

and suggested that good news does not sell. One woman commented that the media, particularly programs such as popular television current affairs shows (*Today Tonight* and *A Current Affair*) uses overweight and obese people for ratings, even if it means misrepresenting people with weight problems:

I think they like to use us is probably the best way of putting it. They use overweight people to their best advantage, whether it be for ratings or advertising or social commentary or upsetting people. And I think that's a bit sad really.

(Female, 47, university education, obese, lap banded)

While identifying that the news constructs a particular version of reality people also recognized that the media's treatment of overweight and obesity had some basis in reality, the same reality that explains what one participant identified as the lack of overweight news presenters. Notwithstanding the fact that many participants were reflexive about the role of the media and what drives the news media to present items in the way it does, many also recognized that the media presents a distorted view of overweight and obese people and the reality of their situations.

In particular, one aspect of media coverage that many participants commented on was representations of overweight and obese people as a burden on society.

Personally/morally responsible and a burden on (enemy of) society

A common theme in participants' responses was that the news media tended to treat overweight and obesity too simplistically, particularly in terms of causes and solutions. There were several dimensions to this theme. In particular, references to representations of overweight and obese people as being personally responsible for their weight were identified by participants as feeding into dispositions of blame, hostility and derision toward overweight people as being a burden on society.

A morbidly obese 42 year old woman provided a lengthy discussion of the way in which overweight and obese people are treated as personally responsible for their circumstances and as a burden on society because of the impact they are having on the health system and health services. They suggested they did not see this in the same way for smokers or alcoholics:

So I've started to notice that around how the obesity is being connected almost with badness, that you're a naughty person, you're a bad person and you're personally bad in terms of

yourself but you're also – this is the media, I'm not saying, I'm saying this – and also that you're going to cost the government a lot of money in the long term because the health issues attributing to overweight are going to cost the Australian public. And that's not framed for other issues in the same way.

(Female, 42, university education, morbidly obese)

A 32 year old obese woman commented on the consequences of being continually presented with information about the burden of obesity on society and the health risks associated with obesity:

It's disempowering for people to be constantly, not only not have their voices in there, but to be told all the time from above, from this authority, you're going to die, you're going to do this, you're going to put a strain on Medicare, you're going to get cancer and heart disease and all of this.

(Female, 32, university education, obese)

A common theme was that there was too much focus on the problems caused by overweight and obesity and not enough emphasis on causes beyond that of overeating and other explanations that centre on personal responsibility. Participants' responses reflected the view that this hostility toward obese people was fed by portrayals of overweight and obese people as weak and lazy and through talk of an 'obesity epidemic' and the 'war on obesity'.

A 39 year old obese woman commented on the way in which stories about an 'obesity epidemic' always focus on individual blame and responsibility and ignore the social and cultural dimensions of the issue:

Whenever there is anything talked about in terms of the obesity epidemic it's always about you know, about the individual losing weight to become in the healthy range. It's, you know, the actual sort of cultural issues, the societal issues, all of those sorts of things aren't really talked about so its most, I think it's very much a blame and shame kind of approach.

(Female, 39, high school education, obese)

Obesity epidemic talk is often closely associated with the rhetoric of the 'war on obesity' and some participants commented on the consequences of this kind of talk for how they feel about themselves and how they feel others perceive them. In discussing the increasing prevalence of the issue of an

'obesity epidemic' in the media and talk of a "war on obesity" the 39 year old obese female participant added:

I've noticed an incredible increase in the amount of time that the media spend reporting on you know, the obesity epidemic or the war on obesity which I just think is appalling that it's being called a war. I feel like you know, that's why I feel like an enemy, I feel like an enemy of society. (Female, 39, high school education, obese)

Participants also said that media prominence given to obesity has further sensitised them to the issue and to the way in which they feel others perceive them in all aspects of their life, including at their place of work, when they are shopping at the supermarket, and when they eat out at a restaurant. Said one obese female: 'I think that people are judging me all the time'.

A 51 year old morbidly obese woman also emphasised that the 'war on obesity' is actually a war on obese people, and a 51 year old obese man (who described obesity as 'the next scare campaign') suggested the media tends to 'beat up' the issues, which creates a division between those who are in the acceptable range and those who are fat. Similarly, a 50 year old morbidly obese woman said talk of an obesity epidemic is stigmatizing in that it made her feel 'it's not what's expected normally of society' and creates an 'use versus them' situation.

News stories about the need for resources to accommodate overweight and obese people, such as: the need for bigger ambulances, bigger school desks; the need for overweight and obese people to pay more for services that have to accommodate them, such as airlines; hospitals forking out millions of dollars on beds and equipment to cope with the epidemic, and comments in the media suggesting that fat people should not be allowed on the train if they cannot fit into one seat, were offered as examples of the ways in which overweight and obese people are presented as being a burden or imposition on society. The following comments are illustrative:

...they always think that overweight people eat too much or they eat junk food all the time. It's like a stereotype and that they should be made to pay extra loadings on health insurance and these sort of things. (Female, 50, high school education, obese)

It's not about individuals, it's about a segment of society, you know, causing the rest of society

to have to pay for things, which is, you know disturbing.
(Male, 51, high school education, overweight)

A 42 year old obese man was sceptical of stories about the increasing medical costs of obesity:

Well I can tell you, I work in a team with all slim people and they've been in and out of hospital a dozen times for sporting injuries and I haven't been once. So I'm not sure if that's an accurate portrayal of medical costs.

(Male, 42, university education, obese)

Coupling news stories that blame individuals for being overweight with increased social costs of obesity posit the blame with the individual while depicting society as ultimately responsible for accommodating and solving the problem. Hence, obese people are depicted as a burden on society and societal level solutions are put forward – but social and environmental causes are often neglected.

Several participants picked up on the moralistic tone of media coverage of overweight and obesity, and social attitudes towards overweight and obese people generally. There was a strong sense that participants perceived there to be an unspoken assumption in the news that it is acceptable to present overweight and obese people in simplistic and moralistic terms. A 41 year old obese IT Manager said he disliked the way in which the news treated being overweight or obese as a reflection of the kind of person you are:

There's an implicit assumption that being overweight is automatically bad and a health risk and even worse than that they treat it as a moral problem. Not a medical one, not a personal one, it's a moral problem and you have a moral failing if you are fat.

(Male, 41, university education, obese)

He likened it to the American attitude to welfare in that it is treated as a personal moral failing instead of a product of the circumstances people find themselves in.

A 53 year old obese retired nurse said she felt that overweight and obese people are treated like 'second class citizens'; not as worthy of respect. A 29 year old morbidly obese woman said the news treats people who are overweight or obese like drug addicts and worse than smokers:

It's that we're abhorrent to society in general and that we are weak and lazy, and kind of that we've almost opted out of our own lives by being fat.

(Female, 29, high school education, morbidly obese, lap banded)

Closely associated with these readings of media coverage of overweight and obesity was the observation that the media tended to ignore social and psychological aspects. Rather than contextualising people's experiences, many participants saw the news media as reinforcing a narrow social script about overweight and obese people, one which suggested that it was all their fault and that they should be punished for being lazy and not eating the right foods. A 51 year old obese engineer said:

Well that they make fun of them and that they simplify, they simplify the problem and tend to make, it's an accusatory approach that it's all their fault and that the problem is easy and that, so that there's an implication that these people are lazy.

(Male, 51, university education, obese)

A 46 year old morbidly obese woman reacted against what she saw as the tendency of news to contribute to the stigma that she is overweight because she eats too much, which she said is not true. She said there is an emotional side to it as well as other dietary related and medical reasons, which she said need to be acknowledged more in the media. A 37 year old morbidly obese woman said the media focused too much on the 'obesity crisis' rather than the underlying causes of obesity, which she said in her case were mental health issues:

Fat people aren't just fat because they eat a lot for no reason. There's always an underlying reason and that's the thing that needs to be looked into.

Frustration with the tendency of the media to suggest that eating the right foods is the solution was also shared by a 46 year old morbidly obese woman who compared being morbidly obese with being a drug addict in the sense that there are confounding factors that make some suggested solutions overly simplistic and unhelpful:

Well for me it's far more complex than that. I mean I'm eating because I'm trying to self destruct, I don't like myself you know, how I was brought up and that has unfortunately has affected me so much. It's more like it's not for me just a case of saying stop eating that. It's far

more complex than that.

A 57 year old morbidly obese woman said she disliked the way in which the news media failed to explore the complexity of obesity and, instead, portrayed it as though all overweight and obese people are at 'Kentucky Fried' or 'Macca's' [McDonald's]:

...they never portray the fact that there are people who are overweight, but not necessarily eating junk food all day long. So I suppose that annoys me greatly. I know their aim is to try and help, or to make a story, but at the same time, it's too much blanket rule for me.

A 41 year old obese single mother who said medical conditions were a factor in her obesity was annoyed with news the media for treating it as though it's a result of bad choices that people have made. She also said, for those who are financially struggling, the higher cost of health food mitigates the suggestion that they are personally to blame for their weight.

Eating well is very expensive. So, it's not always something people have done to themselves.

Some participants suggested that talking about an 'obesity epidemic' had deleterious consequences both for social perceptions of the issue and for overweight and obese people. Some reacted against the clinical connotations of the term 'epidemic', which they said has the effect of associating obesity with contagion and infection. In turn, obese people are positioned as those you would not want to associate with and would want to keep a distance from so as not to be tainted or stigmatised purely on the basis of being seen with an overweight or obese person.

A 29 year old obese psychologist acknowledged that obesity is a big problem that needs to be addressed and reported on but they suggested it was done in a sensational and scare-mongering way. She drew a parallel with the images and reporting of HIV/AIDS in the 80s:

I think at the moment I don't like the way they're [the news media] always talking about Australia's burgeoning obesity epidemic. And they're talking about it like it's AIDS or something, like it's something infectious that you sit next to an obese people you may catch it....I mean I absolutely agree it's a big problem and needs to be addressed and reported and that sort of stuff. But I guess it's very sensational as well.

This comment reflects a strategy of reading and responding to media representations of obesity by drawing upon what they perceive to be more serious, or in this case, contagious health issues. This extract also highlights another common strategy in obese people's talk about the role of the news media, which was to acknowledge that it is a problem that needs to be reported and addressed but to question the way in which the news portrays the issues.

A 26 year old obese man said the news media talks about the 'obesity epidemic' 'like it's something that sort of snuck up on us like influenza or something', yet provided little useful information to people who are overweight. A 35 year old obese woman said the problem of obesity is not as big as the hysteria surrounding it makes it out to be.

Ridicule and derision – use of extreme cases)

Certain types of news stories were identified by participants as treating overweight and obese people as a source of ridicule and derision, with references to 'freak show' common and one person referring to the 'circus sideshow'. These comments tended to cut across people from a range of economic, educational, occupational backgrounds and age groups and were offered by both obese and morbidly obese participants. Women more often than men, however, tended to comment on such portrayals.

Participants gave several examples of the kinds of news stories that portrayed obese people as freaks: the man lying in bed and having to have people move him; the medical show about a 450 kilo man who needed to be fork-lifted out of his house; overweight people needing two aircraft seats; the man who did not go to jail because he was overweight; the funeral home that had to get a fork-lift because of an increase in the number of obese corpses; people unable to move out of their house or bed because of their excessive weight; the 160 kilo man who had to be lifted by crane out of his house; the obese man in Mexico stuck in his apartment; the side of a house being ripped down so an obese person could get out; the man who was so morbidly obese that he had to be weighed on a weighbridge; and the overweight woman who could not be removed from her house to attend a court case. The following comments are illustrative of how people responded to these type of stories:

Oh, it's a joke. They go and report on somebody who's – and they had to knock the house down and get a crane to get this guy out because he was 160 kilos or something and you think oh that poor man. They've turned him into a circus, the last time was that poor lady that sat on the toilet seat for two years and wouldn't come out.

(Female, 44, high school education, obese)

Like the fat lady at the fair, you know? It makes some exciting news, tell a story about this person who's too fat to leave the house sort of thing. And we'll manage to get a crane in and hoist them out of their house so they can have a party one day, and they vanish into the mist and no one ever hears from them again until they die, from being overweight.

(Female, 43, university education, lap banded)

...they always show the rolls or the jelly belly or someone hoeing into a hamburger, that type of thing. Whatever they are talking about with overweight doesn't have to be gross and obese, it might just be someone who is 10 kilos heavier but they always portray what is considered gross.

(Female, 33, less than high school education, obese)

The types of news stories referred to have in common a general audience appeal to novelty or bizarreness (or what one obese woman referred to as the 'odd spot') and they were often the kind of news stories that people said had a personal impact on them. Several people suggested that these portrayals upset them, made them say they will never be like that or made them wonder how a person could get to that point. For example, in discussing a news story about a person confined to bed because of obesity, a 41 year old morbidly obese woman (BMI = 71.7) said:

That brought me to tears and that shocked me and that also, I could hear my parents in the kitchen when I was watching it (because I was in my bedroom) I could hear my father screaming at my mother and saying, 'That is going to become [her name]'.

(Female, 41, high school education, morbidly obese).

Many participants suggested news stories of this type (but also medical programs covering these types of stories) portrayed obese people as freaks and represented extreme cases of obesity. Rather than being sympathetically treated an obese woman suggested that these portrayals contained an element of outrage – 'how did this become this freak?' A 49 year old morbidly obese woman said they [the news media] 'feed the mass hysteria about obese people being freaks and that this is – you know, they are meant to be pitied'. while a 52 year old overweight man saw the stories as a form of poking fun at overweight people.

This 'freak show type' news coverage was seen by many participants as symptomatic of the prevailing

view that it is acceptable to ridicule and disrespect people who are overweight and obese. As a 43 year old obese woman said, 'It is like being overweight is the last thing that you are allowed to make fun of'. Pointedly, a 41 year old obese man said:

It actually bothers me a lot that attacking fat people is the one remaining group that it is politically correct to attack. You can't attack people for any other reason, for their race, colour appearance, whether they are disabled or not, or sex or anything, but you can have a go at fat people.

(Male, 41, high school education, obese)

The news coverage was indicative of what numerous participants identified as the wider tendency of the media to focus on extremes in reporting on overweight and obesity and also of the tendency for people's weight to become the defining element of their personhood (i.e. their weight as emblematic of their failure as a person):

The other thing is that they tend to show gigantic people as sort of the norm for obese people, whereas a lot of people who would be classified as overweight or obese just look normal. So it's making people feel worse than what they are and those people who are very large, even worse about themselves.

(Female, 36, university education, obese)

They tend to focus on the ones that are morbidly obese, not just the ones that are just a little bit overweight. So when they do their little pictures and things like that, it's always the biggest people they can find. It's not necessarily the ones that might be 5 or 10 kilos overweight that could be still in that category. They show the biggest ones they can find, which I think is a bit misleading. That's like unless you're this overweight you don't have to worry about it, rather than if you're a little bit overweight this could affect you.

(Female, 32, high school education, morbidly obese).

I think the media doesn't appreciate, and they have these very old-style images and thoughts about what's overweight. And usually you know, it's usually somebody who's excessively overweight who sweats and everything.

(Female, 47, university education, obese).

In a similar vein, a 44 year old obese woman suggested that the news media should be showing people who are not extremely overweight given that according to the BMI not everyone who is considered overweight has their tummy hanging over their belly.

For some participants, news stories about extremely obese people offer an image against which they measure their own size. These images can make them feel better, as well as reinforce their desire to avoid getting that big and can, in a sense, serve as a kind of motivation for them to lose weight. A 35 year old morbidly obese nurse said:

It probably made me feel that my obesity even though how terrible I think mine is, is probably minimal in the grand scheme of things, because the programs tend to focus on I suppose, the super obese.

A 31 year old obese woman also said: ‘I don’t want to get like that’ in response to a television story about extremely obese people. A 39 year old obese woman said that it was the way in which the media were representing fat people that prompted her to change her eating and increase her physical activity because she didn’t want to feel ‘deviant’ and like ‘public enemy one’ anymore.

Participants responses to how overweight and obesity are treated in the news media reflects the idea that overweight and obese people are depicted as being qualitatively different from and a source of amusement for those who are not. This was associated with the idea that overweight and obese people are not positioned as the audience or reader of such coverage but rather as objects for non overweight people to look down their noses at. This is illustrated in the following comment from a 36 year old morbidly obese woman, which also touches on the idea of contagion:

There’s a real, I think, like there’s a literal and a physical disembodiment in that they talk about fat people like they’re not there or that they’re not one of their readers or you know that they’re not part of the population and so I think it’s kind of like there’s all these fat people out there and it’s like be careful you might run into one.

Dehumanising images – “walking stomachs” doing what fat people do

Predictably, many participants commented on the stock-standard images and file video television news frequently uses in portraying overweight and obesity. This visual representations of overweight and obese people was seen as a major source of derision and ridicule. As a 30 year old obese woman said:

... all they do is focus on people's stomachs. It doesn't matter what the issue is they use that same clip.

Numerous participants in our study were critical of the frequent use of 'faceless fatties' in news reports. They were seen as dehumanising, although a few participants said they thought it was important not to show people's faces in order to protect their privacy. A 36 year old obese woman could see both sides of the issue:

I know they probably have to do it for privacy and so on, but at the same time it makes the person a non person. It's just this body without a person hood.

A 28 year old morbidly obese woman who said she was angered by the pot bellies and chest to hips shots used in a recent television story about Australia being one of the most obese countries in the world said: 'I think there is more to weight problem than a gut, and I guess I'm sick and tired of the media focusing purely on that'.

Other comments illustrate related themes of personal identity:

I think, isn't that interesting, they've ceased to become people, they are purely overweight bodies. They don't deserve to have their head there anymore, they only deserve to have the obese part of them or the fat part of them, which I don't know whether anybody else thinks that, but it's always interesting.

(Female 47, high school education, morbidly obese)

They might be the most fantastic person, but in that shot, they don't even have a head. You know, it's like they're not, that's all they are, a walking stomach. As if there's no more to them than that, and that's not right.

(Female, 42, university education, obese).

A 31 year old obese woman suggested images of 'faceless fatties' are emblematic of the way in which people see (or don't see) people who are overweight or obese. A 39 year old morbidly obese woman

said it was though televisions news producers were saying ‘Any generic fat person will do’. These comments are reflective of the kind of value judgements that people read from news media representations that reduce people to overweight and obese bodies, as though their shape and size speaks to the kind of person they are or their worth and value as a person. In addition to the dehumanised reading of the headless bodies shown in news stories about overweight and obesity, a 19 year old obese student read these as being like a form of criminalisation, in the sense that they hide the faces of criminals: ‘I don’t know they’re making it seem like it’s a very bad thing to be overweight’. [Unlike the US system, it is illegal to photograph and publish the face of someone arrested for a criminal act].

Participants also identified certain stereotypical media representations of overweight and obese people that were a constant source of frustration. The following comments illustrate:

Like it is really offensive and you never see pictures of beautifully dressed, well presented overweight business women or elegant men in suits or anything and there are plenty of them around. You will also see them showing the picture of the slobby bloke in the tee shirt with the beer or the lady in her tracky dacks in some poor part of town and it is not like that anymore. There is a very strong class based slant on it and it is about, the focus is on behaviour that is associated with class too, like everybody who is overweight eats MacDonald’s five times a week.

(Female, 43, university education, obese).

It’s not as if we’re slobs or slouches or sit around doing nothing and yet they will take a picture of them sitting down, with normal people around them of course, having a hamburger or something. You know, and I think, well it’s only to make effect, I realise that but its not a true indication necessarily of what fat people are like. That they are intelligent and they dress better. They often find people who are not well dressed. So yeah, they don’t portray them as they necessarily are I don’t think.

(Female, 54, university education, obese).

The only overweight person you’ll see is either they’re a servant or low socio-economic person, you never see intelligent, successful people, they’re all stupid or doing menial jobs so it further compounds that stereotypical image of being dumb, lazy and unclean.

(Female, 40, university education, morbidly obese)

Participants were concerned that overweight and obese people tended to be depicted eating ‘fast food’, which reinforces the view that all people are overweight because they eat poorly. This representation was seen as a source of ridicule.

So you just seem to see images of someone eating a hamburger or having some thick shake or something that looks totally unhealthy and inappropriate, and that persons got a really big body size.

(Female, 32, university education, overweight)

A 34 year old morbidly obese student who said they write a blog on fat acceptance, suggested that overweight and obese people are dehumanised in the news media through the use of images of ‘headless fatties’:

You get these pictures of these fat people sitting there and they’re always eating McDonalds or whatever. Like that’s all fat people ever do is eat McDonalds and they always show fat people doing the stereotypical doing the fat people things. It just totally dehumanises the whole of idea of fat and just panders to stereotypes.

A 53 year old obese woman said they were depicted as being lazy and eating all day and commented on the generalisations and assumptions that are made about people because they are overweight:

Well a lot of us don’t eat junk food. I’ve never eaten junk food. And that really annoys me because they look at you as if that’s what you do is sit in McDonalds or KFC all day long. I don’t do that, never have done and that annoys me.

These portrayals, they suggested, are at odds with their own knowledge that people who are overweight are active in the community in paid and voluntary work.

A 54 year old obese man commented that the use of such images was another example of the way in which news stories about overweight and obesity provide ‘titillation to people to look down their noses’ at overweight and obese people.

Images of ‘faceless fatties’ can be seen as one example of what some participants referred to as the way

in which overweight and obese people come to be defined by their weight in the sense that a whole range of judgments are invested in and represented by such images. A number of participants commented on the way in which size is used as a visual signifier in news stories about overweight and obesity. Even though the people who are depicted may be medically and physically fit and healthy, aesthetically they appear as larger than normal, for example. Participants saw the use of such images as symptomatic of a more generalized tendency of the news media to devalue overweight and obese people and report their experiences in a simplistic and moralistic manner – that is, the experiences of overweight and obesity can be reduced to a few stock images of people who look overweight and who are eating fast food. Such stereotypical images not only give a false impression people who are overweight and obese but may add to the sense of panic surrounding notions of an ‘obesity epidemic’ and feed dispositions of personal blame.

There were both positive and negative reactions to news reports about successful weight loss concerning the overweight or obese. A 39 year old morbidly obese woman, for example, said that while weight loss success stories could be motivating they could also add to people’s sense of failure as well as reinforcing that fat is bad and wrong and that you’re a personal failure if your fat:

I think it’s really horrible to be a fat person today.

Another participant suggested ‘people can feel as if they’re second class citizens because they can’t do what someone else has done’. Another participant commented that weight loss stories tended to be a ‘flash in the pan’ and there is no follow up to see if the person has kept the weight off .

These comments reflect the way in which overweight and obese people are frequently presented in a positive light in the media only after they have lost weight (thus their status as overweight/obese is rendered invisible except for the ‘Before’ shots that often accompany weight loss stories. There was a view among participants that these kind of portrayals further reinforce society’s negative valuation of being overweight.

Body diversity messages and the question of normalising overweight and obesity

Participants in our study were told of a recent survey which found that body image was a concern for many young people and were asked how more positive messages about people’s different body shapes and sizes could be created.

Participants identified a number of ways in which body diversity could be achieved in the media. These included: putting more fat people on TV; promoting different body sizes as normal and healthy; showing people of different body shapes and sizes enjoying things and being active; normalising the obesity issue on the basis that it is not difficult for someone to be considered obese according to the BMI. But some participants said there was no need for overweight or obese people to be given special treatment. They suggested, for example, it was unnecessary to categorise people as plus size models and that they should just be treated normally – as a representation of the general public ‘without being the token fat person out there’. Another participant suggested that normalization does not come from making a big fuss about a person’s size but by just having a variety of sized people to make people aware that its normal.

The question of diversity can also be seen at structural and institutional levels, as the following comment from a 29 year old morbidly obese woman suggests:

I just think more inspirational stories of people who have achieved these wonderful things, even though they might be overweight. That their weight is kind of irrelevant. That’s the thing; you’re only seen as a success if you’re thin. You can’t be a success and overweight, that means there something wrong. Weight should really be irrelevant so in that case things in the news should be you actually have overweight presenters or people that you interview witnesses to a crash or something like that, could be overweight don’t go for the skinny blonde chick, that kind of stuff.

This comment reveals the way in which the media has embedded within it certain value judgements that predispose the industry toward privileging certain types of bodies, both in terms of their hiring and representational practices.

In relation to stereotypical portrayals of overweight people, which a number of participants commented on, one person related this to this issue of diversity:

I think it should be that whole idea of diversity and not always having, you know in your TV programs where you’re having your diversity don’t always have the fat girl as the lonely one who’s got boy problems because of her body image. (laugh) So that you’ve actually got a diversity of what’s happening.
(Female, 38, university education, morbidly obese)

But some participants were highly reflexive about diversity, as this comment reveals:

I think we need to accept everybody's shapes and sizes, but I don't know if I want to positively give feedback to say look, an overweight person who's overweight should be recognised as a good sort of role model. It's a tricky one and I think it needs to be dealt with sensitively because I'm balancing between, I don't want to see overweight people made into role models to say they're excuses for not doing something, but on the other hand I don't want to see an absence of overweight people in media because then it sort of hides people.

(Male, 42, university education, overweight)

Conclusions

There are several ways of looking at the impact of the news media's reporting of overweight and obesity as reflected in this study. It has been suggested, for example, that alarmist reporting about an 'epidemic' of obesity is generating an 'obesophobic' environment, which could have unintended consequences for the general population as well as people who are overweight or obese (Broom & Dixon, 2008). Data we obtained in our interviews certainly supports the view that we are living in an obesophobic environment, especially from the perspectives of people who are obese, and that the media does contribute to this. However, it was not so much the alarmism per se of news reports that participants felt was generating this, although some did. It was rather the choice of stories and especially the limited, one-dimensional surface level coverage that participants felt was characteristic of the news media's reporting. Many of the participants in our study commented on the way they feel victimised in society and the role of the media in reinforcing this victim status.

Participants in our study provided numerous examples of 'fat stigmatization' in their own lives. Many of these related directly to the treatment of overweight and obesity by the news media – especially the tendency to be negatively valued and portrayed in stereotypical ways (overweight and obese people as weak and lazy, objects of amusement, a burden on society etc). Participants suggested that one of the consequences of these kinds of portrayals is to reinforce both negative social perceptions of people who are overweight and obese, and simplistic attitudes about why they are overweight and what should be done about it. Some participants also said they had experienced prejudice on the basis of their weight in their consultations with medical professionals and in other areas of their lives and that negative and stereotypical media representations, although often subtle rather than explicit, can provide

legitimation for these practices.

As an issue, obesity and especially ridicule and discrimination of obese people is not treated as seriously as other issues, such as discrimination on the grounds of race, gender, sexuality or disability (Longhurst, 2005), which was something that some of our participants discussed. Unlike these aspects of one's identity, obesity is seen as something for which people are personally responsible and, therefore, deserving of society's disdain.

One of the side effects of the rhetoric of 'obesity epidemic' is that obese people, and even the overweight, become the target of public fears about their potential to threaten the wellbeing of others because of their size/weight (Schlesinger, 2005). Some participants in our study commented on how they interpreted this kind of language as positioning them as the enemy of society and they also questioned the disproportionate coverage given to the economic burden of obesity compared to other health costs.

The tendency of the news media to focus on extreme examples of obesity, fulfilling a novelty news value, and to focus too much on the 'problem' (crisis and epidemic talk) rather than providing people with useful information or solutions was also discussed by participants. The costs of increasing levels of obesity are real and participants in our study could recognise and accept that news stories of this kind needed to be told. However, many suggested that portraying overweight and obese people as personally to blame means that other influences on overweight and obesity were not given enough attention. The portrayals were seen as providing little opportunity for alternative readings relating to the complex reasons why people may be overweight or obese or to question the focus on people's weight as a measure of their overall health and personhood.

One of the questions we posed at the beginning of this paper is to what extent can our participants' responses be seen as a form of resistance. Many of our participants were critical of and offended by characteristic ways in which overweight and obesity are devalued in the news media and society and yet they also displayed a level of resignation rather than mobilization. This may be because many of them have internalised negative valuations of overweight and obesity that exist in society and from which they feel unable to escape. At every turn they are reminded that they are seen as overweight bodies or as burdens on society, rather than human beings. Resignation rather than resistance is perhaps a more adequate description of people's reactions to news media coverage, though this might be a product of our purposive sample – the majority of our participants were obese or morbidly obese.

Overweight and obesity are highly visible traits that are easily signified in news media reports and, as our participants suggested, they can also be another device by which the media simplifies the issues. The sense in which obese people are only newsworthy when they can be presented as an object of ridicule led some participants to express the view that less of an issue should be made of obesity and people's weight in general, especially when what is reported tends only to reinforce the 'obesity crisis' or 'obese people as a source of ridicule' frame rather than offer anything new to the discussion.

Consistent with people's observations about the tendency of the media to treat obese people as freaks or as a joke; a spectacle for other people's amusement, the kinds of stories that many people remembered were those with a novelty or somewhat bizarre element. Among our participants there were conflicting views on the use of 'faceless fatties' in news media reports. Some people were offended by these images because of how they said they would feel if they identified themselves. Others spoke in more general terms about why the images were disturbing and offensive, while others saw them as a way of protecting people's privacy.

Our study sheds light on the ways in which overweight and obese people interpret and react to news media representations. There was certainly no standard response to depictions of overweight and obesity but equally overweight and obese people are sensitive to the ways in which they are portrayed. It is within this context of news media reception that they receive and respond to various others kinds of messages about overweight and obesity, including those in public health campaigns.

References

Broom, D.H. & Dixon, J. (2008). The sex of slimming: mobilizing gender in weight loss programs and fat acceptance. *Social Theory & Health*, 6(2), 148-166.

Crossley, N. (2004). Fat is a sociological issue: obesity rates in late modern, 'body-conscious' societies. *Social Theory & Health*, 2, 222-253.

Evans, R. (2006). 'Gluttony or sloth': critical geographies of bodies and morality in (anti)obesity policy. *Area*, 38(3), 259-267.

Longhurst, R. (2005). Fat bodies: developing geographical research agendas. *Progress in Human Geography*, 29(3), 247-259.

Monaghan, L. (2006). Weighty words: Expanding and embodying the accounts framework. *Social Theory & Health*, 4, 128-167.

Oliver, J. E. (2006). The politics of pathology: How obesity became an epidemic disease. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 49(4), 611-627.

Rich, E. & Evans, J. (2005). 'Fat ethics' – The obesity discourse and body politics. *Social Theory & Health*, 3, 341-358.

Saguy, A.C. & Almeling, R. (2008). Fat in the fire: Science, the news media, and the 'obesity epidemic'. *Sociological Forum*, 23(1), 53-83.

Saguy, A.C. & Riley, K. V. (2005). Weighing both sides: Morality, mortality, and framing contests over obesity. *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law*, 30(5), 869-921.

Schlesinger, M. (2005). Weighting for Godot. *Journal of Health Politics, Policy & Law*, 30(5), 785-802.