

I am like you: reflections on education and practices in nutrition from fat body acceptance blogs

Eu sou como você: reflexões sobre a formação e práticas em nutrição a partir de *blogs* de aceitação do corpo gordo

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Abstract

The objective of the present study was to discuss the training model of health professionals, particularly for nutritionists, from the perspective of life experiences reported in blogs by and for women considered overweight according to the biomedical model. The blogs were analyzed from the content analysis perspective, based on the reading and interpretation criteria proposed by Bardin. Prejudice is discussed in the blogs, and the “excess” female body is seen as something “beautiful and healthy”. In addition, the non-subjection to social pressure is encouraged. Acceptance of bodies considered fat is a two-stage process: the first stage is marked by difficulties achieving the hegemonic body standard and the second by an acceptance by women of their bodies and adoption of an attitude against stigmatization. The blogs create a space for discussion in response to a culture that considers the thin body as the only way to materialize feminine subjectivities. Being healthy and obese is a paradox in the training of the nutritionist, who, based on the model of health promotion, reproduces the discourse of risk and, consequently, the social stigmatization of fat. Nutritional behavior cannot strengthen the medicalization of life. The form of care is what must be subordinated to the subjectivity of the person and not vice versa. That is because, as shown by empirical evidence, fat “is not an impediment” to success and “is not synonymous” with unhappiness or illness.

Keywords: Obesity. Health. Social Stigma. Professional Training.

Resumo

O objetivo do estudo foi problematizar o modelo de formação de profissionais de saúde, em especial de nutricionistas, a partir de experiências de vida relatadas em *blogs* desenvolvidos por e para mulheres acima do peso, segundo o modelo biomédico. Os conteúdos foram abordados pela perspectiva da análise de conteúdo, segundo os critérios de leitura e interpretação propostos por Bardin. Nos *blogs*, o preconceito é confrontado pelas autoras, sendo o corpo feminino “em excesso” apresentado como “belo e saudável”, e é estimulada a não sujeição à pressão social. O processo de aceitação do corpo gordo pelas mulheres parece acontecer em duas etapas: a primeira, marcada pela dificuldade em alcançar o corpo padrão hegemônico; e na posterior, elas assumem sua condição corporal, acompanhada de uma postura de enfrentamento à estigmatização. Os *blogs* abrem uma frente discursiva, que se coloca de maneira responsiva diante de uma cultura que estabelece o corpo magro como única forma de constituir as subjetividades femininas. Ser saudável e obeso é um paradoxo na atuação do nutricionista, que, pautada no modelo de promoção da saúde, reproduz o discurso do risco e, conseqüentemente, a estigmatização social da gordura. Consideramos que a conduta nutricional não pode reforçar a medicalização da vida, devendo o cuidado se subordinar à subjetividade da pessoa e não o contrário, isso porque em anuência com o disposto no material empírico, gordura “não é impedimento” para o sucesso e “não é sinônimo” de infelicidade ou doença.

Palavras-chave: Obesidade. Saúde. Estigma Social. Capacitação Profissional.

Introduction

The biomedical view considers obesity to be a serious current public health problem. Treatments and public policy confront it primarily in terms of a positivist perspective centered on “disease” and “health problems” to be reduced, prevented, or corrected.

According to Camargo Jr.,¹ the biological reductionism of the disease overlooks considerations that go beyond understanding the physiology of the health-disease process and that refer to social and individual—that is, subjective—aspects that have consequences for any interventions attempted.

Additionally, according to this author, the disease can be understood as a mechanical and theoretical construct that underpins research and the discovery of facts arising from people's suffering. This construct is a method of organizing knowledge about various types of suffering and seeking data so that new concepts are used to minimize this situation. It should be emphasized that curing or even alleviating health problems may not necessarily involve a technical intervention, currently considered a prerequisite and the basis for the practice of health professionals.

The field of nutrition is no different. Nutrition reproduces the biomedical model's parameters of rationality and objectivity, shaping a model for thought and action that overlooks the multiple dimensions involved in "eating" as a social construct. Nutritional recommendations are based on the epidemiological concept of "risk of disease," producing discomfort, dissatisfaction, anxiety, and feelings of guilt in those who do not make dietary choices that are considered appropriate.²

The notion of epidemiological risk plays a key role in the discourse of health promotion, guiding strategies in public health: it is expected that a duly informed individual can make choices based on scientific rationality. One cannot deny the importance of this concept in the current configuration of epidemiology. However, the concept of risk as an abstract statistical model oversimplifies the phenomena that we propose to study. Attempts to control health may have gone overboard and led to unnecessary concern, given that we are unable to manage all of the risks that threaten our well-being. The cumulative effect of concepts related to prevention, precaution, and protection from health risks has led to a state of "hyperpreventivism," meaning an exaggerated concern for efforts to reinforce health safety that fails to consider that risk calculations cannot foresee all eventualities.³

Thus, there is an urgent need to reflect on practices in health education and their broader consequences, beginning with discourses that equate scientific knowledge with absolute truth, disregarding the subjectivity of the individuals involved in the process. In the case of excess weight, there are indications that normative dietary prescriptions produce individual experiences and representations that foster stigmatization of those who do not fit the model of what is considered "healthy" and that blame them for not taking good care of themselves.^{1,2}

Part of the stigmatization to which obese people are subject is clad in the discourse of health promotion that echoes the biological effect of excess fat on the body. This discourse is found in professional practice and appropriated by the media, which invoke images of lean and muscular bodies, the body standard currently prized and revered, leading to a view of lean, sculpted bodies as being synonymous with health in the popular imagination. However, this movement is not attuned to the consequences of the stigmatization associated with body fat, such as social exclusion and internalization of negative feelings about one's own life experience.⁴

Society ranks people according to the attributes that are considered acceptable and desirable in individuals.⁵ This occurs because the body is viewed as something that can be modified and adjusted to fit the model and measurements imposed as ideal. Under modernity, the body has been reduced to its appearance, and any attempt to change it requires changes in the individual's entire life.⁶ Leanness and muscle tone are idolatized, whereas body fat is renounced, the former being equated with beauty and health and the latter with ugliness and disease. Excess fat is the stigma that obese people carry in the age of "fat phobia": the over-valorization of "ripped" bodies results in the negative images associated with obesity, making this condition undesirable.⁷ This duality embodies the subjugation and power over bodies, particularly female bodies.^{8,9}

The social pressure that considers the lean, toned body to be ideal runs counter to the public health reality in the Brazil, where excess weight affects more than half the adult population,¹⁰ aggravating a number of psychological disorders.^{11,12} In contrast to this tension, a growing movement questions the anti-obesity discourse and, consequently, produces a response among some social segments, particularly in the online environment.⁷

The fat pride movement gives voice to meanings about the body that do not fit within the linear biomedical perspective. Accordingly, the present study aims to examine the model by which health professionals and, in particular, nutritionists are trained, taking as a starting point the life experiences recounted on blogs developed by and for women who are overweight by the standards of the biomedical model.

Methodology

This study was conducted using a qualitative approach, combining perspectives from the fields of nutrition, psychology, and linguistics. Qualitative research aims to study phenomena that involve human beings in their relationships, considering the social space in which they are constructed. A phenomenon can only be studied and understood within its context; this makes for more integrated knowledge.¹³ According to Godoy,¹³ "the researcher goes into the field in an effort to capture the phenomenon under analysis from the perspective of the people involved, considering all of the relevant perspectives. Several types of data are collected and analyzed to understand the dynamics of the phenomenon." The data collected should permit the construction of a provisional narrative that includes inferences that warrant highlighting. Therefore, it is necessary to establish the organization, categorization, and dialogical relations with other texts.¹⁴

Content analysis was used in the development of the study because it is a methodology through which one seeks to understand the information contained in the process of communication, taking the text as the basic unit of analysis. Content analysis attributes little importance to the literal reading of the text; it allows deeper interpretation, seeking that which is implicit, that is, that which

is not observable on the surface but can be discerned between the lines and warrants investigation.¹⁵

Another unique quality of content analysis, compared to other methodologies, is that it refers to the *corpus* of analysis, which does not necessarily need to be limited to classic texts but can extend to different verbal and non-verbal genres such as advertisements, films, letters, magazines, comic books, humorous texts, and, in the specific case of this study, online blogs, among others. These texts are raw materials that must be polished to permit the understanding, interpretation, and inference sought from the application of content analysis.¹⁶

Following the methodological guidelines of this theoretical perspective, this study sought to identify the main themes conveyed in blogs that address the topic of “fat acceptance” written “by” and “for” women who would be considered overweight by biomedical standards. The blogs were chosen because they were specific virtual environments in which communication could be established in a quick and dynamic manner. According to Levi,¹⁷ virtualization is a general movement that affects information, communication, bodies, and collective sensibilities. It also affects the sense of “being together” and the constitution of “us as virtual communities.” In this scholar’s judgment, it is a revolution that goes far beyond mere computerization. In this context, the Internet enhances the representation of marginalized groups, who would otherwise be unable to make their voices heard in the narrative controlled by hegemonic groups.

This study gathered its empirical material from blogs whose editors believe that the “excess” female body is deserving of pride and representation and who seek to shed light on the stigmatization experienced by the group and to confront the discourses that dictate the size and shape of the female figure. This type of community had no space in traditional media over the past three decades but has now found its place.¹⁸

In light of the foregoing, we justify the choice of this topic and believe content analysis can help elucidate many of the issues that arise in blogs because this reading must establish a dialectical relationship with other texts, increasing our understanding of what emerges from these statements. The complexity of this subject posed a challenge to the members of the Núcleo de Estudos em Relacionamento Interpessoal, Saúde e Sociedade (Center for Studies in Interpersonal Relations, Health and Society), a group established at the campus of the Federal University of Viçosa (Universidade Federal de Viçosa) in Rio Paranaíba, Brazil.

The blogs were chosen following an internet search using the terms *fat pride movement*, *fat acceptance*, *fat pride*, *excess weight in women*, *empowerment of the female body*, and *fat phobia*. Two blogs were selected from the total of six that were found: “Big Woman” (“Mulherão”) and “Great Women” (“Grandes Mulheres”). The blogs were selected in an intentional manner because the content was written by and for overweight women to recount their life experiences, they contained sections on behavior and readers’ comments, and they were not merely commercial sites. This selection occurred through the systematic and careful observation of the content published. Blogs that

were simply commercial sites or dedicated to plus-size fashion were not included in the *corpus* to be analyzed. The analysis covered the texts posted during a 12-month period from June 2015 to June 2016, during which time we sought to determine how much variety appeared in the content published by the sites analyzed.

The *corpus* was structured by analyzing the format of the blogs and the content transmitted. The following elements were considered in the analysis of the format: the profile of the blogger, the frequency of posts, the total number of posts in the period analyzed, the year in which the blog was created, sections, advertising, the section that was the most read and had greatest number of previous postings, links to share content on social networks, the section for reader comments, and the content sent. Content analysis was performed using Bardin's method,¹⁵ which consists of the following steps: 1) pre-analysis, 2) exploration of the material, 3) analysis of the results, and 4) interpretation.

During the pre-analysis stage, the entire content of the blogs was read using what is known as free-floating reading, allowing first impressions and initial hypotheses concerning the topic to emerge. Because the formation of the *corpus* to be analyzed limits the materials that will be included in the study, it is necessary to read through the entirety of the text and to establish categories, bearing in mind the need for exclusivity, objectivity, and relevance.

The exploration of the materials consisted of a detailed analysis of the posts, making it possible to identify and choose the relevant recurring structures in the texts. Subsequently, the following categories were established: 1) prejudice: a source of suffering; 2) representations of the "overweight" body; and 3) self-esteem, resilience, and health.

Treatment of the results included interpreting the excerpted contents and developing the inferences and propositions that could explain what was found. Next, the results are discussed in light of the literature.

Results and Discussion

Description of the blogs

The internet presents fertile ground for spreading the idea behind the fat acceptance movement. According to McCloud,¹⁹

it is reasonable to say that when discussing a social or physical condition that only a few have, the members of that minority are in the best position to portray it. Others can only imagine it. And although assumptions in regard to dragons or starships are harmless...they can create a distorted version in popular culture when, for whatever reason, the voices of that minority are seldom or never heard.

Because social networks and other communication spaces such as blogs are easily accessible and are able to connect people independent of geographical distance, they are used to share information and encourage reflection. This is an environment with its own language, with different cultures, that fosters the development of an imaginary place of meanings. It is an atmosphere in which borders are merged and the body may or may not be “invisible.” The Internet is an environment of liberation from the body’s limitations, in which they are set aside.²⁰

The blogs analyzed were developed in 2009 by journalists working in the area of plus size fashion. During the data collection period, items were posted on a weekly basis, amounting to approximately 1,400 posts on each blog. Several sections were found, including some that were common to all of the media analyzed: home, advertise, description of the blog, contact information, beauty, fashion, and behavior. We observed that both the “Big Woman” and “Great Women” blogs have links related to advertising, the most read posts and post history, space for reader comments, links to send content, and links to share content on social networks.

One can infer that the blogs’ authors had suffered some type of prejudice due to the robustness of their bodies that caused them to feel like “failures.” According to the authors, this time was marked by a need to adapt their bodies to fit what society held and still holds as aesthetic and health models. According to Campos et al.,²⁰ the collective imagination still believes that “you’re only fat if you want to be.” Closely related to the discourse of health promotion, the notion of a “healthy” lifestyle curbs peoples’ everyday lives and marks society’s consumption of “body capital.”²¹

As physical capital, the body should appear lean and muscular with a flat stomach, thin waist, and large buttocks and legs that meet measurable standards. As social capital, a series of images is converted into signs of authority, associating it with what is “good” and “healthy.”²¹

The body that fits this stereotype is synonymous with success, happiness, power, and status. The opposite of this over-valorization is the stigmatization of the obese body, which is associated with ugliness, disease, weakness, lack of discipline, and old age. As a result, it is common for overweight and obese people to develop feelings of guilt, dissatisfaction, discomfort, and anxiety.^{11,12}

In their blogs, the authors indicated that the moment of their change in attitude toward social pressure occurred when they recognized that they could not adapt to the prescribed model but that this did not spell the end of life, considering all of the dimensions of human existence. It appears that for these women, the confrontation of their own bodies with the idealized form plays an important role in conceiving of a new existential image. This image is defined through the individual’s symbolic perception of his or her body, stemming from collective relations that vary according to the social space.²²

The same “individualism “ that emerges in the context of idealization of lean bodies also seems to be present in the search for acceptance of fat bodies. According to Elias,²³ a person can assume a leadership position and become a source of pride for a given group by virtue of his or her freedom and ability to act and decide for him- or herself, regardless of the surrounding society, reflecting what the person is by him- or herself. This individual evokes an image of a creative personality whom others revere, identify with, and seek to imitate. One’s ability to act for oneself is perceived in the discourse presented on the blogs: being “chubby” by choice, considering bodies to be beautiful the way they are, and being happy and confident.

The discourse of health that besieges obesity, defining excess body fat as damaging to health, is reworked in the blog posts. In the posts, it appears as a response to the need to care for oneself, pointing to the possibility of being simultaneously overweight and healthy: “Just because a person is fat doesn’t mean they stuff themselves and get no exercise. I’m always on a diet. If I didn’t watch my diet and work out as much as I do, I don’t know what would become of me because I have a strong tendency to gain weight; that’s why I take care of myself.” This is supported by current articles in some scientific publications that note cases of overweight individuals who are metabolically healthy.^{22,24}

The construction of the blogs is based on themes that are shared between the authors and the readers. The technique used in content analysis made it possible to extract these excerpts, which are presented below.

Prejudice: a source of suffering

The prejudice described in the blogs is experienced in various situations, highlighting its effects in the areas of affection and sex; it is said that “dating overweight women is a cause for shame” because men tend not to introduce them in public or to their family. An example of this idea appears in the following value judgments found in the “Big Woman” blog: “fat women do anything in bed to please and hold on to their partner out of fear of being alone,” and “fat women seem to be easier to get.” This scenario reveals conflict occurring not only in terms of the body but also in terms of gender and sexuality: “What they view as an easy fat girl, I view as a determined woman”; “Fat women date, love, marry, get frisky with their spouses, reproduce, and are immortal, my dear!,” and “When you accept that you are fat and recover your self-love, you learn to give not to others but to yourself (...) I deserve the best sex in the world.” We perceive that the statements are aimed at a reader who shares the same dilemmas. Another important aspect is the dialogism present in the texts; that is, the entire text is born of a responsive tension, of a human need to respond to the other, to other texts. For example, to whom is the author referring when she says:

“What do they consider an easy fat girl (...)”? It is possible that she is attempting to respond to a social ideology that subjugates women, particularly those who are considered overweight according to the biomedical model.

The representation of the body is a cultural legacy that affects the person/body relationship, with the representation being shaped by multiple factors that vary according to the society in which it is situated.⁶ The standard currently considered ideal was not always present in the social imaginary. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, women with robust bodies in which no bones could be discerned in the back were the standards of beauty in Brazil, whereas thin bodies were considered to denote disease and poverty.^{12,25} Thus, the standard for the female body has varied over time according each age’s epistemological framework, which modifies the perception of objects in the real world.^{20,26}

Social disdain for overweight bodies emerges in the blog posts: “I (...) had a hard time at the beginning of my relationship. ‘Friends’ said that he couldn’t date a fat girl, he was a singer, he had to date a ‘hot girl’ to get attention” (“Big Woman”). The blog authors emphasize that the search for the perfect body often corresponds to an effort to please not oneself but others; this situation increases the market demand for an “appropriate” body. The distance between the real body and the ideal body causes suffering, exclusion, frustration, psychological disorders, and damage because fat is associated with a series of stereotypes such as illness, ugliness, and failure in affective and sexual relationships.

Fatphobia is the term used to designate the feeling of loathing or unease in relation to fat persons, which may lead not only to verbal but also to physical violence.⁷ Derogatory expressions such as “fat,” “obese,” “fat pig,” “ball,” and “broken” are found in the section for readers’ comments, reinforcing the stigma described by authors in their posts: “Everyone has the right to say what they want. I, for one, don’t like fat women. They bother me deeply. I feel disgust, repulsion. I’ve always strived not to be a fat old woman” (“Great Women”). The “invisibility” provided by the virtual environments, in which there is no personal cost to being present, enables the writer to express this feeling of disgust, even in a space designed to value overweight women.

As democratic environments, the blogs permit the expression of opposing opinions and underscore the need for a minimum standard of civility and mutual respect in relationships: “you have the right to not like fat people, but in order to live together in society, we can’t go around saying everything we think” (“Great Women”). The fact that one is not physically present in the virtual environment provides some measure of protection but does not entirely eliminate a person’s existence. According to the blog’s author, texts that express revulsion for fat “reinforce the need to lose weight at all costs,” providing an example of the pressure exerted by society. This can deprive an individual of his or her freedom, imprisoning the person within him- or herself in a quest to achieve an unattainable body.⁶

To satisfy the social norm, the body is transformed into a machine without individuality or affection, shorn of any historicity and context. The individual ceases to have an identity and becomes a sum of its parts.⁶ Even if leanness is the hegemonic aesthetic norm, the blogs see beauty in other types of figures. The blogs encourage “self-respect,” “happiness,” and the potential for “healthy affectionate relationships,” reinforcing the idea that humanity extends beyond the physical aspect and regardless of her body, a woman can participate fully in her society’s life.

The hegemonic representation that values lean bodies condemns, oppresses, and creates suffering, causing women who do not fit the model to internalize pejoratives such as “ugly,” “inadequate,” and “worthless”: “I was very insecure and always wondered what kind of man could like fat women. The truth is that I considered myself ugly and inadequate as a woman. The prejudice was within me. I didn’t value myself” (“Big Woman”); “(...) At the age of 22, I went on crazy diets to lose weight; I wanted to change my body at all costs. I wish I had been able to see myself at that time the way I see beauty today. I would have suffered less and been much happier” (“Big Woman”).

In light of the foregoing, we can infer that the virtual spaces created by the blogs provide women an opportunity to put the prejudice they have experienced into words. The literature notes that this prejudice is present even in relationships with health professionals,²⁷ which hampers the formation of bonds and the establishment of interaction and trust between people.

Although the body is multidimensional, many health professionals tend to view it as an object or locus of biological processes that determine the presence of health or disease in individuals. They also view excess weight as the direct consequence of calorie accumulation derived from individual choices that stray from what, at least theoretically, are considered “good eating choices.” Health promotion is often secondary to the achievement of an aesthetic standard. Often, behaviors that promote healthy eating practices fail to consider eating practices associated with the cultural heritage of certain social groups, valuing the consumption of highly processed foods.²⁸

In this context, it should be borne in mind that blaming the individual without taking micro- and macro-social aspects into account does nothing to promote understanding of the phenomenon. According to Camargos Jr.,¹ “reified disease, disease-as-a-thing, the final reality in the biological realm, a ‘natural’ entity that requires no theorization, simultaneously restricts the scope of how the health-disease process is conceived and possible solutions to the problems arising from it.”

Representation of the “overweight” body

Overweight individuals face a number of challenges, including frustration while shopping for clothes, low self-esteem, discriminatory looks and remarks, and a marginalized identity.¹¹ Negative perceptions of the fat body come from all directions, occurring at home, in public, and at school,

and those who make these remarks are typically co-workers, teachers, and family members.²⁹ According to Ferreira,³⁰ perception of body image and the meanings that people attribute to it are “simultaneously individual and collective, operating at the social level but not limited to it.” It is marked by physical, cognitive, and emotional aspects of the subject that permeate inter-personal relations, combining different forms of language and features and rules of social behavior.^{31,32} This perception forms the basis for understanding the subjective representations that are attributed to the body.³²

In the blogs, we observe an attempt to reframe the meaning of the overweight body, despite challenges (observed here in the pressure exerted by society). Respect for diversity, including diversity of body shapes, is emphasized by the posts and, according to the bloggers, requires a daily effort to confront the constant imposition of the socially accepted standard of beauty. This perspective considers the individual a whole, in all of the complexity of his or her existence: “Acceptance is a daily process and isn’t easy, but little by little, we develop and get to know the great woman that we are” (“Big Woman”). “Be the change that you seek; go in search of your self-esteem, your self-love, your empowerment because life is too short to spend time in front of the mirror hating yourself, seeing flaws in yourself, feeling like a martyr” (“Big Woman”). The goal of acceptance is to dispel stereotypes and have women take control of that which belongs to them, their own body: “I learned to love myself and value myself for my personality. My body, my love handles and my cellulite don’t measure my character and my grit!!” (“Big Woman”).

When it was created by manufacturers in the early twentieth century, “clothing size” became a mark that identified body size, going beyond a cause of physical suffering to become a source of mental anguish. Size became the inquisitor of those who exceeded it,¹² as leading brands produced and marketed clothing in sizes up to 44 or, occasionally, 46. To “solve” this problem, the term “plus size” was created to market clothing in larger sizes and simultaneously create an identity. Thus, together with the fat acceptance movement, a new marketing niche emerged and was disseminated in the context of blogs.

The blogs’ discourse seeks to value a type of beauty that society does not currently value. Two aspects underlie the fat acceptance movement in the context of the blogs examined: the challenges of achieving a standard body and acceptance of one’s body shape as a stance for confronting stigmatization. With regard to the first aspect, failure to achieve an idealized body is fostered by a range of actions: adopting a risk-based discourse, health care disregards the person’s subjectivity, classifying him or her as ill and hindering the process of self-integration; social distancing due to fatphobia leaves the person to seek emotional comfort in food consumption and resignation to being fat as the prospects for change dwindle. With regard to acceptance of one’s body figure, it is suggested that feelings of frustration throughout life were not internalized as a personal failure but led to a redefinition of the body in its entirety and a new way of relating to society through it.

It should be borne in mind that overweight women face daily challenges, considering that society, culture, and the media exert a strong influence on the image that the individual constructs with regard to his or her body and what would be considered ideal. If these images could be redefined, then the suffering of people who do not fit the current version and have yet to accept themselves as they are would be reduced.

Self-esteem, resilience, and health

The blogs examined are the product of a growing movement for “fat acceptance,” also known as fat pride. Its focus, as observed throughout the analysis, is to promote the acceptance of “excess” bodies, but without encouraging obesity, to make society aware that people with excess weight, particularly women, can lead a normal life and be happy. The texts posted in the blogs seek to promote self-esteem and overcome prejudice so that hostility toward the fat body is minimized. This was observed in the posts associated with terms such as “potential,” “character,” “self-love,” “self-esteem,” “confidence,” “beautiful,” “amazing,” “perfect,” and “absolute.”

As the embodiment of fat acceptance, following the example of other social minorities, a date was chosen to celebrate “fat pride”: “So my question is: What is ‘Fat Pride Day’ all about? A tribute, a way to dispel prejudices?” (“Big Woman”); “This date represents whatever we want. As I see it, it’s another chance to spread the news on the Internet that it’s possible to be happy and healthy even beyond size 38. It’s a date to demolish prejudice!” (“Big Woman”); “It’s a day to show people that we don’t consider the word FATTIE an insult or a bad name any more. To shout out that we’re unapologetically fat but that this, our physical shape, doesn’t define our potential and our character” (“Big Woman”).

Despite the discourse of fat acceptance, one of the posts on the “Big Woman” blog stood out for including a letter from a reader written on the occasion of Children’s Day and addressed “from my future self to my past self.” Among other issues, the letter is steeped in the discourse of risk, inserted as preventive measures to avoid a greater disaster—death:

Exercise and eat healthy. I know, you must think I’m one of those mean adults who just gives orders, but this is serious. At the age of 24, you’ll suffer a heart attack, you’ll flirt with death every day because you managed to achieve a body weight of 163 Kgs. You’ll need modern surgical interventions to return to your ideal weight. You’ll succeed, but you’ll suffer physically and psychologically from all that excess weight. Your social life will be harmed, but you’ll get through this and love yourself the way you are, but your health will be hanging by a thread, and that’s why I’m asking you. Don’t quit playing soccer, don’t be afraid of the gym, and cut down a little on the sweets. No need to do anything drastic, but you don’t need to be as totally careless as you were (or will be).

Blame and suffering are found in the passage, expressed as “managed to achieve,” “be as totally careless as you were,” “you’ll suffer physically and psychologically from all that excess weight,” and “your social life will be harmed.”

As Castiel³ notes, multiple causes contribute to a particular outcome, many of them not being subject to measurement, making it impossible to precisely define the presence of a given disease, even though preventive measures are taken. We have a false sense of control over life by attempting to monitor some risks, as shown in the first part of the letter. However, living and being happy presently entails taking risks, as also shown in the reader’s text:

The decisions are still yours to make (even though they are ours), but although this letter may give the impression that I made mistakes in our life, I want you to know that I didn't. I may have had some problems along the way, but I don't regret anything, and if I had a chance to experience everything again without changing a thing, I wouldn't think twice about accepting because I would do it all again. After all, it doesn't matter what we did in our past or will do in our future. In the end, what's important is to be happy with our present (“Big Woman”).

We believe that despite starting the letter with a strong element of risk discourse, at the end, the author reveals that she would do everything exactly in the same manner, acknowledging that the mere act of living entails taking risks.

Turning to the texts, we also found that the authors’ narratives cannot disentangle themselves from the strategies of “taking care of oneself” drawn from the biomedical discourse. They incorporate recommendations such as “take good care,” “eat right,” and “exercise”: “Thank God that you have a perfect body that works; take care of it: exercise, eat right, drink plenty of water, and do things that make you happy because the worst nonsense is wasting time trying to fit into a standard, no matter what it is (...)” (“Great Women”). The use of these expressions creates an intimacy with the reader, a feeling of care, safety, trust, and identification with the blog.

This may be explained by the fact that strategies for self-control are incorporated in the context of health in several aspects of everyday life, particularly safeguarding against weight gain and encouraging moderation in the consumption of foods that are pleasurable but not considered “healthy eating.”³³ This discourse, backed by health professionals, is embedded and spread particularly among people who seek to minimize the obvious health risks associated here with excess weight. Essentially, this constitutes the dominant role of customs and lifestyles based on principles established by a particular group.³³ The blogs’ discourse interrogates the dictatorship of thinness; it opens space for the expression of subjectivities associated with the experience of body fat, but simultaneously, it does not entirely free itself from the notion of health set by the biomedical model.

Conclusions

The blogs legitimate “overweight” bodies as “beautiful and healthy.” The meaning attributed to the body aims to promote respect for and acceptance of overweight women. Women’s process of acceptance of fat bodies seems to occur in two stages: in the first, women experience difficulty achieving the hegemonic body standard; in the second, they accept the condition of their bodies and adopt an attitude that confronts stigmatization.

The fat acceptance blogs discuss the association of beauty, success, health, and happiness with leanness in the popular media and seek to reverse the negative impact of fat-related stereotypes. In this manner, the blogs open space for discussion as a method of responding to a culture that establishes the lean body as the sole form for constituting feminine subjectivities.

Being healthy and obese is a paradox in the current professional training of nutritionists, which is based on the model of health promotion and reproduces the discourse of risk and, consequently, the social stigmatization of fat. In their practice, professional nutritionists should avoid reinforcing the medicalization of life; health care should serve the person’s individuality, rather than vice versa. Individuals should not be deprived of the desire and ability to care for themselves in the manner in which their abilities, concepts, and values guide them. This reflection does not offer solutions but, rather, highlights the need to expand the discussion of these themes in the field of health, particularly nutrition, considering its importance in different aspects of everyday life, but mainly because the biomedical model’s clinical rationale participates in the maintenance of norms that simultaneously encourage and restrict, causing suffering to people who do not fit the current model of health promotion. We must be alert to the moral issues that accompany nutritional prescriptions/recommendations and reflect on the life circumstances that lead to the current epidemiological situation regarding obesity.

Although fat is a stigma in our society, in their posts, the blogs’ authors create a sense of identification with their readers by sharing their experiences with excess weight. They are able to portray the body as transcending its material form, reinforcing that we are all human, expressed in the statement “I am like you.”

Contributors

AF Ribeiro, MV Abranches, TC Oliveira, and RF Miranda participated in all stages, from designing the study to reviewing the final version of the article. DA Batista participated in the analysis and interpretation of the data and the final design of the article.

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