

How Global is Obesity?

EDS. EILEEN P. ANDERSON-FYE and ALEXANDRA BREWIS, 2017, *Fat Planet: Obesity, Culture, and Symbolic Body Capital*, Santa Fe: School for Advanced Research Press, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 272 pp., ISBN 978-0-82635-800-4

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The central puzzle that *Fat Planet* resolves to address is why people would adopt the new body norms of thinness as popularized by the media with growing enthusiasm. This project came to fruition through a School of Advanced Research (SAR) Seminar (March 2014) organized by the editors. It yields a conversation between the various authors who work between a range of techniques and paradigms. The key theme is fat stigma, addressed through the lens of symbolic body capital. The authors come together from a range of disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, psychology, and psychiatry to explore the changing global cultural norms on bigger bodies and the ways that they play out locally.

While the number of people clinically categorized as ‘obese’ rises, there is a simultaneous expansion of fat stigma. The question which binds the chapters together is this obesity paradox; most authors take this as their point of departure and build their arguments from here. The book, throughout its eight chapters, is critical of the standardized boundaries between overweight and obese based on the Body Mass Index (BMI). It begins with an introduction by Brewis, where she sets the tone for the perspectives on fat stigma and obesity offered from diverse social and regional contexts.

Following the Introduction, Hruschka uses rich household-level data from 63 countries in Chapter 1. He analyzes data from low- and middle-income countries and reviews data from high-income countries. He contends that the resource constraint model, which demonstrates a positive relationship between economic resources and body size, fits the poor majority, but does not explain women with high economic resources. The author uses socioeconomic

factors like income and wealth, as well as education after adjusting BMI to sex and population differences. This work proves to be a useful resource for authors of later chapters.

Edmonds and Mears outline the weaknesses of the market metaphor of attractiveness deployed by economists in Chapter 2. While building on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, the authors also contend that attractiveness is an inherited feature which may disrupt existing social hierarchies, citing, among others, ethnographic work in Brazil – the world's largest market for cosmetic procedures. The authors move beyond the personal advantage perspective, which posits that body capital is an individual possession, to examine how benefits from the valuation and circulation of bodily capital are distributed unequally in social systems. They discuss how health converges and diverges with moral and social expectations, without elaborating on it. This chapter introduces various avenues of theory, laying the groundwork for the chapters to follow. It examines the various ways in which body capital may be embodied, exchanged, marketed, and used in consumer capitalism.

In Chapter 3, Anderson-Fye, McClure, Floriano, Bharati, Chen, and James investigate the meaning of obesity and stigma among young adults in Jamaica, Belize, and Nepal. The purposive sample comprised young adults ages eighteen to thirty. The authors find aesthetics and power to be important factors in defining body norms despite local variations in prevailing body ideals.

In Chapter 4, Casper explores the intersection of two public health crises in the United States – obesity and maternal mortality. She depicts how they happen both inside and adjacent to pregnant women's bodies – both articulated in the language of epidemics. The body of the pregnant woman is the battleground for the war against either. In Chapter 5, McClure discusses the paradox of African American female bodies being bracketed from the global trends in obesity because of the positive social meaning of fat in their bodies. This othering happens at the level of academic as well as non-academic discourse. She attempts to answer the question, "How does it feel to be an exception?" She does so by drawing from various sources, including ethnographic data from a ten-month study of body and identity among African American adolescent girls. She thus contends that a profound account of obesity stigma and social body capital among African American females should investigate this question of "exception." Hence, this work consolidates the place of the 'not normative' as relevant to 'mainstream' consideration.

Taylor looks at language, a significant aspect of the discourse on fat in Chapter 6. She extends theory on language to derive conclusions about the intersection of gender, power, discourse, and the body in the material world. She does so by referring to her study of adolescents at a US high school regarding how they participated in constructing the gendered identities of each other through conversation about body image. Their language of gossip, clothing, and muscle tone created a web of hierarchy where everyone was situated according to their perceived body image. Chapter 8, also on young women, is the result of a longitudinal study by Trainer in Dubai between 2009 and 2011. It suggests that the global and the local intersect to produce perceptions of beauty. Socioeconomic status, marital status, and dietary quality turned out to be poor predictors of weight among these women. Finally, Becker takes us to Fiji in Chapter 7 where she conducted cohort studies and found a shift from preference for corpulent bodies to comparatively slender ones like in the United States between 1995 and 1998. She detects transnational migration, urbanization, assimilation to Western ideals and images as being concomitant to this change.

All the essays in this compilation are critical of the normative view of obesity as a personal failure. However, the data and findings in this volume are largely restricted to youth, often female students, and their body image ideals. At the same time, the book identifies a gap in anthropological literature insofar as it focuses on the Anglophone world to derive understanding of fat. The authors claim to address this gap through explorations of larger trends as our *planet* grows fatter. The puzzle they had set out to solve is attuned to most major continents – North America, South America, Asia, and Africa with little attention to Europe, and hardly any to Australia. It distributes the focus on the sociality of fat bodies all over the world using qualitative as well as quantitative approaches. It is also critical of the fat studies scholarship which opposes the medical science proclamation that the “obesity pandemic” will doom us and blurs the boundaries between fat as a biological fact and a sociological fact. This book will be generally useful to sociologists and cultural anthropologists, and particularly to medical anthropologists interested in understanding obesity – a phenomenon which seems to be growing in all corners of the world.

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