



UNIVERSITY
OF WOLLONGONG
AUSTRALIA

University of Wollongong
Research Online

Faculty of Social Sciences - Papers

Faculty of Social Sciences

2010

'That's not reality for me': Australian audiences respond to *The Biggest Loser*

Kate Holland

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

Richard Warwick Blood

University of Canberra

Samantha Thomas

University of Wollongong, slthomas@uow.edu.au

Asuntha Karunaratne

Monash University

Sophie Lewis

Monash University

Publication Details

Holland, K., Blood, R. W., Thomas, S., Karunaratne, A. & Lewis, S. (2010). 'That's not reality for me': Australian audiences respond to *The Biggest Loser*. Annual International Communications Association Conference (pp. 1-26).

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

'That's not reality for me': Australian audiences respond to The Biggest Loser

Abstract

This paper focuses on how Australian audiences who meet the BMI criteria of being obese or morbidly obese read the television program The Biggest Loser. The study consisted of 152 semi-structured interviews in which people were asked about media representations of obesity in general and The Biggest Loser in particular. Four central themes emerged from our analysis of the interview data: Showing the struggle; Watching the transformation; Creating unrealistic expectations; Reinforcing misconceptions and exploiting people. Many people were reflexive about their complicity as viewers in a process in which obese people, like themselves, are ridiculed and humiliated and, while many challenged the contrived format of the program, very few questioned its underlying assumption about the importance of losing weight. These findings are discussed in relation to previous research with viewers of The Biggest Loser and situated in the context of theorising about obesity, and reality and makeover television programs.

Keywords

reality, audiences, respond, not, biggest, me, loser, that, australian

Disciplines

Education | Social and Behavioral Sciences

Publication Details

Holland, K., Blood, R. W., Thomas, S., Karunaratne, A. & Lewis, S. (2010). 'That's not reality for me': Australian audiences respond to The Biggest Loser. Annual International Communications Association Conference (pp. 1-26).

Submission for consideration to ICA Health Communication Division

Abstract

‘That’s not reality for me’: Australian audiences respond to *The Biggest Loser*

This paper focuses on how Australian audiences who meet the BMI criteria of being obese or morbidly obese read the television program *The Biggest Loser*. The study consisted of 152 semi-structured interviews in which people were asked about media representations of obesity in general and *The Biggest Loser* in particular. Four central themes emerged from our analysis of the interview data: Showing the struggle; Watching the transformation; Creating unrealistic expectations; Reinforcing misconceptions and exploiting people. Many people were reflexive about their complicity as viewers in a process in which obese people, like themselves, are ridiculed and humiliated and, while many challenged the contrived format of the program, very few questioned its underlying assumption about the importance of losing weight. These findings are discussed in relation to previous research with viewers of *The Biggest Loser* and situated in the context of theorising about obesity, and reality and makeover television programs.

‘That’s not reality for me’: Australian audiences respond to *The Biggest Loser*

Introduction

This paper focuses on how Australian audiences who meet the BMI criteria of being ‘obese’ or ‘morbidly obese’ read the reality television program *The Biggest Loser (TBL)*. While several studies have examined and discussed the portrayal of obesity in the media (Boero, 2007; Greenberg et al., 2003; Himes & Thompson, 2007; Kim & Willis 2007; Lawrence 2004; O’Hara 2006; Rich & Evans 2005; Roy, Faulkner & Finlay 2007; Saguy & Almeling, 2008; Saguy & Riley, 2005; Sandberg, 2007), and some studies have looked at the makeover television genre specifically (Heyes, 2007; Lewis, 2008; Oullette & Hay, 2008; Silk & Francombe, 2009), there has been scarce research into the experiences of overweight and obese people as media audiences.

As part of a larger study into the experiences of overweight and obese people, this paper aims to address this gap in the research and to build on Sender and Sullivan’s (2008) research into how television viewers talk about the representation and treatment of obese people on *The Biggest Loser*. Their research provides a useful point of comparison also, given that they sought the views of viewers in general whereas our study focuses specifically on the views of obese people themselves. By exploring the ways in which obese people read programs such as this we hope to shed light more broadly on the possible functions of such programs for public perceptions of overweight and obesity and for people who see themselves in these terms.

Conceptual framework

Obesity as both discourse and experience

Conceptually, the paper is informed by a weak version of social constructionism which we believe is more closely aligned to ‘critical realism’ or ‘semiotic realism’ (Lewis, 2006; Pilgrim & Bentall, 1999; Ussher, 2000; Williams, 1999) and provides a useful way of understanding obesity both as discourse and experience. This approach recognises that scientific concepts need to be viewed in the context of the social and historical conditions and discursive practices from which they emerge and understands human experiences as constituted by a combination of material, discursive and intrapsychic factors (Ussher, 2000). From this perspective the

media, including programs such as *The Biggest Loser* can be seen as an important apparatus through which meanings about obesity are generated and realised in the public domain.

This paper is informed by the work of numerous scholars who adopt a critical approach to obesity discourse (Gard & Wright, 2005; Monaghan, 2005; Rich & Evans, 2005). It seeks to work with Foucauldian concepts and the work of others who have drawn upon his ideas to make sense of programs like *The Biggest Loser* and of obesity discourse more broadly. In discussing the increasingly medicalised discourse of the “institutionalised war on fat” Monaghan (2007) says, “if the obesity discourse is interpreted through a Foucauldian optic, then this constitutes a pervasive form of bio-power that is implicated in medicalised (self-) surveillance and efforts to discipline ‘risky’ human bodies” (p. 586).

Crossley (2004) suggests ‘body conscious society’ theses, such as Foucault’s concepts of self-policing and ‘technologies of the self’, and Giddens’ concept of ‘body projects’ lead us to predict that society is (or should be) getting slimmer and more toned. According to Crossley, slimness, fitness, self-mastery, health and efficiency are the social values implicated in people’s reflexive efforts to shape their bodies in specific ways. However, these theses are not supported by facts regarding weight gain trends and in order for the disciplinary thesis to hold true we would expect levels of overweight and obesity not to be on the increase (Crossley, 2004).

It might be suggested that obesity can be seen as a form of resistance in that it symbolizes an unwillingness to conform to normalised images and to take up self-disciplinary techniques to become slim. But this is not the case for those overweight and obese people who do partake in a range of strategies to try and lose weight, thereby conforming to these disciplinary regimes, such as those who partake in weight loss programs such as *The Biggest Loser*.

Murray (2008) uses the concept of bodily “literacies” to refer to the construction and (re)production of knowledges about certain bodies, which are so familiar to us that they circulate without question and permeate practices of reading bodies (Murray, 2008). In Western societies being overweight is associated with gluttony and sloth, two of the seven

deadly sins, which connotes a lack of moral rectitude of the obese person. It is suggested that various health agencies build upon this religious framework and play an important role in stressing the relationship between obesity and the risk of death and disability. This adds ‘unnatural’, ‘abnormal’ and ‘unhealthy’ to the lexicon of what it means to be obese (Rogge & Greenwald, 2004), which are some of the aspects of what has been referred to as ‘fat stigmatisation’ (Himes & Thompson, 2007) or the ‘civilised oppression’ of overweight and obese people (Rogge & Greenwald, 2004). Unlike other resistance and identity-based movements, the fat acceptance movement has also met opposition in the form of medical arguments about health risk (Saguy & Riley, 2005).

In applying theories of governmentality to media culture Oullette and Hay (2008) suggest that reality television “has become the quintessential technology of citizenship of our age” (p. 472). *The Biggest Loser* can be seen as a reflection of what they describe as the ‘reinvention’ of government in neoliberal capitalist democracies, which reflects an impulse to remake television viewers into active and health citizens. In a similar vein, drawing upon Foucault’s conception of governmentality Silk and Francombe (2009) have suggested that *The Biggest Loser* constitutes a public pedagogy that circulates techniques for a government of the self, which fashions and fosters new social subjectivities. They view the television program as emblematic of neo-liberalism and of the individualisation of obesity discourse in which it is framed as a matter of personal choice. Contestants, they say, are constantly reminded throughout the program that they are responsible for being obese, which they suggest is the “winning neoliberal formula for the biggest losers” (p.7-8). In a culture in which self direction and choice are paramount the obese body represents a failure of will (Silk & Francombe, 2008). They note that in *The Biggest Loser*:

The obese are thus discursively constituted as a ‘problem’ to be managed, an immoral non-productive citizen discursively and visually constituted as ‘other’ – subject to control, and, exclusion. (Silk & Francombe, 2008, p. 12)

They approach the program as a “highly politicised and contested space that educates subjects, disciplines the non-compliant; and becomes part of a moral economy that differentiates between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ citizens” (p. 2). From this perspective ‘capillary institutions’ like the

media do the work of government agencies in encouraging a focus on personal responsibility and self-discipline (Silk & Francombe, 2008).

Christenson and Ivancin (2006) place *The Biggest Loser* in the “lifestyle transformation” category of reality television programs. Their study identified several major themes and issues embedded in health and medical reality shows, some of which apply to *The Biggest Loser*, including that its emphasis is as much on the increased attractiveness as it is on the health benefits of weight loss. They also note that *The Biggest Loser* has been criticised for promoting unrealistic expectations about the speed of weight loss, which may be potentially dangerous. The program also provides information about the role of diet and exercise in weight loss and further information of this kind is also available on its website.

What is absent from the research I’ve discussed is empirical data about how obese people respond to the program, and it is these absent voices that this study intends to bring into the literature in the area. Are similar themes to those identified by Christenson and Ivancin evident in obese people’s readings of *The Biggest Loser*? Is it an extension of neoliberalism as Silk and Francombe and others suggest? Do obese people discipline themselves in accordance with the kinds of thesis being put forward by some scholars?

Research questions

The paper will seek to address the following questions:

What interpretations do overweight and obese people make of *The Biggest Loser*?

What do overweight and obese people suggest are the consequences of *The Biggest Loser*?

Methodological and analytic approach

Data collection and analysis

The data analysed in this paper is drawn from 152 semi-structured interviews with overweight and obese people and the section of the interview that included a series of questions related to the media. Some of these questions related to *The Biggest Loser* and how effective people think it is in encouraging people to live a healthy lifestyle, how regularly they watched it, what

they liked and disliked about it and whether or not they would go on the program. Interviews were conducted over the telephone between April 2008 and April 2009 and were recorded and transcribed for analysis with the consent of participants. On the basis of the BMI participants were classified as overweight (BMI = 25-29.99), obese (BMI = 30-39.99) or morbidly obese (BMI >40). Our sample included 89 people who are obese, 54 who are morbidly obese and 9 who are overweight, which reflects our primary interest in the experiences of obese and morbidly obese people. 108 participants were female and 44 were male. We recognise that the BMI is not an unproblematic measure but that it nonetheless provides a useful indicator for the practical purpose of being able to categorize the size range of our participants.

Following Sender and Sullivan (2008) we were interested to see whether the governmental critique which has been directed at reality television programs is born out by audience perceptions of *The Biggest Loser*. In analysing the interviews we focused on identifying regularities in the meanings that participants took from *The Biggest Loser* and developing themes accordingly. By reading and rereading interview transcripts several readings of the program and the factors informing these readings were identified. Specific statements were analysed and categorised into clusters of meaning and we will use quotes from interviewees to illustrate these themes.

Findings

People's responses to *The Biggest Loser* were mixed. Some identified positive aspects of the program, such as showing people achieve their weight loss, while many were critical of what they suggested was its unrealistic nature. Most participants identified aspects of the program that they liked and disliked, although some were more adamant in their views about the program, suggesting that it should be taken off the television. It was less common for people to laud its merits.

While positive responses to the program were far less common than comments critical of it, there was some evidence to suggest that obese people read *The Biggest Loser* in complex ways and are able to bracket what they see as problematic about it and talk about the value they see in it. Some of the aspects of the program that people said they liked included: seeing the

struggle that people go through to lose weight; being able to see the transformation that contestants go through; being able to identify with the contestants and their struggles; seeing people achieve; showing that it's possible for people to lose weight; seeing people's personal stories; seeing improvements in people's self-esteem; and seeing people taking control of their lives. These readings of the program suggest that it provides something of a mirror for obese people albeit one that does not reflect the realities of their own lives and runs the risk of creating unrealistic expectations about weight loss.

Showing the struggle

In contrast to the kind of 'after' photographs used in promotions for weight loss products and programs, some participants liked being able to see and identify with the struggles of other obese people on *The Biggest Loser*. For some this aspect of the program was not necessarily undermined by what they disliked about the program. The following comment from a 28-year-old morbidly obese woman who said she did not watch the program regularly but if she was at home when it was on she would is an example of the way in which some viewers liked being able to identify with the contestants:

I think it's effective because you see people going through the same problems that you might also be going through as opposed to a stick woman standing inside big pants.

You can actually see the journeys and struggles people have, so you know it's not just you, and I guess you can identify with that and maybe try to draw something from it.

This person said she disliked the competitive element to the program and admired the bravery of contestants in putting themselves out there to be judged and scrutinised, something that she herself said she would not be prepared to do. A 49-year-old obese woman and regular viewer said she liked the program because it showed that people could succeed in losing big amounts of weight and provided a sense of hope and comradeship because she could identify with the contestants and their desire to lose weight. Despite disliking the unnatural conditions in which people lost the weight she said she would love to go on the program and that its publicness would be an added incentive to lose weight. Several of our participants said they had applied to be a contestant on the program.

A number of participants discussed the failure of the media to address the complexity of overweight and obesity (regarding causes and reasons etc) in favour of a simplistic focus on what people should and should not eat. In contrast, a 58-year-old morbidly obese regular viewer praised *The Biggest Loser* for the attention that it gave to the underlying causes of people's weight gain, even though she also said the program made her feel like she was not pulling her weight:

There always seems to be an underlying problem as to why these people has got to the size that they have done, and they enforce this positive attitude on them that you can do it, you can beat it. This wasn't your fault and you weren't responsible for that, and I think that's a lot of good is done by that as long as it is maintained once the people leave the house.

This view about how the program handles contestant's responsibility for their weight contrasts with the suggestion that *The Biggest Loser* situates the blame on individuals for being obese (Silk & Francombe, 2009). The comment suggests that the program searches for causes and explanations beyond that of the individual, though this was not a view shared by many of our participants. However, what this comment also reveals is the way in which the program depicts and enforces a regime of self-discipline and a psychologisation of contestants which in many ways is contrary to a more socio-cultural understanding of people's lives and their weight. This person also adopts the language of weight maintenance, which was a common concern among participants. Despite identifying positive aspects of the program she nonetheless said she would not put herself through the kind of public humiliation and ridicule that contestants go through. This kind of ambivalence was common throughout participants' responses.

In addition to being able to identify with contestants, the program also tapped into people's curiosity and desire to see people 'transformed'.

Watching the transformation

The most common reason people gave for liking the program was seeing the transformations in participants. There was a strong curiosity element to this, which might reflect the format of

the program and the centrality of the weigh-ins to it. For these people the make-over aspect of the program was something that appealed to them. The following comment from a 36 year-old morbidly obese woman who said she watched the show “religiously” is illustrative of this theme as well as the way in which looking beautiful is bound up with weight loss and successful self-discipline in achieving that goal:

It appeals to my sense of the fairytale ending when you get to the finale show and everybody looks beautiful and they feel good about themselves. I like to see that, I like to see the people looking happy and having made a journey.

But this person’s views on the program were also ambivalent, as the following comment shows:

Like *The Biggest Loser* is both for me as an obese woman a very positive message as well as very negative in exactly the same way. It depends on even episode to episode what you’re going to get out of it. Because you know some days like they’re showing a weigh in show and all they’ll do is show the giant boom boom boom up the stairs, you know you go oh yeah great have a go at the fatty making the floor move and all of those things.

Thus, on the one hand, for this person the weigh-in represented a kind of fairy-tale ending and on the other a more sinister type of voyeurism directed at the fat body. These comments reflect the flipside of seeing the transformations, which is the necessity of having to see the body prior to its transformation. Despite her ambivalence she said she would like to go on the show because she responds well to healthy competition.

Some participant’s comments were suggestive of the idea that the program was a guilty pleasure. The following comment from a 31 year-old morbidly obese regular female viewer is typical of the kind of ambivalence that many people expressed about the program:

It’s ridiculous, it’s almost like the freak show thing you know I’m feeding into by watching it and enjoying it but it’s unrealistic and unhealthy and so yes. Even though I love it I do really think it’s stupid and irresponsible.

She said she liked sharing in the success of contestants when they lost weight but hearing that they have put the weight back on after leaving the show can be demoralising and depressing. A 51-year-old obese woman who watched one season described having a “love hate thing” with the program in the sense that she knows enough about losing weight to know that the program is not the way to do it. But she was attracted to the program because of curiosity about how it affected people psychologically and whether or not participants kept the weight off after being on the show. She said she got “really hooked” on one series and was keen to know whether people kept the weight off after being on the show.

Discourses of the importance of self-help, self-discipline and the idea of people applying themselves were evident in some people’s comments about watching the transformation that contestants go through. A 31-year-old obese woman and occasional viewer framed some contestants need to lose weight in the terms provided by the program (i.e. medical necessity):

I guess it’s the fact that the people were helping themselves and they were achieving what they really needed to achieve. Some of them were in a lot of trouble medically and they were able to get themselves lighter. That was really good.

A 42-year-old morbidly obese woman who said she watched the program often also said she liked seeing the journey contestants took and described the transformation of contestants in terms of achieving fitness and a new relationship to food and eating:

The transformations, not how they lose it very fast, but to see people go from being unfit, like from not being able to do a push up to doing lots, to becoming fit. And see how their feelings about food change and the changes to how they eat.

Seeing contestants transform their bodies and achieve their goal of losing weight were aspects of the program that some people said they liked and were the reasons they watched it. Some people said they liked witnessing the change in the mood and demeanour of contestants after losing weight. A 29-year-old woman who said she watched the program regularly commented on how much happier contestants seemed at the end of the program compared to the beginning and that she liked that it showed fat people aren’t lazy:

They seem like different people, not just because of the weight loss but, I mean not just

because physically they look like different people, but because they took charge and made a really positive change in their lives and I think that's reflected quite well.

A 47-year-old obese woman and regular viewer who also said she “enjoyed watching the confidence that was built up in people” had a different reading of the way contestants were depicted. She said she disliked the humiliation that participants were put through and the inaccurate image that it gave of people who are overweight, such as that they are “gluttonous pigs”. This demonstrates the markedly different readings available to viewers.

As the above comments suggest, it is not just the weight loss that people liked to see but transformations in the way people feel about and present themselves (a transformation of the self or self image). There was a sense in which some people liked seeing participants achieve a sense of ‘enlightenment’, although this was tempered with a scepticism about the *you can do it too* way in which the program was framed when most people would be unable to replicate its boot camp like circumstances. Others were more sceptical about the authenticity of the transformations shown in the program. One morbidly obese 53-year-old woman and occasional viewer commented on how the clothes that contestants wore seemed to improve as they lost weight. She said while she didn't really like the show she watched it to see who was eliminated and how much weight contestants lost and that she applied for one season but was glad she didn't go on it.

Some people were conflicted about the transformation aspect of the program. On the positive side people said it was good to see people improve their self-esteem, achieve their weight loss goal and a healthier lifestyle. On the other hand, there was a concern that it reinforced the idea that fat people must internalise the goal of losing weight and attributed a panacea-like status to it that was not justified. As A 52-year-old obese woman and infrequent viewer said:

I think its sad that we're focusing on elements like this is a big fat person and we're going oh this is a big fat person and we're going to change their life and that because they're a big fat person they're not worthy and we need to change their life.

Similarly, a 22-year-old morbidly obese woman and occasional viewer said she disliked the way in which contestants were treated as “big, disgusting blobs of fat” and said: “There seems

to be an underlying tone of once you lose this weight you'll be a real person". A 34 year-old morbidly obese woman and occasional viewer said she disliked the "absolute emphasis on weight loss" in the program as if to suggest that "everything is going to be wonderful for them" after they lose weight. She said there is more to life than losing weight. She said:

Like I said before, bring me back in 5 years and let's see whether they've stuck to it or not, because I just don't think, specially the way they do it is sustainable. It's just ridiculous. I mean how can you have a life and train for four or five hours a day as well.

Consistent with the perpetual question of whether the transformee can retain their "new way of being" (Wood & Skeggs, 2004, p. 206), several people were also sceptical about whether or not people could maintain their transformation outside of the artificial conditions of the program. Some suggested it would be good to have follow-up programs to see if people have managed to retain their new bodies and maintain the diet and exercise regimes they learned from the program.

Creating unreal expectations

By far the most common theme to emerge in people's responses to the program was that it was unrealistic, highly constructed and did not mesh with their own realities. These comments reflect broader debates about whether obesity should be treated as an individual or social problem. *The Biggest Loser* reinforces an individualistic frame by its artificiality and the way that it depends upon insulating people from the social/environmental conditions under which they ordinarily live their lives. The following comments are illustrative of this theme:

I mean you watch it and these people exercise constantly all day and they get a chef in there cooking and teaching them to prepare their meals, so that's a bit unreal, so I mean yeah if I had the money and could give up work and could spend all day exercising and I could look like that too, but it will never happen.

(42-year-old morbidly obese woman and occasional viewer)

I also think they are in, there were removed from the real life and therefore you know, it is not viable for anybody else. You know, nobody can really close himself in a

house, you know, with personal trainers and you know, say I don't want to live anymore, there is no work, there is no kids, there is no family and I am now doing that and that.

(44-year-old obese woman and infrequent viewer)

If someone was trying to lose weight along with The Biggest Loser, one of the biggest challenges that I found with that show even though I like that show was people lose it so fast its not possible to do it in real life if you are not on that particular show.

(32-year-old overweight male and occasional viewer)

There were several aspects of the program that participants described as being unrealistic including: the nature of the weight loss program and successes it depicted when compared with their own personal struggles with losing weight; the amount of exercise participants are made to do; the fact that it requires people isolating themselves from their normal day to day lives and responsibilities; the competition aspect of the program and the incentive of winning money for losing weight; and the fact that contestants have personal trainers and unlimited fresh food. For the majority of participants the unrealistic nature of the program was likely to constrain its potential to motivate or encourage people to live a healthy lifestyle. The following comments are typical:

It's encouraging but not realistic. I can't disappear for three months into a farm and be locked up and come out trim. That's not a reality for me.

(42-year-old obese man and regular viewer)

They are a good motivator but at the same time they are very unrealistic, like nobody can exercise that many hours everyday. You know nobody can be locked away from being in the outside world for that long.

(21-year-old morbidly obese woman and regular viewer)

I mean it's inspiring I'm sure but it seems unrealistic because when they're there they've got all trainers and everything and all the equipment they need for monitoring their diet and that just doesn't happen in real life unless you're rich.

(19-year-old obese woman and occasional viewer)

It's not normal and so people can't do that and don't see any point in trying.

(26-year-old obese man and occasional viewer)

There was also a sense in which people's perceptions of the program as being unrealistic contributed to an attitude of "I could do that if I was able to have that opportunity", as a 42 year-old obese woman and infrequent viewer said. A 58-year-old morbidly obese woman who said she never watched the program had nonetheless deemed enough from publicity surrounding it to be emotionally effected by it:

I think they play with people's emotions. I know they play with mine. I think, well why can't I do it, but then I realise I'm not living in a house with so many other people and being put through the regime that they are and not having personal trainers.

There was also a perception among some participants that the program was constrained by the need to be selective about the types of contestants to include in the program, which was seen as further evidence of the programs lack of authenticity. A 55-year-old morbidly obese man commented on its strict selection process in that it only includes people who are able to be "flogged along physically". An occasional viewer, he said the program provided a false perspective on how to handle obesity.

On the issue of reinforcing false and unrealistic expectations a 29-year-old morbidly obese woman and occasional viewer said the fact that so many contestants put on weight after leaving the program "maintains the theory that, well they could do it if they just tried harder, when in fact they couldn't because our society is set up against them" (eg. full time sedentary job and worrying about the mortgage). She also said that by selecting people who eat bad food and never do any exercise the program reinforces the myth that people are fat because they are lazy. This reading of the program highlights its potential to create unrealistic expectations about weight loss, not just for those wishing to lose weight but also for other viewers of the program. Similarly, a 40-year-old morbidly obese woman who had to watch the program for study purposes said she disliked the way in which the program presents the idea that people need to engage in the extreme kinds of exercise if they are to lose weight, which they suggest is actually not the case.

These unrealistic aspects of the program were seen as having the potential to pressure people into having unrealistic expectations about their own weight loss leading to a sense of failure as a result of not being able to achieve the same kind of weight loss as depicted in the show. This was closely related to people's comments about the program not recognising the realities of people's lives and the constraints and barriers to their ability to lose weight.

Reinforcing misconceptions and exploiting people

Another theme to emerge in people's comments, which was closely related to its lack of realism, was that the program reinforces misconceptions and exploits contestants. A 37 year-old morbidly obese woman and regular viewer suggested that it gave the impression that obese people are abnormal "and that unless you lose weight you're not accepted in society". She said it stigmatises people by feeding views such as "well they can do it why can't you sort of thing". A 37-year-old morbidly obese woman who said she watched the program once every two or three weeks described it as "morally repugnant" and said she watched it from her perspective as a "fat activist". She referred to "its cultural impact of sneering at fat people, and this idea that extreme intervention is required in order to obtain acceptability". A couple of people interpreted the program's title as a way of poking fun at overweight people.

A 48-year-old morbidly obese woman and occasional viewer was critical of the program and the way in which it ridiculed and played mind games with contestants:

This is one I watched, the day before they joined *The Biggest Loser*, they put them into a hall full of food, as if that's the last thing they want to do before they go into the house like they might want to spend a day with their family before they go into the house. They just automatically assume that it's food that they want to gorge on.

A 29-year-old morbidly obese woman who said she had seen a couple of episodes said she hated the program and that it reinforced misconceptions about people who are fat:

So pretty much it just reinforces the fact that people are fat because they are lazy, and they've specifically chosen people that eat crap and never do any exercise, to go on their program because of course, they're the people that are going to lose the most

weight when they start eating healthily and exercising a lot.

She suggested that the program doesn't say anything about the medical conditions that are causing obesity and criticised the diet police aspect of the program and the way in which contestants are treated like children. She said there was an attitude that if you're overweight you belong to everybody and that everybody has a right to tell you what they think of you. Similarly, a 54-year-old obese male who had only seen a little of the program said:

There's still some sort of patronising thing about them and I think just continues the idea about fat people are fat and ugly and no hoppers and losers and things like this which is not nice if you're a fat person.

This person also touched on the authenticity as well as the artificiality of the program in commenting on seeing people achieve. He said he liked to see people who he felt were happy with their own efforts but did not like the "false congratulations of presenters".

For some, *The Biggest Loser* was seen as a forum for ridiculing and laughing at obese people. For this reason a 79-year-old morbidly obese woman who had seen the program a few times said it "should be wiped off the TV". A 39-year-old morbidly obese woman who had seen parts of the program said it compounds the idea that obese people are a joke by, for example, putting women in crop tops and bike shorts "basically for the country's amusement". A 38-year-old obese woman and regular viewer suggested that contestants were humiliated by being made to wear tight bike shorts and crop tops. A 36 year-old morbidly obese woman and religious viewer of the program said her reactions to it changed from day to day depending on what was being shown. For example, she suggested there was an exploitative aspect in the show that fed into subliminal messages of fat people being terrible – eg. "have a go at the fatty making the floor move and all of those things".

A 46 year-old morbidly obese woman who expressed concern about the news media generally focusing only on the calorie in versus calorie out explanation for overweight and obesity, carried this over to their response to *The Biggest Loser*. She said putting all the food out at the beginning of the show to show what people have been eating suggests that "everyone is overweight because they eat a whole pile of cream cakes and crap all the time". She said after

seeing a couple of episodes she now doesn't go near it. A 35-year-old obese woman who watched the first season said she liked the sensationalist value of the program which she described as "wow these people are changing before our eyes". But she didn't like the way in which people were demonised and depicted as lacking will power:

As it was all about lack of control, and especially the scene where they're put in with all that crappy food and then photographed in that really voyeuristic way of them eating all the food. It was just kind of like porn, it was scary.

Discussion

The Biggest Loser is one example of the burgeoning reality television or makeover television genre in which ordinary individuals are "urged to escape their 'lack' through the cultural self-knowledge imparted by television's expert mediators (Francis Bonner 2003), the new cultural intermediaries of self" (Wood & Skeggs, 2004, p. 206). Weight loss is the explicit focus of *The Biggest Loser*, which means that the obese body is discursively constituted as the devalued object in need of discipline. Nonetheless, for participants in our study this did not translate into providing motivation for them to lose weight. While some people said the program could be a source of motivation for others to lose weight, this was constrained by its unrealistic nature.

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). 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. As one participant suggested *The Biggest Loser* is one example of the way in which it is considered acceptable for overweight people to be put on display and judged on the basis of their weight – the idea that they are the property of society from whom they are set apart as an aberration in need of intervention. In this sense the program can be seen as contributing to 'fat stigmatisation', which refers to the devaluing of people on the basis of excess body weight in conjunction with the glorification of the thin ideal (Himes & Thompson, 2007).

In the context of a media culture in which fat people are either invisible, or portrayed eating fast food, or in a derogatory fashion, some participants in our study said they liked that *The Biggest Loser* provides the opportunity to see fat people exercising. Unlike the ‘faceless fatties’ that dominate film footage used in news stories about overweight and obesity, viewers of *The Biggest Loser* see the whole person and are invited to gain some understanding of their experience. While it may not be a celebration of fatness, with weight loss being the aim of the show, it does offer an alternative image of overweight people to that of the lazy glutton; an image that has the potential to counter derogatory representations. On the other hand, the ‘spectacle’ of *The Biggest Loser* was for some enough for them to avoid watching it but it also reinforced their views about how obese people are devalued in society more broadly.

As suggested at the outset one of the aims of this paper is to build on the work of Sender and Sullivan and in order to do that we will compare some of our findings with theirs, making a note of any similarities and differences. In their study Sender and Sullivan (2008) found that viewers thought the program focused too much on exercise and not enough on diet. While this did not emerge as a major theme in our participants’ comments, some people did make similar observations. Several of our participants commented on the extremeness of the exercise regimes participants were put through. People could see the positives for the contestants but were less convinced about its potential to encourage people to live a healthy lifestyle or to challenge social perceptions about overweight and obesity. There was something of a disjuncture between people’s views in terms of the achievements of individual contestants on the program and their views about the broader discourses the program generates about overweight and obesity.

In contrast to Sender and Sullivan very few participants in our study said they had picked up information and advice from the program that they felt to be useful. In fact, several participants identified this as something that was absent from the program. This reflected a broader theme and the most common one to emerge in participant’s comments about *The Biggest Loser*, which was that it is unrealistic. The potential for *The Biggest Loser* to help people to live a healthy lifestyle was for many people very much constrained by the unrealistic and somewhat contrived nature of the program.

Comments about the unrealistic nature of the show were suggestive of what is absent from the program, which may relate to its imperatives to entertain and, therefore, favour certain narratives over others. There was a clash between the demands of the program to entertain and viewers' desires for more practical information and advice. For some people the artificial environment in which the program is set also manifested itself in what they suggested was a lack of practical advice given to audiences about how to cook their meals and how to balance the amount of food one has in relation to the amount of exercise they do in a day. Others suggested there was too much focus on the game and competition and not enough information about what people could do, permanent lifestyle change or emotional or psychological change on the program. The competition element of the program was read as evidence that it is not a serious attempt to help people lose weight or educate and encourage people to lose weight.

Consistent with Sender and Sullivan's finding some participants in our study made reference to how the demands of the program shaped the type of contestants it included. For example, some people commented on what they saw as the selectivity of people included on the show, such as choosing contestants on the basis of their potential to lose weight and to be able to engage in the kinds of exercise required. The suggestion was that this would exclude obese people who may have medical or health conditions that would put them at too much of a risk to be a contestant. This could be seen to further undermine any suggestions that the program provided a realistic representation of the lives of obese people and their struggles with losing weight. Selecting people for whom a significant change in diet would inevitably make a huge difference to their weight in conjunction with exercise was also mentioned as another way in which the program reinforces the notion that all obese people eat unhealthy foods.

As with Sender and Sullivan, representations of contestants' bodies during weigh-ins and challenges that they had to go through was a concern for some of our participants, in that it was seen as exploiting people. Similarly, participants' comments also reflected a clash between their own knowledge about the most healthy way to lose weight and the demands of television, with weekly weigh-ins a central aspect of the program and also one that appealed to several participants in our study. Many described being conflicted about this. It was common

for people to say they liked seeing the transformations even though they thought the weight loss on the show was too quick and were concerned about whether it was sustainable. It was also suggested that seeing contestants put weight back on after leaving the show could have the potential to make others feel even more disheartened about their own ability to do it. On the other hand, being able to relate to contestants and their experiences and to see them achieve what they set out to and become happy and healthy was also something that a number of people identified as what they liked about the program, which is something that Sender and Sullivan also found. This kind of talk often drew upon discourses of the importance of self-esteem.

Like Sender and Sullivan our study also found that audiences can distance themselves from humiliating representations and critique the instructions provided in the program, which presents something of challenge to concerns that makeover shows provide the opportunity to laugh at less fortunate people or that they train citizens in the rules of good behaviour. This ought not be overstated however, given that like Sender and Sullivan there was a sense in which our participants also endorsed the show's assumption that fat is a problem to be changed or disguised and that "fat bodies manifest a crisis of the inner self that the makeover can solve" (p. 579). This was perhaps less pronounced than in Sender and Sullivan's study due to the fact that all of our participants were themselves obese or morbidly obese and likely to be particularly sensitive and receptive to programs such as *The Biggest Loser*, in terms of what they like and dislike about it. But it was certainly evident in people's favourable response to people achieving weight loss.

Conclusion

The Biggest Loser caters to and reproduces dominant cultural understandings and assumptions about the negative and undesirable status of overweight and obesity as well as reaffirming a cultural logic that it is a condition that people should strive to discipline back to 'normal' or within the bounds of 'normality'. The overweight and obese contestants who participate in the show are complicit in a process in which viewers are invited to watch the 'fat' body slim down, with the help of personal trainers and dieticians. Viewers are invited to observe, to be a spectator, as people discipline their bodies back within the boundaries of social acceptability and 'visibility' to be seen on television. Many obese viewers themselves are reflexive about their own participation and complicity in this process, while other obese people avoid watching the program altogether. Very few in our study actually challenged its underlying assumption about the importance of weight loss but many challenged the way in which it was done.

In concluding, we want to address some of the possible implications of this research in the context of health communication. To our knowledge this is one of the few studies to have investigated the views of overweight and obese people about how they are depicted in the media and, specifically, what they think about *The Biggest Loser*. As we have said, people in our study were also asked questions about news media portrayals and a recent communication campaign linking obesity to health problems. In our view it is important to recognise that people do not read media in compartmentalised ways but in a general sense. People's views, for example, about how obesity is reported in the news media provide an important context for their readings of programs like *The Biggest Loser*. For some people, the program confirms and mimics the kind of negative and derogatory imagery they associate with news coverage, while for others it provides an important counterpoint to this kind of coverage by showing the weight loss struggles and successes of previously obese people, albeit in the context of an unrealistic environment that they themselves would not be able to replicate.

It is important that obese people's readings of *The Biggest Loser* are included in the literature in this area and inform our understanding of its role and meanings, and this study represents an attempt to do this. On the basis of other data obtained from our interviews with obese people

about their experience of being obese it has emerged that many of them, especially those who are morbidly obese, may have got to a point with their weight that a program such as *The Biggest Loser* is unlikely to have the effect of making them take up techniques of self-discipline with the aim of losing weight. For this group, the disciplinary thesis is not easily applied and other explanations are required if we are to understand what they see and find in the program. Moreover, for those who see nothing positive in the program their reasons for doing so are not for the most part grounded in what they identify as its self-disciplinary imperatives or even its celebration of weight loss but, rather, their concerns about specific aspects of the program, such as its potential to create unrealistic, even dangerous, expectations and to contribute to obesophobia.

References

- Boero, N. (2007). All the news that's fat to print: The American "obesity epidemic" and the media. *Qualitative Sociology*, 30 (1), 41-60.
- 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.
- Christenson, P. & Ivancin, M. (2006). *The "reality" of health: Reality television and the public health*. A Discussion paper prepared for the Kaiser Family Foundation.
- Crossley, N. (2004). Fat is a sociological issue: obesity rates in late modern, 'body-conscious' societies. *Social Theory & Health*, 2 (3), 222-253.
- Evans, J., Rich, E. & Davies, B. (2004). The emperor's new clothes: fat, thin, and overweight: The social fabrication of risk and ill health. *Journal of Teaching in Physical Education*, 23 (4), 372-391.
- Gard, M. & Wright, J. (2005). *The obesity epidemic: Science, morality and ideology*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Greenberg, B. S., Eastin, M., Hofschire, L., Lachlan, K. & Brownell, K. D. (2003). Portrayals of overweight and obese individuals on commercial television. *American Journal of Public Health*, 93(8), 1342-1348.
- Herndon, A. M. (2005). Collateral damage from friendly fire?: Race, nation, class and the "War against obesity". *Social Semiotics*, 15 (2), 127-141.
- Heyes, C. J. (2007). Cosmetic surgery and the televisual makeover: A Foucauldian feminist reading. *Feminist Media Studies*, 7(1), 17-32.
- Himes, S. M. & Thompson, J.K. (2007). Fat stigmatization in television shows and movies: A

content analysis. *Obesity*, 15(3), 712-718.

Kim, S. & Willis, L. A. (2007). Talking about obesity: News framing of who is responsible for causing and fixing the problem. *Journal of Health Communication*, 12 (4), 359-376.

Lawrence, R. G. (2004). Framing obesity: The evolution of news discourse on a public health issue. *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 9 (3), 56-75.

Lewis, B. E. (2006). *Moving Beyond Prozac, DSM, and the New Psychiatry: The Birth of Postpsychiatry*. Michigan: University of Michigan Press.

Lewis, T. (2008). Changing rooms, biggest losers and backyard blitzes: A history of makeover television in the United Kingdom, United States and Australia. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 22(4), 447-458.

Monaghan, L. (2005). Discussion piece: A critical take on the obesity debate. *Social Theory & Health*, 3 (4), 302-314.

Monaghan, L. F. (2007). Body Mass Index, masculinities and moral worth: men's critical understandings of 'appropriate' weight-for-height. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 29(4), 584-609.

Murray, S. (2008). Pathologizing "fatness": Medical authority and popular culture. *Sociology of Sport Journal*, 25, 7-21.

O'Hara, L. (2006). Australian bodies to become biggest in the world within next ten years. *Health at Every Size*, 19 (4), 235-247.

Ouellette, L. & Hay, J. (2008). Makeover television, governmentality and the good citizen. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 22(4), 471-484.

- Pilgrim, D. & Bentall, R. (1999). The medicalisation of misery: A critical realist analysis of the concept of depression. *Journal of Mental Health*, 8(3), 261-274.
- Rich, E. & Evans, J. (2005). 'Fat ethics' – The obesity discourse and body politics. *Social Theory & Health*, 3 (4), 341-358.
- Rogge, M. M. (2004). Obesity, stigma, and civilised oppression. *Advances in Nursing Science*, 27(4), 301-315.
- Roy, S. C., Faulkner, G. & Finlay, S. (2007). Fit to print: A natural history of obesity research in the Canadian news media. *Canadian Journal of Communication*, 32 (3/4), 575-594.
- 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.
- Sandberg, H. (2007). A matter of looks: The framing of obesity in four Swedish daily newspapers. *Communications*, 32 (4), 447-472.
- Sender, K. & Sullivan, M. (2008). Epidemics of will, failures of self-esteem: Responding to fat bodies in *The Biggest Loser* and *What Not to Wear*. *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 22(4), 573-584.
- Silk, M. L. & Francombe, J. (2009). *The Biggest Loser: The Discursive Constitution of Fatness*. Proceedings of the Political Studies Association. Retrieved 19 October 2009 from <http://www.psa.ac.uk/Proceedings.aspx?JournalID=5&ParentID=3>
- Ussher, J. (2000). Women's madness: A material-discursive-intrapsychic approach. In D. Fee (Ed.), *Pathology and the Postmodern: Mental Illness as Discourse and Experience* (pp.

207-230. London: Sage.

Williams, S. J. (1999). Is anybody there? Critical realism, chronic illness and the disability debate. *Sociology of Health & Illness*, 21(6), 797-819.

Wood, H. & Skeggs, B. (2004). Notes on ethical scenarios of self on British reality TV. *Feminist Media Studies*, 4(2), 205-208.