Personal Responsibility and the Body: Challenging Normative Discontent through Critical Obesity Literature

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Bachelor of Psychology (Honours)

This thesis is presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Bachelor of Psychology (Honours), Murdoch University, 2012.
I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains as its main content work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

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Abstract

Contemporary Western society positions the individual as responsible for themselves and their bodies, with weight understood as being personally controllable. This study sought to explore the previously undiscussed relationship between obesity stigma and normative discontent by considering the idea that information challenging contemporary beliefs about obesity and weight might assist women of all sizes in feeling less accountable for their bodies. 70 women from Perth, Western Australia (M age= 26, SD=10.26) participated in this study. Participants were randomly allocated to three groups: 27 read an article prioritising scientific information that highlighted the powerful biological factors that can counteract weight loss attempts, 20 participants read an anecdotal article demonstrating the life-changing amounts of commitment required to maintain weight loss, and 23 participants read a control article that represented contemporary views. Although expected, no significant differences were found between groups for antifat attitudes or responsibility for weight. The Scientific Evidence condition scored significantly higher than the Personal Story condition for worry about imperfection and significantly lower for overall appearance ratings. Unexpectedly, the Scientific Evidence condition scored significantly lower than the Control for self esteem. The results are discussed in the context of the complexity of delivering critical obesity messages that alleviate the burden of responsibility.
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