

Becoming Smaller: Autobiographical Spaces of Weight Loss

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Abstract: This research focuses on the spaces and politics of *weight loss*. It is informed by “fat studies”, critical geographical scholarship on fat, and two contrasting feminist readings of Michel Foucault’s notion of “care of the self”. Using autobiography as a method of inquiry I share my experience of “becoming smaller” through weight loss dieting. I argue that losing weight for me has been paradoxical on at least three counts: first, by being a feminist scholar who critiques discourses around women and slimness while at the same time desiring to be slim; second, by my new eating patterns marking me simultaneously as both a disciplined and a disordered subject; and third, by publically and politically supporting the Health at Every Size movement but privately in my “quest” to recreate myself emphasizing shedding kilos over fitness. The article concludes that understanding these paradoxes that surround weight loss is useful for furthering understanding of a complex embodied, gendered and spatialized process.

Keywords: fat, weight loss, autobiography, feminism, body, women, paradox

Introduction

Over the past few years “fat”¹ has become an important issue in many parts of the Western world. Governments and public health officials are claiming that, on average, people who live in urban areas in the West are getting heavier each year (Langdon 1999) and this is highly problematical. Bethan Evans (2010:21) draws attention to a statement in a UK Department of Health 2002 Annual Report that describes obesity as “a health time bomb with the potential to explode over the next three decades”. Evans also refers to a statement made by the US Surgeon General as “a threat that is every bit as real to America as weapons of mass destruction”. Clearly, governments and public health officials have become increasingly concerned, panicked even, about this new “epidemic” and have been urging people to lose weight. Obesity is assumed to be a “problem”, a potentially catastrophic problem, and a sign of irresponsibility and immorality. As Rachel Colls and Bethan Evans (2009:1012) suggest: “The politicization of body size in this way is resulting in, and reflects, a widespread fear of fatness and prejudice against those deemed ‘fat’ or obese.” Fear of and prejudice against fatness affects not only women, but also increasingly men (Aaronovitch 2000). Fatness is thought to reflect poorly on individuals, communities, and nations. Individuals, and entire populations, are therefore being encouraged to lose weight.

It is this issue of losing weight that is the focus of this article. While human geographers have begun to make some useful critical contributions on the politics and spatiality of fatness (see Colls 2006; Colls and Evans 2008; Evans 2006; Herrick 2007; Longhurst 2005) to date they have written little on weight loss despite there being much to reflect on in relation to the social and spatial relations that surround the slimming/slimmed body [although see Guthman and DuPuis (2006) on a political economy of eating and dieting]. Peter Hopkins (2008:2111) argues: "certain indicators of identity ... have been neglected within human geography. In particular, there is a lack of research that focuses on critical geographies of body size." He explains that there is some literature on fat bodies but this literature needs to be extended to include "the experiences of those who are thin, small or tall" (p 2111). One could add "slimmed" to this list. Also, examining slimmed/slimming bodies or weight loss helps make it possible to understand more about the shifting and temporal nature of embodiment.

What I aim to offer in this article is a combination of feminist poststructuralist theory on the body and personal experience. I examine what becoming smaller has meant to me. In just over a year I lost more than a third of my body weight (35 kg or 77 pounds) reducing from a size 20/22 to a 10/12.² I have so far retained this new weight for 18 months. In this article I reflect on the experience of weight loss using a spatial lens. Weight loss shapes, and in turn is shaped by, various psychoanalytic, discursive and material spaces. Colls and Evans (2009:1012) note: "space and place are becoming increasingly important to the conception and deployment of obesity politics". They are also becoming increasingly important to the processes and politics that surround weight loss.

In the first section, I situate this research in an area of scholarship known as "fat studies" and in some of the critical *geographical* scholarship on fat. Following this I outline Cressida Heyes' (2006) and Samantha Murray's (2008) contrasting feminist readings of Michel Foucault's notion of "care of the self" developed in his later work (Foucault 1985, 1988). Since the research rests "heavily" on a narration of my own lived experience of a slimmed body, the second section offers a discussion of autobiography as a method of inquiry. I've tried to avoid writing some kind of solipsistic self-reflection in which I set myself up as a diet guru for others and instead have attempted to offer an account that positions my paradoxical experiences as central to my critical scholarship on fat bodies. In the remainder of the article I argue that body size affects people's experiences of space. The aim is to raise awareness about discrimination against fat people but also to suggest that losing weight for me has been contradictory on at least three counts: first, by being a feminist scholar who critiques discourse around women and slimness while at the same time desiring to be slim and embarking on a weight loss project; second, by my new eating patterns being simultaneously both disciplined and disordered; and third, by publically and politically supporting the Health at Every Size movement but in my private "quest" to recreate myself emphasizing shedding kilos over fitness. The article concludes that understanding some of these paradoxes that surround weight loss is useful in furthering understanding of a complex embodied and spatialized process.

“Fat Studies”, Feminist Geographical Scholarship on Fat, and “Care of the Self”

For a long time there have been cultural anxieties about fatness and the stigmatization of fat bodies in Western cultures (at least since the early twentieth century) but more recently new discourses have emerged about the indecency of the fat body, about fatness as something to be feared and loathed, and about obesity as a disease that is reaching epidemic proportions across the globe (Kulick and Meneley 2005). Unsurprisingly, fat has been subjected to increased medicalization and pathologization. It is these discourses about the “obesity epidemic” and the like that have given rise to an area of scholarship known as “fat studies”.

Fat studies has provided much needed critical insight into, and examination of, some of the social, cultural, political and ethical implications of the various meanings that have come to be associated with fat bodies. Perhaps more than any other area of scholarship on fat, it has provided a space for recounting some of the *lived experiences* of those who are fat [see Murray (2005) on “living the fat body”]. Scholars and activists working in a range of different areas have discussed the effects (some enabling, but most disabling) of living in a society that reveres slimness. They illustrate how (bio)medical knowledges occupy a privileged discursive position and therefore are widely believed to reveal an essential and irrefutable “truth” about fat bodies.³

Over the past decade, informed by fat studies, some much needed critical research on fat has emerged in geography (eg Bell and Valentine 1997; Craven 1996; Evans 2006, 2010; Guthman and DuPuis 2006; Longhurst 2005).⁴ One of the people at the forefront of this critical geographical scholarship on fatness is Rachel Colls. In 2002 Colls explained that fat refers to a person’s body size but also to their “emotional size”, that is, to the way in which people perceive their bodies. Some “average” sized or even “thin” people (eg anorexics) understand themselves to be fat while some fat people understand themselves to be “average” or perhaps even “thin” (Colls 2002:219). Colls has also reported on big women’s experiences of shopping for clothes in a UK city (Colls 2004, 2006) and produced what she termed an “intra-active account of matter” which addresses “the materiality of fat” (Colls 2007). In 2009 Colls and Evans organized a “Critical geographies of fat/bigness/corpulence” symposium (published in *Antipode*). As part of this symposium Deborah McPhail examined a range of texts advising women on what to do to help slim the “tubby hubby” in cold war Canada; Evans and Colls questioned the power afforded the body mass index (BMI),⁵ especially in measuring children’s bodies, in the UK; Emma Rawlins analyzed narratives of health, eating and lifestyle within the spatial context of a school in the UK; and Julie Guthman discussed teaching a course at Santa Cruz, USA on the politics of obesity.

Geographers to date, however, have not paid much attention to geographies of weight loss and dieting. Therefore to think through the slimming and slimmed body I turned to feminist, mainly poststructuralist, accounts in other disciplines. Two contributions I found to be particularly useful are Cressida Heyes (2006) article “Foucault goes to Weight Watchers” and Samantha Murray’s (2008) chapter “Fattening up Foucault: a ‘fat’ counter-aesthetic?” Both authors consider Foucaults’

later work on “care of the self” presented in *History of Sexuality, Volume II: The Use of Pleasure* (1985) but present a different reading. In arguing for practices of care of the self Foucault suggests that “one might be able to recreate oneself as a ‘work of art’”. He writes “art has become something which is related only to objects and not to individuals, or to life . . . But couldn’t everyone’s life become a work of art? (Foucault in Rabinow 1984:350). Murray (2008:125) explains: “Foucault references the Greco-Roman world when he explains that to live a ‘beautiful life’, one must avoid regimes of excess, and practice control in all aspects of one’s existence.” For Foucault this was not a moral but an ethical project, it was not an indulgence but a necessary condition of effective citizenship.

Heyes makes the point that Foucault’s practices of the self embed people in ever-tightening webs of power but also increase their capacities. In relation to dieting this means that dieting can be both oppressive and enabling. Heyes writes that some critics of dieting such as Sandra Bartky (1990) and Susan Bordo (1993) suggest that people attempt to lose weight because they act on a false belief that it will improve their health. Other critics influenced by feminism (eg Hesse-Biber 1996), argues Heyes, suggest that women also diet because we have been “ideologically duped by an oppressive set of beauty ideals” (Heyes 2006:127). Heyes notes that while this account is not “wrong”, it does not speak to the notion that one doesn’t just become *subjected* to disciplinary practices but one can also *become a subject*. This means that:

On the one hand, deliberately losing weight by controlling diet involves the self-construction of a docile body through attention to the minutest detail. On the other hand, becoming aware of exactly how and what one eats and drinks, realizing that changing old patterns can have embodied effects, or setting a goal and moving toward it, are all enabling acts of self-transformation (Heyes 2006:128).

A useful example of “becoming a subject” can be seen in Karen Throsby’s (2008) account of weight loss surgery. Throsby refers to the reborn post-surgical subject or the “new me”. The “new me” is a familiar trope in narratives about weight loss surgery.

Murray (2008) is more critical than Heyes (2006) of the notion of becoming a subject or transforming oneself, that is using “techniques of the self” to create oneself as a “work of art”. Foucault suggests that “aesthetics of existence” may have enabling possibilities. Murray (2008:126), however, argues aesthetics are “not something spontaneously produced in a vacuum by the individual” rather, aesthetics are learned discursively. She makes the point that bodies deemed to be fat are read in many Western cultures as greedy, excessive and lacking in control. Therefore:

for the “fat” woman to conform to the aesthetic ideals that lie at the core of an “arts of existence”, she needs to transform her body, and her flesh, to be perceived as living a “beautiful life”, to become normatively beautiful. Hence, she must restrain her supposedly excessive desires, she must learn to exercise control in all aspects of her daily life, she must set about employing Foucault’s “techniques of the self” (Murray 2008:127).

Unlike Heyes, Murray focuses on the notion of *choice*, asking “how much choice does an individual really have in deciding what kind of a subject they want to

be?" Choices (including aesthetic choices), Murray argues, are determined within particular sets of discursive relations which cannot simply be deconstructed.

These are some of the arguments that have furthered my thinking on the paradoxes surrounding fat and weight loss. As previously mentioned weight loss has not yet been fully addressed by geographers and yet it can tell us a great deal about the politics, spatialities and temporalities (see Evans 2010) of fatness and slimness, "volatile bodies" (Grosz 1994) and power. It can help us to question some of the dominant moral, political, medical and health discourses (Moss and Dyck 2002; Parr and Butler 1999) that construct bodies (including the size of bodies) in particular ways. As Annemarie Jutel (2001:283) argues: "Extreme pressure to regulate the size of the body is a common contemporary theme; calorie counting, exercise obsession, body sculpting, and diet meals pervade Western cultural practices, particularly among women." Lee Monaghan (2007) explores this theme further, focusing on men's experiences of a commercial slimming club in north-east England. Monaghan argues men's bodies are "rationalized" as they strive to lose or manage weight to conform in a "sizist culture" and yet resistance was also evident. It is my aim therefore, using autobiography, to examine some of the spatial and highly paradoxical aspects of body weight reduction through dieting.

Autobiography: "Phenomenological, Reflexive, Insurgent"

Mark Purcell (2009:234) explains "autobiography is a method of inquiry in which the researcher narrates his or her own life. It shares much with biography, ethnography, and autoethnography in that they all aim to provide a rich account of human experience" (also see Besio 2005). Purcell adds to this that autobiography has not yet gained widespread respect in the discipline of geography. This seems to be an opportunity missed since an autobiographical methodology can produce powerful writing. For example, in 1998 Gill Valentine published an autobiographical account titled "Sticks and stones" which was about her experiences of being harassed (also see Lucal 1999). Valentine's article has remained with me over the years as one of the most compelling—emotionally and politically—pieces of writing I've read in geography. Valentine (1998:305) notes that although the central tenet of 1970s British and North American feminism—"the personal is political"—prompted quite a substantial body of scholarship based on personal testimony in the social sciences, feminist geographers have "been more notably circumspect about baring their souls in academic writing" (p 305).

Despite this tendency towards being somewhat circumspect, in recent years geographers have begun to explore autobiography as a way to examine the mutually constituted relationship between embodied subjectivity and space (see Moss 2001). Autobiography can combine cultural analysis with stories of the self, resulting in thick description that helps to further understanding of individuals' and groups' lives. Weight gain and loss is something that has had a dramatic effect on my life and so I want to use this to think critically about the intersection between my personal and academic experience as someone who has researched body size. These selves are not separable.

In 2005 I wrote “Fat bodies: developing geographical research agendas” in which I describe myself as a ‘big-boned girl’, a ‘solid’ teenager and a ‘plus-sized’ woman” who has “long been aware of the complex politics that inhabit the bodies and spaces of fat people” (Longhurst 2005:248). I wanted to “make some space in the academy for geographers and others interested in spatiality to take up the issue of ‘fatness/corpulence/bigness’” (Longhurst 2005:248). Prior to writing “Fat bodies”, in 2002, I carried out, with the help of research assistant Amanda Banks, semi-structured interviews with 13 women who live in Hamilton, New Zealand who self-identified as fat, large, big, overweight or obese. The aim of the research was to examine fat women’s relationships with different places such as shopping malls, cafés, work places, and beaches. The women discussed discrimination, feeling out of place, feeling “ugly”, disgust, shame, and self-loathing. Two of the women cried during the interview. The participants, however, also conveyed humour and narratives of courage and resistance. Analyzing these emotional geographies was challenging, prompting moments of painful self-reflection [see Davidson, Bondi and Smith (2005) and Davidson and Milligan (2004) on emotional geographies]. The women’s stories triggered my own hurt about being a fat woman and for the next few years I felt unable to analyze these data. More recently, since losing weight, I have been able to understand these narratives within a different frame and have attempted to convey the participants’ experiences (see Longhurst 2010).

What these reflections illustrate is that the process of constructing knowledge is always embodied (Longhurst 1997). Valentine, in the aforementioned article, quotes Gillian Rose (1997:316) as saying: “researcher, researched and research make each other; research and selves [are] ‘interactive texts’”. Valentine explains that reading Rose’s essay stirred in her a buried realization of how much of her own identity has been made and remade through her own research. Research and researchers are not easily separable nor is this necessarily desirable. This does not mean that we can all assume to unproblematically know and represent ourselves (see Gibson-Graham 1994). However, some reflection on our own complex and shifting embodiment can help materialize the notion that our subjectivities as gendered, sexual, as being a particular ethnicity, as having skin that is a particular color, and being a particular body size and shape cannot be easily separated. I recognize in writing this autobiography that while this method aims at (re)presenting an individual—the self—this is not straightforward. In poststructuralist theorizing there is now a large corpus of work that deconstructs binary divisions including the division between self and Other. Subjects are constituted in part by who and what they are not. Therefore, the lines between self and Other are always unclear. So too are the lines between autobiography (self or the individual) and autoethnography (others or society). As Purcell (2009) notes: “therefore, the goal is never to elucidate ‘only’ the self, since no self exists in isolation”.

Purcell (2009) refers to a number of different forms of “autobiography as method”, although he explains that these are not necessarily autonomous. My account is based on several of the approaches he outlines. The first mentioned by Purcell (2009:34) which is relevant to this project is “phenomenological autobiography”. This is autobiography that tries to “capture the felt experience of everyday life”. This approach recognizes the richness of human experience

including the “ordinary” person and values this. My account also contains elements of what Purcell calls “reflexive autobiography” which is typically informed by poststructuralist critiques and involves researchers critically examining their own subjectivity. Knowledge is understood to be actively constructed by the researcher and therefore it is important to examine critically the multiple social and political relations invested in the production of knowledge. A third type of autobiography discussed by Purcell (2009) is “insurgent autobiography”. This research also has elements of this in that it aims to actively destabilize dominant assumptions about obesity and to give voice to those who are marginalized by a culture that revolves around slim bodies—bodies that exercise and deny themselves food in the pursuit of an aesthetic ideal. Trim and taut bodies are constructed in the contemporary West as superior to fat bodies and in this way, this is undoubtedly a political project.

In using autobiography as method I aim to recognize that attitudes about gender, obesity, and weight loss vary historically and culturally. I draw inspiration from other feminist and critical social scientists who have written about fatness and slimming to raise awareness about discrimination against large people. My aim is not to attempt to speak about weight loss generally. Instead I acknowledge that my account squarely rests on my experience as a predominantly working class but well-educated, academic, “Pākehā” (white) woman who lives in a small city, Hamilton,⁶ New Zealand. This specificity does not mean that this account is of limited use. It can, hopefully, help shed light on the multiple, complex, and shifting discourses that surround dieting and weight loss in a variety of different places and cultural milieus allowing for contrasts and comparisons to be made. It is of course just one story of many I could have relayed.

Simultaneously Critiquing and Desiring Slimness

In the following sections I aim to raise awareness about discrimination against fat people but also suggest that losing weight for me has been paradoxical. The first paradox is that for the last couple of years I have wrestled with critiquing discourses around women and slimness while desiring to be slim. At the beginning of 2008 I decided I wanted to lose weight. I have been fat, or at least “big”, most of my life. As a young person I dieted but when I “discovered” feminism in my late teens I gave up dieting deciding to eat what I want, when I want, wherever I want (see Orbach 1978). As Heyes (2006:126) notes:

For feminists, weight-loss dieting has long been associated with the tyranny of slenderness and the enforcement, by patriarchal disciplinary practices, of an ideal body type that carries a powerful symbolism of self-discipline, controlled appetites, and the circumscription of appropriate feminine behavior and appearance.

However, despite understanding that “fat is a feminist issue” (Orbach 1978; also see Bell and McNaughton 2007; Bordo 1993; Chernin 1983; Tenzer 1989) a part of me has continued for many years to feel self-conscious, hindered and even ashamed of my ample body.

By the time I reached my 40s I did not go anywhere near bathroom scales and for several years had only a vague idea of what I weighed. However, early in 2008

a number of events occurred that encouraged me to attempt to lose weight. A close friend of a similar age passed away suddenly. He was not fat but his death prompted me to think more about my own body/size/health.⁷ I was not suffering from health issues often associated with being overweight such as diabetes, heart disease, hypertension and stroke, gallstones and some cancers (see Huff 2001 on the relationship between health and obesity) but I was feeling increasingly stiff and “weighed down” in the mornings, regularly experiencing shoulder and back ache, chafing in heat, breathlessness climbing hills and stairs and frustrated with not being able to fit clothes in “regular” sizes. With a great deal of fear and trepidation one morning I stood on some rather dusty bathroom scales that had sat in a wardrobe for many years. Following this, with the aid of the internet, in a moment that felt like utter madness, I calculated my BMI. It did not tell me anything that I did not already know—I was “obese” [for critiques of BMI, see Evans and Colls (2009) and Jutel (2001)].

I decided I wanted to lose weight. Although aware of fat acceptance groups, an emerging “plus-size” fashion market, magazines that celebrate largeness and an increasing number of internet sites (including personal advertisements, fashion and sex sites)⁸ that cater for fat people and their admirers at a visceral level, I have found it difficult to “accept myself” as is. I tried many times in my teens to lose weight experimenting with various diets. I joined Weight Watchers [see Heyes (2006) and Stinson (2001) on commercial weight loss programmes, and Braziel and LeBesco (2001) on how selling the fear of fat is a profitable business] when I was at secondary school attending with my mother, best friend, and her mother. I don’t remember much about this experience except that it united mothers and daughters against the common enemy fat. I also recall that whoever put on the most weight each week had to take home a large pink ornamental pig which we were told by the organizers to put on the top of the fridge to remind us to curb our appetite. Although I had some success at Weight Watchers the weight quickly went back on, plus a little more [and of course I may regain the weight this time—see Aphramor (2005) on health risks associated with weight fluctuation or yo-yo dieting]. In my 30s I had two children and did not attempt to diet. Although secretly I would have liked to have lost weight, dieting felt inconsistent, hypocritical even, given my feminist research on bodies.

Other feminist scholars have also wrestled with this seeming contradiction of critiquing discourses around women and slimness while desiring to be slim. Samantha Murray (2010) offers some personal reflections on her experience of laparoscopic gastric banding, explaining that although she has embraced the aims of various forms of fat activism she has also struggled with feelings of ambivalence towards her own body. When her doctor suggested she undergo weight loss surgery she felt, given that some activists argue that weight loss surgery is little more than a violent “stomach amputation” aimed at eradicating fatness, her politics would be compromised [also see Throsby (2008) who challenges the perceptions of those within fat studies communities who undergo weight loss surgery as being dupes of disciplinary regimes].

Susan Bordo (1993) offers an account of her 25 pound weight loss, explaining although it benefited her it reduced her efficacy as an alternative role model for

her female students (Bordo 1993:31). Bordo's discussion illustrates the potential difficulties faced by feminists as they attempt to juggle competing ideas, desires and practices in relation to their own bodies.

Feminist sociologist Kandi Stinson (2001) joined a commercial weight-loss programme, explaining that her research was propelled by the conflicts and tensions she felt between her professional and personal life. As a feminist scholar and sociologist she was aware of the pressure on women to meet a rigid ideal of thinness. As an overweight woman who suffered from chronic tiredness, recurrent knee problems, and a lack of choice in clothes in regular sizes, Stinson was aware of the personal benefits of shedding kilos/pounds.

Karen Throsby and Debra Gimlin (2010:106) address a similar issue asking:

given the feminist goal of reflecting upon our own part in "producing" social scientific findings, where do researchers—and more specifically, their bodies—fit into critiques of women's body management? In particular how can we, as feminist sociologists writing critically about the technology and ideologies of body size and shape, account for our own bodily desires and practices, both in conducting the research and writing it up? In short, how is it possible to critique the ideologies and practices of slimness while not wanting (and trying) to be slim?

Like these aforementioned feminists I think it is important to reflect on one's own embeddedness in the discourses that surround managing women's bodies. Heyes (2006:127) says she joined Weight Watchers because she was "both interested in losing weight, embarrassed by that desire, and curious about institutionalized weight-loss programs". She asks how can she speak simultaneously from her normalized position as a dieter and from her critical position as a diet resister? Murray (2005:275) notes, "I struggle with the guilt of compromising my theory and my politics by engaging in processes such as the diet which has me buying into the very discourses I critique".

Over the past two and a half years since deciding I wanted to lose weight I have found myself facing similar dilemmas. The spaces of weight loss are undoubtedly complex, fluid, contradictory and paradoxical (see Rose 1993 on "paradoxical spaces"). A part of me has not wanted to conform to dominant health, beauty, and gender ideals. However, in an increasingly fat phobic culture I have felt judged by others (Bordo 1993; Chernin 1983), especially in spaces of consumption such as restaurants, cafés, galleries, and women's clothing stores and wanted to feel "ordinary" (but less so in spaces dominated by working class and/or Māori and Pacific Islanders where larger bodies are more socially acceptable). People's judgment, contempt even, of my fat body was not usually overt. It was more likely to be a disapproving look, being ignored, or told with a wry smile that the largest size in store is size 16. Given that I needed size 20–22 it was unlikely that anything in most stores would fit. For many years prior to losing weight I had been unable to shop in "regular" clothes stores (see Colls 2004 on clothes shopping for big women). I hardly ever entered these stores without feeling like my body's lack of solidity, its folds and softness offended some of the retailers' and shoppers' sensibilities (see Colls 2007 on the materiality of fat). This is not something one can know for sure but more a visceral feeling in the presence of others. As Elizabeth Grosz (1994:195)

notes, bodily fluids and viscous materials, and one could add fat here, disrupt the solidity of things and in this way they occupy a borderline state that disturbs identity, system and order. Simply reclaiming the word “fat” as a positive signifier and outing myself as a fat woman was not enough to make me forget the dominant discourses that surround fat bodies (see Murray 2005 on why fat pride did not work for her). I felt, therefore, societal pressure to become thinner despite wanting to resist and disrupt the dominant discourses around fat.

Disordered and Disciplined Bodies

The second way in which losing weight has positioned me paradoxically is that I have become simultaneously a disordered and a disciplined body. One of the major shifts from being fat to being slimmer is that I now continually pay attention to details (quantities, weights, kilojoules/calories, carbohydrates, fat content etc) about the consumption of food. For example, if I am making a school lunch and an extra piece of cheese doesn't fit on the sandwich I know that if I am to maintain my current body weight I have to resist the temptation to put it in my mouth. I count how many grapes I eat and I weigh myself every day. Monaghan (2007:84) in “McDonaldizing men's bodies” quotes a research participant, Paul, who describes himself as a “compulsive scale hopper”. He explains that having lost 8 stone (50 kg) he is “terrified” of putting the weight back on. As a result of this fear Paul gets on the scales two or three times a day. Monaghan uses the idea of “(ir)rationalities” to understand the behaviors of men at the Sunshine slimming club who both conform to and resist dominant discourses of weight loss.

My own behaviors—being acutely aware of every scrap of food or sip of drink that enters my mouth, getting on scales daily and feeling incredibly anxious about regaining weight—mark my body paradoxically as both compliant and resistant, disciplined and disordered. On the one hand, I have become, to use Foucault's phrase a “docile body” (see Bartky 1990:63–82; Bordo 1993:185–212). Bartky (1990) recaps Foucault's argument in *Discipline and Punish* (1977), explaining producing “docile bodies” requires that attention be paid to the more minute details of the body's functions. It requires relentless surveillance. As Heyes (2006:128) points out: “losing weight by controlling diet involves the self-construction of a ‘docile body’ through attention to the minutest detail”. When I started dieting in 2008 I felt immediately that this heightened awareness of food and eating was a potential cost to my wellbeing. A cloud of grief hung over me for the first couple of weeks of dieting, even though I lost several kilos. I grieved the loss of the “old me”, that is, the me who was able to eat and drink what I liked, when I liked. This “me”, I thought, could not return so long as I want to live as a slim person. Although I did not write down everything I ate and drank (like participants who count “points” in some commercial weight loss programmes; see Heyes 2006) I fastidiously studied food labels on products at the supermarket and knew that if I ate something that was particularly high in calories I would have to “surrender” something else from my diet that day. Throughout the process I told myself that losing weight was like carrying out a research project and I needed to be disciplined, to work at it. In other

words, I used skills developed in my “professional life” in my “personal life”. I had a sense that it would take time but that the final result would feel satisfying.

On the other hand, in reading Evans et al (2008) I am cognizant that some of my behaviors around food are similar to those exhibited by their research participants—40 young women, aged 11–20, from the UK, who suffer from anorexia nervosa or bulimia nervosa. If I was younger and lighter my behaviors could be read by some as disordered eating. Like anorexics and bulimics (see Bray and Colebrook 1998) I was spurred on by my success of losing kilos and looking increasingly like the stereotypical images of women in the popular media. When people commented on my “success” and asked how I’d done it, I felt that my fierce determination, bodily vigilance and will power had been worthwhile. And yet there were occasions when my new eating regimes meant that I no longer fitted in the easy way I used to. A student told me that as a larger academic woman I had been an important role model to her but was not any more. With friends, limiting my alcohol consumption at parties and choosing not to eat sweets and snacks at times resulted in me feeling like I was no longer part of “the group” (often a mixture of working class, feminist, and Māori) who justifiably critiqued and resisted the fat phobic world in which we live. There was a sense for them, and at times for me, that I had “sold out”.

In short, I was positioned paradoxically. At times I felt disciplined and in control and had a sense that others also read my middle-aged body in this way. After many years I was finally eating in a way that was seen to be more in keeping with contemporary discourses about the need for individuals to “exercise” bodily control both for their own good, and for the good of the social body [see Guthman (2009) on neoliberal subject formation and the fat body]. At other times I felt that my behaviors such as “obsessing” about calories and daily weighing could be read as disordered. If I was younger, had a lower body weight, and lived within a different social context where slimness is not revered I might be read as having an eating disorder. Evans et al (2008:9) state: “Disordered eating may have little to do with either eating or weight and everything to do with social relations involving power and control in which achieving recognition and a sense of authenticity . . . can seem and feel like impossible ideals.” Unsurprisingly, therefore, there are often questions about exactly what is the “right” amount of weight for someone to lose. As I got slimmer some people began to make comments such as “I hope you aren’t planning to lose more weight” and “don’t you think it might be time to stop now?” Weight loss it seems is differentiated along multiple axes of power.

Healthy and Slim?

A third way in which my shrinking body came to be positioned paradoxically was in relation to health. The Health at Every Size (HAES) approach emphasizes health over weight loss and focuses on “the achievement and maintenance of lifestyle changes that improve metabolic indications of health” (Ikeda et al 2005:203). Health is understood as being not about body size or shape but about physical, mental, cultural and social well-being. This way of understanding health has long seemed desirable to me because it opens the door for accepting a wide range of body “types” as healthy. Fat is often thought to be unhealthy and yet:

recent medical research shows that fat has a much more complex relationship to health than is generally acknowledged. Current investigations call into question the general threat to health posed by body fat, demonstrating that although there are some specific health risks associated with corpulence, fat is by no means the universally unhealthy condition that it is usually represented to be (Huff 2001:47 cited in Longhurst 2005:249).

In other words, being fat does not simply mean being unhealthy. Nor is health simply about individuals lacking the will power to say “no” to food and doing insufficient exercise. The relationship between body size, food intake, metabolism, genes, emotions, culture, health and place are far more complex (Huff 2001).

Given this, it is somewhat contradictory that when I decided to attempt to become slimmer I found myself much more focused on weight loss and what the scales said than on becoming healthy. This seemed to run counter to what I have argued publicly as a feminist academic. I was determined to shed kilos and while I disciplined my body with an iron will in relation to food, I did not do the same in relation to exercise (meaning work out at a gym, take part in an exercise class, play sport, run, jog, cycle, or swim) which is widely touted as having health benefits. I became a highly disciplined subject who for all intense purposes could be seen to be living within the bounds of a highly repressive regime in relation to food, but *not* in relation to exercise. Exercise was, and still is, one way in which I resist (see Pile and Keith (1997) on “geographies of resistance”) dominant narratives of the taut body. When people asked if I had been exercising to lose weight I took pleasure in voicing my resistance explaining that while I was prepared to eat less in order to reduce my body size I was not prepared to exercise despite the supposed health benefits.

Previously I have argued (Longhurst 2005) that there is no straightforward correlation between body size and health and that weight loss is not necessarily the key to health. I still believe this, and yet carrying 35 kg less means I do feel different—more energetic, less aching in my joints, no chafing in heat—even though I was not exercising or specifically aiming to get fitter and healthier. However, having a *smaller*, as opposed to having a *healthier* body, means that I am able to fit into spaces and places I have not fitted into for a long time. Having lost weight I can now occupy most spaces, including spaces of consumption, without feeling discrimination. These positive experiences of weight loss are linked to my experiential understandings of well-being which acknowledge material, social and political relations. They stand in contrast to “objective” methods of fitness, cardiovascular health and so on. The process of slimming then, in some ways, has been an enabling (and in this way one could argue healthy) experience given the dominant discursive regimes that surround slimmer/fatter bodies.

Being slim carries with it some very real rewards. Feminists (and I include myself here) argue convincingly that the ideal of being slim is unattainable and harmful for women and yet it is undeniable that the benefits, socially and spatially, for women, of being slim, are numerous. Most of the spaces that I inhabited on a daily basis as a fat woman felt disabling and disempowering—not just emotionally disabling but also materially disabling. Trying to “fit” into physical spaces that have not been designed for one’s corporeality is a challenge. In most instances

there is little attempt to accommodate bodily “difference” whether it be a disability (see Chouinard 1997, 1999; Gleeson 1999) or fatness (which is increasingly being recognized as a disability; see Aphramor 2009; Longhurst 2010). As I grew fatter over the years I experienced an increased sense of confinement, that is, a restriction and shrinking of my horizons. When I decided to diet I understood that being fit and healthy was not going to provide me with access to a new wide range of spaces but having a smaller body would. Therefore, despite my political commitment to HAES I knew that (somewhat ironically) my physical, mental, cultural and social cultural well-being was at least in part dependent on my having a smaller body so that I “fitted in” or could become “ordinary” in a society that privileges slimmer bodies over fatter bodies.

Conclusion

To conclude I return to the work of Cressida Heyes (2006) and Samantha Murray (2008) who as I suggested at the outset offer different readings of Foucault’s notion of “care of the self” in relation to fat and slimmed bodies. Although I have not discussed their ideas explicitly throughout this article it is their differing accounts that have been useful in prompting me to think about the paradoxes and ambiguities surrounding my own weight loss. Heyes (2006:136) argues that “Bordo’s reliance on Foucault’s genealogical phase obscures the paradoxically enabling elements of the process of dieting that might be better theorized through Foucault’s final work”. She says this leads Bordo to “stress the *repressive* moments in the construction of the slender body, contra the *enabling* function of the dieting process” (Heyes 2006:136 italics in original). Heyes (2006) mounts an argument that dieting can help people develop capabilities. Foucauldean feminists, she argues, need to focus not just on technologies of power but also on technologies of the self. Although these technologies are implicated in disciplinary practices they can “cultivate a broader repertoire of human possibilities instead of increasing docility” (Heyes 2006:138). Care of the self, argues Heyes drawing on Foucault, is not an indulgence but a condition of effective citizenship. This is not to say that in order to be an effective citizen one must be slim. Rather it implies that the process of transforming oneself opens up possibilities for new capacities and for reflecting on a newly emerging self. Foucault suggests that it is not that we ought to attempt to liberate some kind of real or authentic self within (some weight watchers groups suggest that slimming allows people to discover their real slim self within) but to newly invent ourselves in ways not yet imagined. Heyes (2006:138) notes:

It is the attentive technology—care of the self—that Foucault thinks we have failed to understand as a politicized activity, although arguably the vast self-help industry capitalizes on our inchoate need in the postindustrial West to develop a satisfying *rapport à soi*.

My experience has led me to agree with Heyes but only to a point. I think Murray also offers a convincing argument. She questions how much *choice* we actually have in deciding what kind of subject we want to be. Foucault (in Rabinow 1984:356) says: “The choice, the aesthetic choice . . . for which they decide to accept this kind

of existence ... [is] a choice, it's a personal choice". Murray (2008:127), however, is concerned "with the question of the degree to which we are free to choose our investment in aesthetic ideals". She makes an interesting case that if an aesthetic is, as Foucault insists, discursively produced and we create ourselves in relation to that ideal then this begs the question to "what extent are subjects created as free and autonomous?" Murray explains that because the fat body is read as excessive and lacking in self control it can never be seen to be living a "beautiful life". Even creating a counter aesthetic through fat-affirming representations does not overcome this; rather it remains as simply a reversal of the dominant aesthetic ideal. A counter aesthetic does not in itself dismantle and subvert the dominant discourse. Murray argues that Foucault's subject of aesthetics comes into being through the production of the Other as an object. In other words, the self and the Other are mutually constituted. The self cannot be constructed without an Other. Hence, since losing weight I have at times felt uncomfortable that in cultivating myself in relation to an aesthetic ideal of slimness I am reproducing dominant ways of knowing and being that construct my slimmer subjectivity at the expense of those who are constructed as fat Others (and a future fat self).

It seems then that weight loss from dieting—becoming smaller—is a highly paradoxical process. It is both enabling and repressive, dominant and resisting, about the social and individual, and about the self and the Other. It can be understood and addressed at a variety of different and overlapping spatial scales from the body to the globe. Geographers have begun to acknowledge this in relation to fatness, for example, through research that critiques the notion that people are neoliberal subjects who are seen to be individually responsible for their own size, shape and health and well-being but more work remains to be done in relation to weight loss.

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Endnotes

¹ "Fat" is a contested term. The *Collins English Dictionary* (1979:529) defines it as "corpulence, obesity, or plumpness" but that does not readily convey the social meanings attached to being fat in particular times and spaces. Some prefer other terms such as "large" or "big", or the more clinical term "obese". In this article I acknowledge the complex politics around naming and use a variety of signifiers to discuss body size. I also acknowledge that the word "fat" may have a different resonance when used by a fat person rather than by a slim person.

² Women's dress sizes vary from country to country but to provide readers with some idea, in New Zealand and Australia a size 10/12 is equivalent to a size 38/40 in Europe, 10/12 in UK and 8/10 in the USA.

³ It ought to be noted that some groups are more likely than others to be criticized for being fat. Fatness amongst white, middle class tends to not prompt as much anxiety as groups constructed as Other, such as, in the case of New Zealand, Māori and Pacific Islanders (Bell, Amosa and Swinburn 1997; Brewis et al 1998), or in the case of the USA, African Americans.

These groups are widely thought to make “bad” choices in relation to food, eating and health and to take up too many resources (eg welfare and health budget).

⁴ It is worth noting that a lot of research in geography does *not* take this kind of socio-feminist approach, instead geographers have focused attention on issues of population, health, mobility and public policy. Many have been concerned with examining “obesogenic environments” which are all the influences (surrounds, opportunities, circumstances and conditions) that help produce fat bodies. Cummins and Macintyre (2006) provide an overview of recent findings on obesogenic environments and highlight cross-national variations in their distribution (also see Procter et al 2008; Swinburn and Egger 2002; Smith and Cummins 2009). It is beyond the scope of this article to review this growing literature but journals such as *Health & Place*, *Social Science & Medicine*, *Environment and Planning A* and *Urban Studies* are useful places to search for work on spatial dimensions of obesity or fatness.

⁵ BMI is a statistical measure of the weight of a person scaled according to height. It is defined as the individual’s body weight divided by the square of their height. The formula is used widely in medicine to produce a unit of measure of kg/m². People are then classified as “obese”, “overweight”, “normal weight” or “underweight”. This approach to measuring body fat, however, is highly problematic in that it takes no account of differences in age, gender, ethnicity, fitness or muscularity.

⁶ Hamilton is located in the central North Island in New Zealand. In 2006 it had a population of 129,249 (3.2% of New Zealand’s total population). It is the fourth largest city in New Zealand and located in the Waikato region (Statistics New Zealand 2006). Hamilton is made up of 65.3% Pākehā (white) compared with 67.6% for New Zealand. The city has a youthful population compared with other New Zealand cities (median age is 31 years). Like other Western cities, Hamilton has a flourishing weight-loss industry with the local phonebook listing 20 entries under “Weight reduction” and advising readers to see also “Diet and nutrition” and “Dietitians”.

⁷ The causal relationship between fatness and health is highly contested. Bio-medics often argue that many people in the West are diseased, ill or at risk due to being “overweight”, fat or obese. Others, however, counter this view, arguing that while there is social disadvantage and stress that results from the stigma of being fat there is no simple equation between being fat and being unhealthy (Colls 2002; Evans 2010; Monaghan 2007).

⁸ For more information on sex, excess and pleasure see Kent (2001) on FaT GiRL; Brazil (2001) on fat pornography; Stukator (2001) on carnivalesque; and Klein (2001) on fat beauty. For more information on the politics of pride, see Probyn (2005); on accounts of the size acceptance movement in the USA, see LeBesco (2004) and in the UK, see Bovey (2002). On the fat acceptance movement, see Wann (1998).

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