

## Weighing in on Obesity and Breastfeeding II Some Disturbing Trends in the Discourse around Weight (And Let's Try to Avoid Them)

*Editorial*

For the past several weeks, I've been busily working on a session I'm presenting on obesity and breastfeeding at this year's ILCA conference. To prepare myself, I've been working my way through a large pile of books and articles. I have to admit, I've been getting some funny looks from recent house guests. They are naturally curious about why I am reading books with titles like, *Tales from the Fat-o-Sphere*, *Fat: A Cultural Perspective*, or Gary Taubes' two outstanding books: *Good Calorie, Bad Calorie*, and *Why We Get Fat*. Even though I'm fairly well versed on this topic, I've made a point of reading more broadly about the medical aspects of the "obesity epidemic," as well the psychological, political, and cultural implications of what it means to be fat in America. I think these perspectives are especially important for lactation consultants to consider as we are in the early phases of shaping our discourse around this issue, and deciding about our best practices for mothers and babies.

As I work my way through these various writings, I have noticed some disturbing trends. First, I am struck by the *moralistic* tone of much of the discourse around weight. We live in a culture that hesitates to call anything wrong—except, oddly enough, for fat. Some authors note that it comes back to our beliefs that fat people could change if they *really* wanted to (a belief that persists despite of the well-documented dismal track record of weight-loss programs). For some, there is the underlying, and rather smug conclusion that fat people are both lazy and undisciplined. Of course, people will usually not just come out and *say* that. But it comes out in the discriminatory practices that are all too common in healthcare settings. [To read an excellent critique of treatment of women with higher BMIs during pregnancy, click here: <http://www.scienceandsensibility.org/?s=pamela>.]

Unfortunately, that is not the worst of it. Several critics have noted is how often issues of weight are also associated with subtle, and sometimes not-so-subtle, beliefs about race and class. Higher BMIs are more common among ethnic minorities and lower-income people, and this demographic reality tinges much of the discussion. Political scientist J. Eric Oliver, in his book *Fat Politics*, describes the link between race, class, and weight this way.

Another reason why our growing weight has come to be viewed as an "obesity epidemic" is because of our cultural biases against body fat and fat people. It is common for white, middle-class Americans in particular, to think of weight as a barometer of a person's character—if people are fat, it is only because they are too lazy or irresponsible to "take care" of themselves. With such a strong moral connotation, body weight has become one of our most potent markers of social status whereby those with the resources or wherewithal to keep themselves thin rightly deserve their place at the top of the social ladder.

Given all the negative associations we heap on our fatness, it is no wonder our growing weight is seen as a cause for alarm across the political spectrum. For some on the right, the obesity epidemic merely reinforces their beliefs about the cause of the ever-widening gap between the rich and poor or between whites and minorities. After all if African Americans, Latinos, or the poor are becoming fatter than America's predominantly white elite, it is only more proof that they lack responsibility to take care of themselves. For others, our growing weight highlights the precarious social position of the middle class in an ever-stratifying America—if middle-class Americans, particularly middle-class children, are getting fat, it surely indicates the frailty of their own class status. And for those on the left, the growth of obesity is further proof that large, multinational corporations are running amok, fattening a hapless public with their billion-dollar advertising campaigns and super-size value meals. The American people, particularly the poor and minorities who have the highest obesity rates, they argue, need to be protected from these corporate behemoths.

Running throughout all these perspectives is a paternalistic condescension towards fatness and fat people—not only do people with this view assume that fatness is inherently bad, but they also presuppose that fat people (that is, minorities and the poor) are too ignorant to know that they should be thin. Thus, when the filmmaker Morgan Spurlock sneers at the black kids who actually like McDonald's food in his film *Super Size Me*, or the

writer Greg Crister derides the Latinos at his local donut shop in his book *Fat Land*, it is not simply because they are worried about America's moral decline or unbridled corporate power. For many people, trumpeting the "problem of obesity" is an opportunity for them to express both their own moral superiority and their latent class snobbery and racism (pp. 6-7).

University of Colorado law professor, Paul Campos, raises similar concerns when he reviews a rather stunning article by Greg Crister. This article was published as the cover story in *Harper's*, and manages to make references to both race and class. Below is quote from the article, with comment by Campos.

At my local McDonald's, located in a lower-middle-income area of Pasadena, California, the supersize bacchanal goes into high gear at about 5 PM when the various urban caballeros, drywallers, and jardineros get off work and head for a quick bite. Mixed in is a sizeable element of young black kids traveling between school and home, their economic status apparent by the fact that they've walked instead of driven. Customers are cheerfully encouraged to "supersize your meal!" by signs saying, "If we don't recommend a supersize, the supersize is free!" ..... Suffice it to say that consumption of said meals is fast and, in almost every instance I observed, very complete.

In reply, Campos noted the following.

Again, note the lurid tone: You would think the author had been watching teenagers exchange

sexual favors for crack cocaine, given the text's mixture of salacious detail and horrified sanctimoniousness.... Indeed, at this point even the most anti-PC Hispanic you can find might well want to ask the author a couple of questions. Such as, did some urban caballero ride off with his girlfriend or something? And what is it with these skinny uptight Anglos, anyway? Who exactly deputized them to be the fat police at their local fast-food emporium? (pp. 63-64)

The issue of obesity in the U.S. raises many issues, and many will not be comfortable to discuss. Breastfeeding does have an important role to play in obesity prevention, and in protecting the health of both mother and baby. As we are in the early phases of our discussions on how to best serve mothers with higher BMIs, it is my fervent hope that we do not perpetuate the overt size discrimination that is present in so many other areas of women's healthcare. Nor do I want us to inadvertently perpetuate the more subtle attitudes of racism or classism present in much of the discourse around weight. I am hoping that our field can anticipate and avoid some of these real pitfalls, and do a better job with the women we serve.

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## References

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