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Constructionist Perspectives on Body Weight: A Critical Review Essay

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Review Essay

Constructionist Perspectives on Body Weight: A Critical Review¹

Natalie Boero

Sobal, Jeffrey and Donna Maurer, eds. 1999. *Interpreting Weight: Fatness and Thinness as Social Problems*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter.

Is body weight an objective attribute of individuals, and a solely personal matter? The construction of body weight as a personal matter persists in spite of recent developments in public health warning of "epidemics" of eating disorders and obesity. Though these "epidemics" are stratified on the basis of race, gender, and socioeconomic class, and raise core sociological questions about deviance and stigma, Sobal and Maurer rightly point out that historically questions of food, nutrition, and body weight have rarely been addressed by the sociological literature. This lack of sociological attention to issues of body weight has recently begun to shift, particularly in light of feminist scholarship on the body and eating disorders (Bordo 1993) and the gendered nature of food and food preparation (DeVault 1991). However, in spite of this growing attention to the body, the social science literature on fatness has remained particularly thin.

In Jeffrey Sobal and Donna Maurer's edited volume, *Interpreting Weight: Fatness and Thinness as Social Problems*, the editors begin by problematizing this individualistic view of body weight and then seek to develop an understanding of weight as an inherently *social* phenomenon. Drawing on the work of Spector and Kitsuse (1987) they set out to apply a multi-disciplinary, social constructionist perspective to the issues of fatness and thinness. Pointing out that most approaches to the study of body weight begin with an understanding of weight as an objective social fact, Sobal and Maurer argue that a constructionist account of body size will contribute to our understandings of fatness and thinness as social problems by "focusing on how social problems are created, maintained, and promoted within social environments" (3). In their opening chapter Sobal and Maurer loosely classify a constructionist perspective as an approach to the study of social problems that does not

¹ My sincere thanks to Orit Avishai, Cheri Jo Pascoe, Barrie Thorne, Kerry Woodward, and the BJS editorial board for their thoughtful comments on various drafts of this essay.

rely on the unearthing of objective facts, but one that focuses on the process of defining and constructing social problems.

The chapters in this book are written by scholars from several disciplines, including sociology, history, nutrition, psychology, and public health. All of the articles draw on original empirical research. These previously unpublished works reflect a wide variety of methodological and theoretical perspectives, though the editors suggest that all, to varying degrees, borrow from and build on the constructionist perspective outlined above. The twelve chapters are grouped into five sections that the editors claim reflect fundamental and interrelated perspectives that can be used to explore the social construction of body size and weight: historical, medical, gendered, institutional, and collective.

Following the introduction, the book's second section features articles by Peter N. Stearns and Paula Saukko that seek to locate concerns about body size in specific historical and cultural contexts. Building on his previous work on the history of fatness in France and the United States (Stearns 1997), Stearns offers a comparative historical analysis of American and French understandings of children's body weight. Stearns argues that throughout the first half of the 20th century, a French focus on disciplined eating and a lax American attitude towards children's food consumption in large part explains lower rates of childhood obesity in France. However, Stearns' argument is weakened in parts by an unnecessary and ahistorical search for the causes of childhood obesity. Because of this, at several points Stearns seems quick to prescribe French patterns of eating and discipline as a solution to higher American rates of childhood obesity.

In the second article in this section Paula Saukko offers another fascinating historical exploration of the life and work of Hilde Bruch, a 20th century pioneer in American research on eating disorders and obesity. Positing that theories of eating disorders and obesity tell us much more about the historical contexts in which these theories were written than they tell us about the "disorders" themselves, Saukko carefully examines Bruch's early psychological theories of anorexia and obesity in light of the political, economic, and sexual contexts in which Bruch was writing. Saukko shows how Bruch's depictions of the laziness and weak character of fat recent immigrants and the docility and dependence of white middle class anorexics connected with and reinforced common notions of citizenship and femininity. Saukko's greatest contribution in this piece is not her understanding of how theories of body size are historically contingent on the various contexts in which they arise, but rather how they are historically persistent.

In the book's third section, Mark T. Hamin, and David Smith and Sally Horrocks explore the medical history of body weight. Hamin's article examines the early 20th century development of several scientific communities in five biomedical traditions, natural-historical, biostatistical-anthropometric, psychological-behavioral, psychological-chemical, and surgical-mechanical, each with its own theory of body weight. This article provides an important historical perspective from which to view current scientific approaches to the study of body weight, in particular with regard to the emergence of medical specialties dealing with weight. However, Hamin's claims could have been significantly broadened and strengthened had he more explicitly situated his work in the larger body of research on the development of medical professions.

Smith and Horrocks's article chronicles the rise and fall of the Dreyer Method for the assessment of physical well being. The Dreyer Method, developed in Britain by Georges Dreyer in the late 1910s and early 1920s, was a quantitative formula for determining levels of fitness. The authors present multiple arguments explaining the popularity of the Dreyer method, including its appeal to medical professionals seeking to find ways to apply mathematic principles to medical problems. The authors also suggest that this method for the measurement of health and fitness, and the support it received from the British government facilitated the "active management of the bodies of individuals and groups by scientists and health professionals, on behalf of the state" (89). This method allowed the British government to determine levels of public health by creating a system of aggregates (statistics) which determined where individuals and populations fell in a distribution around an "objective" norm. Though this observation strongly resonates with Foucault's (1973, 1977) work on the governance of individuals through the ascendancy of norms, the authors have not engaged these Foucaultian concepts. More broadly, this neglect of Foucault is indicative of the authors' general lack of theoretical grounding. In spite of a paucity of theory, this analysis of the Dreyer Method makes a significant contribution in the potential it creates for contextualizing contemporary scientific techniques for measuring and evaluating body size. Though the Dreyer method was eventually replaced by other measures of health and fitness, its history remains an example of the political, economic, and professional forces that shape current definitions of health and illness.

The fourth cluster of articles, the strongest in the book, focuses on the gendered constructions of fatness and thinness. Essays by Nita Mary McKinley, John Germanov and Lauren Williams, and Martha McCaughy explore the relationships between body size and gender, specifically, femininity. It is interesting to note that McCaughy's article on the parallels between anorexia and compulsive male bodybuilding is

the only article in this book that attempts to bring a discussion of masculinity into theorizing on body weight.

In their piece, Germanov and Williams offer a Foucaultian perspective on the overwhelmingly female practice of dieting. The authors extend Foucault's theory of the panopticon by arguing that constant surveillance of women by other women, and themselves, plays a central role in perpetuating and naturalizing dieting as a taken for granted aspect of femininity. Indeed, recent statistics show that dieting has become a normal part of life for girls as young as eight (Fraser 1997). Given these trends, the analysis Germanov and Williams provide becomes even more prescient.

In her theoretically sophisticated piece "Ideal Women/Ideal Weight," McKinley discusses the gendered nature of ideal weights, arguing that we live in a culture in which women's adherence to feminine norms is largely evaluated on the basis of their appearance. Connecting ideals about weight with norms in other areas of women's existence, including motherhood and sexual norms, McKinley clearly demonstrates how constructions of ideal weight and ideal women are deeply intertwined. McKinley concludes her piece with the suggestion that, because of the intersection of normative weight and normative femininity, it is fat women who can then potentially embody resistance to ideologies of both weight and gender. In other words, by virtue of their visible departure from the ideal of thinness, fat women are walking protests against oppressive feminine norms. Though this claim is logically congruent with McKinley's central argument, the issue of fat women and resistance is far more complex than McKinley acknowledges and is very much in need of further exploration. It is also worth noting that constructions of ideal weights and ideal women are also inextricable from the construction of ideally white women and ideally heterosexual women, an observation McKinley fails to make in any depth.

Articles by S. Bryn Austin and Ellen S. Parnham make up the fifth section of the book, which centers on the often-neglected institutional components of the construction of fatness and thinness. In Parnham's piece the author discusses the contested meanings of weight among dieticians and nutritionists. Parnham's piece is important in understanding how nutritionists and dieticians view their profession vis-à-vis the topic of weight management. However, because the author focuses on how dieticians and nutritionists negotiate popular understandings of fatness and does not look at how these meanings are created and transformed *within* these two professions, this article is particularly weak in its employment of a constructionist perspective.

Austin's article, "Commodity Knowledge in Consumer Culture," provides critical insights for understanding contemporary developments in public health and the growth of the diet industry. In this piece, Austin details the role of nutritional health promotion programs in the development and expansion of the commercial diet industry in the U.S. Situating himself in the literatures on public health, consumerism, and consumption, Austin adeptly demonstrates that the knowledge disseminated through nutritional health promotion programs is a crucial link between the producers and consumers of diet foods and services. Austin uses two case studies, the government's "Project Lean" program, and the development of the "Healthy Choice" line of diet foods to show how this knowledge lays a common foundation for diet food producers and consumers. In demonstrating this entanglement of public health programs and the market place, Austin provides useful information for evaluating the concomitant growth of public health programs dealing with nutrition and body weight, and the exponential growth of the \$33 billion per year American diet industry.

In the final section on collective process, Sobal and Maurer contribute pieces on the meanings of fatness and thinness in the vegetarian movement and in the size acceptance movement. In Maurer's work on the vegetarian movement, she shows how popular images of "skinny" and "malnourished" vegetarians have been central to the ways in which the movement has chosen to construct its public image in opposition to these stereotypes. She argues that in order to combat these negative images, leaders in the vegetarian movement have self-consciously chosen to downplay the potential weight loss resulting from a vegetarian diet and to focus instead on more general health benefits of vegetarianism.

Sobal's article "The Size Acceptance Movement and the Social Construction of Body Weight" is a hopeful conclusion to the book. In this piece Sobal chronicles the development of the Size Acceptance Movement, a movement whose general purpose is activism and education against size discrimination. It is the movement's assertion that because dominant U.S. beliefs falsely deem fatness as necessarily unhealthy, the result of individual deviance, and entirely changeable that size discrimination has not been widely problematized.

Sobal's main task in this paper is to offer a general overview of the movement through an examination of its historical development since the 1960s and the founding of the National Association to Advance Fat Acceptance (NAAFA). Also central to Sobal's analysis is a consideration of movement allies, strategies, and functions. Though Sobal's piece is an interesting preliminary dissection of a movement, its

strength lies in presenting alternatives to oppressive and stigmatizing understandings of fatness.

All of the articles in this book are well chosen, and contribute in some way to an understanding of body weight as a social construct and more generally to the development of a constructionist perspective. Because of the intensely individualistic nature of popular understandings and representations of body weight, the strongest pieces in this book are those that most truly employ the constructionist perspective outlined by Sobal and Maurer in the preface. It is interesting to note that most of these come out of History and Gender Studies, disciplines in which a social constructionist perspective has long been embraced as a theoretical and methodological tool. It is perhaps in the areas where it is most needed, in medicine and public health, that the constructionist perspective is weakest in this book.

My strongest criticism of this book as a whole is the general lack of interrogation of the language commonly used to talk about body size. In her article "Thinking Sex," Gayle Rubin has argued that recent scholarship on the constructed nature of sex and sexuality "has brought a welcome insistence that sexual terms be restricted to their proper historical and social contexts" (1993: 278). Moreover, as Rubin asserts elsewhere in "Thinking Sex," an archaeology of the language we use to talk about sexuality is not ancillary to, but rather at the core of the study of sex and sexuality. With the exception of Sobal's discussion of the significance of reclaiming and de-stigmatizing the word "fat" for activists in the Size Acceptance Movement, the works presented in this book pay little attention to language. Even the title of the book itself, perhaps unintentionally, constructs a binary relationship between "fatness" and "thinness" that begs for analysis. Another example of this inattentiveness to language is the authors' unreflective use of the terminology employed to talk about fatness. Terms like "obese," "fat," "overweight," and "large" (to name a few) are all historically specific social constructions in and of themselves. To simply use these terms as synonyms is to deny the historical, social, and political contexts in which these terms emerged and are deployed. I would argue that when the place of language is reflected in scholarship on body weight, this work will be more dynamic and more truly reflect a constructionist perspective.

In general, I highly recommend this book both to scholars interested in the issue of body size as well as to a more general audience. *Interpreting Weight* goes a long way in advancing our understanding of the historical and contemporary construction of body weight in the United States. This book is by no means an exhaustive account of the interrelated economic, political, and social complexities around the questions of fatness and thinness. Its strength, however, is that it

represents a decisive and multifaceted break from individualized, normative, and moralistic popular psychological and medical theories of body size.

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