

# Chewing the fat: Feminist analyses of neo-liberal discourses on obesity

## [ B O O K R E V I E W ]

Tischner, I (2013) **Fat Lives: A feminist psychological exploration.** (Women and Psychology series.) London & New York: Routledge. ISBN: 978-0-415-68094-3 pbk. Pages ix + 166.

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Apart from the material that the domain of popular media literally sells to us, it also gives us clues as to what cultural products and social constructs are being produced and presented for broader discursive consumption, usually to ideological ends far more serious than the forms in which they are conveyed. Take the issue of health and more specifically, body size. Although there has always been significant emotional, political and economic currency in the topic of health, there is currently an onslaught of messages and images that speak to a notion of health informed by a particular construction of the *overweight* or *obese* body. Follow the thread of seemingly nonsensical reality television (“*The biggest loser*”), seemingly innocuous news headlines (“*What caused the obesity crisis in the West?*”; “*Most obese South Africans in denial!*”), or advertisements (*Coca cola’s anti-obesity ad campaign* – in the United States), unpack the meaning making occurring beneath the surface and you are likely to find rather sober proscriptions governing our lives and bodies - often with our “manufactured consent”. Although far more visible in the UK and US, these pronouncements on fat bodies are gaining discursive momentum here in South Africa.

The body has almost always been at the centre of culturally constructed ideals of gender identity, attractiveness, sexuality, strength, fertility and a host of other value-laden ideals of beauty, goodness and power (Bordo, 1998). Women’s bodies in particular have received ongoing scholarly attention, with biomedical discourses playing a powerful role in dominant meaning making around women’s well-being. The discipline of psychology is a prime example of how women’s biological and social inferiority has historically been ‘written on the body’ in theories of women’s madness, badness and sadness (Ussher, 1992; Chesler, 2005). Feminist analyses shifted the discourse

around the body from biological causation to social construction and regulation, with a pivotal text being Susie Orbach's 1978 publication **Fat is a feminist issue**, a book that linked women's relationships with fat and food to broader societal power dynamics and gender inequity. In the thirty-five year interim since that publication, there has not been much focus on individual narratives that speak to the experience of being "large", with scholarly attention seemingly more drawn to the medicalisation and pathologisation of being "too thin".

This book, **Fat lives**, offers us a feminist psychological exploration into the subject of fat, looking at women's embodied experience of being large and exploring how self-designated "fat" individuals discursively manage their subjectivities and subject positions within the politics of "obesity". The context of Tischner's study and this publication is British society and the introductory chapter gives a glimpse of the current "healthism" and "war on obesity" in the UK, using examples from popular media, national health promotion campaigns, and medical and psychological literature. As stated by Cheek (2008, cited in Tischner, p 6), "Health has become ... a new form of badge of honour by which we can claim to be responsible and worthy as citizens and individuals".

Tischner also introduces a reflexive thread that runs subtly throughout the text by succinctly describing her own "embodied experiences of the regulatory power of discourses" (p 3), with reference to the gendered body, feminization and weight. The study is simultaneously a critique of reductionist approaches to public health, a commentary on the role of discourse in reproducing power relations and a description of the production of subjectivities within the broader body politic. The feminist poststructuralist and critical psychological theoretical resources are well suited to a study such as this. The premise of knowledge as partial and situated, rather than as a metanarrative of truth shifts analytic attention to the contextual sites (material and discursive) and subject positionings out of which particular meanings and experiences of obesity emerge. Together these resources thus allow Tischner to explore the link between macropolitical governance and micropolitical self-governance of bodies (Saukko & Reed, 2010, cited in Tischner).

This book has seven chapters, and to my reading can be divided into three distinct sections. The introduction and first two chapters set the scene, describing the social context of the issue of obesity, reviewing relevant literature on the topic and outlining the research methodology, respectively. A separate appendix includes further detail on the "epistemological, theoretical and methodological foundations of the critical psychological approach taken in exploring fat embodiment" (p 133). I am not sure whether this separation works and I would rather have it included in the main body of the book. My guess is that the dilemma was between overwhelming the reader and forfeiting a substantial theoretical review that had probably accompanied the original dissertation.

Chapters 3 to 6 focus specifically on the research data and are positioned as the heart of the book. The data emerged from interviews with both women and men and were analysed using Foucauldian discourse analysis (FDA). The author provides a clear and accessible description of the difference between various strands of discourse analysis and of the principles of FDA. This section will be useful to students who are often overwhelmed by the range of different offerings that define discourse analysis and describe how to do it.

The excerpts from interviews with participants provided a rich nuance to the analysis and made the analytic commentary on the main themes easy to follow and comprehend. The first theme on the in/visibility of fat women looked at issues of surveillance and the politics of visibility or appearance. The second theme was on issues of clothing choice and availability. Tischner

describes how “The women constituted themselves as interested in fashion and appearance, but regulated and hampered by the retail industry, and a neo-liberal society that values self-perfection according to socially constructed standards, which equate fat with unattractive, and unhealthy” (p 73).

The third theme concerned the constructions of health, responsibility for health/weight and the neoliberal citizen: “... in the current neoliberal atmosphere of healthism, health and healthcare have been made the individual’s responsibility and body weight has become the prime indicator of a person’s health status, and by extension, moral standing” (p 7). The analysis draws on Nikolas Rose to describe how in neo-liberal societies like the UK, notions of individual responsibility mean that the role of the state escapes scrutiny and individuals’ “free choice” is a regulative freedom based on what is considered culturally normative and for the good of society.

While the author acknowledges that the theme of “gender” runs through all the analysis, it is dealt with as a separate thematic chapter. She describes her surprise that the concept of gender was not spoken about much in interviews with women, while it was clearly raised by men. Her curiosity led to subsequent focus groups on “gendering fat” and the chapter thus looks more explicitly at issues of gendered identity and gender differences and similarities in the embodied experience of being fat.

I like the way in which, using fat or obesity as an illustration, this book allows for a critical interrogation of the ways in which subjectivities are produced, reinforced or transmuted through discursive constructions of “difference”, deviance and personal responsibility. It shows how these discursive mobilisations can exclude, marginalize and oppress those who do not fit within these narrow and regulated brackets of dominant notions of what is normal, natural and healthy.

The analysis was also strengthened by the focus on agency in participant’s resistance to objectification, the ways in which they asserted their denied subjectivity and disrupted and resisted the hegemonic readings of the fat body. This is one area in which this book could resonate in our South African context as the large, Black body has been construed as a resistance to “both imperatives of whiteness and slenderness as an ideal state of embodiment ... as well as to hegemonic aesthetic imperatives” (Shaw, 2006, cited in Ogana & Ojong, 2013, p 111).

I like how clearly structured, coherent and accessible this book is. It is a good example of how to describe and share relevant research with a wider audience, while still making a contribution to the body of critical scholarly literature. Because of this, the book will benefit not only those working on the topic of the gendered body, but those interested in using the resources of poststructuralist and critical feminist theory as a way of making sense of social issues. I would recommend this book to students who are embarking on a research project and intend using critical psychology and feminist poststructuralism as theoretical resources.

The other side of this coin is that in my opinion the book lacks a more nuanced analysis. Perhaps the analysis seemed a bit weak to me because in our African context the body has been so heavily implicated in the ideological projects of scientific racism, and constructions of health deeply informed by gendered and racialised notions of sexuality, risk and deviance (MacFadden, 1992; Gqola, 2005). Social crises (whether “HIV/AIDS” or “obesity”) are given a specific moral lexicon depending upon the ideological needs of a society at a given moment in time (Gilman, 1988). I would have liked Tischner to go further in interrogating how ‘the fat crisis’ as historically

situated, structured by political economies and institutions (global, national, familial – all gendered, sexualized and racialised), and inextricably enmeshed with the social ideologies and cultural codes. I missed that deeper engagement. On the whole though, I expected to have to wade through heavy, inaccessible theory and culturally irrelevant analytic conclusions and I was pleasantly surprised to find that this was not the case.

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