



Education, disordered eating and obesity discourse: fat fabrications

lisahunter

To cite this article: lisahunter (2010) Education, disordered eating and obesity discourse: fat fabrications, *Sport, Education and Society*, 15:4, 515-518, DOI: [10.1080/13573322.2010.519179](https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2010.519179)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573322.2010.519179>



Published online: 09 Oct 2010.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 437



View related articles [↗](#)

Sugden does not appear driven by an ethical concern for participants, but rather the desire to uncover information that is currently secret, but the revelation of which is deemed politically or ethically important.

The final chapter by Williams and Williams offers an apposite conclusion to the book. In reviewing the main research findings on obesity, type 2 diabetes mellitus and the metabolic syndrome, Williams and Williams note nothing of concern methodologically or philosophically in this research. However, having outlined what is known about the choices of prevention for these diseases they left us with the conclusion that science alone cannot show us how to deal with a problem which is not only scientific, but also moral, ethical and political.

As the editor, McNamee has done an admirable job in compiling a collection of essays that offer a relatively moderate critique of the health, exercise and sport sciences. At times, the book jumped markedly from chapter to chapter, leaving me feeling that some resequencing or work on smoother linkages could have been considered. Yet, there is much to recommend in this book as it offers an accessible combination of both philosophical theorizing and concrete examples drawn from practicing scientists. I share McNamee's hope that this book will appeal to those teaching or studying undergraduate and postgraduate methodologies of the sciences of sport, exercise and health.

Hamish Crocket, Department of Sport & Leisure Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

Email: hamish.crocket@gmail.com

© Hamish Crocket, 2010

Education, disordered eating and obesity discourse: fat fabrications

John Evans, Emma Rich, Brian Davies & Rachel Allwood (Eds), 2008

London, Routledge

22.99 pounds sterling (pbk), 182 pp.

ISBN10: 0-415-41895-X (pbk)

ISBN10: 0-203-92671-4 (ebk)

The pervasive weight discourse consciously wounded me for the first time at about age four when I witnessed the deep hurt on mum's face as three kids called her 'fatty,' continuing with comments starting with 'you're so fat you . . .' Many readers will no doubt be familiar with such jaunts that are still common more than 40 years on. A caring, thoughtful and generous person who taught us to never treat people so insensitively, mum was sitting undercover on the small wooden seats by the public pool watching me practice my lifesaving and then have some 'free time' with my friends. Tears of anger in my eyes I ran out of the pool and chased the bullies away, feeling very dissatisfied with the response, but also bewildered at why this would even happen. Mum had put on a lot of weight after having me and struggled with it for the rest of her life despite eating less and walking everywhere as she carted us four kids around town

to do the motherly duties such as shopping, and all the other things people would mostly do using a car. She had been a successful sports person, playing representative tennis, hockey and lacrosse before marriage, tennis and golf when mothering duties allowed. Her pre-children photos showed her to have quite a different shape. I knew that others' comments made her sad; her anguish carried in her flesh until her death. Several of my students have suffered terribly, one losing her battle with life, due to anorexia. My content area is probably a culprit in their suffering.

Many of us have experienced such stories and we know so much more now—about the difficulties of low-income mothers and physical activity, about 'body image,' about yoyo dieting, about disordered eating, and even now with books such as this, about the effects of the more recent 'obesity discourse on peoples' health. Yet despite this knowledge, as a society we still witness practices of strong moralizing around the body with palpable effects located in eating practices, including eating disorders. This book complements several others such as Kathleen LeBesco's *Revolting bodies: The struggle to redefine fat identity* (2004) and Michael Gard and Jan Wright's *The obesity epidemic: science, morality, and ideology* (2005) to challenge some of the thinking that goes on in institutions such as the media and schools, thinking that works through the bodies of young people, such as the girls in this book, and with devastating outcomes.

The authors of *Education, disordered eating and obesity discourse* provoke us as a society to rethink, and ultimately re-practice that which makes my opening story possible. They investigate how 'body centered' talk about exercise, eating and weight is made possible through science-health policy (Chapters 3 and 6), through popular culture and media lifestyle advertising (Chapter 5), through schools (Chapters 6 and 7), through emotion and desire (Chapter 8), through gender and class (Chapter 7) and of course through the 'obesity' discourse (Chapters 2–4). But they do not just employ critique, a criticism often made about critical theory—a position taken in the book. They offer potential answers in the form of alternative pedagogies to rethink health and a challenge to health education that will shake some of the foundations of what it means to 'do' health—the corporeal processes as indicators of social reproduction and change (Shilling, 2008). They address the debate around health and weight using a sociocultural perspective in how 'body centered talk around weight, fat, food and exercise is "recontextualized" ... its impact upon the health and embodied subjectivities of young people' (3). Using five years of research about the disordered eating of young women, the authors explore the obesity discourses through the women's experiences of mainstream schooling and their own disorder. Like LeBesco, Gard and Wright, and others attending to the discursive work associated with eating and exercise, John Evans, Emma Rich, Brian Davies and Rachel Allwood have eloquently challenged not only a set of powerful discourses but also those who have built successful careers through establishing or reinforcing such discourses, or who have been unknowing perpetrators of such symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1998) through the four fat fabrications of obesity discourse (Chapter 10).

This book is an important read for those seeking education to work in professions related to health, physical activity, nutrition, education, young people and/or related to the body. This includes those educators in higher education responsible for teaching courses associated with physical activity, nutrition, exercise science, health education and physical education. As a member of the HPE and Teacher Education professions the book reminds me that there is not just the enduring bodywork in schools about which I need to be vigilant to avoid reproducing oppressive practices, but also that as adults our responses to such issues are embodied in our everyday practices that I can resist, counter or reinforce. The lives of the young women in the study on which the book is based could be our own stories or those of the young people in our own lives. They are stories that deserve compassion and a thoughtful response by all. As such I would endorse the book not just to educators but also to the adult public who want to go beyond news media for their intellectual reading. The value of interpretive ethnographic research is apparent in the production of such a book, specifically in terms of illustrating significant points with the stories of the young women but touching on broader social issues that some chapters address. Perhaps the authors could follow up with a trade book to bring their findings into an even more public arena!

Evans and colleagues' critique reveals the insidious but also explicit bodywork done through standards of performance and appearance in and beyond schools. Such work is not just related to weight, as I am sure these authors would be quick to suggest, hence their continued call for the work of critical pedagogy that relates to the many oppressive and unjust practices in society and in one of its institutional powers—the school. While we should not overemphasize the effect and responsibility of schools and teachers around issues such as these, we also need to simultaneously recognize those professionals, including teachers, are people with prejudices and normalizing practices, but some also with critical pedagogies and a strong sense of social justice—the very people who can embody change through their pedagogy. To the list of professionals we can add exercise physiologists, champions of physical activity and sport, nurses, coaches and nutritionists. A discussion about alternative pedagogies in a book such as this recognizes the importance of creating a sociology of possibility: employing a sociological imagination (Mills, 1959). It is in our corporeal practices that we (de)legitimate and (re)value particular discourses and dispositions.

The process of conscientization popularized by Paulo Freire (1993) and underpinning the intentions of the book, it is hoped, would deter the more mindful professional or academic from employing harmful discourse, those *counterproductive* to their professed objectives. But such a call needs to go to *all* people, as even young children know how to employ powerful and unjust discourses to oppress others, as illustrated in my early experience that still has traces of emotion imprinted as enflashed memory. I would recommend this book as compulsory reading in undergraduate courses and academic areas associated with the aforementioned professionals and subject areas. It is a very readable, well-written book, yet with concepts that will

challenge then hopefully inform practices that reduce the circulation of oppressive myths such as those exposed in this book.

References

- Bourdieu, P. (1998) *Practical reason. On the theory of action* (Cambridge, Polity Press).
- Freire, P. (1993) *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (New rev. 20th-Anniversary edn) (New York, Continuum).
- Gard, M. & Wright, J. (2005) *The obesity epidemic: science, morality, and ideology* (New York, Routledge).
- LeBesco, K. (2004) *Revolting bodies: the struggle to redefine fat identity* (Boston, MA, University of Massachusetts Press).
- Mills, C. W. (1959) *The sociological imagination* (New York, Oxford University Press).
- Shilling, C. (2008) *Changing bodies: habit, crisis and creativity* (Los Angeles, CA, SAGE).

lisahunter, Department of Sport & Leisure Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand, and School of Human Movement Studies, The University of Queensland, Australia.

Email: lisahunter@waikato.ac.nz

© lisahunter, 2010

Physical education: picking up the batons

Malcolm Thorburn & Shirley Gray (Eds), 2009

Edinburgh, Dunedin Academic Press

Sterling: 14.50; US\$24.65, pp. vi + 92

ISBN: 978-1-906716-07-3

Physical education: picking up the baton edited and collectively authored by Malcolm Thorburn and Shirley Gray is the twenty-seventh book in a series entitled 'Policy and Practice in Education'. It is arguably notable for its subject-specific focus, with the majority of preceding texts addressing issues with recognised broad appeal across subject communities and/or phases of schooling, including school leadership, learning communities and assessment. In some respects, the focus of this text can be seen as signifying the status that physical education has recently gained in education and political arenas in Scotland. Thorburn and Gray's emphasis is that this is a time of unprecedented policy opportunity for physical education in Scotland and that furthermore, it is essential that the physical education community recognises this and 'picks up the baton' in response. In reading this relatively short text, however, I came to increasingly question the likelihood of an adequate response arising, but also the nature of the 'opportunity' that physical education as a school subject and a profession is being presented with in Scotland. In his concluding chapter Thorburn (2009a) acknowledges that physical education has been identified as 'a major part of the policy solution' (77), a statement that begs us to pursue what precisely is being presented as the 'policy problem'.