

# Obesity and bullying in childhood and adolescence: the stigma of fat

Rafael da Silva Mattos<sup>1</sup>

Rodrigo Perfeito<sup>2</sup>

Maria Cláudia da Veiga Soares Carvalho<sup>3</sup>

Jeferson Retondar<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Adjunct Professor at the Institute of Physical Education and Sports at UERJ – IEFD/UERJ  
Researcher at the Laboratory of Social Imaginary on Corporal and Recreational Activities and at the Laboratory of Physiology Applied to Physical Education at UERJ

<sup>2</sup> Litentiate in Physical Education and member of the Laboratory of Social Imaginary on Corporal and Recreational Activities at UERJ

<sup>3</sup> Adjunct Professor at the Josué de Castro Nutrition Institute - INJC/UFRJ

<sup>4</sup> Adjunct Professor at the Institute of Physical Education and Sports at UERJ – IEFD/UERJ  
Coordinator of the Laboratory of Social Imaginary on Corporal and Recreational Activities at UERJ

*Corresponding author*

Rafael da Silva Mattos

E-mail: profmattos2010@gmail.com

## Abstract

This paper aims to identify the symbolic representations of bullying against obese children and teenagers. Through socio-anthropological studies it is possible to interpret data suggesting the process of stigma creation by signs of deterioration, humiliation and prejudice in the school sphere from the excess of body fat. Thus, it is important to reflect on how the actors situate themselves in this social plot and what are the possible repercussions against the victim student, as well as the offender student. The inferiorized student has his identity intersubjectively built as stigmatized. We conclude that the prejudice given to children with childhood obesity is founded on social and cultural constructions about beauty standards and body pathologizing. It is up to educators and health professionals not to build ways to regulate the healthy body, but to step in ethically and responsibly in these situations.

**Key words:** Bullying. Childhood Obesity. Stigma.

## Introduction

In June 2011, *Veja Rio* Magazine published a story about a student who suffered bullying at the São Bento High School.\*□ The case generated great media coverage, due to the fact that the school is one of the best in Brazil, because every year it reaches the first or second position in the ENEM ranking. The media exposure has also been influenced by the earlier massacre of Realengo, on which *Veja* itself did a special report on in its issue of April 13th, 2011. There was no shortage of experts saying the killer of the children in the Realengo school was a psychopath who suffered bullying in childhood and adolescence.

These cases are not new. The Columbine massacre that occurred in Colorado, United States, like many other cases, exemplifies how prejudiced attitudes in relation to others can have a tragic ending. No theory can explain or prove whether these cases were caused by bullying, although all are partly related. Bullying is the attack to differences. Everyone has experienced some kind of bullying. Some go through the experience as victims and others as attackers. While some have their subjectivity completely disorganized and become traumatized for life, others can overcome it and lead a life considered healthy. We can not deny that carrying within oneself the pain, the memories and the unconscious

effects of the humiliation and embarrassment can cause numerous damages to a person's life.

School violence has always existed, not only with the name “bullying”. The theme is so fashionable that there are already studies on cyberbullying.<sup>1-3</sup> We can say, in this introduction, that bullying is a product of discourses and practices that produce objects in a specific historical and social context. Such understanding is based on the genealogical methods of Nietzsche, Foucault and Latour. The aim of this paper is not to conduct a genealogy of bullying, although we recognize that this might be necessary at a future time.

Who is the victim of bullying? Would it be the deviant,<sup>4</sup> the stigmatized<sup>5</sup> or the abnormal<sup>6-8</sup>? Of course it's all that and something more.

In a bioascetic society,<sup>9</sup> that is, where the most valued ascetics is body ascetics and the identities are predominantly somatic, cases of bullying related to body appearance are expected to occur. Childhood obesity may be the social phenomenon that has more victims and attackers. The objective of this article is, thus, to identify the symbolic representations of bullying attributed to children and teenagers who are obese.

If at other times Brazil – and other countries – had a goal of eradicating child malnutrition, today the public health problem is childhood obesity and becomes relevant to think of this issue taking into account interdisciplinary aspects of humanities and social sciences.

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\* Available at: <http://veja.abril.com.br/noticia/brasil/mae-de-aluno-do-colegio-sao-bento-acusa-direcao-de-omissao-sobre-caso-de-bullying> Access on October 1st, 2011.

## Food and childhood obesity

As much as it may seem *natural* to say that a child is “overweight because they eat too much”, it is expected that, through reflection, we can clarify some social and symbolic agreements expressed in this statement. In society we are faced with a consented order around which is built a symbolic universe around body fat. No need to ban fat, it already carries a negative value to social relationships\*\*\*\* and although it not thought in school, that distinction of the “opposite” operates as a criterion of classification and organization.

One of the questions that guide this text is: what are the eating habits associated with childhood obesity and how to analyze this relationship without decoupling theory and practice? We emphasize two aspects: first, that the meanings of a fat body construct a sense to the life the subjects in a sequential way – every time they are constructed. In childhood this is much more evident because of the aesthetic changes with growth and maturational development of the body.

With the abundant supply in the commercial market for a “new face” for consumption, many meanings of “too much” transform in a fast pace, aided by the media, packaging and popularization of food prices. For example,

dietary sweeteners and diet foods seek to respond to the “too much” with the “very little” or nothing, and in a few decades changed their images, going from refined and expensive foods to the middle and upper classes of the population, to a popular and cheap food for weight loss.

The second aspect is that the meanings of food are plural, pervade many subtle elements in the relationship between the subjects: invisible elements that require some care and consideration in their analysis and interpretation. The “invisible” elements can help us understand how each one constructs into their reality the idea of healthy balance, relativizing truths through social relations from one context to another, with creativity and respect for differences.

We suggest a reflection on the symbolic violence that today has been called bullying. One aspect of this violence is the imposition of a societal “normality”, expressed in the restrictive diets as a therapeutic strategy, following the model of a growth curve for childhood and adolescence. This is an idealized pattern of growth that plays a dangerous preventivist *habitus* in the sense that it may undermine the power of individuals to action.

This standardization idealized upon eating in the social imaginary has an ambiguous character, which makes it refer to different meanings depending on the context: two people can not always see the same imbalance. Some theoretical foundations guide the construction of meanings and concepts of

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\*\* \*Taking as reference anthropologist Mary Douglas' text “Purity and Danger: An Analysis of the Concepts of Pollution and Taboo”, we can say that fat, in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> century, represents filth, disorder, pollution – in short, social transgression itself.

balanced or healthy eating habits in the contexts. For example, we can appropriate the Canguilhem thesis<sup>10</sup> on the concept of health and give another meaning to obesity, other than that of disease, essential to sustain the preventive model of health policies from the 1970s until today.

The exaggeration of preventive actions articulates with the ideal of medicalization and the myth that each of our diseases has an associated remedy. Often the food fulfills this remedy function and carries a promise of miracle, or return to a normal, ideal health. The concept of normal is relative, is a construction that takes place “invisibly” in the local culture. Obesity is one way of being in the world representing a different kind of normality, though in a lower range of values. In this sense, a subject considered obese can be healthy if they are able to build new forms of living and eating that favors their living with this inferior normality, caused by limitations – which may be vascular and metabolic – and in the interaction of the subject with their environment, establishing what is healthy for them. The weight loss or weight maintenance, in the case of the child who is growing, imposes specific conditions to their life that are both creative and innovative, when consensual, and a symbolic violence when imposed without consent of the subject.

On the one hand, the human capacity to adapt is a conscious action connected to power. On the other, passivity can lead to servitude, and if we do not recognize the power of discourse which dominates us or often

paralyzes us, we are hostages to violence. Being mechanized, we would be reacting, responding to stimuli without thinking, alienated from us and our active and creative power power in eating habits. Passivity can propel us into a vicious circle of dependence of health standards and solutions to eating that work as canes, and not rods for the subject to catch their own fish.

Reducing food needs of a quantity of nutrients is to reduce the power to create favorable eating habits within a context, as is desired today, in the long term, to address chronic diseases such as obesity. The food policies should operate as a food guide and open negotiations and consensual agreements of the subjects in their living conditions, promoting adaptations and not restrictions.

The difference is subtle and changing, and that is the central point of this speculation: to be surprised with what seems natural and, knowing in detail how it became natural, understand those elements which give strength and power to this natural character of growth curves of children and teenagers, which takes the place of indisputable truth, reproducing symbolic violence. By analyzing the context of eating in childhood obesity in contemporary society, it is possible to observe that the adjustment of eating is singular with taste, and must be less dominated by a single model of knowledge, free from the violence that today we call bullying.

The term obesity is complex and “does not bring with it the requirement to always be the same, but to be explicit so that it can

be operating in the context where it is being used.”<sup>11</sup> *Food represents a treasure for mankind and is able to express, along its history, the constitution of social structures from the moment man differentiated itself from other animals, by preparing and socializing it, dividing the work to obtain it.*<sup>12</sup> The social life is organized together with food, not only as an expression of these social structures, but also as a historical-cultural creation able to agree on the allocation of meanings that enables communication.

We can understand feeding practices as a complex meaning core, an expression of socio-cultural meanings that (re)produces identification codes to people in their social context. Eating is a social experience that involves symbolic exchanges, agreements and constant negotiations on the significance of food in a culture.

The food practice, in its social character, is a shared event capable of expressing a variety of elements of meaning such as customs, usages, traditions, control mechanisms, rules and instructions. For example, the act of liking a food may be linked to gestures, smiles, caresses or even to hostility and disgust. Food is a construction, an appropriation of symbols that constitutes a learning experience in the culture due to its public and reproducible manner, whether or not for good. We learned to eat and find meaning in food in communion. According to Geertz<sup>13</sup>:

*What a cockfight says is portrayed with a vocabulary of feeling – the excitement of risk, the despair of defeat, the pleasure of triumph. However, what*

*it says is not merely that risk is exciting, that defeat is depressing or triumph is gratifying, banal tautologies of affect, but that it is with these emotions, thus exemplified, that society is constructed and the individuals are gathered. Attending cockfights and participating is, for the Balinese, a kind of sentimental education (p. 2010).*

Eating goes beyond a question of physiological need for nutrients, and builds customs, accompanies rites of passage, frees spirits and seals relationships between people and between them and the community. Before eating, you need to enjoy with your eyes, smell the aroma, the texture, discerning the features well, in the various spices and ingredients of the local cuisine. The food, either simple or more sophisticated, has meaning, communicates and evokes something that can be deciphered and identified because it was seized somehow through culture.

We do not intend to delve into Weber's theory,<sup>14</sup> which organizes the types of social action, but to use his concept of social action in relation to the production of meaning of the action itself, which in no way can always be specified with absolute clarity, nor is it always conscious, much less fully conscious.

According to Weber<sup>14,15</sup> even without realizing the meaning of our social behaviors or social relations, we seek to commune a sense, whether it has existed, exists or may exist, and culture is a social space for communion of senses and symbolic exchanges.

We observed a way to “fix” the symbolic universe in contemporary food practices

that may be called (thesis) food bricolage: an adaptation of the savage thought of Levi-Strauss,<sup>16,17</sup> a kind of “do it yourself with what is available”. We have long used this strategy of mixing things to make a combination that at some point many people will like. The food culture houses a contemporary construction of meanings that can follow different “ethics”, ways of being, and have different interests and policies. It can reproduce from the most perverse appropriation of a symbol for its own benefit, profit, to even the most genuine expression of a social strategy for survival and sustainability in social inequality. Depending on the more or less specific laws and the subtleties about which we have spoken above, a symbolic arrangement may constitute a specific form of adaptation of policies on food and nutrition to health actions in the local context.

### The stigma of childhood obesity

Currently, one of the most written or spoken words in the academic field and society is “bullying”. There is a generalization of the term without any care to reflect on its impact and social construction over the years. Discussing the topic simply attributing it to any act of violence or superiority, or even to mean nicknames aimed at others does not give us any basis to enter into discussions or issue any type of conceptualization on the subject.

A proper way to handle bullying would be doing a genealogy, as proposed by Nietzsche<sup>18</sup> and, later, by Foucault.<sup>19</sup> It's about analyzing the set of mechanisms by which, in the human species, their fundamental biological

characteristics will become policies a general power strategy.

The discourse and practices that produce and ratify the imaginary around bullying are immersed in relations of power and knowledge, which are mutually implicated, that is, statements and visibilities, texts and institutions. Bullying can be understood as a discursive practice that falls within many discursive formations and under a regime of truth, which means that we are always obeying a set of rules, given historically and affirming the truths of an era. Exerting a discursive practice means speaking under certain rules, and exposing the relationships that occur within a discourse, says Foucault.<sup>20</sup>

It is necessary, therefore, to open a dialogue through symbolic representations that, for Retondar,<sup>21</sup> are philosophical constructs that define possibilities and limits that allow to touch the world, knowledge, ideology and art. It is not intended to give meaning to ideology, but realizing that the representations are a product of culture, and therefore fully capable of learning and modifications, which are shaped by symbols and meanings created by life in society. Such representations, when through bullying, inscribe derogatory marks on individuals in society, whether belonging to the school or any other social site.

Thus, our dialogue between prejudice and obesity occurs through the signs and symbols that result in the stigmatization of others, belittling their virtual and real social identities. That, according to Goffman<sup>5</sup>, concerns how the individual sees and recognizes themselves

in society. It may be totally adverse to social identity, real or not. It is an identity that takes into account all the problems caused by stigma, such as fear and apprehension as to how people see them. It is the self-image recognized by the individual, which in turn can modify the real social identity, capable of being understood as the identity that really belongs to the individual, regardless of their desire and their social identity, virtual or representative. It's how much of society sees and perceives them.

Before reporting any expression on prejudice or bullying, we shall understand how it is constructed through the stigmatization of an individual by means of signs. The signs were used since the earliest times. Warriors who failed in the war had their bodies painted with derogatory signs that identified them as incapable, weak and dishonorable. Similarly, the warrior who won the war was also painted, but with signs that referred to him as strong, brave and capable. Advancing in the years, we realized that the signs that aim to classify individuals in society are still present. When we assign the sign of disbelief or something that needs to be improved to excess fat in the body, we created a classification of inferiority and abnormality to the people that have this feature. Thus we build social groups – the obese class – and attribute to them the sense that something, symbolically, needs to be modified and/or improved, the stigma then arising through the sign of excess body fat.<sup>5</sup>

The stigma of fat was treated recently in the literature by Mattos.<sup>22,23</sup> The author found that obese people understand themselves as stigmatized whether because they can

not perform daily activities with the same functionality and practicality than others, or because they are motive of pranks, teasing, jokes wherever they go, by virtue of their different appearance.

We are not denying that there is a need for us to pay attention to obesity. Although there is still no clear definitive relationship between obesity and the risk of death, this disorder is usually linked to hypertension, diabetes and dyslipidemia, bringing health risks. That is, obesity is a risk factor for various morbidities.<sup>24-29</sup>

However, man does not live limited to the reality of health or social events. There are representative diagrams inherent to each individual. In other words, each person lives and builds webs of relationships, shaped by self-concepts and the process of living with others, that go beyond the visible and understandable, in an attempt to represent themselves through imaginaries that are created through ideals, thoughts, emotions, among others. These ideals often escape the reach of others attempting to understand this phenomenon through eyes that do not reach the magnitude of the symbolic representation of the act or object.<sup>30</sup>

Therefore, through the stigma represented symbolically by signs of failure, inferiority, or even abnormality before obesity, the virtual social identity is modeled, as reported by Goffman.<sup>5</sup> Thus, symbolically, the obese, when facing daily speeches emphasizing their stigma as something bad, different, abnormal, among others, creates a social imaginary inherent to these classifications, recognizing their social identity as worthless. In other words, when



faced with daily negative comments directed at them, the stigmatized recognize themselves, or better, are convinced that their role in society has no value and they must choose between two choices: change and become better or continue being a different subject and inferior to the others.

A deteriorated virtual identity, along with the stigma, will be represented by those who act with prejudice on their own terms. Thus, an individual who suffers bullying during the process will be called by terms that exalt their demeaning sign, such as “whale”, “elephant”, “hippo”. The symbolic representation of these terms before the stigmatized permeates the sense of simple words and represents them as someone without social qualities. Thus arises a process called masking stigma. In this social process, which aims at the improvement of the stigma, the decrease in cases of prejudice, or the cover of the signs that lead to stigma, the stigmatized looks for ways to cure or hide the features that reveal them as being inferior or different.

The most used strategies, even if not presented as something effective in disguising the signs, similarly to Goffman's studies,<sup>5</sup> are: moving to neighborhoods, cities or countries where people do not know or can not recognize their signs; obtaining new documents, changing the name in the identity document being most common; disclosure of another stigma of lower depreciation in order to disguise the stigma of obesity; becoming isolated, so that nobody can see them and thereby decreasing the possibility of discovering their signals.

Despite getting to the stigmatized with greater intensity, the prejudice does not reach them exclusively. Given the signs of dishonor, the stigma of obesity has repercussions to the social behavior of the obese, causes losses in social and psychological health, influencing social relations. Such stigmatization process restricts some daily activities, like going to the beach or chatting with friends or family in public places. There is a negative perception of their body and their lives that cause isolation and difficulty interacting with others.<sup>31</sup>

Due to the virtual social identity being molded before the constant stigmas, the obese builds a symbolic representation that portrays the prejudice and inferiority in relation to himself and others belonging to their group.<sup>32</sup>

The family plays an important role in the face of bullying suffered by individuals with obesity. The stigmas present in the lives of obese people are also disseminated in familiar surroundings, and, thus, it is important to include all family members in programs of assistance and support of obese people.<sup>31</sup>

We can therefore state that bullying is a symbolic process rooted and built by signs that highlight the comparison and negative judgment of value, classifying and creating groups that will interact in a controversial manner in social representations. It can be understood, yet, as a new concept that conceives social actions present long ago in our society through the social imaginary created by comparative and undervalued representations – that is, stigmas that will deteriorate the image



of social individual of the stigmatized. This causes the individual to lose purpose and social value, and they need to improve or change.

Bullying can be spoken and physical, with assaults that aim to raise inferiority and weakness. Thus, physical, psychological, emotional and social losses are created, which are not limited only to the victim, reaching friends and family directly or indirectly.

We must reflect on bullying in schools because it is a place where it occurs frequently. Nansel et al.,<sup>33</sup> in a large study with more than 15,000 students, found that 29.9% of students are involved in bullying in schools, either as victims or perpetrators. Boys are more victims and more perpetrators than girls. Likewise, the authors found that students with lower ages can be much more cruel than older students.

An important milestone of existing reforms is the fact that, until the twentieth century, Education divided and selected their students: on one hand, students from poor classes, and on the other, students with greater purchasing power, called bourgeois. Until then, the goal of the school was to educate citizens trained to command other individuals with lower purchasing power. Nowadays, suppose there is a group of students increasingly heterogeneous with a differentiated objective: to train citizens.<sup>34</sup>

Reflecting on the new goal of the school, it is important to report that the educational process formed by increasingly differentiated classes, and hence with different cultures, brings disparate representations of life among peers participating in this medium. The

distinction of the act of perceiving life creates different social behaviors, which makes the other, in macroanalytic terms, different. Then, at the moment of perception of what is different, possible comparisons, ratings and value judgments occur before students and teachers. Mostly, this categorization exposes the other as someone inferior or less ready for the action criticized by the participants. The overvaluation of the ego, the need to demonstrate superiority, among other factors, among all those present in the school, is a way to cause school bullying.

The obese child, because of their stigma and consequent classification and inferiority, suffers constant acts of violence at school. However, the prejudice should not be understood as a social construction that isolates and builds only in the school environment. There are several factors that, in addition to the distortions of stereotypes constructed in school, cause stigmatization of the obese – among them, the existing signs in their body and in the family environment. According to Batsche & Knoff,<sup>35</sup> research shows that most students who perpetrate bullying were raised by violent parents.

In every culture we find prejudice and violence, which, in turn, cause mental and emotional suffering, isolation and difficulty learning. The victims – no different in obese children –, because of their insecurity, lack the courage to ask for help. In face of the stigma imposed at school by their alleged friends, individuals with childhood obesity start to lose interest in school, avoiding it, and in some cases, simulating diseases not to leave home and find their aggressors.<sup>36</sup>

Hence, we have a conflict relationship between the child and the school. The educational context should be a place for teaching to all. However, due to exposure of prejudice that roots demeaning stigmas and undermines the social identity of those who are exposed to this evil, it becomes a place avoided by children who have the stigma, which in our work are young people with obesity. There is no clear and easy solution to the problem of bullying regarding the obese and the school. Trying to cure or conceal the signs is not the solution to the problem. Likewise, the attempt to ban bullying may have no effect, and when not properly thought through and organized, may trigger further exposure and prejudice.

However, although there is no ready solution for combating and decreasing prejudice, educators, students, families and society as a whole should reflect on stigma as a social construct that is capable of teaching. Coslin,<sup>37</sup> when conducting a survey with 70 teachers and 550 students, found that school violence is not a problem restricted to French reality but present worldwide. This problem will not be solved with any kind of improvements in the school environment, as is the relationship between teachers and students or between students themselves. The parental care and prohibitions appear to influence student behavior in school. The author stresses that parents and guardians play a key role in curbing school violence, though not present in the school routine.

Lyznicki et al.<sup>38</sup> claim that even doctors have an important role in dealing with bullying in childhood, as both victims and perpetrators can reveal traces of psychiatric morbidity.

When an child stigmatizes their obese friend at school, they are only repeating information that have been taught to them by society. Thus, even without a solid solution to the problem, since the deconstruction of a culture guided by prejudice does not fall apart easily, it is important that, especially in the school environment, there is a reflection on bullying, on what is different, which should not necessarily be better or worse. Only through the union of all, with the reconstruction of symbolic meanings, is that we understand that, if prejudice is a social construct, it is capable of being molded or reconstructed with different meanings. Only then our schools will be host to the formation of citizens for all, without exception.

## Final considerations

The purpose of this article was to identify the symbolic representations of bullying against children and teenagers who are obese. Thus, before what was exposed above, we can say that one of the representations found is that young obese people are disregarded because of their appearance and are qualified morally responsible for it. Hence arise two major problems: the first is the displacement of obesity and its levels from the health field to the moral field, for the obese is above all accused of being lazy, undisciplined, having no “willpower” or the like. The second is that, by reducing obesity to the sole responsibility of the subject, obesity is individualized and this epidemic worldwide problem is removed from the responsibility of the state, in which mass media have enormous influence and also responsibility in forming

opinions and habits. Obesity is a public health issue, not a food irresponsibility of the subject or even lack of regular physical activity, even if one can not do without such issues to think of health in a multidisciplinary way.

Symbolic violence does not necessarily have immediate effects. A humiliation, an undue exposure of a subject before a group can have no practical impact on the part of the offended or humiliated the next day. This does not mean that such a situation has not been internalized and that such effects will not manifest themselves in some way and at some point in their life, since nothing escapes the human experiences and the meanings we attach to them.

School is a place for socialization and inclusion of subjects regarding the different skills that are available in the world of the institutionalized way of life. It is the duty and responsibility of the State to take on the formation process of the subjects in this sphere. Therefore, it is not possible for the school to

be passive, intimidated or not knowing how to react in the face of the stigmatization that many children suffer in school. It is no longer possible to tolerate that differences of gender, ethnicity or morphological grounds are to be objects of mocking and disqualification in school. That is, one can not allow the differences to be treated as inequalities.

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