The Discourse of Weight Control and the Self

Deirdre Davies

Bachelor of Science in Sociology

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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 education institution.

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Deirdre Davies
Abstract

This thesis offers an exploration of the discourse of weight control and examines how its concepts and goals are incorporated into the way people perceive and understand the self and others. The central focus is an analysis of the nexus between weight control and concerns surrounding ‘excess’ weight. The analysis reveals the way discourses on the balanced body, the normalised body, the healthy body, the natural body and the transformative body generate varying understandings of the normal, weight-controlled body and overweight body and in turn, how they give rise to different weight watching practices. It shows how the different ways of viewing the body also engender various visualisations of the subjects of weight control. It is argued the discourse of weight control is not put into effect by subjugation but through the generation of a personal desire to be slender and weight-controlled. As such, the central inquiry of the thesis also gives consideration to the impacts which discourses of weight control might have upon individuals in the constitution of self and identity. A sub-theme of the analysis is a consideration of the possibilities people have to engage with the discourse of weight control, in particular those who are considered overweight. Particular attention is paid throughout to the relationship between women and weight control. The findings are predominantly based upon content analysis of a broad range of primary texts including medico-scientific texts, historical material, policy and public health documents, and popular written and audio-visual media. The research is also informed to a less extent by participant observation at two weight loss centres and by semi-structured in-depth interviews with 13 women considered ‘overweight’ by current standards.
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