

**Thinking Outside the Laboratory Box:
The Individualization, Surveillance, and Moralization
of Obesity within *The Biggest Loser***

A Thesis Submitted to the College of Graduate Studies and Research
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to better understand the ways in which scientific discourse contributes to the individualization and moralization of obesity, through reality television. Popular reality television programs emphasize the importance of lifestyle to health and wellness, often focusing on participant weight loss. Within this research, I describe the ways in which the obesity epidemic is approached in popular reality television, specifically in NBC's *The Biggest Loser*, and identify how the discourse of obesity is tied to issues of individualization, surveillance, and morality. Specifically, I undertake a laboratory study of *The Biggest Loser* to illustrate how this methodology can be extended from the traditional laboratory into a space of science that has no formal walls. With a focus on the seventh season of *The Biggest Loser*, I argue that the program is based on a human experiment that illustrates the interconnectedness of science and society, while perpetuating individualized and moralized obesity discourse. By conducting a laboratory study of a popular television program, I offer a new way to address obesity discourse.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 The Problem with Obesity

The purpose of this study is to better understand the ways in which scientific discourse, through popular reality television programming, contributes to the individualization and moralization of obesity. Specifically, in this research I describe the ways in which the obesity epidemic is approached in *The Biggest Loser*, and how the discourse of obesity is tied to issues of individualization, surveillance, and morality. To do this, I describe and analyze the reality television program from the theoretical and methodological framework of science studies and laboratory studies as its own laboratory space. *The Biggest Loser* laboratory space, much like other spaces, is concerned with the creation and perpetuation of fact-making.

This research begins with a description of what has come to be currently known as the ‘obesity epidemic’. The obesity epidemic is heavily tied to constructions of morality and ideology, maintained through scientific discourses. Following this, I outline science and laboratory studies, and how *The Biggest Loser* can be defined and studied as a laboratory. I then outline the specific parallels between a traditional laboratory experiment, and that which happens on *The Biggest Loser*. After arguing that *The Biggest Loser* can be identified as a laboratory space, I analyze the program by discussing how it undertakes the creation of scientific fact through the individualization and surveillance of obesity.

For Michael Gard and Jan Wright (2005), obesity reflects a social construction or ideology about the way individuals should look and behave. Gard and Wright argue that Western culture’s current discourse regarding the obesity epidemic has “more to do with preconceived moral ideological beliefs about fatness than a sober assessment of existing evidence” (2005, 3). Gard and Wright argue that the scientific and perhaps genetic construction of disease is erroneous, with disease being dependent on social and cultural evolutions (2005). This definition of the obesity epidemic de-emphasizes medical conceptions of obesity while still recognizing the role of science in obesity discourse.

Gard and Wright suggest that scientific discourse has infiltrated the social concern about obesity, shaping the issue as a very important problem of epidemic and disease, rather than the

simple issue of being ‘fat’. They suggest that it is *exactly* the discursive connection to scientism, or science as an ideology, that confirms the obesity epidemic. The further reduction of individual fatness to ‘lifestyle choices’ and discipline further entrenches the issue of fatness and obesity as an individual problem that is connected to questions of morality and surveillance. Individuals become increasingly blamed for their problematic lifestyle choices, which are re-entrenched in scientific discourse.

One way to unravel these claims and better understand the role of scientific discourse in social consciousness is to study popular media. What is the role of science in framing obesity in popular culture? How do scientific discourses emerge in the popular media and what do they look like? How does scientific fact get made into a television show? Moreover, what are the potential implications of this? In this regard, Gard and Wright (2005) recognize that the scientific knowledge within Western culture regarding obesity is misleading, as measuring an individual’s weight does not create an understanding of how the individual came to gain that weight. Obesity science is based on the assumption that the body operates as a machine that can be quantified and is understood as being universal throughout the human species (Gard & Wright, 2005). This conception of obesity favours the medical and physical over the social reality of the body.

One main concern in the obesity epidemic is the way in which scientific discourses infiltrate the popular consciousness to re-affirm the belief that individuals are to blame. Individualization is the concept that individuals have responsibility for their own health and happiness and for the construction of their own lives. Individualization is a product of social change in a society dependent on science and modern convenience (Beck, 1992). Gard and Wright indicate that what “scientists say about overweight and obesity is important because the public picks up pieces of scientific information... and incorporates them into their existing beliefs about the world” (2005, 9). Sociologist Deborah Lupton suggests that this individualization creates a lifestyle ‘package’ that “privileges the self as a continuing project that requires constant work and attention” (2002, 112). This obesity framework creates a situation in which individuals are blamed for “letting themselves go” (Gard & Wright, 2005, 161). Gard and Wright argue the scientific discourse that creates this individualization is bolstered by moral judgements “about the kinds of health practices that individuals engage in, that they have put themselves at risk, and furthermore, they are a cost to the nation that could be prevented” (2005,

181). This infiltration of scientific discourse in public consciousness is perpetuated by these ideologies and beliefs about individual responsibility.

As discussed, the scientific discourse of the obesity epidemic individualizes obesity. This creates the concern that the ‘obesity epidemic’, though seemingly objective and value-neutral, is potentially connected to questions of morality. Lupton suggests that “control over diet for the sake of one’s health and appearance has led to a morally-laden victim-blaming discourse” (2005). Individuals are not only blamed for their physical appearance, but their health as well. Moralization can be defined as the process of placing judgment on an individual, based on sinful behaviour. J. Cogan and P. Ernsberger suggest that this morality is associated with food choice and stems from the notion that people can change their weight at will (1999). Cressida Heyes writes that “[f]or many in the overdeveloped world it is an accepted truth that we are almost all too fat and that losing weight will ... have positive health consequences” (2006). Gard and Wright refer to this belief as a “misreading of the evidence about human body size” that “reinforces our cultural prejudices about the sinfulness of being fat” (2005, 106). If losing weight means a healthier life, why do people stay fat?

Gard and Wright understand the morality attached to body weight as connected to the medical labels associated with obesity. The morality associated with obesity is intertwined with scientific fact making. As obesity became linked to the risk of chronic diseases, the individualization of obesity grew along with the surrounding moral judgments (Gard & Wright, 2005). This individualization comes from the assumption that individual health practices lead to obesity, which will then create disease. Individuals who are unable to manage their own health come under the gaze of surveillance by health care professionals (Gard & Wright, 2005). These professionals take control away from the individual by ‘treating’ obesity through medical interventions. This creates the link between science, morality, individualization, and surveillance.

Again, one way to better understand how these discourses work is to study popular media and the way in which they integrate the ideologies of science to explain the obesity epidemic. How do scientific discourses continue (or discontinue) to perpetuate the problems of individualization and morality? What are the broader risks of these discourses? What role does scientific ideology, as understood through popular culture, play in the discursive construction of the obesity epidemic? To understand the role of the popular media in Western culture, I turn to

media studies. I will briefly address the field of media studies in the following section, as it relates to Western culture and obesity, but I will also discuss media studies more substantively within Chapter Two.

Douglas Kellner is an influential theorist in the field of media studies, and argues that the “media provide[s] access to and construct[s] social problems for large numbers of audiences throughout the world” (Kellner, 2001, 1). The media is often blamed for promoting social problems, such as sexism and violence (Kellner, 2001). Claire McInerny et al. state that “the media reflect and report on the pulse of the public – the common knowledge of the day and the controversies and concerns of everyday people” (2004, 443). A discourse analysis of the media illustrates “which representations of the social world predominate” (Matheson, 2005, 1). In the current climate of weight control and active lifestyle movements, many media sources report on the obesity epidemic or choose to air reality weight loss programs as a way to reflect the interests and concerns of the public.

An analysis of reality television looks for “the norms which are being enforced by people’s performance before the surveillance of the camera and by their confession to the camera” (Matheson, 2005, 107). Author Tania Lewis also argues the important role that the media plays in Western culture, specifically drawing attention to reality television and the lifestyle genre. Lifestyle television programs are those that focus on self-improvement and the transformation of lives through lifestyle changes, weight loss, and makeovers. Lewis maintains that health care is becoming an individual responsibility, but is becoming such in “a way that seamlessly connects health issues to other forms of consumption in the realm of lifestyle” (2006, 522). These forms of consumption range from foods and products to diet plans and lifestyle television programs. Most obesity-based programs on television are part of this lifestyle television genre.

This project examines the role of obesity in television, as a useful reflection of the interests of Western culture with the ability to both entertain and inform. Television has an important role in both reporting on the issue of obesity and perpetuating its conception as a disease and problematic state of being. This happens through the promotion of lifestyle television as instructive and educational. Author Johnny Williams contends that consumers are “inclined to view reality television programs as socially engaging, informative, authentic, and artistic rather than sensationalist and exploitative” (2006, 549). Audiences come to view lifestyle and reality

television as being educational and produced as public service (Williams, 2006). Programs such as *The Biggest Loser* not only entertain, but provide knowledge about weight loss and engage with scientific obesity discourse.

1.1.1 The Body, the Medical, and the Moral

A basic theoretical understanding of the body and morality can be garnered from the sociology of the body. Within this field, the body is defined as not only an environment, but also a “medium of the self” (Turner, 2008, 40). Individuals not only *have* bodies, they *are* their bodies as well; thus, the body is not only physical but a reflection of self. Individual bodies are then regulated according to the interest of the population (Turner, 2008). In terms of the sociology of the body, the body has always been linked to morality but the way this morality has been governed has changed over time.

Bryan Turner outlines how morality has evolved in Western thought, with the body having once been governed by religion (2008). People were thought to be “morally responsible for the diseases which invaded them”, and at the same time were responsible “to God for the stewardship of their bodies” (Turner, 2008, 182). Morality and health were both maintained by following religious norms.

Traditionally, the body was considered a site of irrationality, “being a threat to personal stability and social order” (Turner, 2008). This irrationality is historically linked to sexuality. In the eighteenth century, discussion on the body was based around the immorality of sexual deviance (Turner, 2008). The mismanagement of the body was linked to illness and death. In turn, the management of the “individual body had a close relationship to the government of the social body; both required discipline, order, and morality” (Turner, 2008, 185). Health was thought to be dependent on body management, and illness the result of improper lifestyle choices (Turner, 2008).

Turner argues that, over history, the body has undergone a process of secularization, “which has transferred the body from an arena of sacred forces to the mundane reality of diet, cosmetics, exercise and preventative medicine” (2008, 182). This reality became part of the rationalization of the body. As organized religion declined, moral ideology entered the realm of medicine (Turner, 2008). Although the sociology of the body recognizes the body as being

linked to morality, the source of this morality has changed. As I argue throughout this research, the moralization of the body is now linked to obesity and the scientific fact-making that takes place around obesity science.

The obesity epidemic has received considerable attention from current sociologists (see: Austin; Boero; Murray; Vaz and Bruno) beyond the sociology of the body. Many sociological issues are related to the reality of being obese as well as the medical and moral components of obesity. Obesity is a unique phenomenon as it is not only a social issue but is also framed as an individual concern (Boero, 2006 42). Within society is some discussion of the social, economic, and geographic influences on obesity, but it is a state of being that is still largely blamed on the lifestyle choice of the individual (Yeary et al., 2006). Obesity is conceptualized as a problem because of the *other* associated health risks (WHO, 2010; Gard & Wright, 2005) and, more abstractly, because it is non-normative and does not reflect Western body ideals that privilege thin and athletic individuals.

By itself, obesity is simply an affront to visual ideals and outside of society's beauty norm. A small body size is valued and privileged in Western culture, as thin individuals are assumed to be in good health and are visually appealing (Jutel, 2008). However, obesity itself does not kill individuals; rather, it increases the risk of other health problems (such as diabetes, high blood pressure, and heart disease) that are hidden from the public eye while body size and shape is not. This makes obesity problematic in two separate but interconnected ways: it is the precursor and cause of poor health, disease, and even death *and* it is visually insulting to health, beauty, and fitness ideals held by Western society (see: WHO, Health Canada, Jutel, Murray).

The medicalization of obesity is well addressed in the sociological literature (see: Jutel; Change & Christakis; Murray). Within this literature, being obese is more than a medical issue despite the medical conception of obesity comprising the main element of current obesity discourse in Western society. Beyond a medical disease and visual affront, many sociologists recognize obesity as a state of being that is often associated with indulgence and inappropriate lifestyle choices (Gard & Wright, 2005). This state of being is not only discouraged but is now legitimized as a serious disease by the government and public health authorities (see: Health Canada, WHO). This therefore makes obesity a very 'social' disease that signifies numerous social issues.

Paulo Vaz and Fernanda Bruno comment that “obesity is a curious disease. In itself it is not necessarily accompanied by the subjective feeling of being sick; in fact, eating is a potent source of pleasure” (2003, 280). Unlike other diseases, obesity does not automatically equate to feeling ill. In fact, as Vaz and Bruno suggest, eating is often a pleasurable experience that stimulates the senses. The pleasure of eating becomes an issue when it is combined with self-surveillance and a perceived lack of self-control. This perception of obesity leads the public to both moral and social conclusions about obese individuals and the lifestyles they lead.

1.1.2 The Social Issue of Obesity, Surveillance, and Moralization

While at the heart of this project is the relationship of science to society and how this is illustrated through the discourse of obesity and *The Biggest Loser*, I also wish to follow the example of Turner, and authors Gard & Wright, and consider how the science/society relationship perpetuates the moral conception of obesity in Western culture. Specifically, I am addressing the moral conceptions in the media that exist within Western culture, which is predominantly comprised of white, working class individuals. Obesity is a state of being that is problematic beyond the health concerns, as there are also many social implications of being obese in Western society (see: Gard & Wright, Jutel, Lupton, Murray).

The moral discourse surrounding obesity within Western society is widely believed, as evidenced through television programs, such as *The Biggest Loser*, that ascribe morality and immorality to participants. An emphasis on the obesity ‘epidemic’ has created a society where food choices have become inextricably linked to morality. The academic literature instead suggests that obesity is more complex and the result of not only overeating but genetics, geography, and socioeconomic status (Peralta, 2003). However, obesity discourse is victim-blaming, placing blame on individual autonomy.

The morality of obesity is also discussed by S. Austin, who more specifically relates the way in which the moral conception of obesity is related to food choice and lifestyle. Austin states that “once dietary fat became widely villainized, it took on all the moral turpitude already assigned to body fat” (1999, 254). Choosing to eat high fat foods is constructed as morally

inappropriate, as the individual who does so is knowingly putting themselves at risk of negative health consequences.

1.1.3 What's in a Name?

One of the greatest reflections of morality on *The Biggest Loser* is the name of the program itself. On *The Biggest Loser*, obese individuals are brought to a special ranch to participate in a weight loss competition. The title is meant to reflect that the winner of the reality program, who collects a monetary prize, is the person who loses the most amount of weight. At the same time, the title is a play on words with the word 'loser' having obvious connotations beyond those of losing weight. 'Loser' is a childish word that is not commonly considered positive, instead being reminiscent of school yard taunts. Being a loser is being 'less' than someone else. The use of such a term in the program title leads viewers to make assumptions about the content of the show and people cast in it. By naming the program "*The Biggest Loser*", a moral commentary is being made regarding the participants on the program.

This moral interpretation is, however, secondary to the creation of scientific fact. *The Biggest Loser* tests the hypothesis that the obesity epidemic can be controlled through individual change. While the title ascribes the idea of morality to the participants, it also reflects the experimentation happening on the program. This allusion to science is most noticeable within *The Biggest Loser* logo, which is very simple and consists of the title in block lettering and cinched in around the middle by a measuring tape. The presence of the measuring tape is an obvious illustration of the science associated with weight loss and, at the same time, it clearly represents what the program is about. In essence, the program is about 'big losers' tightening their belts. This is achieved through measurable scientific interventions.

1.2 The Social Context of Obesity

Having discussed the apparent individualized, moral, and scientific beliefs about obesity within Western culture, it is also important to note the social context in which this research is being conducted. Obesity discourse has been changing rapidly within recent years. Within the

past few decades, attention has been drawn to both the medicalization of obesity and the problem of labelling it as a medical disease (see: Chang and Christakis; Germov and Williams; Wray and Deery). Attention has also been given to the BMI index, the genetic risk factors of obesity, and its treatment through exercise and nutrition. Obesity research continues to evolve, questioning the validity of the basic facts about obesity that we hold to be true.

The medicalization of diet is largely due to the conception of the body as a machine, a popular position in medical science (Turner, 1982). In this conception, the body is a system of 'parts' that join together to form a larger mechanism. The parts of the body must be maintained for the machine to continue running. This conception of the body has driven much of the science about obesity and continues to do so, with weight loss programs (such as Weight Watchers) breaking down weight loss into very small, defined measurements and steps. Lupton argues that food is then a fundamental substance, as it ensures the well-being of the machine (2005). However, not all foods are equal. The conception of the body as a machine, and foods as 'good' or 'bad', orients food as simply a fuel for the body (Lupton, 2005) and eliminates any social and emotional factors that influence food choice. Therefore, nutritional science now plays a very influential role in Western society.

In recent years, nutritional science has made it possible to know with greater precision the composition of food stuffs (Lupton, 2005). Both the US and Canadian governments have made inclusion of nutritional information on packaged foods mandatory (Health Canada, 2006). These labels guide individual food choices and act as a warning system, suggesting that eating too much of the product may be unhealthy. In this respect, nutritional labels function much like the mandatory warning labels on packages of cigarettes and help to promote a culture of surveillance. Such labels allow individuals to closely monitor their caloric and nutritional intake, which is an accepted and expected part of everyday life. Public health care promoters consider the counting of fat and calories to be, at most, an inconvenience (Austin, 1999), and this has become a marketing tool used by the food industry.

The marketing of health is evident in the grocery store where numerous products are flagged and labelled with their individual health benefits. These special labels make the products appear to be healthier and better choices than alternative brands. The colourful labels draw consumers to the package and, in turn, the health benefits that the package proclaims influence the individual's decision to commit to the product. Jane Dixon and Cathy Banwell discuss this

relationship, stating that “the nutritional qualities or health benefits of particular foods or commodities [are] an important ingredient in the fight for competitive advantage” (2004, 123). This ingredient has become almost as important as the components of the product itself.

As obesity science (science concerned with the ‘treatment’ of obesity) continues to evolve, new strands of thought are appearing. Some researchers now believe that individuals can become addicted to food, which presents a very challenging problem as one cannot simply stop eating (Davis, Carter, 2009; Taylor et al., 2010). This argument understands “compulsive overeating [as]... similar to conventional substance dependence” (Davis, Carter, 2009, 327). Researchers in this field argue that therapies “traditionally applied to the area of addiction may be helpful in managing weight problems” (Taylor et al., 2010, 1). This field of thought also suggests that the genetic modification of whole foods may be beneficial in the treatment of obesity, as a way of designing foods that are more nutritionally rewarding (Taylor et al., 2010).

Western culture has now discovered that the long-term effects of being obese are unclear and that ‘treating’ obesity may not be as straightforward as once thought. As such, obesity continues to be a feared state of being due to its uncertain nature and associated risks. This risk continues to drive (and is driven by) obesity science, and is largely what makes obesity a popular topic within science, media, and Western thought.

1.2.1 Risk

The concept of risk can largely be found within the work of Ulrich Beck, who began writing on risk and risk society in the 1980’s. According to Beck (1992), risk is created through the application of scientific processes before the *testing* of these processes. Science is produced and applied on such large scale that studying and estimating its effects is impractical. In this sense, society becomes the experiment as adequately mimicking the affects of some sciences within the laboratory is impossible (Beck, 2009). For example, no one knows what impact thousands of factories will have on the environment unless thousands of factories are functioning within the environment; however, simply due to scale considerations this cannot be accurately replicated in the laboratory.

The relationship of science to society causes risk. Lupton and John Tulloch write extensively on risk and its relationship to the body. Again, Lupton argues that current health discourse positions individuals as being responsible for their body size, and demands that individuals monitor and regulate themselves to manage risk. Lupton and Tulloch comment that “the avoidance of risk is strongly associated with the ideal of the ‘civilised’ body, an increasing desire to take control over one’s life, to rationalise and regulate the self and body, [and] to avoid the vicissitudes of fate” (2002, 113). As the consequences of the sciences and technologies functioning within society become known, interventions must be produced to combat any negative consequences that are revealed. Society is always ‘at risk’ and risk societies are constantly ‘behind’, managing via intervention as opposed to prevention of any negative consequences.

Ulrich Beck developed the concept of risk society as a way to address the climate of fear in which Western society lives. Risk is when an “exceptional condition threatens to become the norm” (Luckhurst, 2007, 60). Beck defines risk society as being one that always anticipates catastrophe (Beck, 2009). This impending catastrophe must be taken seriously by society to avoid the event but, at the same time, no one is certain this catastrophe will actually take place (Beck, 2009). Risk society embraces the worst case scenario and works to keep this scenario from becoming reality.

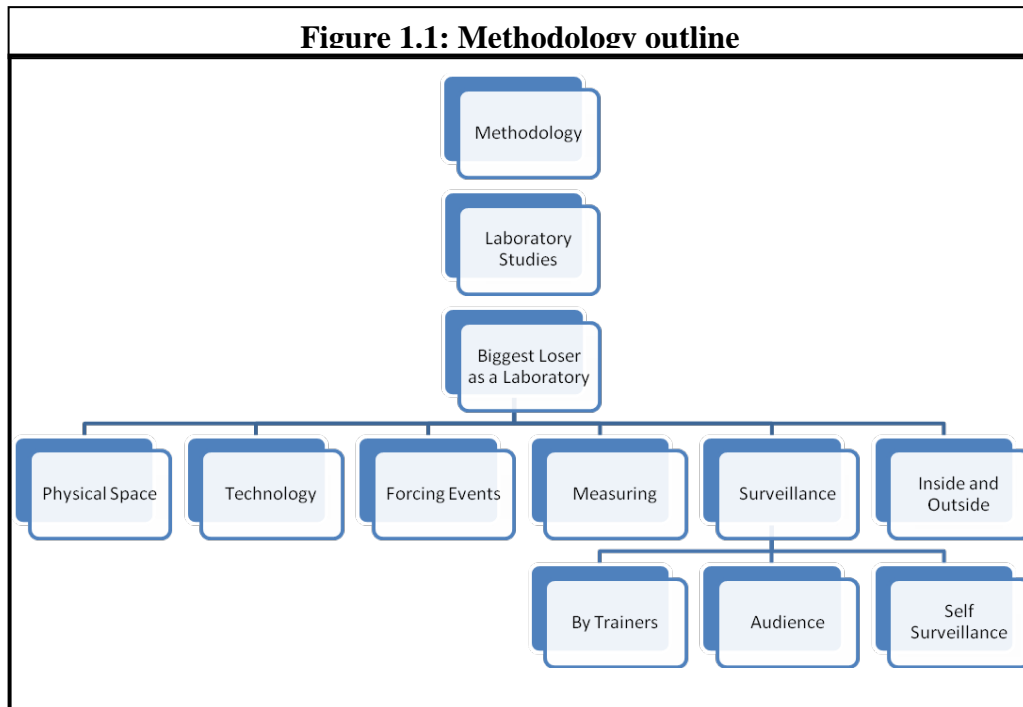
Science has an important role in society, as it causes risk. Each element of science that reaches the general public brings some risk to society. Many of these risks are small and can be accurately assessed in the laboratory, while others cannot be predicted or studied. Beck suggests that the better the science, the more consequences it will create (2009, podcast). Science creates risk society, as it has become so powerful that we can no longer predict what it will do or control those effects (Beck, 2009, podcast). The effect of introducing test tube babies into society cannot be known until those babies enter society. In this case, society becomes the laboratory. A more contemporary example is the H1N1 epidemic. In this case, the H1N1 flu is revealed and treated as a global ‘epidemic’ and a new immunization (Arepanrix) is developed and released for public protection against the flu virus. However, the risks of the immunization are unknown and many individuals and groups ‘take their chances’ preferring the risk of side-effects over H1N1. While the implications of the immunization will not be known until data are collected on reported side-effects, the ways in which society is a laboratory space open for human experimentation are

evident. Where scientific and technological interventions are typical, and risk is a dominant narrative in the social world, the easy transition between the laboratory and society—or experimentation both inside and outside in the social world—is evident.

Obesity is constructed as a catastrophic scenario, but other less dramatic effects of obesity profoundly impact individuals. These can include anything from weight-related teasing to being unable to comfortably sit at a movie theatre. Alone, these events are not catastrophic but are signs of the bigger risk. Beck argues that risk society makes daily life both tragic and paradoxical (2009, podcast). Individuals lead tragic lives, as alone they are powerless to stop catastrophe. At the same time, their lives are paradoxical as they are reliant on experts to solve problems that the experts created in the first place. An interconnection of science and society allowed the innovations that allocate us a steady food supply while changing the way in which we relate to food. Individuals continue to turn to experts for the special knowledge required to successfully lose weight and adopt a healthier lifestyle.

An understanding of risk is necessary to truly understand the problem of obesity within Western society. Obesity is an unusual disease as everyone is at risk. On a regular basis, individuals manipulate their bodies by modifying their caloric intake and engaging with nutritional science. Individuals also engage with the technologies and equipment related to exercising and with television programs, such as *The Biggest Loser*, that serve to inform and educate the individual in weight loss and self-control. By doing this, individuals are engaging with science and technology in an attempt to avoid the risk associated with obesity. Gard and Wright suggest that the obesity epidemic is “a modern-day story of sloth and gluttony”, with Western culture not having the “self-discipline or moral fibre to resist” (2005, 6). As previously discussed, this morality is inextricably linked to risk and the science of the obesity epidemic. It is society’s tendency to both fear the unknown and predict catastrophe that makes this project timely and necessary.

1.3 Research Outline



One of the most intriguing and predominant examples of popular culture around obesity and its epidemic is the popular show, *The Biggest Loser*. Throughout this project I analyze the ways in which *The Biggest Loser*, with its emphasis on obesity, can be used to represent the interconnectedness of science and society while also considering the how this perpetuates an individualized and moralized conception of obesity. Specifically, I undertake a laboratory study of this popular media program to illustrate how this methodology can be extended from the traditional laboratory into a space of science that has no formal walls. Figure 1.1 outlines this methodology. In Chapter Two, I begin by addressing laboratory studies and then how *The Biggest Loser* can be defined as a laboratory. To do this, I focus on six aspects of the laboratory that are outlined in Figure 1.1. The rationale, methodology, and method will be discussed in depth in Chapters Two and Three.

Also in Chapter Three, I introduce the parallels between traditional laboratory science and that found within *The Biggest Loser*. I also begin the analysis of *The Biggest Loser* and discuss the specific laboratory processes and practices that become part of the human experimentation happening on the program. Specifically, I address the individualization of obesity on the program and the surveillance used to monitor the participants and their progression through the experiment. This analysis is undertaken using concepts of the laboratory

and laboratory studies as defined by Bruno Latour and Karin Knorr-Cetina, as applied to specific examples in the television program.

Following the analysis of *The Biggest Loser* as a laboratory site, in Chapter Four I outline and discuss the way in which *The Biggest Loser* perpetuates the moralization of obesity that exists in Western society. Again, this is done through the use of specific examples from the program as they relate to the individualization of the participants, the participants ability to progress through the experiment using self-motivation and discipline, and how the social body is represented on the program.

To conclude, Chapter Five presents the reader with an overview of the concepts and arguments made throughout this project, drawing conclusions in relation to the research questions and the subsequent analysis chapters. Finally, I suggest further topics of study that are derived from this project.

1.4 Research Questions

In this study, I explore three research questions. These questions are designed to address the way in which obesity discourses are approached within social media and popular culture, how scientific fact gets made into a popular television program, and how the extension of a laboratory framework can be used to address social media, such as reality television programs.

The research questions are as follows:

- 1) How do scientific discourses of obesity emerge in Western popular culture? How does scientific fact about medicalized obesity emerge and become re-constructed on reality television programming?
- 2) How can social media be analyzed within the framework of a laboratory? How does popular culture create a laboratory through reality television?
- 3) What evidence is there of the individualization, moralization, and surveillance of obesity within social media, and what are the potential implications of these social processes?

This study explores the obesity epidemic as it relates to popular culture and social media. While one could chose to study government and industry policy related to obesity and healthy living, I

limit my analysis to the intersection of science and society found within popular culture. This concentration of science aids in the construction and perpetuation of the obesity epidemic.

Chapter 2: Theory and Methodology

One way to understand how scientific ideologies unfold in the popular culture is to apply a science studies framework to analyze popular media. More specifically, to better understand scientific discourse is to recognize popular culture as a laboratory. Beck and Latour argue that despite the collective discursive binary between laboratories and society, our society, as understood through all kinds of media, reflects the values of a laboratory.

To answer my research questions, I will use the popular television program *The Biggest Loser* to represent reality lifestyle television. On *The Biggest Loser*, a number of participants undergo a type of human experimentation wherein they are trained and tested using the mantra ‘eat healthy and exercise’. *The Biggest Loser* is an elimination-based game show, but both the trainers and contestants comment that it is about more than money and that the focus of everyone on the program is on getting ‘well’. As such, the game aspect of the show is secondary to the physical and lifestyle transformations the participants undergo. These transformations happen in a very specific manner, following a very strict set of guidelines. In this chapter, I address the manner in which participants become ‘Biggest Losers’, as I argue that this happens through the extension of laboratory practices.

2.1 Social Studies of Science and Laboratory Studies

“We use a model of analysis that respects the very boundary between micro and macro scale, between inside and outside, that sciences are designed to not respect” – Latour (1998)

In this research, I draw primarily on the idea that if we see culture in laboratories and beyond through ethnographic laboratory studies, we can see, describe, and analyze laboratories in cultural spaces. In general, social studies of science is a field of study that attempts to “show how social factors enter into decisions about what scientific knowledge gets produced” (Hess, 1997, 101). Beginning in the 1970’s, scholars of science began to open up the “black box” of

scientific inquiry and see the scientific laboratory as a site of study (see Latour; Knorr-Cetina). While much of the previous work dealt with ethnographic studies of laboratories and their networks (see Latour), their main theoretical contributions, particularly to this work, are the interstices between the idea of laboratory experiments and spaces and the messy cultural world. Laboratory studies is a method of science studies that developed from Bruno Latour's and Steven Woolgar's conviction that science is "a body of practices widely regarded by outsiders as well organised, logical, and coherent, [which] in fact consists of a disordered array of observations with which scientists struggle to produce order" (1979, 36). Latour and Woolgar (1979) contend that the process of science and creation of scientific fact is not straightforward, and that the sociology of science needs to address how scientific fact is created.

Latour indicates that scientific fact is a driving force behind social change, but there seems to be little understanding about the ways scientific knowledge is actually produced, as opposed to revealed, by objective scientific inquiry. This misconception of the scientific process has placed science on a pedestal, where it is unquestioned and unreachable. Latour argues that the "sciences are one of the most convincing tools to persuade others of who they are and what they should want" (1998, 259). This idea of science creates social, economic, and political interests through its cultural inclinations to objectivity, rationality, value-neutrality, and progress. To create interest, science reframes cultural phenomena as problematic and improvable.

Latour (1998) also suggests that laboratories are neither micro nor macro, as their very design transcends these divisions. A laboratory is not isolated from nature, as it brings nature inside for manipulation. At the same time, the laboratory functions as a part of society, blurring the line between nature and society. As Latour attests, society is a mixed history of people and microbes (2009). Beck attests that the future of society depends on overcoming this false dichotomy of culture and nature (2009). Without laboratories, society would not have vaccines, trusted medicines, fertilizers, or even safe foods. In turn, these societal advances change nature.

Science studies attempt to remove science from the pedestal and examine it as a part of society. Woolgar and Latour contend that "rather than making scientific activity more understandable, social scientists have tended through their use of highly specialised concepts to portray science as a world apart" (Latour & Woolgar, 1979, 17). When studying science and laboratories, "we use a model of analysis that respects the very boundary between micro- and macro-scale, between inside and outside, that sciences are designed to not respect" (Latour,

1998, 265). Sciences are not developed for the laboratory alone; they are used in the laboratory but their reach extends beyond the laboratory walls and has real-world effects.

Latour (1998) illustrates the permeability of the laboratory by discussing the research of French scientist Pasteur on anthrax that influenced the world of microbiology. Pasteur took a small piece of nature, captured the interests of farmers, and used his knowledge of the anthrax microbe to change society. Latour comments that this is “not a small endeavour to transform society so as to include microbes and microbe-watchers in its very fabric” (Latour, 1998, 258). By moving his lab from Paris into the fields where anthrax was infecting cattle, Pasteur changed how a formal laboratory works and gained the interest of the farmers who were able to see how the scientist’s work could personally benefit them (Latour, 1998). The interest in Pasteur’s work developed when he displaced the laboratory and moved his project into the agricultural realm.

Laboratory studies take the social sciences beyond the study of empirical scientific practices, opening science to qualitative analysis. Laboratory studies are studies of science as it happens (Woolgar, 1982, 483). The direct observation of scientific events allows the analyst to record and describe the actual process of science more accurately than if the analyst was relying on second-hand data or retrospective interviews (Woolgar, 1982, 483). This method significantly changes the way in which social studies of science are approached, but is still somewhat limited. Laboratory studies are generally confined to physical laboratory spaces. Woolgar questions this limitation, commenting that “we have now reached the point where we can see how a sociology of laboratory practice can be done ... the question which then confronts us is whether we should remain satisfied with this. How can we move beyond this point?” (1982, 487). Woolgar credits laboratory studies for being the potential “stimulus for developing radically new directions in the social study of science” (1982, 493). If science and society are not separate, then other arenas exist in which scientific knowledge is being both used and created. To move laboratory studies forward as a method, sociologists must look beyond formal laboratories to consider other arenas of science.

2.1.1 Discourse analysis

Discourse analysis is a common qualitative methodology within sociology, and is often used in conjunction with laboratory studies as well as media studies. Broadly, discourse is understood as “a pattern of words, figures of speech, concepts, values and symbols” (Lupton, 2003, 20). Specifically, a “discourse is something which produces something else” (Mills, 1997, 17); it is the productive use of language. As a method, discourse analysis is not limited to the study of written texts and is often used in the study of images and visual media. In laboratory studies, discourse analysis is used in conjunction with ethnography, which is an analysis of science ‘as it happens’, and occurs when a researcher becomes part of the culture which they are studying (Woolgar, 1982). The researcher becomes a ‘participant’ in the study, immersing themselves in the culture of the laboratory and performing an analysis of the discourse used in the laboratory setting.

Foucault believes that we not only use language but are used by it as well. The way that we speak about a subject affects the way we understand the subject and the surrounding social processes as well as determines the content and structure of future conversations/understandings of the topic. Foucault argues that “we should not study texts as documents that are *about* something else but as discourse that is *part* of a network of relations of power and identity” (Matheson, 2005, 9). Language is not a neutral tool, but is determined by social context. These ‘discourses’ are the groupings of statements that produce a phenomenon. It is through the use of language that a subject comes to have meaning; however, a subject does not only come into meaning through the use of discourse, it is also determined through what is *not* included in the surrounding discourse.

A discourse becomes dominant by subjugating and marginalizing competing discourse. This is done in a variety of ways, and for a number of reasons, although it is not a specific goal of an individual subject but a product of power. Author Sara Mills (1997) comments on a Foucauldian understanding of discourse, suggesting that:

Foucault is not interested in which discourse is a true or accurate representation of the ‘real’ ... rather he is concerned with the mechanics whereby one becomes produced as the dominant discourse, which is supported by institutional funding, by the provision of buildings and staff, by the state, and by the respect of the population as a whole (19).

While discourse can be studied in many ways, my concern is with the dominant discourse of the obesity epidemic and how this can be studied through discourse analysis. Obesity, until even recent decades, was not discussed in relation to health risks and was not a part of health discourse. However, obesity is now often discussed in relation to ‘epidemics’, ‘disease’, and ‘risk’, all terms with health and illness connotations. A discourse analysis of obesity looks for these health and illness connotations.

The term ‘discourse analysis’ has a number of definitions that vary depending on disciplinary strands of thought. Linguistic and psychosocial scholars tend to study discourse as a series of statements, tending to word choice, sentence structure, and transitions. Within the social sciences, ‘discourse analysis’ is commonly used “to signal that language is being situated within these wider frameworks on the nature of thought, experiences and society” (Matheson, 2005, 2). Foucault’s interest was not specific statements, but the way in which statements “coalesce into discourses or discursive formations and take some of their force from such groupings” (Mills, 1997, 62). Language cannot be separated from its social context; the relationship between discourse and society is dialectical, with one constituting the other. This organization creates and reinforces power relations as well as helps to develop knowledge of the phenomenon being spoken about. Foucault refers to this organization and positioning as discursive practices.

Power is a recurring theme, and Foucault’s understanding of power is an important concept when considering discourse and discourse analysis. From a Foucauldian perspective, ‘power’ is the relationship between people and knowledge (Markula & Pringle, 2006). It is not a hierarchal force that is enacted on people from the top down. Instead, “power is dispersed throughout social relations” constructing behaviour (Mills, 1997, 20).

Central to Foucault’s “conception of power is that it cannot be located; it is everywhere and therefore also inside us” (Vaz & Bruno, 2003, 273). Power is always exercised with a specific objective or aim, but this is not specified on an individual level, or by the state and social institutions (Markula & Pringle, 2006). Although ideology and belief are thought to propagate power, Foucault argues that power is primarily transmitted “through practices that are self-validating” (Chambers, 2007, 27). Foucault does not prescribe to a value laden notion of power. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault argues that “power and knowledge imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge” (1979,

27). Power and knowledge are joined together in discourse, and this creates power as a productive force.

Foucault's understanding of power informs discourse analysis. For my study, I recognize discourse as extending beyond written texts and not necessarily bound by sentence structure (Mills, 1997, 131), as messages can be communicated through visual means as well. Applying this concept of power to a reality television framework, power is not created through the viewing of private lives but is deployed based on the "ideas and statements that shape that viewing" (Matheson, 2005, 107). Donald Matheson argues that a discourse analysis of the media allows us to "analys[e] what kinds of interactions media texts set up between people and the world and between the powerful and the rest. And it analyses how meanings are made differently in different media texts" (2005, 1). The media represents the values, thoughts, and concerns of the social world.

Discourse is understood as language in use, and to discuss discourse is to talk about its power to shape society and culture (Matheson, 2005, 178). The Frankfurt school were among the first to see the media as a powerful influence in the world. Specifically,

[i]n their view, the media stand in the center of leisure activity, are important agents of socialization, mediators of political reality, and should thus be seen as major institutions of contemporary societies with a variety of economic, political, cultural and social effects (Kellner, 2001, 2).

Matheson suggests that "discourse analysis's strength [is that] it allows us to study media discourse in ways that shows the media's connection to other parts of social and cultural life" (2005, 2). Fiction or reality, comedy or drama, the media reflects the concerns and beliefs of the social world. This belief drives the design of this study.

2.1.2 Reality Television as a Laboratory Space

My research offers a new way to employ laboratory studies by using reality television as a laboratory site. I am using the theoretical writings of science studies theorists Knorr-Cetina, Latour, and Beck to show that the binary between the laboratory and society is blurred and that

society plays a role in a social laboratory. More specifically, I draw upon Knorr-Cetina's understanding of the laboratory site as unrestrained by the nature of objects, and Latour's argument that there are no closed systems of knowledge, to contend that *The Biggest Loser* can be defined as a laboratory site. In the following section, I begin outlining Knorr-Cetina's understanding of the laboratory and epistemic culture.

The advantage of laboratory science is that the laboratory does not have to adhere to the rules of the field; it can manipulate objects to suit the needs of the experiment. Knorr-Cetina states that "laboratory practice entails the detachment of objects from their natural environment and their installation in a new phenomenal field defined by social agents" (1999, 27). Knorr-Cetina (1999) notes three aspects of an object that laboratories do not have to accommodate. The laboratory:

- need not "put up with an object *as it is*, it can substitute transformed and partial versions" (Knorr-Cetina, 1999, 27).
- does not need to "accommodate the natural object *where it is*, anchored in a natural environment; laboratory sciences bring objects 'home' and manipulate them on their own terms, in their own laboratory" (Knorr-Cetina, 1999, 27).
- need not "accommodate an event *when it happens*; it can dispense with natural cycles of occurrence and make events happen frequently enough for continuous study" (Knorr-Cetina, 1999, 27).

The laboratory is not limited by the natural object, nor does it need to consider a 'whole' object. The laboratory can change the location of the object of inquiry, and it can force events to study the actions and reactions of the object in question. Reality weight loss programming has much in common with the laboratory. The relationship of these concepts to *The Biggest Loser* will be revisited in explicit detail when I discuss the parallels between *The Biggest Loser* and a laboratory as outlined in Figure 1.1.

The Biggest Loser represents a concentration of scientific activity and human experimentation and, in many ways, follows the same format and layout as a traditional laboratory experiment. Knorr-Cetina's concepts can also be broadly applied through reality weight loss programming. The premise of reality weight-based programming is to take an object and transform it. This transformation only focuses on one aspect of the object and does not

happen in the object's natural setting. A reality weight loss program is focused first and foremost on the individual's weight, and the other aspects of an individual's identity are secondary to the experiment. Much like a formal laboratory, *The Biggest Loser* has both a contained physical space and real life applications. The manipulation of bodies on *The Biggest Loser* mimics that which happens in the laboratory where scientists take an object from its natural setting, recreate it, and offer society an improved version of that object.

Latour maintains that closed systems of knowledge no longer exist, as does Roger Luckhurst who argues that the divisions between science, culture, and economy have blurred so it is impossible to separate the different spheres (2007). This combining of spheres creates the leaching of science into entertainment programming. Although interaction between the natural and social worlds is ever present, the laboratory is a space where this interaction is concentrated. Knorr-Cetina comments that this "'enhanced' environment 'improves upon' natural orders in relation to social orders" (1999, 26). This improvement of the 'natural' body in relation to 'social' ideals is certainly evident within *The Biggest Loser*.

Reality weight loss shows, such as *The Biggest Loser*, are continuously experimenting on human bodies through a process of manipulating the time, space, and physicality of an object (see Knorr Cetina). A reality television program has no formal walls, but does offer distinct boundaries in regards to what can, or cannot, happen within the premise of the show. The program is limited by budget, crew, participants, creative vision, and societal interests. In this way, the research is still done in a 'fixed' space; both the premise of the show and the experiment being performed do not change.

This research starts with the belief that laboratory-like experiments are taking place in the social context, and can be analyzed discursively to understand the way that principles of science permeate the social world and how they are an important part of risk society. Studying science 'as it happens' is thought to offer a more accurate, less distorted picture of science than one dependent upon the recall of actors removed from the scene (Woolgar, 1982, 484). Latour and Woolgar argue that the "fact that scientists often change the manner and content of their statements when talking to outsiders causes problems both for the outsiders reconstruction of scientific events and for an appreciation of how science is done" (1979, 28). Laboratory studies are meant to be ethnographic depictions of science as it happens, not accounts of science muddled by retrospective analysis.

2.2 Research Design

For this research, I employ a laboratory study based on the science studies framework as laid out by Latour, Knorr-Cetina, and Woolgar. I undertake a discourse analysis of the seventh season of *The Biggest Loser*. The program is analyzed for statements, phrases, metaphors, and imagery that create a conception of human experimentation happening in the laboratory and produce evidence of the individualization, moralization, and surveillance of obesity.

The Biggest Loser is aired on the NBC Universal network, beginning on January 6th, 2009, with new episodes airing every week until the live season finale broadcast on May 12th, 2009. The season was comprised of nineteen episodes, each two hours in length, for a total of thirty-eight hours of broadcast material (television commercials airing during this time are not included in the data). Each episode was watched as it aired on the NBC network and field notes taken. From these notes, I developed a general understanding of the themes and concepts regarding obesity that were present in the program. Once the season was completed, I began watching it again as a whole, looking for overarching themes that had been harder to conceptualize when watching the season episode by episode. At this time, I looked for specific images, comments, and discussions that created the perception of obesity on the program and illustrated my conception of *The Biggest Loser* as a laboratory.

Each episode of *The Biggest Loser* was digitally recorded for referencing purposes and to ensure quotations could be transcribed verbatim. Quotations used within this research featured prominently on the program and are not obscure, offhand comments made between participants. Instead, the chosen quotations were either spoken directly to the camera or were used on the program to mark a significant event.

2.2.1 The Biggest Loser as a Source of Data

Before choosing to focus extensively on *The Biggest Loser*, I considered a number of reality weight loss television programs. I developed a set of field notes for several programs—*The Biggest Loser*, *Bulging Brides*, *The Last 10 Pounds Bootcamp*, and *X-Weighted*—

representative of the weight loss genre of lifestyle programming. These programs focus on the weight loss of one individual who is supervised by a personal trainer and given a workout regime and diet plan. *The Biggest Loser* differs from the other programs in that it is based on teams of participants and on extreme weight loss. Participants on *The Last 10 Pounds Bootcamp*, *Bulging Brides*, and *X-Weighted* might lose ten pounds throughout the course of a show, while *The Biggest Loser* participants are expected to lose upwards of one hundred pounds over a longer period of time. The field notes taken from these programs aided my conceptualization of both the research questions and the role of weight loss reality television as a genre in Western society. The inclusion of all of these programs would have widened the research beyond the scope of this study.

The research was narrowed to address the discursive practices in *The Biggest Loser*, which airs on an easily accessible major United States television network. Of the four programs sampled, *The Biggest Loser* presented the participants' weight loss journey in the most depth. Moreover, *The Biggest Loser* has become a popular culture phenomenon, sparking the creation of numerous weight loss programs and an Australian based spin-off. The pervasive nature of *The Biggest Loser* makes it a valuable resource when considering the interconnectedness of science and society.

The Biggest Loser offers "severely overweight participants the opportunity to undergo radical physical makeover without any kind of surgery" (www.nbc.com, May 15th, 2009). This makeover is approached through extreme exercise and nutritional therapy. The series airs in over ninety countries, has five bestselling books associated with it, and has inspired a number of fitness DVDs, meal plans, weight-based video games, and lifestyle clubs (www.nbc.com). The show's ability to permeate an array of popular culture media suggests it is an important source in the dissemination of fitness and nutritional knowledge.

2.2.2 *The Biggest Loser as a Television Program*

The Biggest Loser is an elimination-based show that documents the weight loss of eleven individuals admitted to *The Biggest Loser* ranch. While on the ranch, participants are led in their weight loss journey by certified, and now famous, expert fitness trainers Jillian Michaels and

Bob Harper. Each week, viewers follow the participants for two hours through workouts, challenges, temptations, weigh-ins, and the inevitable elimination round. The two participants who have the least weight loss for the week are placed below a yellow line, and the remaining participants vote to decide who will leave the ranch; the entire process is repeated until only three individual remains and *The Biggest Loser* is crowned for the season. The winning individual receives \$250,000.

Instead of individual participants, the seventh season—*The Biggest Loser: Couples*—focused on teams of two participants who were admitted to the ranch together. This season was chosen because it was current at the time of the study and I could ensure access to every episode. Moreover, the focus on weight loss ‘couples’ adds complexity to the program as it presents more relationships to study; instead of the typical eleven participants, season seven followed the weight loss of twenty-two individuals. These couples had relationships that included husband/wife, best friends, cousins, and parent/child. A plot twist at the beginning of the season saw each couple forced to send one member home from the ranch to continue their weight loss journey away from *The Biggest Loser* facilities. The participants who remained on the show after thirty days were reunited with their partners to once again become a weight loss couple. During eliminations, these weight loss couples were treated as a single individual. They weighed-in together, with their individual weight losses combined to create a weight loss total. The couple with the lowest weight loss total fell below the yellow line, and the remaining participants voted (as couples) on which one member of the offending couple should be sent home. Half-way through the season, the couples were dissolved and two teams created.

Throughout the season, the couples were easily distinguishable by the colour of their clothing. Each couple was assigned a colour, which represented the team (e.g., Pink Team, Green Team) and provided easy call names for the participants, trainers, and audience at home. I will use these colour references as well as individual participant names when referring to specific couples within the analysis. Participant couples were then divided into teams based on selections of the two trainers (i.e., ‘Bob’s team’ and ‘Jillian’s team’). At the beginning of the season, the only difference in the teams was who they trained with, as the participants themselves were competing as couples. When the couples dissolved, these teams became more important as these participants then competed and were weighed-in together. The team with the least weight loss

would fall below the yellow line and was faced with a vote to select one of their teammates to be eliminated.

2.2.3 Biggest Losers as Objects of Experimentation

The participants are the objects of experimentation on *The Biggest Loser*. I focus on four participant teams extensively throughout this research: the Grey team, Green team, Pink team, and Brown team. The Grey team was comprised of Joelle and Carla, both middle-aged black women. The Grey team came to *The Biggest Loser* ranch as best friends. Joelle lived at home with her mother, while Carla was married (www.nbc.com). The Grey team was eliminated from *The Biggest Loser* very early in the program.

The Green team, Tara and Laura, were younger, blonde, white women in their late twenties. These women were close friends who met during their modelling careers. Laura had a university degree and lived alone; Tara also had a prestigious degree but lived at home with her mother (www.nbc.com). Tara eventually won second place in *The Biggest Loser* competition.

Mother and daughter, Helen and Shanon, formed the Pink team. Helen was a blonde woman just under fifty years old, and was a stay-at-home mother to her three children (www.nbc.com). Her daughter, Shannon, was a blonde woman in her late twenties. Helen and Shannon were part of an upper-working class family, with a large family home to return to after the program. Helen eventually won the competition, and became season seven's Biggest Loser.

The Brown team was comprised of a father, Ron, and his son, Mike. Ron was a middle-aged white man who spent most of his life close to five hundred pounds. Ron was able to retire early, at fifty-four years old (www.nbc.com). Mike was eighteen years old and college bound. Like Helen and Shannon, the Brown team came from an upper-working class family, with a large home and the ability to send their children to college. Mike and Ron finished third and fourth on the program, respectively.

2.3 The Biggest Loser as Laboratory

A crucial component to this research is envisioning the parallels between the tools, techniques, culture, events, surveillance, and physicality of a typical laboratory and the tools and techniques laden with scientific discourses that carry *The Biggest Loser* laboratory. Table 2.1 summarizes some of the broader conceptual comparisons I use in this thesis.

Table 2.1: CONCEPTUAL COMPARISONS	
LABORATORY	<i>THE BIGGEST LOSER</i>
The making of scientific fact	Objective measures of weight and moralizing participant behaviour
Facility	<i>The Biggest Loser</i> ranch
Objects of inquiry and experimentation	Participants
Scientists	Network of professionals e.g., producers, directors
Technology	Computers, filming equipment
Measuring equipment	Weight scales, kitchen scales
Safety equipment	e.g., Heart monitors, blood pressure machines
Laboratory technicians, experts	Trainers

In the following section, I will briefly outline some of the parallels between what is thought of as laboratory science and what is seen on *The Biggest Loser*. These themes include the physical space of *The Biggest Loser*, the technology, the ability to force events, measurement on the program, contamination, observation and surveillance, and the way science flows both inside and outside of *The Biggest Loser* walls. Before discussing these themes specifically, I address the culture of *The Biggest Loser* laboratory and define the objects of inquiry and the scientists as they exist within this laboratory site.

2.3.1 Culture of the Laboratory

Knorr-Cetina (2007) argues that science and laboratories have their own culture. The epistemic culture approach to science does not focus on the production of knowledge, but rather the “machineries of knowledge production” (Knorr-Cetina, 2007, 363). Instead of looking at what facts are being created, Knorr-Cetina is concerned with what creates facts. This approach to laboratory science “refers to those sets of practices, arrangements and mechanisms bound together by necessity, affinity, and historical coincidence which ... make up how we know what we know” (Knorr-Cetina, 2007, 363). The culture of the laboratory includes everything from the experts and objects of inquiry to the machinery and technology of the laboratory.

The culture of *The Biggest Loser* laboratory is defined by these practices and arrangements. On *The Biggest Loser*, severely obese individuals are brought to a ranch to learn about weight loss and focus solely on losing weight. While at the ranch, the participants live in the same house, work out at a ranch fitness facility, and take part in challenges and temptations, with the goal of losing weight and keeping themselves from being voted off the ranch.

On *The Biggest Loser*, the participants represent the objects of inquiry in a laboratory. The participants follow specific weight loss plans to see how much weight they can lose within the program’s timeframe. In this sense, emphasis is not necessarily on the creation of new scientific knowledge about obesity, but rather is on the individuals who come to *The Biggest Loser* ranch to take part in the weight loss experimentation. According to Knorr-Cetina, the ‘objects’ of scientific knowledge are the “doers in scientific research” (2007, 365). Objects “have powers, produce effects, [and] may have their own internal environments, mold perception, and shape the course of an experiment” (Knorr-Cetina, 2007, 365). As they have power, the objects of study have agency in the experiment; they are not simply subjected to the will of the experts.

For this analysis, I recognize the network of professionals involved with the making of *The Biggest Loser* as equivalent to the scientists in a formal laboratory. In a formal experiment, scientists are those with the understanding of the overarching experiment and the hypotheses. For *The Biggest Loser*, this role is filled by the directors and producers responsible for the creation and maintenance of the laboratory. The scientists are not necessarily the individuals involved

with the technical manipulation of objects, or the machinery of the experiment, but their vision is responsible for moving the experiment forward.

The science of weight loss originates in the laboratory, and weight loss is only achieved if the science is used in the same manner. The successful application of science is dependent on following a set of instructions as defined by the laboratory. Latour comments that “[s]cientific facts are like trains, they do not work off their rails. You can extend the rails and connect them, but you can’t drive a locomotive through a field” (1998, 266). For science to exist and thrive in society, it must be reproduced in the same way as in the laboratory. Individuals are required to respect a number of laboratory practices, including “disinfection, cleanliness, conservation... timing and recording”, if the questioned science is to be used successfully (Latour, 1998, 264). Such laboratory practices will be described in depth in the following section and will reappear within Chapters 3 and 4.

2.3.2 *Physical Space*

Laboratory sciences bring objects ‘home’ and manipulate them on their own terms, in their own laboratory – Knorr-Cetina (2007)

In *The Biggest Loser*, participants are confined to *The Biggest Loser* ranch, which functions as a physical laboratory space. The positioning of the objects of inquiry on *The Biggest Loser* is reflective of Knorr-Cetina’s argument that laboratories do not need to accommodate objects “where they are” (2007, 363). The participants are chosen as a sample of the obese population, representing different sexes, ages, and races, and are brought to the ranch as objects of the study and the show. On the ranch, participants manipulate their bodies through the guidance of experts in the field of weight loss, the use of technology, and the modification of diet. They are not allowed to contact the outside world but can win this privilege during challenges. The only other contact with the outside world happens when the scientific objects are sent home and tested to see how they function in a real world environment. This testing of the objects not only mimics laboratory practice but perpetuates the argument that laboratory walls are permeable and that science is actually a social experiment. Indeed, the ranch/laboratory does not need to ‘put up with’ the contestants where they are.

The Biggest Loser ranch functions as the laboratory space for the experimentation happening on the program and restricts the participants in the same way that a laboratory confines its experiment. This forced isolation is central to the success of the experiment, as the objects of inquiry are not contaminated by outside forces (as they do not have access) and can be easily monitored by the experts on the ranch. The ranch consists of a house where contestants live, a separate fitness facility filled with cardio and strength training equipment, a running track, and miles of walking trails. These facilities are used to varying degrees by the participants. The ranch is secluded, miles away from the nearest town, leaving participants little access to the outside world, including family, friends, work, shopping, and outside food sources. Isolating the objects of inquiry eliminates these variables from the experiment.

2.3.3 Technology

Like a laboratory, *The Biggest Loser* ranch is stocked with the technology and equipment used to run the experiments and manipulate the objects. *The Biggest Loser* gym houses enough cardio and strength training equipment to accommodate the simultaneous workout requirements of twenty-two individuals. The house is outfitted with state-of-the-art kitchens, where participants prepare meals, as well as computers, where they can track their meal plans, nutrient and caloric intake, and access weight loss information and programs. Cameras are also available in the house for participant testimonials in addition to other visual equipment used for the filming of the program. The participants *and* the program are dependent on this system of technology to aid weight loss, keep the show running smoothly, and, ultimately, determine the winner of the weight loss competition.

2.3.4 Forcing Events

The Biggest Loser has the same advantage as the laboratory in that it need not accommodate events as they happen. Much like a laboratory, the objects of inquiry are tested to gauge how they will respond to manufactured real world events. For example, in the real world, events such as family gatherings may impact the way in which an individual eats and may

encourage an individual to overindulge. *The Biggest Loser* is able to ‘test’ the reaction of the participants to these kinds of events by manufacturing a similar event on the program.

This type of testing happens in a number of ways within *The Biggest Loser*, but the temptation challenge is especially noteworthy. Temptation challenges come in many forms, but have the same theme; the participants are tempted to quit the game or cheat on their diet in exchange for the instant gratification of indulgence, a monetary gain, or an advantage at the next weigh-in. This gratification often comes in the form of over-indulging at a buffet. The temptation challenge mimics many real world events where individuals indulge in a manner that is considered unhealthy. For example, overeating is often associated with holidays and/or family events. While at the ranch, the participants do not participate in family events or celebrate holidays in a normal manner. However, the program forces these events using temptation challenges. These temptations test the participants and determine if they will be able to stay on their diets and exercise regimes when they return home. The temptations also test the attitude of the participants and determine their commitment to the game and the experiment. In this case, the experiment is mind over matter.

As well, the forcing of events on *The Biggest Loser* reminds us that the laboratory is not limited to taking objects as they are. *The Biggest Loser* forces weight loss by picking a specific group of individuals to take part, focusing its experimentation on a group of people who are obese but still fall within Western culture’s beauty ideal in some way. The participants on the program are beautiful, able-bodied individuals whose only visual ‘flaw’ is their weight. The participants also represent the higher socioeconomic classes within Western society. While the status of each participant is not known in detail, they all at least have a home to which they will return and have the fiscal ability to leave their homes, jobs, and families for the duration of the program. *The Biggest Loser* represents a relatively small subset of the human population, but suggests to millions of viewers every week that if they were to lose weight, they could look just as good as the individuals they see on television.

2.3.5 Measuring Equipment – Human and Machine Interaction

The Biggest Loser ranch also houses the equipment that is used each week to measure the weight loss of the participants and thus determine which participants are up for elimination. The

scales for the weigh-in are housed in a separate building where they are displayed on a stage in front of three large television screens. Staging the weigh-in in this manner not only emphasizes the accomplishments or failures of the participants, but also the importance of technology to the show. As a participant weighs in, the screens show their weight from last week, their current weight, and the percentage of body mass lost. The percentage of body mass lost is then shown in comparison to the other participants on a large screen. This metric determines which participants will be leaving the ranch and gives the participants, trainers, and viewers a measure of every participant's success or failure. The weigh-in is one way in which humans and machines interact on *The Biggest Loser*.

Knorr-Cetina (2007) indicates that both humans and machines have agency over the other in a laboratory setting. Humans use machines to conduct research, but are also used by them. On one hand, humans use the machines for their own benefit. The machines used are determined by the research being done, which also dictates who can use the equipment, when they use it, and how much attention needs to be paid to the experiment. On the other hand, the machines have agency over humans in that the machinery impacts work schedules, sleep and meal patterns, and time for family and activities. The machinery can dictate aspects of the researcher's life that are outside of the laboratory. In *The Biggest Loser*, both the objects and machinery have agency. The participants have agency over their own weight loss; although they are heavily pressured by the experts to maintain a workout routine and eat well, they still remain in control of their own lives and their own Biggest Loser experience. However, the Losers are also in a relationship with the machinery on *The Biggest Loser*. Indeed, they work together as a human/machine to ensure the proper functioning of the laboratory and the experiment. The participants exercise agency by deciding to participate in the show and use the machinery, but the show/experiment can only work if the humans comply with the inner workings of the tools.

2.3.6 Observation and Surveillance

The concepts of observation and surveillance are important to both laboratory science and the experimentation happening on *The Biggest Loser*. The benefit of confining participants to *The Biggest Loser* ranch is that they can be placed under constant surveillance, much like in a traditional laboratory. Laboratory science involves the careful monitoring of objects to determine

the effects of the scientific manipulation. Much like the object of an experiment, participants are filmed constantly and are monitored in a number of ways. The trainers are able to watch videos of the participants as a way to monitor behaviour. Participants who misuse gym equipment or cheat on diets are quickly caught, and the situation rectified through an extra, intense workout. The actions of the participants are also all on camera for a viewing audience who can tune in to judge their weekly accomplishments. Filming the participants creates a visual representation of their progress, both with respect to the change in their physical appearance and the beliefs they hold regarding obesity and weight loss. The theme of surveillance is one that consistently reappears throughout *The Biggest Loser* and drives much of the experimentation happening on the program. This concept will be further addressed in Chapter 3.

2.3.7 Contamination

Concern over possible contamination is a feature of laboratory science that is evident in the show. Confining *The Biggest Losers* to the ranch not only allows the same surveillance as a laboratory but also prevents ‘contamination’ of the experiments. The objects of inquiry are removed from their natural setting, which is full of factors that may influence body weight, and placed in an artificial reality as objects of study. This confinement also changes the participants, as they are not arriving to the ranch ‘as they are’; the participants exist as part of a social world, but their social reality is stripped away (in part) upon entering *The Biggest Loser*. The participants are isolated from their homes, families, and careers, and are brought to the ranch to focus exclusively on weight loss. *The Biggest Losers* are not allowed off the ranch unless they are participating in challenges or win the privilege. Containing the objects of inquiry keeps the experiment relatively uncontaminated by outside forces, allowing the laboratory to force events in a clean, emotionless manner.

As an example, one of the most important contaminating factors on *The Biggest Loser* is the temptation of unhealthy foods and overeating. Participants on the program often talk about their reliance on fast food as a quick affordable meal, but these foods are villainized on the program. Isolating the participants on the ranch removes their ability to eat convenience foods, which are not accessible or provided on the ranch. Instead, the participants are taught to make alternative meals that are nutritionally adequate for the extreme weight loss expected on the

program. Food choice is one of many variables that could influence the success of an experiment, thus necessitating control over the risk of contamination.

2.3.8 Inside and Outside the Laboratory Walls

It is also the practice in the laboratory to replicate inside its walls what is happening on the outside. Many formal laboratories throughout the world are undoubtedly working on the science of weight loss. *The Biggest Loser* is much the same, using what is already known about weight loss and adapting it to create extreme weight loss for its participants. This weight loss is approached through the formula of eating well and exercising. In turn, this formula mimics the healthy lifestyle trend we see in Western society. *The Biggest Loser* is meant to be both entertaining and educational, but this does not lessen its legitimacy as a laboratory. The practices of *The Biggest Loser* are scientific and formulaic, and the media emphasis allows the examination of the visual aspect of obesity and weight loss by the public.

The flow of science and objects inside and outside of the laboratory is important theoretically, as it represents both Latour's argument that the laboratory is a permeable space and Knorr-Cetina's conception of the laboratory as being able to force events. *The Biggest Loser* tests its participants by sending them home for predetermined lengths of time. The participants are still expected to work out and follow their diets while at home, as they will still be weighed-in upon return to the ranch. This testing moves the experiment outside of the laboratory, but keeps the practices of the laboratory present and at the forefront of the participant's lives. In this manner, *The Biggest Loser* is testing the participants by forcing the type of interactions that the participants will experience when they go home for the final time, while still keeping control over the objects and the experiment.

2.4 Summary

In this chapter, I outlined the methodology of laboratory studies and identified some ways in which *The Biggest Loser* program can be defined as a laboratory space. As I have shown

above, a number of parallels can be made between what is thought of as laboratory science and the experimentation happening on *The Biggest Loser*.

The comparison of *The Biggest Loser* to a laboratory is limited to some degree, as *The Biggest Loser* is foremost for entertainment purposes. Although *The Biggest Loser* is marketed as educational, it must appeal to a large audience to be profitable and is dependent on spectacle. I am only able to analyze what is aired to the public as many of the more mundane, everyday happenings on the ranch do not make it to air. These limitations are not enough to derail the study, since there is still adequate material to study and the project itself is timely and worthwhile. *The Biggest Loser* is based on Western culture's fear of obesity and the associated risks. In the following chapter, I will analyze *The Biggest Loser* laboratory in depth, expanding on the concept of surveillance as it is found within the obesity discourse promoted on the program.

Chapter 3: The Biggest Loser as a Laboratory and Surveillance

“What have you done today to make you feel proud?” – The Biggest Loser: Theme song
“You are in-between two lives; the unhappy unhealthy life that you used to lead, and the happier healthier life that awaits you” – Allison Sweeney (Host: The Biggest Loser Seasons 3- 9)

Previously, I suggested that social media presents a useful arena in which to study scientific obesity discourse through the framing of *The Biggest Loser* as a laboratory. Specifically, I used the theories and concepts of Knorr-Cetina and Latour to discuss the ways in which *The Biggest Loser* can be identified as a laboratory space where processes of human experimentation take place. In this chapter, I begin my analysis of *The Biggest Loser* while continuing to draw upon the concepts of the laboratory and identify how these concepts and scientific obesity discourse are reflected in social media. In particular, I draw on the parallels between laboratory science and *The Biggest Loser*, as outlined in Chapter Two. I focus primarily on the process of surveillance that reflects the laboratory of *The Biggest Loser*. This relationship of science, society, and surveillance within the program ultimately creates a moralized conception of obesity that will be addressed in Chapter 4. I begin below by addressing the

concept of surveillance as it appears within the sociological literature, followed by an analysis of how this, and the larger laboratory framework, are created and perpetuated on *The Biggest Loser*.

3.1 Concepts of Surveillance

One of the key aspects of laboratory science is that of surveillance. In the laboratory, objects of investigation are constantly and meticulously monitored to measure results and to ensure that the experiment is proceeding according to plans. This surveillance happens both inside the laboratory and during the testing of the object outside of the laboratory space.

The issue of surveillance is often addressed using Foucauldian concepts. Heyes suggests that food surveillance and weight loss programs are an extreme version of Foucault's panoptic gaze (2006). Heyes uses the example of Weight Watchers to discuss the surveillance of food, arguing that diet programs benefit from an individualized approach to health (2006). More broadly, Foucault argues that "constant surveillance creates a sub-culture where individuals, in continuous anticipation of being monitored and judged, turn their gaze onto themselves and self-monitor and self-discipline" (Tischner, Malson, 2008, 264). This concept of surveillance recognizes that the individual monitors and disciplines themselves in fear of being judged by others. Participants enter *The Biggest Loser* as a way to escape this "gaze of normalizing judgement" (Markula, Pringle, 2006).

Western public health discourse promotes the idea that constant surveillance and management of obesity is to be undertaken by the individual. Gard and Wright comment that individuals "come to discipline themselves, to regulate their behaviour so as not to offend social norms" (2005, 158). This is done through "the practices of monitoring the shape and weight of the body and attending to the balance of food in/energy expended in exercise" (2005, 158). Individuals who are unable to monitor themselves are deviating from social norms and are judged as behaving immorally. Individuals enter *The Biggest Loser* ranch after they fail to monitor themselves and are unable to lose weight and manage their obesity. While on the ranch, they learn to self-monitor while under the watchful eye of the experts.

As in Heyes' analysis of Weight Watchers, the concept of surveillance can be applied to *The Biggest Loser*. Every aspect of the participant's lives was broken down and analyzed

according to the benefit or detriment it may offer towards the goal of the weight loss. The processes of surveillance on the program stem from this manipulation of the participants and a need to monitor results. The surveillance on *The Biggest Loser* happens through self-surveillance, the use of technology, hidden cameras, and weigh-ins as well as by the trainers and the audience.

Arguably, the most important form of surveillance on the program was self-surveillance, which is often associated with the care of self (Vaz & Bruno, 2003). Vaz and Bruno define self-surveillance as “the attention one pays to one’s behaviour when facing the actuality or virtuality of an immediate or mediated observation by others whose opinions he or she deem relevant” (2003, 273). On *The Biggest Loser*, participants paid attention to their actions as they were being observed by their trainers, fellow teammates and contestants, and the audience. This constant surveillance is an ingrained part of the culture of *The Biggest Loser* laboratory.

While the self-surveillance of the objects may not be common in all laboratory settings, the human experimentation happening on *The Biggest Loser* is somewhat dependent on the ability of the participants to move the experiment forward. While the trainers—the laboratory technicians—had considerable control over the participants, the participants made the choice whether to follow their guidance or not. The participants were also responsible for the success of the experiment when the trainers were not present.

The second form of surveillance I discuss is that of the trainers. *The Biggest Loser* trainers provided the participants with the tools required to succeed, but their effectiveness was limited by the agency of the objects. There were very few instances on the program when the trainers were not present to guide the participants, although the trainers were obviously not on the ranch the entire time. Moreover, the trainers guided the experiment and actions of the participants even while absent. The trainers assigned the participants homework, impacted their dietary regimes, and influenced the elimination game. While these processes were predetermined for the participants, their success was dependent on their willingness to perform the experimental principles as laid out in the laboratory.

When the trainers were absent, the objects of inquiry had more of an opportunity to exercise their agency. This agency was illustrated in episode seven, when a unique challenge locked all but the Pink and Brown teams out of *The Biggest Loser* gym for the week. Locking participants out of the gym also divided the trainers as they spent their time working out with the

participants who did not have gym access, surmising that those in the gym would perform their normal fitness regimes. In this situation, the participants who had access to the gym were reliant on their ability to monitor themselves as they did not have access to their trainers or the opinions of the viewing audience. During this time, the Pink Team (Helen and Shanon) were filmed ‘playing’ in the gym. While they did work out, they did not do so in the way that would have pleased their trainer, Bob. Ultimately, Shanon and Helen reported below average weight loss at the weekly weigh-in. This event reaffirmed the participants’ belief in Bob’s workout regime.

The audience of *The Biggest Loser* is also a major surveillance force. As consumers of the television program, the viewing audience is responsible for the existence of the laboratory; *The Biggest Loser* exists because of Western culture’s preoccupation with the obesity epidemic. *The Biggest Loser* aims to entertain, educate, and give the population the knowledge (and hope) needed to prevent obesity. *The Biggest Loser* participants come to the program knowing that millions of viewers are watching their actions every week. Although they cannot see the audience, the expectation is that they are being watched and that people want to see them succeed.

3.1.1 Technologies

Much like a laboratory, *The Biggest Loser* provided the participants with a number of tools and technologies to perform the experimentation. The participants used different technologies to monitor their exercise and food intake. These tools ranged from gym and hospital equipment to measuring tools in the kitchen, and represented a spectrum of equipment ranging from highly advanced technologies to swing sets and wooden blocks. In this section, I discuss the technologies used in the process of human experimentation happening on *The Biggest Loser*.

One of the more technical tools used on the program is one that also represents the concept of self-surveillance, the Body Bug. This piece of technology was worn by the participants and measured their activity levels and heart rates during their workouts. At the end of the day, each participant attached the Body Bug to the computer, entered their meals for the day, and learned the number of calories they had burned. Participants could then use the

computer program to track their progress over time. This equipment allowed very technical and precise self-surveillance, and mimics the epistemic culture of laboratory science.

Other equipment (e.g., swing set, wooden blocks) was less technically advanced but still a large part of the experimentation happening on the ranch. These items were often used in challenges or when *The Biggest Loser* gym was made unavailable (as in episode 7) and represent a level of innovation on the show. They are also pieces of equipment that would be available to individuals who were trying to lose weight at home.

The promotion of nutritional science on *The Biggest Loser* also represents the interconnectedness of society and science. Nutrition is carefully monitored on *The Biggest Loser* as diet greatly impacts the success of the experiment. In most instances, the participants were directly responsible for their own caloric intake, although the trainers did recommend products and make nutritional and food choice recommendations. Participants were frequently seen weighing their portions and determining servings at the kitchen table using measuring cups.

The influence of nutritional science can be understood through the work of Latour, who stated that the “sciences are one of the most convincing tools to persuade others of who they are and what they should want” (1998, 259). Nutrition is a science that persuades people that a long life is indicative of a good life, and that people should be eating to promote health and not pleasure. Scientific nutrition emerged when the body began to be defined as a machine, whose inputs and outputs could be measured, quantified, and predicted (Austin, 1999). As such, the body could be controlled and shaped.

3.1.2 Weigh-ins

The use of technology on the program leads to, and is exemplified by, the weigh-in. A laboratory requires a way to mark the progress of an experiment. As an elimination-based game, *The Biggest Loser* requires a way to determine who will leave the game, and this is done by determining which individuals have lost the least weight at a weekly weigh-in. The two participants with the least amount of weight lost are up for elimination, and can be voted off by the remaining participants. Towards the end of the season, the weigh-in formula changed as the participants group into teams of five and the weight loss ‘couples’ were abolished. When the

teams were created, the individual weight loss totals were added together to determine team weight loss percentages. The person with the highest weight loss on the losing team received immunity for that week, while the rest of the team had an hour to decide which one of them would be going home.

The weekly weigh-in was one of the most overt forms of surveillance that happened on the show, and served two purposes: (1) determining who is up for elimination and (2) revealing to the trainers and audience who was working the hardest and who needed to work harder. As the season progressed, the weigh-ins became a way for the participants to measure the impact of switching trainers, and had a more important role in the game play aspect of the program. The weekly weigh-in provided a check point for the experiment and, in the end, marked the conclusion and final results of the program's experimentation as the person with the highest percentage of weight loss was crowned the winner, or '*The Biggest Loser*', for the season.

Although the weigh-in was a highly scientific aspect of the show, the program injected an air of morality into the event by emphasizing an individual's accomplishments as measured by simple weight loss (or failings by weight gain). *The Biggest Loser* weigh-in was presented as a huge event, and the show built suspense through the use of music and camera angles. The weigh-ins also happened at night, with the participants walking together in a line towards the weigh-in building. This segment was usually filmed in slow motion, giving the impression that something sinister was about to happen or that the participants were walking towards their doom. By filming the weigh-ins at night, an air of secrecy was created around the event, as if the participants and their weight loss were being veiled from the public. This filming technique also emphasized the individualism involved with obesity and weight loss, and recreated what millions of individuals feel when they lock themselves in the bathroom and step on the scale away from prying, judging eyes.

When the participants reached the weigh-in room, they lined up in two rows and separated themselves by teams, as defined by their trainers. The trainers stood together in the middle and acted as a divider between the teams. The participants were oriented so that they faced the stage that hosted the scales and weigh-in equipment. In the seventh season (couples edition), the stage hosted two scales so that couples could be weighed-in together. Behind each person was a screen with their individual numbers, including their starting weight, their weight at the weigh-in, and the number of pounds lost or gained. The level of detail during the weigh-in

heavily reflects more traditional laboratory science, where objects are measured and monitored in comparable increments.

Between the two individuals being weighed was a large screen that showed the total weight loss of the couple. Beyond the technology and the participants, the stage was empty. This crisp, clean look mimics the stark cleanliness of a laboratory. It also served to single out the participant being weighed, putting them on display for the trainers, teammates, and audience to see and reminding them of their weight.

The weigh-ins determined who was up for elimination but also allowed the trainers to assess the progress of the individuals in their care. The weigh-ins often led to dismay from the trainers and commentary for the camera. For example, after one disappointing weigh-in, Jillian replied sarcastically to a suggestion from the offending participant that she maybe had not lost weight but had gained muscle. Jillian commented that she “can’t stand the bull crap that goes on around weight loss. Trainers pull that crap all the time ... I love this one ‘you’ve lost inches’, even though the scale hasn’t moved” (S7E5). With this statement, Jillian is challenging common weight loss beliefs that are not rooted in scientific study as well as the dedication and determination of the participant. In this situation, the participant had not progressed in a manner that suited the experiment, and Jillian altered the weight loss regime accordingly. The weekly weigh-ins furthered the weight loss experiment and were part of the creation of ‘fact’ within the program. The weigh-ins quantified individual progress, allowing very different participants to be compared to each other to determine what weight loss techniques were, and were not, working.

3.2 Laboratory Culture as a Site of Surveillance

The culture of the laboratory is created through the interaction of all the people, objects, and technology in the laboratory, which all work together to keep the space functioning as an experiment on weight loss and individual fortitude (Knorr-Cetina, 1999). Although the laboratory is a highly technical and scientific space, it is not devoid of interaction or human emotion. Part of what makes *The Biggest Loser* resemble a laboratory is the culture on the program, which is very complex but at the same time very evident. Upon entering the ranch, the participants become part of the culture of *The Biggest Loser*. Participants leave their families and

friends behind and become part of a laboratory culture, interacting with the technicians of the laboratory, other objects of inquiry, and the machineries of knowledge. This culture is not specific to the show but is a standard part of laboratory science.

3.2.1 The Elimination Game

The culture of *The Biggest Loser* is directly impacted by its premise as an elimination game. Participants were brought to the ranch where they were pitted against each other as both individuals and teams in pursuit of both weight loss and the monetary prize. Those who lost the lowest percentage of body mass each week were up for elimination and could be voted off of the ranch. This automatically separated participants from each other, as everyone was portrayed as being primarily concerned with their own performance rather than the collective weight loss of the entire group. Although participants were in the weight loss program together, each participant was also there to compete for the prize money. Support was provided from team members and the trainers, but the game aspect kept the participants separate from each other.

The isolation of the participants on *The Biggest Loser* ranch kept the objects of experimentation from being contaminated by outside forces; however, *The Biggest Loser* participants also policed themselves while on the show. This policing maintained a level of separation between contestants but still mimicked real world events. While all the participants on *The Biggest Loser* were physically similar, not all were seen to be putting in the same effort in regards to weight loss; this was considered to be a great offence and was met by considerable judgement from the group. In the seventh season, one participant, Joelle, was isolated from the group due to a perceived lack of discipline. Joelle's trainer, Bob, showed considerable frustration with her, exclaiming that, "When I see Joelle not giving 100% that is unacceptable because, at this point, nine people are gone and Joelle wanted to be here. Then you know what? You better start acting like you want to be here Joelle" (Bob, 2009, S7E2). This sentiment was shared by teammates, who felt that Joelle came up with excuses as to why her workouts failed (Filipe, 2009 S7E2). This form of surveillance played itself out during eliminations, where couples generally based their decision on who to vote off based on who showed the least effort during the last

week's workout. This suggests that this morality became more important to the participants than the game, as game play would advocate that the strongest couples be voted off.

The elimination of participants from the ranch mimics laboratory practice in another way. In a laboratory setting, unsuccessful experiments are learned from and then eliminated. The objects of inquiry are subjected to (and subject themselves to) numerous processes, techniques, and materials in the pursuit of positive change. Those processes that do not work are not used in future experimentation, and objects of inquiry who are stagnating, have peaked, or that are not successfully navigating the experiment are removed.

3.3 Isolating Participants to Maximize Surveillance

Both Latour and Knorr-Cetina maintain that the benefit of the laboratory, in part, is that an object can be isolated and removed from the field, which means that the object can be controlled by the scientists and technicians and manipulated on their own terms. The laboratory is also able to reframe the issue; to solve their problem, the public must reach out to the laboratory (Latour, 1998). In Latour's discussion of French scientist Pasteur's work on the anthrax vaccine, he comments that Pasteur gained the interest of the public by reframing the issue. Instead of bringing the vaccine to the farmers, Pasteur created a scenario where the farmers must pass through *his* laboratory to solve *their* anthrax problem (Latour, 1998).

On *The Biggest Loser*, isolation is key not only to the game but to the experimentation that happens on the program and the subsequent argument that the program itself can be viewed as a laboratory space. Participants were isolated from their homes and moved to the ranch for the duration of the program. This isolation separated the participants from their everyday reality—from their family, friends, work, and the risk of contamination. It also removed them from any of the responsibilities they may have had, forcing them to focus on themselves and their weight loss goals. If the participants were not isolated, they would not have the same time to spend in the gym, and they may not have experienced the same level of focus and resolve when it comes to working out and resisting temptations.

In one episode, trainer Jillian emphasized this idea of contamination. During the episode, one of the contestants, Mandy, won a challenge and was rewarded by a twenty-four hour visit

with her husband at the ranch. Jillian admitted to the team that this horrified her, and she felt it was perhaps the worst thing that could happen to Mandy. When asked to explain, Jillian stated that:

In certain instances, spouses have this unspoken pact that's like 'Okay, you're going to be unhealthy and you're going to be overweight, and I'm going to love you anyway, and I'm not going to feel threatened that you're going to leave me and this is the agreement that we have' (2008, S7E6).

Jillian's suggestion that Mandy's spouse may not be supportive of her weight loss goals drew indignation from the participants, but as a 'doer of science' Jillian was protecting the experiment to which she had given so much of her time. Jillian feared that a lack of support from Mandy's husband would cause Mandy to reconsider her weight loss journey and make her experience feelings of guilt that could negatively affect her weight loss. Simply, Jillian was afraid that the object of the experiment would become contaminated and would ultimately fail.

The theme of contamination is an important factor in the argument that society *is* the experiment. Latour discusses the extension of laboratory practices to society in his writing on laboratory studies. Latour observes that Pasteur's anthrax vaccine was only successful when the laboratories practices were extended into the field (1998, 264). This was paralleled on *The Biggest Loser* as all of the participant's actions were precisely managed, and the mantra was that the participants were being given the tools they need to succeed when they went home. Substantial portions of episodes were devoted to the participants learning about different nutritional requirements and portioning and cooking meals (S7E10). Every episode also features workouts in the gym that are meticulously managed by the trainers.

As mentioned in Chapter Two, Knorr-Cetina argues that laboratories "do not need to accommodate the natural object *where it is*, anchored in a natural environment; laboratory sciences bring objects 'home' and manipulate them on their own terms" (1999, 27). *The Biggest Loser* did not accommodate work schedules, school and daycare drop off and pick up, or story time. Instead, the participants were released of these obligations and were taken to *The Biggest Loser* ranch where many were quoted as feeling extremely guilty about leaving their families behind (Aubrey, S7E12). Free from these responsibilities, the participants had little to focus on other than the extreme weight loss program.

Indeed, the isolation on the program was such that participants were *rewarded* for winning challenges with phone calls and letters from home. *The Biggest Loser* became a way not only to create a healthier version of themselves, but also to take care of their families. As Dane stated during his time on the ranch, “I’ve learned how important it is to take care of myself, and how by taking care of myself I’m taking care of my family” (Dane, S7E8). To take care of his family, Dane was forced to leave them behind and join *The Biggest Loser* ranch. The trainers were sceptical of family visits, because they feared that these would create conflicts and feelings of homesickness (S7E6). The program risked these issues by removing participants from their homes, and the trainers tried to isolate the participants from these feelings. These strategies recognize that weight loss is more than just eating right and working out.

3.3.1 Authority on the Ranch

*“You have the ability to shut up and do the work, but you don’t! 99% of the time, you don’t!” –
Jillian (S7E10)*

As in the laboratory, some form of authority was required on *The Biggest Loser*. *The Biggest Loser* scientists had the most power over the program but were not involved with the immediate experiment. Knorr-Cetina understands scientists as being a technical device, stating that, “[i]n the laboratory, scientists are methods of inquiry; they are part of a field’s research strategy and a technical device in the production of knowledge” (1999, 29). Scientists have authority over the laboratory, although they may not be involved with the day to day happenings of the laboratory. As stated in Figure 2.1, *The Biggest Loser* scientists were the professionals involved with the functioning of the program (i.e., directors and producers); however, the day-to-day experimentation was undertaken by the laboratory technicians.

On *The Biggest Loser*, the actual work of experimentation was conducted by the trainers, Bob Harper and Jillian Michaels. These technicians were responsible for the daily functioning of the laboratory. They tailored the exercise regimes of the participants, monitored the use of equipment, motivated the participants, and provided some of the emotional support needed by those on the ranch. *The Biggest Loser* trainers ultimately controlled the experimentation on the program, although they did receive advice and opinions from other professionals. This extensive

network was revealed in the disclaimer at the end of the show, which read “Our contestants were supervised by doctors while participating in the show and their diet and exercise regimen was tailored to their medical status and their specific needs” (S7E1). This network of professionals (technicians and experts) all influenced how this experiment was performed.

As the authority figures at the ranch, the trainers were each responsible for half of the participants, and each trainer took a very different approach to the objects in their care. During episode eight, Mandy commented that she did not “think that people understand just how much these trainers affect everything here”. The effect of the trainers became very apparent as the season progressed. As the participants’ weight loss progressed, many became very attached to their trainers and attributed their extreme weight loss to the motivation and techniques used by their trainers. Filipe, trained by Jillian, suggested that this knowledge was “the great thing about the trainers here. Jillian knows my limits, I don’t” (S7E8). This comment illustrates the recognition of Jillian as Filipe’s authority figure, and the person to whom Filipe reported his progress, failures, and successes. Also, this comment reflects the control that Filipe gave Jillian, as Filipe’s comments imply that she knows him better than he knows himself.

One of the most dramatic moments on this season of *The Biggest Loser* was when many of the participants were forced to switch trainers after losing a challenge; this happened midway through the season, after nutritional and weight loss regimes had already become routine. Being forced to trade trainers created panic and fear amongst the participants and generated a range of emotions within the participant group, ranging from sadness to anger. For example, Blue team member Sione stated that, “[e]ven though I know Bob is around campus, and I’ve been told that by a lot of people, it’s fact that I won’t be able to train with him, as I won’t have him to push me” (Sione, S7E8). Sione felt a loyalty to Bob, and a seemingly unwavering belief in his workout style. In the following weeks, Sione lost little weight (consistently under five pounds) and blamed his inability to lose weight, in part, on working out with Jillian. By switching trainers, the objects of inquiry were subjected to new processes and manipulations that took them outside of their comfort zone. This change reflects the science that happens in the traditional laboratory, where objects are constantly manipulated to determine which processes will best enhance the object.

The mid-season trainer switch was not only emotionally taxing on the participants, but caused some emotional despair for the trainers as well. Although they were set apart from the

participants, the trainers were part of the camaraderie on the ranch and the culture of *The Biggest Loser* laboratory. In particular, Bob found the loss of his team challenging and took the time to meet with his former team. Emotions came to the surface during this meeting, with all the men from Bob's team, and Bob himself, shedding tears over the change. During this meeting, Bob stated that, "[t]his is the hardest thing that I have ever gone through on *The Biggest Loser*" (Bob, S7E8). This emotion was played up by *The Biggest Loser* cameras, with the scene being set to sad music followed by a montage of training footage.

The trainers represent authority on the ranch, and both motivated and intimidated *The Biggest Loser* participants. In the first episodes of the season, Jillian was often shown to be shouting at participants, and seemed to care little about participant health and safety. This changed as the season progressed, and Jillian was filmed more often giving motivational speeches to her team members. In contrast, Bob approached the weight loss of his team in a calmer, balanced manner. This differing approach added another element to the experiment. While most of the participants on either team lost extreme amounts of weight, the way in which they lost the weight varied substantially depending on the workout style of their trainer.

3.4 Participating at Home, through Self-Surveillance

In a major twist on the seventh season of *The Biggest Loser*, the couples were divided for thirty days with one participant from each couple sent home. For example, the Pink Team, Shanon and Helen, chose to send Shanon home for thirty days. These at-home participants then functioned as a control group for the human experimentation happening at the ranch. During this thirty day period, the participants remaining on the ranch worked to keep from being sent home, as being voted off would mean their partners would never have the opportunity to return to the ranch. In return, the at home participants worked to lose weight, as the participant with the highest weight loss guaranteed their team immunity for a week upon their return to the ranch. The participants that were sent home to work out were meant to show that weight loss can happen anywhere, not just on *The Biggest Loser* ranch. This division of the couples also put the fate of each individual in the hands of their partner; any apparent lack of discipline not only

impacted the individual, but the partner as well, and thus added another element of guilt for the participant.

By sending participants home, *The Biggest Loser* highlighted the concentration of science on the ranch. As a control group, the at-home participants were still working out like their Biggest Loser counterparts, but without *The Biggest Loser* resources and with the responsibilities and obligations that come with home life. While these participants successfully lost weight, they did not lose the same amount as those on the ranch. Both of the trainers commented on this division, with Jillian stating:

This is like the Olympics of weight loss right here, okay? It's not realistic to go home and lose these numbers but the idea is that, you know, if you can lose twelve pounds in a week, maybe the person at home can lose twelve pounds in six weeks (2008, S7E5).

Jillian's comment draws on a sports metaphor, but the idea of the laboratory is still present; the laboratory represents a concentration of science, much like *The Biggest Loser* ranch. Bob also commented on the weight loss on the ranch, exclaiming that it is "not realistic, I mean, we're losing crazy mad numbers here in this house, this is their job, I mean, this is his JOB right now. There's no taking care of kids or going to the office or anything" (2008, S7E5). This statement reaffirms that *The Biggest Loser* ranch is strictly about the science of weight loss, and is not concerned with processes outside of the laboratory space.

3.5 The Spectacle of Science

While *The Biggest Loser* can be studied as a laboratory, the program's survival is dependent on its entertainment value. *The Biggest Loser* achieves success, in part, through the spectacle of science. The show is based on a very formulaic approach to weight loss, but tests participants through unusual and spectacular challenges and temptations. Science is made entertaining through these feats of strength and stamina that push the boundaries of the body.

The Biggest Loser creates spectacle through the weekly challenges. During a challenge, the participants all compete to win immunity in that week's weigh-in, a one pound advantage, or a material prize. The challenges vary, ranging from the simple (standing on one foot for hours) to

the extreme (being lifted into the air by a series of ropes, and being suspended there for hours holding themselves up by one hand). These challenges often involve series of colourful pulleys, ropes, and machineries, take place in unusual settings, or require hours to complete. The weekly challenge is the climax of each episode, bringing the unusual and unexpected back into an otherwise predictable show.

The spectacle of science is also created through the way the participants dress. Participants come to *The Biggest Loser* ranch wearing oversized, shapeless clothing. During the weigh-ins, participants (both men and women) strip off their shirts as they approach the scales, leaving them in spandex shorts and bras. Each participant then stands on the scale with their body revealed, allowing the audience to see their imperfections and the lumps and bulges associated with obesity. The weigh-in outfits change as the season progresses, with the women allowed to wear spandex shirts and the men sport sleeveless t-shirts. These shirts show off the participants new, slimmer physiques and muscular arms. This wardrobe change emphasizes the progression of the participant's weight loss, making their bodies appear harder and stronger than they did when shirtless.

3.6 Summary

In this chapter, I have addressed the evidence of individualization and surveillance that can be found within *The Biggest Loser*. The confirmation of these concepts relates to the third research question, which asks what evidence of these concepts can be found within social media. Throughout this chapter, I have also provided evidence that *The Biggest Loser* can be studied successfully within a laboratory framework. I specifically discussed the manner in which the connection of science and society in *The Biggest Loser* represents Latour and Knorr-Cetina's concept of the laboratory.

Chapter 4: *The Biggest Loser* and the Moralization of Obesity

"This is about losing weight. Get skinny! That's the whole point." – Tara (S7E15)

“I look at these contestants as role models. I expect them to set the example” – Jillian, Trainer (S7E15)

“This is going to be something that’s hard for me to overcome. I mean its years and years of me feeling not worthy” – Kristen (S7E17)

“Anything is possible here man, it’s like, magic time” – Jillian, Trainer (S7E17)

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which *The Biggest Loser* could be defined as a laboratory space involved in the creation of scientific fact and specializing in human experimentation. I also provided evidence of the individualization and surveillance found within the program. In this chapter, I will continue to purport that this process of experimentation individualizes the participants on *The Biggest Loser*, which creates the moralization of obesity within the show. To do this, I address the concept of the body as being social and more than just a physical state of being. I also discuss the individualization of the participants, as outlined in the previous chapter, and its relationship to the self-control of the participants as well as self-surveillance. These concepts, in turn, create a moralized understanding of obesity. Specifically, this moralization will be illustrated with the examples of discipline and temptation on the program as well as camaraderie and the role of family on *The Biggest Loser*.

Part of the individualization and moralization of obesity comes from the conception of obesity as an aberrant state of being and an individual problem that is the product of lifestyle choice. This concept reflects the biomedical model of obesity. The ability to prevent obesity individualizes the problem and also creates the moral discord that surrounds obesity. Obesity is considered a disease that is both self-diagnosable and self-treatable (Jutel, 2008). Because a variety of information sources are available to the general public, obesity is considered a preventable disease, with the biomedical model of obesity recognizing prevention as the best form of ‘treatment’ (Saguy and Riley, 2005, 873). This model of obesity recognizes the individual as the best form of both prevention and treatment.

Author Samantha Murray is among those who argue that obesity is an individualized problem and relate this to the social problems that surround living with a non-normative body. Murray states that:

[g]iven the discourse that positions fatness as aberrant in Western society, it has been tacitly understood that the greatest frustration to medicine’s project to cure obesity is the

individual; the obese individual has failed to heed medical advice to reduce one's weight via regulating one's food intake and engaging in regular physical activity. (Murray, 2008, 10)

While prescription drugs and radical surgeries are not the focus of this study, the same moral panic leads to the development of weight loss programs such as *The Biggest Loser*. Improved access to weight loss advice and programs, as well as medical programs, means that everyone in society should have the tools required for weight loss. As such, obesity is considered a failing of the individual rather than the product of other factors, such as government, health, and industry policies. With the individual being defined as the cog piece in the battle against obesity, television programs such as *The Biggest Loser* are based on the premise of individual self-control. The ability of an individual to control their lifestyle choices becomes a matter of morality in a society that emphasizes appearance and physical fitness.

Author Adele Clarke and colleagues suggests that health has become a moral obligation, and that

health itself and the proper management of chronic illnesses are becoming individual moral responsibilities to be fulfilled through improved access to knowledge, self-surveillance, prevention, risk assessment, the treatment of risk, and the consumption of appropriate self-help/biomedical goods and services (2003, 162).

Society's access to obesity and lifestyle knowledge allows for the prevention of obesity and helps create the impression that obesity is an individual problem. With access to this knowledge, there is little reason for individuals to become obese.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Knorr-Cetina recognizes the objects of science as being the 'doers' of science. These objects have power and shape the experiment (2007, 365). I demonstrated that the objects of experimentation on *The Biggest Loser*—the participants—make the whole process of human experimentation necessary. These participants undergo a process of individualization on the program that closely mimics the individualization of obesity in society and everyday life. This similarity reflects the idea that society *is* the experiment; although the laboratory may change objects to suit its needs, it is still working with objects that are part of a

larger social world. In *The Biggest Loser* laboratory, these objects were highly individualized through the actions and language of the show.

Murray comments on the language associated with Western society's obesity epidemic, remarking that the language of obesity is "one of retaliation, framing fatness as a clear and present danger that threatens the social body" (2008, 19). This language reflects the ever present danger associated with obesity and the idea that obesity will ultimately lead to death. Media headlines draw on metaphors of war as well as medical concepts that link obesity to disease and death, define it as a silent killer, and convey the message "what *you* can do to help yourself". This language is all-important to creating a moralizing as well as individualizing discursive surrounding obesity.

In *The Biggest Loser*, the individualization of obesity is apparent in both the dialogue of the program and the unspoken interactions among participants, trainers, and equipment. This individualization was illustrated through a short but telling exchange between participant Tara and her trainer Jillian Michaels:

Tara – I just don't want to do it by myself.

Jillian – Baby, you are doing this by yourself. Every time you make a food choice, that's your own choice. Every time you do your homework, that's your own choice. You're alone in all of this. (S7E7)

In this statement, both Tara and Jillian perpetuate the existing belief that obesity is an individual problem that results from poor lifestyle choices. When Tara expressed fear that she or teammate Laura would be voted off the ranch and she would be forced to continue her weight loss journey alone, Jillian remarked that she is already doing it alone: Tara gained the weight by herself, and she is responsible for losing it. At the same time, Jillian drew attention to what the show portrays as the two main contributors to both obesity and weight loss: nutrition and the self-discipline to exercise.

In the above quote, Jillian refers to the 'homework' of weight loss and to Tara's 'choice'. These words not only emphasize the individual nature of obesity and lifestyle, but also depict *The Biggest Loser* ranch as a campus. On the campus, the participants are 'students' of weight loss, learning how to make healthy food choices and develop exercise regimes that are both beneficial and maintainable once they leave campus. By making the choices necessary to lose

weight, the participants on *The Biggest Loser* are re-educating themselves while learning both self-control and how to monitor their actions and behaviours. Jillian also remarked on the agency of Tara and her ability to choose whether or not she followed the weight loss plan. Failure to achieve these goals would be evidence that these individuals were out of control.

The issue of self-control also relates to the concept of self-surveillance. By choosing to participate in *The Biggest Loser*, the individuals on the program acknowledge they are unable to take care of themselves. Moreover, they become part of a network of surveillance that ultimately imposes limits and controls on the lives of individuals who were unable to impose these limits on themselves. This individualized notion of obesity largely ignores social impacts on the body, to which I will turn next.

4.1 Moralizing Obesity – the Body as More than Physical

While the experimentation on *The Biggest Loser* is dependent on a biomedical and scientific understanding of the body, knowledge of the social body is necessary to illustrate the moral component of obesity. *The Biggest Loser* participants may be contained in a laboratory space, but the laboratory is not devoid of culture and social influences. The participants exist in a social world that is fixated on lifestyle and fitness, and this fixation is written on their bodies, thoughts, and personalities. In the following section, I will briefly outline the concept of the social body and the stigma of obesity in the social world.

Gard and Wright contend that the “‘obesity epidemic’ is, as much as anything else, a social idea (or an ideology), constructed at the intersection of scientific knowledge and a complex of culturally-based beliefs, values and ideals” (2005, 168). As a result, bodies are not only physical but part of a ‘social body’, which is the recognition that physical bodies become social entities through the application of a community’s body norms and practices (Lorber and Moore, 2007; Wolpute, 2004). The social body “relates to the ways the body operates as a natural symbol, as a tool at hand to think and represent social relationships such as gender, kinship, and mode of production” (Wolpute, 2004, 254). The body is the product of the individual and their relationship to their social world. The social body recognizes all social

impacts on the body from kinship to socio-economic status, as opposed to a biomedical model that emphasizes the health risks of eating poorly with little exercise.

Weight management is a social issue; it is not only promoted through a medical model of obesity, but the obese body's visible nature opens it to public scrutiny. Obesity is a state of being that can be diagnosed without tests and a medical education. Author Annemarie Jutel argues that vision "has an important role in the assessment of people and their intrinsic worth" (2008, 117), with a small body size being privileged within society. Obesity, and even being overweight, are states of being that are easily seen; this is in contrast to hidden conditions such as heart disease and diabetes. This visibility of obesity impacts the social reality of those who are classified as overweight or obese.

While the current climate of weight loss and lifestyle management affects both men and women, most sociological literature emphasizes the relationship of women to obesity. The scrutiny of women embeds food and weight into daily concerns (Warin et al., 2007; Zdrodowski, 1996). Women feel they have no option but to diet, and are privately obsessed with food intake (Carrier, 2001). Evidence of this obsession is the overwhelming number of televised weight loss programs that emphasize the role of diet in 'health', framing it as part of a "larger lifestyle package" (Lewis, 2006, 522). *The Biggest Loser* bases its weight loss experimentation on this lifestyle movement.

The current lifestyle movement in Western society is largely based on beliefs about the moral worth of thin versus obese individuals. Lupton claims that controlling diet for "health and appearance creates a morally-laden, victim-blaming discourse" (2005). Those who are overweight or obese are blamed for their size, as obesity is considered the outcome of individual lifestyle choices. Dawn Zdrodowski expands on this claim by specifically looking at how the discourse of obesity affects women. She suggests that for many overweight women "carrying 'excess' weight" is not a problem for themselves individually, but only becomes one through social interactions where "continual pressure is placed on individuals to conform to an ideological image that for many women is unattainable" (1996, 657). In *The Biggest Loser*, this was exemplified by one participant, Tara, who commented on this and her life before *The Biggest Loser*. Tara suggests that before losing the weight you "realize you never were really living life to the fullest because you're so... conscious... so self-conscious" (S7E19). This consciousness about body size is intertwined with moral beliefs about obesity.

While the literature may recognize men and women as being affected differently by obesity discourse, *The Biggest Loser* does not. Both men and women approach the actual science of weight loss in the same way on the program. However, gendered obesity discourse is still apparent within the show, notably in the way in which the individuals were prepared for returning to life after leaving the ranch. The trainers often discussed life at home with the participants, giving the women ideas on how they could continue to lose weight while looking after kids and running a household. Single women without children were taught how to make healthy restaurant choices when eating with friends as well as schooled that it was okay to have a social glass of wine now and then. Conversely, the men were groomed for active, physical lifestyles, with two participants going on to become personal trainers and another college-bound man prepared to 'get the girls'. While the weight loss experiment was the same for both genders, the outcomes were tailored to feminine and masculine roles.

4.2 Engaging the Senses

Throughout this thesis, I focus primarily on the visual of obesity as these visuals are very accessible through television. However, hearing and touch are also important when considering the moralizing of *The Biggest Loser* participants.

A number of sounds on *The Biggest Loser* created an impression about obese individuals. Most striking was the lack of silence on the show. The only moments without dialogue were those that emphasized the puffing and wheezing of participants during workouts and challenges. Participants cried, gasped for breathe, panted, and vomited, and *The Biggest Loser* used these sounds to stress the effort necessary for weight loss. At the same time, these noises are considered crude in society and associated with rude behaviour. *The Biggest Loser* gave the impression that the participants were noisy, associating these body noises with obesity. This was very apparent when contrasted with the trainers, who worked-out alongside the participants with no sound.

Also of note is the sense of touch associated with obesity. When the participants joined the program, they had soft bodies that lack developed muscle. Most of the participants left the ranch with hard bodies. An example was Jerry, a member of the White team. Jerry came to the

ranch as an obese grandfather, looking to lose weight so that he could keep up with his grandchildren. Jerry was a large, warm individual, who was pictured on the program hugging his grandchildren. Jerry left *The Biggest Loser* ranch early in the season, and returned to the season finale a changed man. On the season finale, the soft, huggable Jerry was revealed as a gaunt but muscular man with bulging neck veins and little body fat to speak of. The man who once resembled Santa Claus no longer appeared as soft and huggable.

The softness associated with obesity was created in many ways on the program. At the beginning of the season, the large participants often cried and appeared to ‘whine’ about their lives and physical shape. As the season progressed, the participants’ emotional and mental states hardened along with their bodies. The participants no longer felt victimized by their lives and bodies, but began to harden themselves against past pain and judgment. This was apparent through their actions and statements as well as the way in which they related to those around them. For example, at the beginning of the season participants were voted off depending on whom the voters felt could lose weight at home and who needed the ranch. As the season and weight loss progressed, elimination votes were no longer based on concern for individuals but on game play and the desire to win.

4.3 Temptation and Immorality

“We all got crazy in there... we all got crazy” – Helen (S7E15)

One of the most accessible illustrations of the moralization of obesity on *The Biggest Loser* is the temptation challenge. The title of the challenge itself is indicative of moral issues and the idea of ‘sinning’ and misbehaving. Vaz and Bruno comment that obesity “signals a frailty in individual self-control” (2003, 280). Obese individuals are thought to be unable to curb their impulses and desires, and this leads to gluttonous behaviour. The temptation challenge is thus premised on the perception that an obese individual cannot refuse food and that they lack self-control, and reflects the idea that obesity is based on inappropriate lifestyle choices. The challenge also served to divide the players into groups: those who were truly concerned about their diet and health and those who could be swayed by the food and money. This division was very evident to both the participants and the viewing audience.

The temptation challenge was based on visual spectacle. While it did not rely on fancy equipment or machineries, the temptation challenge always presented the participants with an overabundance of food, laid out on silver platters with caloric content noted on place cards beside each item. Two food-based temptation challenges were used season seven, one in which participants were presented with a well-stocked buffet and the other with the gym filled with food-laden silver platters. The presentation of the silver platters in the gym facility, resting on the gym equipment, created a strong visual for the audience; it emphasized the life the participants led before *The Biggest Loser* ranch and the lifestyle restructuring they received while on the ranch.

The buffet temptation challenge also ascribed morality to the participants through the use of visual techniques. During the buffet challenge, participants were left alone in front of a buffet of food. The participant who ate the most calories would receive a monetary prize; however, the participants were isolated and unaware of how many calories, if any, the other participants ate. This challenge was filmed using a hidden camera motif. The images were black and white and time-stamped, as if the participants were being caught stealing on a security camera. The participants were also filmed from above, with the images mimicking those from a wall-mounted security camera.

Morality was also created during the temptation challenge beyond the visual element of the program. Through the reaction of the trainers, and the comments of the participants, the audience learns that succumbing to the temptation is a serious offense. In the temptation challenge held in the gym, the participants ate all of the food on the platters. At the end of the challenge, the participants were surrounded by a pile of platters on the gym floor with looks of shock on their faces. Helen commented on the events that led them to this moment, saying that “[w]e all got crazy in there... we all got crazy” (S7E15). Helen observed that none of the participants were able to overcome their desire for the prize, and they lost control with all of the food in the room. By calling the events crazy, Helen suggests that the participants acted irrationally. By setting up the temptation challenge in this manner, *The Biggest Loser* is perpetuating the belief that obese individuals lack self-control and discipline.

The trainers also express dismay after learning that the participants were responsible for eating all the food in the gym. Jillian remarks that she views the participants as role models, and that she “expect[s] them to set the example. And when these contestants do stupid things like

this, it's disappointing to me" (S7E15). She also asserts that by taking part in this challenge and indulging in the gym, the participants disrespected themselves and the facility (S7E17). Bob also commented on the spectacle, but reserved his remarks for the condition of the participants. Upon noting that many of the participants were not feeling well, Bob stated "Good, I'm glad. I'm glad Tara's shaking and glassy eyed. I'm glad you feel this way. I hope you remember this day ten years down the road" (S7E15). By staging this challenge in this manner, the individuals on *The Biggest Loser* were positioned as not only lacking discipline but failing themselves as well as millions of home viewers, as they reverted back to the behaviour that brought them to the ranch in the first place.

4.4 Discipline

"She tried to stand up there and tell us that she had been doing vigorous exercise ... all week, it didn't make sense" – Aubrey (S7E5)

Obesity is considered a health problem that is both preventable and treatable by the individual. Individuals who are unable to change their weight on will are thought to lack the discipline to do so and, therefore, are moral failures. If morality is defined as behaving inappropriately, or sinfully, then discipline is the process through which an individual returns to, or retains, normative behaviour.

4.4.1 Disciplining Joelle

Failing a team member was considered a great offence on *The Biggest Loser* ranch, and this could occur in a number of ways—from losing a challenge to failing to lose enough weight during the week. While evidence of these failures can be found throughout *The Biggest Loser*, the best example is the breakdown of the silver team, Joelle and Carla.

When deciding which individual would be going home for thirty days, Carla reluctantly left after Joelle promised that she would work hard and keep above the yellow line long enough to bring Carla back (S7E1). Upon arrival on the ranch, Joelle's teammate Carla was weighed-in as the heaviest female participant to ever join *The Biggest Loser* (S7E1); Joelle's weight was

similar to the other women on the ranch. Joelle was repeatedly shown on camera to be less active during workouts than her counterparts, and she consistently lost less weight than any other participant each week. This apparent lack of care and concern was noticed and commented on by both participants and trainers (S7E2) and was the cause of a number of rifts and arguments between Joelle, her trainer, and the other participants. The week Carla returned to the ranch, Joelle did little during workouts while Carla was considered to be doing everything in her power to remain on the ranch (S7E5). This difference in activity levels (and apparent discipline) between Joelle and Carla created many arguments that ended in heated shouting matches for all to see, and rifts with teammates that were captured for the camera.

During Carla and Joelle's last weigh-in at the ranch, the scales revealed that Joelle had not lost any weight that week. This failure was met with much judgment at the ranch, with Joelle's trainer Bob commenting that he could "just feel the shame coming out of Joelle" (S7E5) as she stood on the scale. Participants suggested that they were shocked to see the zero pop up on the screens, as they expected Joelle to have *gained* weight (Aubrey, S7E5). Shanon captured the feeling that Joelle was behaving immorally when she failed to lose weight, and therefore harmed Carla's health and feelings:

It makes me so mad that Joelle can stand up there and have no passion, no accountability for anything she has done to her team, to her partner, while Carla is the biggest woman you guys have ever had on the show and fighting for her life. She's fighting for her life while Joelle spaces out and won't even say 'Carla I'm sorry, I'm sorry I flaked out on you. (2008, S7E5)

Shanon's outrage at Joelle's behaviour appeared to be on Carla's behalf; Carla was considered to be in medical danger from her obesity and *The Biggest Loser* ranch was considered by many participants to be their last chance at weight loss and a healthy lifestyle. By not losing weight herself, the participants felt that Joelle was directly harming Carla. Worse, Joelle made excuses for her poor performance and lack of discipline and refused to apologize for putting Carla in a situation where they may be eliminated from the game.

The language and heated exchange lead the audience to make judgements about Joelle's immoral behaviour. Shanon commented on Joelle's lack of accountability to Carla, who was fighting for her life. This statement alone is very significant and powerful, as it suggests that

Carla's life is hanging in the balance and that her elimination from the ranch is a death sentence. This statement also puts all of the responsibility for this in the hands of Joelle, who was unreliable, unaccountable, and "flaky". Joelle represented an unwillingness to change that was viewed as sinful, considering the enormous lifestyle and weight loss journeys the other participants had undergone.

Joelle's failure on the scales, and with her teammates, represents a lack of discipline that is often perceived as a problem of obese individuals. While Joelle never felt that she lacked discipline and argued that she pushed herself to new and vigorous intensities (S7E5), others on the program commented on the positive change they experienced in motivation and discipline upon becoming part of the show. For example, Kristen (Purple team) commented on the frustration she felt before becoming part of *The Biggest Loser*:

I used to be the person who would sit on the couch and watch the show. And I know how frustrated I was at home, you know, to see these people on the show transform their lives forever and you sit at home and you want that so bad, you know? (S7E8)

Kristen was referring to her desire to transform her body (her life) but her perceived inability to do it at home. Kristen quite successfully lost weight while participating on the program and managed to beat seventeen of the twenty-two participants. In contrast, Joelle came to the ranch with a desire to change herself but was often filmed as being unfocused and unmotivated during workouts. On many occasions, the cameras followed Joelle while she walked around the gym and watched others work out, sweat heavily, and push themselves until they vomit. Joelle was never filmed showing this level of discipline. As a result, Joelle received little support from her teammates and was quickly eliminated from the program.

4.4.2 Un-disciplining Tara

An opposite to Joelle's lack of motivation and discipline would be the weight loss journey of Tara, a member of the Green team. Tara became neurotic about weight loss to the degree where the experts encouraged Tara to show *less* discipline. Tara's extreme game playing and weight loss drew considerable attention from her teammates and trainers. Tara, a former

model, came to *The Biggest Loser* with her partner Laura after she gained a hundred pounds in one year and was unable to lose it. From the start of the game, Tara was extremely competitive and became a force to be feared, always drawing the ire of her counterparts and never falling below the yellow line during her time on the ranch. As the weeks progressed, Tara became extremely obsessed about her weight loss journey.

At the beginning of the season, Tara became known as one of the strongest competitors on the ranch after losing a great deal of weight in the first two weeks. As Tara became stronger, she began to get frustrated with the perceived shortcomings of her teammate, Laura. Laura was the member of the Green team that decided to return home for the first three weeks of the season; before she ever returned, Tara voiced her concern about Laura's performance, stating that "I'm afraid that she's going to come back and not give it that 115% like I've been giving it for the past four weeks" (S7E5). Two conclusions about obesity can be drawn from this statement. The first is that obesity cannot be tackled at home and requires intervention, such as *The Biggest Loser*. The second is that individuals are not disciplined enough to lose weight on their own, and that to affect change they must give it everything they have, dedicate themselves to the process, and then give just a little bit more. This comment marks the beginning of the Tara that Jillian refers to as being "manic" about weight loss as well as *The Biggest Loser* game (S7E12). As the season progresses, Tara becomes obsessive about weight loss to the point where Jillian grew concerned about the possibility of underlying mental health conditions.

Tara's tendency to over-exercise became a larger issue on the program than her individual weight loss. While obesity is considered the result of a poor lifestyle choice, Tara represented another extreme that is frowned upon on *The Biggest Loser* ranch. While Tara's mantra was that she just wants "to change, like truly change" (S7E14), the others on the ranch saw her as a threat because her weight loss had the ability to send them home and reduce their chances of winning the game and the monetary prize. They also recognized she was going above and beyond what was truly required on the ranch. As Tara became more obsessive towards the end of the program, Jillian sat down with her and commented:

It's one thing to work out 6 hours a day, it's one thing to be an incredible athlete, you know, these are all wonderful things. But when you're working out 8 hours, and 10 hours, and constantly obsessive compulsive about different aspects of the game, there's nothing that's quiet for you (S7E14).

This statement of Jillian's draws into the forefront many aspects of life on *The Biggest Loser*, both about Tara and beyond. Working out for six hours a day, which is an inconceivable amount of time for the everyday working individual, was acceptable on the ranch. However, Jillian suggested that anything beyond that is *unacceptable*, making the line between acceptable and unacceptable behaviour very thin. This implies a very small window of behaviours is appropriate both on, and outside of, the ranch.

Tara's time on *The Biggest Loser* ranch was marked by quiet and extremely focussed /radical behaviour, adept game playing, and extreme athleticism. Tara eventually made it to *The Biggest Loser* finals, never once falling below the yellow line during the weigh-ins, and never coming up for elimination. On the other hand, Joelle's time on *The Biggest Loser* was marked by shouting matches with trainers and teammates, and time spent wandering aimlessly around the gym. Joelle fell below the yellow line more than once, and was swiftly eliminated from the game. While both participants represent very different levels of discipline and motivation, both deviate from the standard of normal behaviour set at the ranch. This deviation drew considerable attention from both participants and trainers; it also raises the question of what *is* appropriate behaviour for obese individuals.

4.5 Defiance

As discussed in the previous section, success on *The Biggest Loser* was often defined by the participant's ability to motivate themselves to eat right and push themselves during exercise. This agency of the objects of inquiry within the experiment directly influences the direction and success of the experiment and also raises the issue of what is and is not considered moral behaviour. This moralization of obesity was present in all aspects of the experimentation and processes happening on *The Biggest Loser* ranch, and was created in many ways. While this agency was evident in the discipline of the participants, it was also evident when the participants chose to defy the wishes of the authority figures on the ranch, their trainers. I understand defiance as the disregard or resistance to authority, and it can be found within the relationship of the participants to their trainers.

Murray states that the “fat woman appears as an uncared for, unmanaged, excessive body... She is a body out of control, whereas an art of existence is all about a reigning in, of giving shape and form to one’s life, one’s desires, and one’s body” (2004, 241). While this article focuses specifically on obese women, many of the moral considerations remain the same independent of sex. The fat body is one that is uncontrolled and gluttonous, excessive and unmanaged. It is given shape through control of the individual’s life and desires. *The Biggest Loser* is comprised of individuals who enter the ranch as a way of gaining control over their bodies, specifically by giving their control away to someone else.

The Biggest Loser trainers, Bob and Jillian, played a huge role in the experimentation happening on the program. As I argued above, the participants on *The Biggest Loser* were largely in control of how the experiment proceeded on the ranch. The participants chose whether to eat right, exercise, and do their homework. However, there was little chance to stray from the exercise regime as laid out by the trainers, due to the visual nature of the program and the fear of being disciplined. The gym and Biggest Loser house were fitted with cameras that allowed access to the normally ‘hidden’ behaviour of the participants.

Participants were very quick to admit any perceived wrongdoing to their trainers as they were monitoring their own behaviours. The trainers often disciplined their team members, creating more difficult workouts if the team was caught cheating during a temptation challenge or indulging in some way. By creating these workouts, the trainers punished the participants for behaviour that was inappropriate and self-defined.

The immoral behaviour of defying the trainers was an important theme on *The Biggest Loser*, although it did not happen particularly often. Small instances of this defiant behaviour often occurred during workouts (e.g., stepping off the treadmill, shouting at the trainers). During episode seven, Bob’s team went against his wishes during an elimination, a move that made Jillian exclaim, “I can’t believe they defied him, no one defies him, I’m shocked!” (S7E8).

This defiance by Bob’s team was also linked to trepidation. While Jillian found the challenge to Bob’s authority shocking, the participants on Bob’s team were hesitant and afraid to tell Bob what they had done. Kristen remarked that she “felt like a little child who just broke something” (S7E7) and was scared. This fear and trepidation reflects the issue of morality. As Kristen stated, the participants felt as if they had behaved inappropriately and were to be punished for their actions by the authority figure on their team. Bob’s attempt to influence the

elimination suggests that the participants were unable to make appropriate decisions without guidance. Moreover, the participants later *do* tell Bob what they did and receive his help. This was an act of self-surveillance, whereby the participants attempted to monitor themselves and correct something they knew they did wrong.

4.5.1 Camaraderie on The Biggest Loser

In the previous chapter, I indicated that the laboratory isolates the objects of inquiry to manipulate and survey the progress of the experiment. At the same time, the participants work together to ensure that the experiment keeps running. This is important, as I do not want to cast *The Biggest Loser* program as being unnecessarily negative, and as this camaraderie illustrates a paradox within *The Biggest Loser*. At the same time as participants are isolated from the other participants, an air of camaraderie on the program stems from the shared lived experience of the participants. On many occasions, the participants took it upon themselves to help teammates and those who were struggling on the ranch. Often, the support of *The Biggest Losers* went to Ron, a father who had spent his life well over five hundred pounds and had a number of joint and leg issues that handicapped him during workouts and challenges. This camaraderie was illustrated in episode seven when the participants were required to run up and down a steep hill collecting keys. A walking Ron received assistance from every passing participant; instead of simply passing him by, they helped him up and down steep areas on the path. Ron's son, Mike, expressed his amazement for the concern expressed by others, stating that, "[p]eople could easily have just been, you know, 'I need to do this as fast as I can to get more keys' and just passed him by and um, they didn't, they helped them" (S7E7). This camaraderie played out in other ways on *The Biggest Loser*, with participants commenting on the friendship and feelings of family on the program. The care and support given to the weaker members of the ranch illustrates the camaraderie that the participants felt and keeps the program positive.

4.6 Moralizing Family Relationships

"I always looked at him and said 'I'm never going to be like him [his father]', and kept saying it, and kept getting bigger" – Mike (S7E17)

Family also plays a major role on *The Biggest Loser*. While most participants left family behind to join the program, a number of couples were made up of family members ranging from sisters and cousins to father/son and mother/daughter pairings. The majority of *The Biggest Loser* participants were not the only obese individuals in their families or homes. Those who did not come to the ranch with an obese family member left someone at home who was waiting to benefit from the participant's new weight loss advice. The participants included three notable family groups: Helen and Shanon, Cathy and Kristen, and Ron and Mike. These mother/daughter and father/son teams consistently talked about getting themselves healthy so they could go home and help their other family members. The following is a brief discussion about the role of family in the journey of *The Biggest Loser*, specifically addressing the relationship of father/son team Ron and Mike, and mother/daughter team Helen and Shanon.

4.6.1 Ron, Mike, and Max

Ron was a middle aged father of two sons, Mike and Max, who came to the ranch weighing over four hundred pounds. His eighteen year old son, Mike, was close to four hundred pounds when he came to the ranch. Throughout the entire season, Ron insisted that his time on the ranch was not for his own benefit, but for that of his sons. Specifically, Ron used his time on the ranch to do everything he could to manipulate the other participants and ensure his son a spot on *The Biggest Loser* finale.

Much like his father, Mike believed that his time on the ranch was not only for his own benefit, but for that of his younger brother at home. Mike stated that both he and his dad wanted to be at the ranch "for my brother, I mean he's just as big as I am and he's sixteen years old. We really want to get this weight thing under control so we can go back to him and, you know, help him out" (S7E6). In one way, Mike's concern for his brother is an extension of laboratory principles beyond *The Biggest Loser* laboratory; Mike becomes part of machinery of knowledge and extends what he learned on the ranch into his home to teach his brother. On the other, Mike's concern appeared to be very altruistic as he was looking out for his younger brother and

commented that “it is soul crushing to be 300 pounds as a teenager” (S7E17), and he does not want his brother to suffer in the same way he had.

The bond between Ron and Mike was one that was continually reinforced on the program, and the couple stayed intact until the very final episode of the season. Mike and Ron appeared to be beyond the individualizing forces of *The Biggest Loser* ranch, and of obesity in general. Ron frequently commented on how it was his fault that his boys both became obese (S7E17), and was quick to take the blame when Mike was angry about his life. At the same time, Mike claimed that he did not really blame his father for his weight.

On the final episode of the season, the participants were sent home for thirty days. During this time, Mike was filmed working out with his younger brother, and told the camera that he was happy to be home and have the chance to pass on his knowledge to Max. Conversely, during a conversation with a visiting Jillian, Mike voiced his frustration with Max, stating that “he’s so apathetic it disgusts me” (S7E19). Although a short statement, these words are very poignant and indicative of the moralization that surrounds obesity. Mike, who was once almost four hundred pounds himself, was now passing judgement on his younger brother for being in that same position and not helping himself. Mike may no longer be obese, but he continued to engage with the moralized notions of obesity by ascribing them to his brother.

4.6.2 Shanon and Helen

While most parents on the program insisted they were on the ranch to encourage their children, Helen’s relationship with Shanon was somewhat different. Early in the program, daughter Shanon chose to be the participant from the Pink team who went home, as she did not want to stay at the ranch without Helen. Upon returning to the ranch and being up for elimination, Helen and Shanon lobbied the other participants to vote Shanon off the ranch. This choice was considerably different than that made by other parent/child team on the ranch. On this seventh season, the standard practice was for the parent to sacrifice themselves and go home, allowing their child to remain at the ranch.

The choice of the Pink team to send Shanon home instead of Helen was a dramatic moment, mirroring the tension and judgement surrounding Joelle’s departure early in the season.

One member of the Black team, Dane, stated that “I know the other parents in the house, if they were in that situation, they wouldn’t think about staying even for a second” (S7E7). Dane believed that a parent should happily sacrifice themselves not only for the wellbeing of their child, but to ‘save’ the child. This belief was also reflected by Ron, who suggested that “[t]here’s probably a little bit of selfishness that says, ‘ok, if my daughter really wants to go home I’ll let her go home, because I really want to stay’. And Helen really did want to stay” (S7E7). In Ron’s view, the obese individual, Helen, made an inappropriate and selfish decision when she decided to send Shanon home and remain on the ranch without her.

This sentiment of sacrificing for a child coming from Dane and Ron is especially interesting considering the family backgrounds of these participants. Dane and Ron were two contestants who entered *The Biggest Loser* believing that by helping themselves, they were ultimately ensuring the wellbeing of their families. When framed in this way, the audience was not led to any moral conclusions about these contestants. On the other hand, Helen came to the ranch with Shanon, and then advocated for Shanon to be sent home. While this could be seen as the same situation that Ron and Dane were in—putting their own health first as a way to help their loved ones—Helen’s choice was met with considerable judgement despite the fact that she was learning the same skills and gaining the same knowledge that could be taken home to help her family live a healthier lifestyle.

4.7 Summary

“This is not what happy looks like” – Nicole (S7E14)

As part of the science and society interconnection, *The Biggest Loser* is understandably based on a medical conception of obesity. However, this medical conception does not eliminate the concept of the social body from the program, nor does it relieve the participants from the moralization of obesity that exists within Western society. Indeed, the moralization of obesity not only exists within *The Biggest Loser*, it is part of the creation of scientific fact within the program. Obesity is considered a problem of individual self-control that is achieved through the extension of scientific practices and principles into individual lifestyles. Issues of morality then

produce, and are produced through, the creation of ‘fact’ and the extension of obesity science into the everyday life of the individual.

In this chapter, I discussed how *The Biggest Loser* perpetuates the moralization of obesity. This moralization was perpetuated through the individualization of participants on the program, through the discipline and motivation of participants, and during the temptation challenge. Specifically, I discussed the individualization and discipline of participants through the specific examples of Joelle and Tara. I also argued that moral components of the program could be found within the role of family on *The Biggest Loser*, specifically addressing family members Ron and Mike and Helen and Shanon. In turn, this presents the evidence needed to answer the third research question regarding evidence of individualization, surveillance, and the moralization of obesity found within the social media.

Chapter 5: Conclusions

“The fat kid is always going to be inside of me” – Mike (S7E17)

“It seems like such a simple thing, losing weight and stuff, but I feel like it’s going to prepare me for my future life” – Nicole (S7E14)

5.1 Overview

Throughout this research I have attempted to uncover evidence of the individualization, moralization, and surveillance of obesity through an analysis of *The Biggest Loser*. I have also illustrated the ways in which *The Biggest Loser* can be studied and addressed as a laboratory space. Analyzing *The Biggest Loser* in this way adds a new dimension to the discussion of the “obesity epidemic” that exists in Western society. The main discursive characteristics of the obesity epidemic is that obesity is dependent on individual self-control and the ability to monitor, motivate, and discipline oneself. *The Biggest Loser*, as a source of data, represents the creation of scientific fact (regarding obesity) as the participants on the program engage in human experimentation to manipulate and transform their bodies.

At the beginning of this thesis, I outlined Gard and Wright’s conception of obesity and scientific obesity discourse as being driven by moral and ideological beliefs. Gard and Wright

“explore the possibility that the dire predictions and sheer intensity of ‘obesity talk’ has more to do with preconceived moral ideological beliefs about fatness than a sober assessment of existing evidence” (2005, 3). Throughout their research, Gard and Wright argue that it is more important to study the morality ascribed to obesity than the health risks and consequences, as these are actually the product of morality and ideology. Gard and Wright indicate that the obesity epidemic “relies, in part, on a particular form of morality. It is morality that sees the problem as a product of individual failing and weakness” (2005, 7). They suggest that the obesity ‘epidemic’ is not actually based on obesity science, but rather stems from other areas of science, culture, and literature (2005). This framing of the obesity epidemic led me to identify the three major themes that I used throughout the analysis: individualization, moralization, and surveillance.

Specifically, in this research I undertook a laboratory study of *The Biggest Loser* to address obesity discourse in the social media as well as illustrate and analyze the science and society connection. Drawing from concepts of the laboratory as outlined by Latour and Knorr-Cetina, I analyzed the themes, images, dialogue, and language existent within *The Biggest Loser*. Latour (1998) recognizes the laboratory as having permeable walls, which allow the flow of science in and out of the space, and no micro or macro limitations. Knorr-Cetina (1999) comments upon three aspects of an object that laboratories do not have to accommodate: using the object *as it is*, keeping it *where it is*, or only monitoring an event *when it happens* (Knorr-Cetina, 1999, 27); all these factors were modified within *The Biggest Loser* in the context of a laboratory. These ideas and conceptions of the laboratory are outlined in Chapter Two, and discussed further within Chapters Three and Four.

I employed three research questions that addressed scientific obesity discourse, methodology, and the presence of individualization, moralization, and surveillance within social media. To begin, I questioned how scientific discourses of obesity emerge in Western popular culture, and how discourse about scientific fact and medicalized obesity are re-constructed on reality television. I also asked whether social media could be analyzed within the framework of a laboratory, and how reality television creates a laboratory. My final research question asked if evidence of the individualization, moralization, and surveillance of obesity could be found within social media, and what the potential implications of these social processes may be. These research questions reflect the idea that obesity science is based on moral and ideological

conclusions about individuals, while questioning whether extending the laboratory studies framework beyond a traditional laboratory is possible.

5.1.1 The Biggest Loser as a Laboratory and Site of Surveillance

Although it may seem like a stretch, extending laboratory practices and principles into a non-traditional setting such as *The Biggest Loser* is not challenging. Within Chapter Two, I outlined a number of specific similarities between *The Biggest Loser* and a traditional laboratory, including concrete examples, such as the physical space of *The Biggest Loser* and the use of technology and equipment, as well as more abstract ideas, such as the risk of contamination within the program and the use of surveillance.

Although this research is based on a fluid conception of the laboratory, *The Biggest Loser* does have a physical space that resembles a formal laboratory and can be studied as one. *The Biggest Loser* ranch houses the living quarters of the contestants as well as the gym, fitness facilities, pools, and walking trails that participants require to lose weight. This ranch also houses the technology used by the trainers and participants during the experimentation. This space resembles a formal laboratory, as everything required for the experiment can be found on site, with the objects of inquiry and scientific technicians using the space for experimentation.

The Biggest Loser also incorporates a number of laboratory practices and principles that can be found within a traditional laboratory space, including the forcing of events to further the experiment, the extension of laboratory principles into the field, and the surveillance of the participants by the trainers, audience, and participants themselves. Knorr-Cetina argues that one of the benefits of the laboratory is the ability to force events, and not wait for these events to occur in nature (1999). On *The Biggest Loser*, this happens in the challenges and temptations as well as when participants are sent home to their real lives to test their ability to cope in a real world environment.

The significance of these temptations and challenges is, again, in the interconnection of science and society that is apparent within the program. Obesity is considered to be caused by a lack of individual self-control and self surveillance, and *The Biggest Loser* promotes self-control and surveillance as a way to manipulate bodies. This concept of surveillance is key to both the

argument that *The Biggest Loser* can be defined as a laboratory space and that evidence of individualization, moralization, and surveillance can be found within social media. The concept of surveillance is discussed, in depth, in Chapter Three. The surveillance on the program happens in a number of ways—through self-surveillance and the use of technology, hidden cameras, weigh-ins, and by the trainers. The audience of *The Biggest Loser* is also responsible for a large part of the surveillance related to the experiment.

Self-surveillance is often associated with the care of self (Vaz & Bruno, 2003), which is the very premise of *The Biggest Loser*. Participants pay attention to their actions as they are being observed by their trainers, fellow teammates and contestants, and the audience. This constant surveillance is an ingrained part of the culture of *The Biggest Loser* laboratory.

5.1.2 Moralizing Obesity

The last subject addressed within the analysis and discussion is moralization. With the risk associated with obesity, individual self-control and surveillance are important for both prevention and intervention of this disease. However, this also creates a moralized conception of obesity that stems from the idea that individuals can change their weight at will. The biomedical model of obesity fails to consider the body as being more than physical, having social meaning and implications. Within this research, I found that the moralizing discourses on *The Biggest Loser* are perpetuated by an emphasis on individual self-control and surveillance. I have shown this through a discussion of the moralization of obesity as it relates to discipline, defiance, and temptations on the program.

In Chapter Four, I specifically addressed the meaning of temptation within the program, with Joelle and Tara as characters representing different ends of the discipline spectrum. I argue that this is strong evidence of the moralization of obesity on the program. Both Joelle and Tara were harshly judged by their teammates and trainers for their unbalanced lifestyles and relationships toward the experiment. I subsequently discussed the defiance of the trainers and argued that it was positioned as both harming the experiment and the individual. I also specifically addressed family within this chapter, as morality was ascribed to individuals depending on the way they related to, and treated, their family members.

5.2 We Need a Change - Conclusions

With the current negative climate of weight loss within Western society, academics must continue to study and discuss the ways in which the obesity epidemic is being addressed in the social world. While some literature is available regarding the sociology of obesity, much is focused on the medicalization of obesity as well as the social ramifications of being obese in a society that emphasizes fitness and a small physique. As this issue continues to grow, methodologies must be extended to examine aspects of obesity, and of being obese, that have not yet been adequately addressed. To date, little has been done to address the overarching influence that the intertwining of science and society has on the obesity epidemic. By extending the laboratory framework to the social media, I was able to address the way that science intertwines with social consciousness to emphasize the morality and ideology that has become part of obesity discourse.

Through the extension of the laboratory framework, I determined a benefit to addressing self-surveillance within science studies, even though this concept is not common within the field. Self-surveillance can be used within a science study where the object of inquiry has agency; indeed, Knorr-Cetina (1999) argues that objects have the ability to make their own choices. This concept allows a new approach to science studies, which recognizes that objects are reflexive and able to shape the experiment through their actions. Self-surveillance is then the process through which objects come to monitor themselves, ensuring that their actions fit within the bounds of the experiment.

A connection between the concept of self-surveillance and power can be found in the work of Foucault, who argued, as mentioned above, that when individuals anticipate being monitored and judged due constant surveillance, they turn their gaze on themselves and self-monitor their behaviour (Tischner, Malson, 2008). While power is not addressed in detail within the body of this thesis, power relationships do influence the experiment and the objects within it. On a micro-scale, power is evident in the relationships between the participants as well as between the participants and trainers. This power is not enforced from the top down and is productive, creating weight loss through a normalizing gaze. Using self-surveillance as a concept

allows science studies to better determine how social forces and relationships impact the production of science, as objects are attuned to the social world.

While the self-surveillance of objects may not be common in all laboratory settings, the human experimentation on *The Biggest Loser* relies on the ability of the participants to move the experiment forward. While the laboratory technicians have considerable control over the participants, the participants make the choice whether or not to follow their guidance. To maintain agency, the participants must illustrate consciousness to the experiment and control over the self, or risk having their agency and autonomy taken away by the trainers. In this regard, self-surveillance also interacts with the individualization of obesity. While obesity is individualized in many ways, it is reinforced through the moral gaze and judgment that individuals use upon themselves when obesity discourse blames them for their weight. Further research needs to be done to better understand self-surveillance as individualizing obesity, the role of self-surveillance in the laboratory, and the concept's usability in a science studies framework.

In the third research question, I asked what evidence of individualization, moralization, and the surveillance of obesity could be found within social media and the possible implications this may have. While there is considerable evidence of these concepts within *The Biggest Loser*, we cannot know the implications for the individual. However, I suggest that *The Biggest Loser*, and the larger obesity discourse that surrounds it, emphasizes and re-enforces a victim-blaming attitude towards obesity as well as the need for constant surveillance of the self and obese individuals. Programs such as this re-enforce a culture of weight loss that is already deeply entrenched in Western society.

While *The Biggest Loser* is an unconventional laboratory site, it emphasizes the concerns and power relationships within Western society. Matheson argues that when viewing reality television, less emphasis should be put on the individual lives that viewers see played out on screen and more on “the ideas and statements which shape that viewing” (2005, 107). Focusing on ideas and statements uncovers the way that power is displayed in reality television and emphasizes that “the lens through which we receive these images is not neutral” (Gameson et al., 1992, 374). I believe that these ideas and statements not only define the experiment of *The Biggest Loser*, but reflect and perpetuate the non-neutral obesity discourse prominent within Western culture.

As discovered throughout this research, scientific facts and assumptions about obesity and chronic disease create a moral discourse that is based on individual discipline and control as well as the inability of the individual to adequately observe and monitor their health through the manipulation of body weight. Throughout the course of the research and analysis, it became evident that the scientific obesity discourse present in *The Biggest Loser* not only perpetuates the morality, surveillance, and individualization of obesity but also emphasizes the risks associated with obesity. Gard and Wright suggest that defining obesity as a disease “means that a whole range of institutions, and individuals associated with those institutions, are provided with the right and indeed the responsibility to identify people so categorized, or people who might be ‘at risk’ of such categorizations, and to regulate their behaviours” (2005, 181). The perpetuation of risk is one of the implications of the scientific discourse of obesity within Western culture and social media.

Obesity is a state of being that is perceived to be related to individual self-control, and thus individuals are at risk of becoming obese. This individualizes obesity and suggests it is caused by indulgent lifestyles and a lack of self-control. This philosophy of obesity leads to moral and social issues that would not arise without the systems of surveillance and the technologies available within a society intertwined with science, or without the morality and fear assigned to obesity. Obesity is a problematic state of being that can be addressed through the science of weight loss and nutrition that is easily accessible within Western society, and that can be prevented through individual self-control and self-surveillance. As such, obesity is an issue that should continue to be addressed through science studies, as considerable knowledge can be gained through extension of these methodologies.

During the analysis, it became clear that despite being unable to be ‘on site’ to study the laboratory, *The Biggest Loser* is a significant source of data. *Biggest Loser* functions as a laboratory without physical walls. In many ways it resembles a traditional laboratory, but each week the science of the program permeates the boundaries of *The Biggest Loser* ranch and enters the home of the consumer. The significance of *The Biggest Loser* is apparent, as the program’s highly scientific and technical experimentation is extremely popular in Western society and draws an average of ten million viewers to the television each episode (www.nbc.com). *The Biggest Loser* illustrates the connection of science and society through the extension of

laboratory practices and principles outside of the traditional laboratory and into the climate of weight loss and lifestyle control apparent in Western society.

From *The Biggest Loser*, we can form the idea that the obesity epidemic is actually an epidemic of self-control. *The Biggest Loser* is all about control and surveillance, as these are key to the success of the participants and experiment on the program. The experimentation that happens on *The Biggest Loser* attempts to demonstrate that the obesity epidemic *can* be controlled, and the risk associated with obesity erased, through self-control, surveillance, discipline, and technology. By applying these ideas and items, obesity can be managed at an individual level. Whether this is realistic or not, Western society (as reflected through *The Biggest Loser*) emphasizes an individual approach to health that can be achieved through the extension of laboratory practices and scientific principles out of the laboratory and into the home. This intertwining of science and society creates risk, as defined in Chapter 1. Further research in this area is needed if society is to address obesity in a manner that is not dependent on victim-blaming discourses or which further creates or perpetuates a moralized perception of obesity.

5.3 Future Directions

Numerous examples of non-traditional laboratories within society make it challenging to limit discussion to one specific illustration of this concept. While *The Biggest Loser* represents the most popular of the weight-based reality television programs, researchers could draw comparisons with numerous others or study them as stand-alone laboratory sites.

The real value of this research is the extension of laboratory studies beyond the traditional study site. While other authors and theorists outline how to perform a traditional laboratory study, I provide a framework for research taking place beyond the traditional laboratory site. I am confident that sociology would benefit from the extension of this methodology and the theoretical science studies framework. Non-normative laboratory sites could also include weight loss programs, such as Weight Watchers or L.A. Fitness. Even the kitchen provides a fantastic site for a laboratory study, as this is where individuals engage with numerous sciences, facts, and technologies to create healthy bodies for themselves and their

families. A study of this nature would create a new theoretical intersection between the sociology of family and that of science and technology, extending laboratory studies in a way that benefits both fields of research.

If I were to continue with this line of research, a future study would involve an examination of how the conceptions of obesity on the program, and the science and technologies used in the experimentation, have changed throughout the course of the nine seasons of *The Biggest Loser*. I would also draw comparisons between the weight loss ‘teams’, as they are divided on the program into what is arguably two separate experiments. Further study would include an analysis of how ‘facts’ created in the first seasons of *The Biggest Loser* continue to inform subsequent seasons. Even further study would link any changing conceptions within the program to the changing role of obesity within Western society.

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