

Remaking the obese 'self' in *The biggest loser: Couples* (Australia)

Debbie Rodan

Dr Debbie Rodan is a senior lecturer in Media & Cultural Studies at Edith Cowan University, Perth, Australia. She is the author of *Identity and justice: Conflicts, contradictions and contingencies* (2004) and her most recent work is published in *Continuum: Journal of media & cultural studies* (2009; 2007; 2003), and the *Journal of intercultural studies* (2008). Currently, Dr Rodan is one of the chief investigators on an Australia Research Council linkage grant, Construction of the subject as heart patient in the context of the gift economy. She is presently researching communicative spaces, which aim to advance citizen participation.

Abstract

Focusing on the overweight and obese body is popular in the mass media, as are practices of the self that are advocated in makeover television programs, such as the Australian version of The biggest loser: Couples (2009). Australians obtain much of their health information through the mass media, in particular the Internet and television. By analysing the 2009 Australian series as well as The biggest loser official website forum, I explore in this paper the way in which remaking the obese self is conceived in a program like The biggest loser. As a way of doing that, I draw on Michel Foucault's idea of "technologies of the self" in The hermeneutics of the subject.

The catchphrase of The biggest loser: Couples (2009) is that if just one contestant can lose weight (with physical perseverance and the right mental attitude) everyone in Australia can, no matter how old they are! The main claims made explicit in the program—through the views of personal trainers and contestants—is that thinner people are happier and freer than obese people. However, this claim to freedom does not account for the regulations contestants are required to internalise and impose on themselves to maintain their slim body, to their possible detriment.

Introduction

The biggest loser television program is an inevitable consequence of Australians' preoccupation with the overweight and obese body. In analysing the Australian version of *The biggest loser: Couples* (2009), I want to explore how remaking the obese self is conceived in the program, and whether the program lives up to its promise. Analysing programs that focus on health is important because Australian's obtain much of their health information through the mass media.¹ Knowing how health messages are constructed contributes further to our understanding of the impact of media messages.

One of the main claims the program makes—through the views of personal trainers and the contestants—is that thinner people are *happier* and *freer* than obese people. However, this

¹ Virginia Nightingale and Tim Dwyer see the internet as a form of mass media in their edited book *New media worlds: Challenges for convergence* (2007).

claim to freedom does not account for the rules and regulations contestants internalise and impose on themselves to maintain their slimmer body both inside *The biggest loser* camp and outside. As a way of examining this claim to freedom, I draw on Foucault's idea of "technologies of the self" in *The hermeneutics of the subject* (2005).

I start by giving some background information on the program; I follow this by outlining my method of analysis and the usefulness of Foucault's theoretical perspective of "technologies of the self". I then position *The biggest loser* within the genre of makeover/self-help television to understand how the genre works as a part of the television industry and for viewers. Three points are made about makeover television: 1) it promises advancement for lower-middle class citizens; 2) it is predominately about entertainment; and 3) contestants have the power to transform themselves. I then proceed to analyse the 2009 series and the comments made by participants on *The biggest loser* forum in an attempt to reveal the limits of televisual (self)representation and discourses as a way of the remaking the obese self.

Now I must declare my interest in this program: I have been a viewer of *The biggest loser* (the Australian version) over the last four years (2006–2009), identifying with the contestants as they endeavour to empower themselves by the practices presented on the program to remake their obese bodies. I like the fact that the program targets a broad range of viewers—from 18 to 60 years—and I like the universality of the topic, at least in countries that have an abundance of food.²

Background information

The biggest loser program has 75 episodes; the first episode in the fourth series was aired on Channel Ten on 1 February 2009 and the final episode on 27 April 2009. The program has a host, Ajay Rochester (2009), two main trainers, Michelle Bridges and Shannon Ponton, and two additional trainers, Steve Willis (The Commando) and Emma Hutton (Emazon). In the 2009 series there were ten couples and a total of 20 contestants at the start of the series. The contestant profile is as follows:

- The Mother and Daughter, Julie and Meaghan;
- The Sisters, Holly and Melanie;
- The Team Mates, Sean and Ben;
- The Best Friends, Jeda and Jodi;
- The Husband and Wife, Amanda and Stewart;
- The Father and Daughter, Cameron and Samantha;

² In 2008 "3.71 million Australians 17.5% were estimated to be obese" (see *Access Economics report 2008*, p.iii). According to Access Economics the "55–59 year age group contained the largest number of obese people"; men and women were roughly the same numbers. The financial cost for the Australian nation is "estimated as \$8.283 billion"; however, the individuals loss of "wellbeing" is estimated to be about "90%" (2008, p. iv). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2008) claim that the number of Australians "classified as overweight and/or obese" was around 54% in 2004–2005.

- The In-Laws, Bob and Tiffany;
- The Brothers, Andrew and Nathan;
- The Newlyweds, Ramses and Tania; and
- The Work Mates, Sharif and Teresa (*The biggest loser*, 2009).

Generally each week the program set-up was: Sunday episodes contain major challenge conclusion, last chance training, and weigh-in; Monday elimination; Tuesday warehouse (teams choose between two food groups) or a challenge; Wednesday, temptation (contestants are tempted with high calorie foods) ; Thursday “the walk”; and Friday a major challenge.

During this fourth season, the program did not rate in the top 20 programs nationally until the week of 22 March – 28 March, The Weigh-In episode (17). After that the program rated most weeks: 29 March – 4 April, The Weigh-In episode (10); 5 – 11 April, The Weigh-In episode (9); 12 – 18 April (19); 26 April – 2 May, The Winner Announced (1) and Finale Night (2) (OZTAM, 2009). In a nutshell, the program rated after it aired for seven weeks, but only on Sunday nights (The Weigh-In episode) and when the winner was announced. *The biggest loser* ratings are typical of reality television programs that have a competition where contestants are eliminated.

Methodology

I assumed that a textual analysis of media such as television and Internet forums can reveal contemporary Australian cultural beliefs about remaking the obese self. I analysed 75 episodes of the fourth series of *The biggest loser: Couples*, Australian version. I watched each episode and conducted a content analysis to ascertain which elements, such as type of exercise, mental attitude and diet, the program emphasised.³ Other documents have also been examined: *The biggest loser* internet websites and forum, and newspaper articles about *The biggest loser: Couples* (2009). During the 2009 series I collected thematic threads from *The biggest loser* internet forum that specifically dealt with practices of losing weight and had more than five replies. Some of thread headings included: “Cancel TBL, size 16s are the happiest women?” (2009, January 4); “TBL weight loss record, Shannan happy, real weight loss expert unhappy” (2009, February 1); “I’m doing it for my kids” (2009, February 4); “tbl and eating is it just me?” (2009, February 23); “Too light to be contestants” (2009, April 6); “Children watching BL” (2009, April 7); and “Does the massive weight loss adversely affect their relationships?” (2009, April 15). In total, 46 thematic threads, out of the 500 random threads on the official website, were chosen, and the most relevant ones analysed. Threads were chosen on the basis of:

- how participants in the forum thought about remaking and transformation in terms of weight-loss;
- how this thinking about weight-loss is expressed in forum dialogues through patterns of language and recurring ideas; and

³ Four episodes were missing from the DVD set, so only 71 episodes were closely analysed.

- how participants regard the program and how they use the program.

I draw on Foucault's idea of "technologies of the self" in his book *The hermeneutics of the subject*. Foucault's construct is useful for investigating how knowledge is constructed in the weight-loss industry and how the everyday discourse about losing weight functions. By having insights into the latter, it may be possible to understand why contestants and forum participants internalise the ideas as an "art of living" (Foucault, 2005, pp. 322-323). For Foucault (1988, p.18), technologies of the self give "individuals" permission "to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality". Technologies of the self imply "acquiring certain skills" as well as "acquiring certain attitudes" (1988, p. 18). Crucial for this paper is that the television program and the forum enable private individual knowledge and disciplinary practice to become public. I take the stoic technique of *askēsis* (Foucault, 2005, pp. 34-45) as a way of revealing the techniques used to remake the obese self on *The biggest loser* program.

The level of commitment and discipline contestants have to their weight-loss practices in *The biggest loser* program and *The biggest loser* forum could be read as "constituting oneself through" "*askēsis*" (Foucault, 2005, pp. 319-320). Foucault (2005, p.315) defines *askēsis* as an "exercise of self on self" which enables individuals to arrive "at the formation of a full, perfect, complete, and self-sufficient relationship with oneself, capable of producing the self-transfiguration that is the happiness one takes in oneself" (Foucault, 2005, pp. 319-320). In the context of *The biggest loser*, "self-transfiguration" entails participating in and practising specific weight-loss activities, specifically dieting and exercising. These activities are supposed to have benefits not only for losing weight but also, as the contestants (and some of the forum participants) claim, for the betterment of the "whole" person. This is the promise.

The essential function of *askēsis* is to develop a relationship with oneself and by doing so the individual builds up the equipment to deal with their life (Foucault, 2005, p. 326). The relationship with oneself is essential for the individual to develop a life-plan and carry it out—ultimately the self becomes the equipment. This relationship comes from the formation of "*paraskeuē*"; Foucault (2005, p. 326) translates *paraskeuē* as "a preparation, an equipment". He explains:

In the ascesis, the *paraskeuē* involves preparing the individual for the future, for a future of unforeseen events whose general nature may be familiar to us, but which we cannot know whether and when they will occur. It involves, then, finding in ascesis a preparation, a *paraskeuē*, which can be adapted to what may occur, and only to this, and at the very moment it occurs, if it does so. (Foucault, 2005, pp. 320-321)

In *The biggest loser* program, reference is continually made to contestants being able to continue their weight-loss journey at home—"weight-loss journey" is seen as a lifelong commitment to the disciplinary practices of losing weight once an individual has the necessary and right equipment. Equipment in this sense means skills and attitudes. Further sharing of information—about calories, exercise, BMI indexes, weight-loss practices—via *The biggest loser* official forums is important in acquiring skills and attitudes for the

individual in the present, and in the future. In short, contestants and participants need to attain a body of knowledge which they can materially draw on now and in the future.

Skills and attitudes on *The biggest loser* program and forum are the “phrases” that contestants and participants have “really heard or read, really remembered, repeated, written and rewritten” (see Foucault’s discussion of the athlete, 2005, p. 323). They are lessons given by the trainers—specifically Michelle and Shannan— that is, the phrases spoken by the trainers, the “phrases” contestants have “spoken” and/or phrases the contestants say to motivate themselves (Foucault, 2005, p. 323). Contestants internalise these phrases and, as a consequence, the phrases are the equipment—that is, the technologies of the self—in which contestants transform themselves into *thinner* people.

To sum up, “the *logos* or discourses” of losing weight on the program must be “ready to hand” and “in such a way” that contestants “can reactualize” these discourses “automatically” in any situation, now and in the future (Foucault, 2005, p. 326). In effect the discourses “must be a memory of activity”, as well as “a memory of action” (Foucault, 2005, p. 326), so contestants can “act” as they have been trained “to act” by the trainers. And in the process of training, contestants internalise the disciplinary phrases (Foucault, 2005, p. 326). So this discourse constitutes the skills and knowledge contestants have as armoury against gaining weight in their everyday lives.

Makeover television

I now provide a further construct to assist the viewers’ understanding about what is going on in *The biggest loser* program. *The biggest loser* fits within the genre of makeover program. Most literature claims that makeover television has the usual ingredients of:

- personal trainers as experts;
- family members and contestant’s reflexivity;
- new self celebrated in photo shoots;
- contestants winning challenges; and
- symbols, such as the dream outfit.

Moreover, makeover programs are about the *ordinary* person on television. According to Redden (2007, p. 156), identities on these programs are individual rather than collective: they “function as *typifications of individuality* whatever their apparent social category”. And what is the role of the expert? Redden points out the expert on makeover programs interprets the “life situation of the given person, who may represent a certain social category of ordinary person” (Redden, 2007, p. 153). So while makeover programs purport to be about the ordinary person and make claims about the “actual” of the ordinary person’s life (Skeggs & Wood, 2008, p. 559), they also depict social categories.

This brings us to another ingredient of makeover television: it promises “transcendence to the working and lower middle classes” (see Miller, 2008, p. 589; Fraser, 2007, pp. 188-189). And not surprisingly it is a transcendence most “viewers cannot afford to emulate” without participating in the program (Miller, 2008, p. 589). Transcendence in *The biggest loser* not only comes from losing weight, but also from winning the competition. Without

doubt contestants who win the final prize money could afford a maintenance program to keep their weight off, such as personal training, working fewer hours, installing a gym at home, having diet food delivered etc. Doing these things to transform oneself is often “presented” as the middle class “standard” and the ongoing “practices” of the “middle class” (Skeggs & Wood, 2008, p. 561; Redden, 2007, p. 155). Skeggs and Wood, in their analysis of British makeover television, claim that “moral value” is given in makeover programs to “specific intimate practices” (2008, p. 561) and “generally middle-class tastes are purveyed” (Redden, 2007, p. 155). But clearly much of what is depicted above (such as personal trainers) are beyond the budget of even the Australian middle class family.

Tania Lewis argues that, unlike its British counterpart, Australian makeover television is less concerned with class, having a “familiar” and “neighbourly” mode of address (2008b, p. 455). Even though class is not featured as a major issue on the program, nearly all the contestants on the Australian *The biggest loser* (2009) are from working or lower-middle class backgrounds. Most have white collar jobs in non-professional occupations where they sit down for their workday, such as accounts manager (Holly), disability support officer (Nathan), and roadhouse owner (Bob). Apparently when *The biggest loser*⁴ started in 2004 on American NBC, the contestants were also mainly from lower-middle class backgrounds (Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 575).

Another hallmark of makeover television is a “call to the nation” to become “successful self-managers” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, pp. 471-472). Writers focusing on the American version of *The biggest loser* make a strong case to support the claim that makeover television is about developing self-sufficiency as well as becoming a self-governing citizen (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, pp. 471-472; Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 581; Lewis, 2008a, p. 443). Much of the American writing on the topic supports the view that the United States are at “war” with obesity (Jones, 2010; Herndon, 2005, p. 127). For instance Herndon comments that, as the public health against obesity campaigns have intensified in the United States, “being slim and ‘healthy’” is considered to be the “patriotic duty of each inhabitant” (2005, p. 127). In her study, Herndon found that obesity is seen as “largely volitional” and “particularly a problem for weak people of color who placate their children with fattening foods” (2005, p. 136; also see Ringrose & Walkerdine, 2008, p. 237 re how poor women in Britain are represented). Thus the problem of obesity was often “portrayed as a problem of class, race and nationality” and as a consequence would cost the nation in terms of healthcare (Herndon, 2005, p. 127). Presumably the economic cost is considered to be similar to any war.

In the Australian program, trainers Michelle and Shannan and presenter Ajay tend to also take a fervent view about the nation’s problem with obesity. However, *The biggest loser* contestants in the 2009 Australian series mostly talk about transforming themselves for their families rather than for the nation. It is the case, however, that on occasion contestants sometimes make a call for other citizens to be “like them” (Bob, Julie and Tiffany), and take up the challenge of caring more for themselves and their families. Bob and Julie often point out that as people aged 50 plus they are happy to be an “inspiration”. Bob said especially if people think “He’s 56 years old. If he can do it, we can do it” (14, 18

⁴ *The biggest loser* is an American format started in 2004 and aired on NBC.

Feb 2009). Alongside transforming themselves for family, learning about how to maintain weight through exercise and dieting is seen by contestants and forum participants alike as a path to personal “self-regulation and empowerment” (Ouellette & Hay, 2008, p. 476). Contestants in the Australian version of *The biggest loser* often comment at the weekly weigh-ins on how empowered they feel as their weight goes down.

Thus, contestants uphold the prevalent view that slimness is the cultural ideal in Australian society. And in keeping with this view, obese people, more particularly adults, are constructed as morally deficient because their (over)weight affects their families’ health, the nation’s health system, and probably their own self-esteem. From this perspective, contestants affirm the moral divide (Foucault, 1977) between those who uphold the ideal and those who do not.

A further ingredient of makeover television is that the programs are made predominantly for entertainment (Dover & Hill, 2007, p. 24). Because melodrama is a large part of the content, it is evident that makeover programs like *The biggest loser* are geared more towards entertainment than to providing factual information about how to lose weight and/or the health risks of gaining excessive weight (see Dovey, 2000, pp. 17, 97 re the rise of melodrama in documentary).⁵ I assume (see also Kavka, 2008; Skeggs & Wood, 2008) that most viewers of makeover television programming such as *The biggest loser* are fairly media savvy. Being savvy means realising that reality television programs are highly edited, casting is an important element, contestants’ personalities are constructed through the editing process, and that contestants’ bodies, in *The biggest loser* in particular, are constructed as grotesque (see also Sender & Sullivan, 2008, p. 579; DietVader, 2009). Many forum participants on the official *Biggest Loser* website took a similar position:

It’s all about the drama. It’s a tv show and they’re going for things that will work but also things which will be dramatic enough to entertain the audience. Wouldn’t be good viewing if your average every day personal trainer was going through regular routines (DietVader, 2009).

C’mon Maggie—you’ve watched the show before surely?

You do know it’s an ‘entertainment show’ right?

Well if not—here’s the breaking news—it’s edited to the max, scenes cut and spliced between days and weeks—all to provide the entertainment factor. (storm-boy, 2009)

At the end of the day it’s a reality TV show and the contestants are the spectacles. Even though i have myself applied to go on this show, i don’t agree that it’s the right way to lose weight and get fit. I realised last year when the blue team had to do an obstacle course with the comando while wearing evening gear, that their humiliation is our entertainment and it’s horrible!

So why do we watch? Because us fatties want to emotionally connect with these contestants in order to find the inspiration to do something about it ourselves. (Cactusfreak, 2009)

i watch purely for the entertainment value of human nature, how they behave, how they interact and their personalities to say they are going to do something and stick to it (as we all know how freakin hard that is!) (almitywife, 2009).

⁵ To boot, Lewis (2008a, p. 442) points out that reality television borrows ingredients from other genres such as melodrama, drama, conflict emotions and stereotyping.

As the forum participants Cactusfreak and almywife reveal, there is a paradox. Makeover programs rely on viewers identifying with contestants, especially with the idea that “we” are “all the same” (Fraser, 2007, p. 190).

However, whereas *The biggest loser* program aims to entertain, some viewers use the program, for *more* than entertainment—some for identification and others for motivation.⁶ According to comments from the forum, some participants used *The biggest loser* as a motivation tool—when the program was on they did their exercises and ate after the program in order to lose weight. As forum participants testified: “I never feel hungry after watching an episode, always feel like I wanna get up and exercise” (jungle0005, 2009); “I end up doing my abs and push ups during the program” (cathur, 2009). And one very motivated forum participant said:

yes I am hungry but I am on the treadmill when BL is on and then I have my dinner. I find that BL motivates me. Every year I lose weight while the show is on and then go into Big Brother and put some of it back on because I do what the people do on BB and sit around eating . . . lol (domesticqueen, 2009)

Identification by viewers is also evident in contexts beyond the televisual. For instance, calls are made by sport and recreation centres to people in the workplace and university settings—who are “inspired by the commando” on *The biggest loser*—to join boot camps.⁷

But other forum participants admitted that watching the show made little difference to their eating and exercise regimes (domesticqueen, 2009; brideofhorror, 2009; nickeroo, 2009; sub101, 2009).

Another ingredient of makeover programs is “consumption” (Redden, 2008, p. 486). In *The biggest loser* program, this takes the form of meal replacement diet on the program and website, and product placement (Burgen bread) as the main form of advertising. In between the program segments, there are also advertisements for Burgen bread. For instance, one of the trainers, Shannan, advertises meal replacement not as a replacement for “real” food but as a useful alternative for “time-poor” individuals (8 March 2009).⁸ And Michelle and the presenter, Ajay, introduce the second-chance couples who have embarked on *The biggest loser* journey of a meal replacement program (5 Feb 2009; 3 April 2009; 9

⁶ The family viewing time of 7.00 pm could also prompt discussion about good eating habits, the value of exercise, and the kinds of health issues that can occur once people are what is considered dangerously overweight. Some forum participants used the program to explain to their children why they are not allowed to eat take-away food or too much dessert (11ACES, 2009).

⁷ For instance, this advertisement was in the Murdoch University, newsletter: Wednesday 3 March 2010 – Wednesday 14 April 2010 *Boot Camp* “Do you want to really train? Have you been inspired by the commando on The biggest loser? Then register for Boot Camp – NOW!” Retrieved from [https://wwwforms.murdoch.edu.au/pls/news/NEWSQIT\\$NITEM.Query.View?P_UNIQUE_KEY1=5032](https://wwwforms.murdoch.edu.au/pls/news/NEWSQIT$NITEM.Query.View?P_UNIQUE_KEY1=5032)

⁸ The episodes which talk about food often focus on how many calories are in particular foods and the foods that are promoted as good choices tend to be advertised during the program, such as Burgen’s soy and linseed bread. The family viewing time of 7.00pm could also prompt discussions about good eating habits, the value of exercise and the kinds of health issues that can occur once people are what is considered dangerously overweight. Having said that there are good discussions on what and how to eat when contestants have no control over food preparation—i.e. when they eat out or eat take-away.

April, 2009; 23 April, 2009; 27 April 2009). Tania, a second-chance couple, says: “The meal replacements for my lifestyle are very convenient. I am busy at work, so I can grab something on the go” (23 April, 2009). In terms of healthy eating, this approach has the potential to become a health risk.

The final ingredient of makeover programs is the idea that, with the right information, viewers will have the power to transform their lives. The idea of transformation has a long history, dating from the oral form of the fairy tale (Bratich, 2007, p. 17). Weber (2009) also points to the long history of makeover as a form of transformation in magazines. Bratich (2007, p. 17) claims that “the fairy tale conveys a realm of profound modification and makeovers (as long as the protagonist has the right knowledge and allies)”. By attaining knowledge about nutrition, calories and exercise, and learning about one’s eating habits, the consumer can “metamorphosis” herself (p. 18)—in the case of *The biggest loser* from the ugly duckling to the swan.

Every item introduced on makeover programs, according to McGee, “promises fulfillment, but instead delivers a never-ending project on the self” (cited in Miller, 2008, p. 587). Certainly contestants on *The biggest loser* speak about continuing their weight-loss journey at home as a lifetime commitment to themselves and their family. Even though contestants internalise the discourse by which they have to work on themselves in order to stay slim, anecdotal evidence reveals that many contestants actually put on weight after leaving the program. Despite that outcome, it does not mean the discourse has not been internalised; internalising the “phrases”, the practices does not guarantee success. Contestants construct themselves on the program as a lifelong “project on the self”; therefore “losing [on the program] is not defeat” because contestants can continue the learning at home (Bratich, 2007, p. 9). To sum up: like other makeover programs, *The biggest loser* promotes products as well as promises “new identities, new configurations of self” and “the promise of a better future” (Fraser, 2007, p. 182).

Remaking the self in *The biggest loser*

Most comments by personal trainers, contestants and forum participants suggest that the fat/obese body needs to be remade, because it is less desirable, less productive, less healthy and less worthy—that is, less morally acceptable—than the slimmer body.⁹ The slim body is indicative of a life that is whole, future-orientated and under control. One of the main claims the program makes—through the pronouncements of personal trainers and the contestants—is that thinner people are *happier* and *freer* than obese people. Often what is suggested is that being fat is like being in a prison.¹⁰ Yet this claim to freedom does not account for the new regulations contestants must internalise and impose on themselves—doing intense exercise after consuming excess calories, weighing their food, calculating the fat/carbohydrate/protein/calorie content of every morsel of food they place

⁹ Commenting on the American *The biggest loser*, Sender and Sullivan remark that ultimately the view presented on the program is based on a “moral imperative to be thin” (2008, p. 580). As a consequence of that imperative, *The biggest loser* (American version) promotes the idea of “self-governing the self” (2008, p. 581).

¹⁰ It is the younger contestants who talked about their future as being happier and freer; the contestants who were over 50—Julie, Cameron and Bob—rarely spoke in this way.

in their mouth—in order to maintain their slim body both inside *The biggest loser* camp and on the outside. Thus through internalising the training and discipline, the individual is able to be unequivocal—and as a consequence feel *free*—because they no longer have to ponder choices. In a nutshell, they have internalised the correct course of action (Foucault, 2005, p. 357).

In much of the discussion about the construction of the “fat body”, theorists like Samantha Murray claim that the overriding view in Western narratives marks the “fat body” as “a site of moral decay and failure” (2005a, p. 111). Murray explains that the knowledge individuals draw on is “tacit” due to internalised social statements: “We see a ‘fat’ woman, we *know* their bodies implicitly, and what they mean to us . . . and we *know* her as lazy, greedy, of inferior intelligence” (Murray, 2007, p. 363). Some of the characteristics that have come to “define fatness are laziness, gluttony, poor personal hygiene, and lack of fortitude” (Murray, 2005b, p. 154). Further, Murray points to the psychosocial problems of being obese “with substantial costs for the children involved” (also see Access Economics, 2006, p. 11).

The stereotypical characteristics Murray refers to are also used by health care providers. Ebbeling, Pawlak and Ludwig (cited in Access Economics, 2006, p. 11) reiterate earlier findings when they state that “obese children are stereotyped as unhealthy, academically unsuccessful, socially inept, unhygienic, and lazy”. Walters and Baur (cited in Access Economics, 2006, p. 11) refer to a US study that found “obesity carries a social stigma in children greater than a physical disability”. From my analysis of the program, the trainers implicitly reinforce the stereotypical idea that the overweight/obese body is unhealthy, lazy and unsuccessful.

In *The biggest loser* some contestants, commenting on big banner images of themselves, reinforce stereotypical representations by saying “I never want to go back to those two big heifers” (Holly, 15 February 2009). Shannan, when talking about a challenge involving carrying extra weight, referred to his team as “the sad people that walked into the show four weeks ago” (8 March 2009). Shannan reinforces stereotypical representations when he refers to the three past contestants: Alison, Cosi and Sam, as “still not the fat kids” (18 March 2009). Michelle, the other personal trainer talks about how Sammy, one of the contestants, has always been seen as the “funny fat girl” (11 March 2009). By episode six of *The biggest loser*, a number of the contestants were constructed as indulgent, lazy, and as giving in too easily.

Individual and societal reaction to large body size is a response to “visible difference” (Murray, 2007, p.363). Murray points out that the “fat body” is “hypervisible in terms of its mass in relation to the thinner bodies that surround it” (2005b, p.157). Because the response is so widespread, one expects “violent responses to ‘fat’ bodies” and “disgust” inside and beyond the medical clinic (Murray, 2007, p. 371). One of the contestants in *The biggest loser*, Jodi, repeats her daughter’s fear that Jodi was “growing into a monster” and Jodi responds “I am” (27 April 2009). In this exchange Jodi does not consider herself a person—at least not until she begins her weight-loss journey. Personhood is conferred on the “fat body” provided the person is engaging in a “continual process of transformation, of becoming and, indeed, *unbecoming*” (Murray, 2005b, p. 155).

Researchers and forum participants often see humiliation of contestants on the Australian *The biggest loser* in two ways: one as a dubious representational strategy used to exploit the contestants “self-loathing” (Sender & Sullivan, 2008, pp. 577-79); the other, as a key motivational and transformational step (workingout, 2009; DietVader, 2009). Many people on *The biggest loser* forum (and in general) state that it was not necessary to humiliate contestants at weigh-in with the clothes they wore and during the commando’s training. The crop-top sports bra and aerobic shorts that the women wear accentuates their rolls of flesh and skin, making them look unbecoming. The men take their t-shirt off to weigh-in right up to the final episodes (19 April 2009) thus their upper body is naked, revealing excessive rolls of flesh and “male” breasts. It is not clear why it is necessary for contestants to wear tight and minimum clothing when they weigh-in, especially clothing that is not flattering. At other times there are flashback segments (usually in black and white) of contestants in their underwear at home looking in a mirror at their body. The camera always focuses/zooms in on rolls of flesh.

The role humiliation plays in weight-loss transformation is a question discussed in several threads on the website forum, but never clearly resolved. One line of thinking presents the view that no amount of money would be worth the indignity of revealing the over-weight body on national television in its underwear:

I don’t know . . . nothing would motivate me to appear on national tv wearing only my bra and undies and then go wibbly-wobbling through weeks of physical torture until I’d slimmed down enough to have half my skin removed as it was flapping around in the breeze and frightening children.

shudders dramatically. (inarastarte, 2009)

Why do the cruel producers make the contestants strip for weigh-ins. I’ll tell you why . . . so viewers can be judgemental when they expose their huge butts, cottage cheese cellulite, overhanging guts and man boobs. I’ve watched TBL with others and all I ever hear is “OH MY GOD”

I’m sure most of the contestants would prefer to cover up. I’m sure that most contestants would prefer to cover up to hide their imperfections. So why not allow them to keep a bit of dignity in front of a national TV audience. (TheDanaCrew, 2009).

Another line of thinking is that the act of appearing semi-naked on national television signals the depth of an individual’s commitment to the weight-loss challenge. As such, it is a key motivational and transformational step, especially in the case of the first weigh-in:

Yeah i can see ur point i wouldnt fancy standing on national tv in my bra or knickers either!!! *But* i honestly think as hard as that would be and as hard as the first weigh in would be its all part of losing weight. I struggle with my weight but no one knows how much i weigh not even my partner, nor my mother!!! So standing like that in front of Australia would be a massive motivation for me to prove to everyone i will change. it would be a massive wake-up call. I would love to audition for the show! (workingout, 2009)

Cressida Heyes in her book, *Self-transformations: Foucault, ethics and normalized Bodies* (2007), discusses how dieting can be individually empowering as opposed to simply normalising and repressing as many feminists have claimed (pp. 73, 76). For Heyes, like participants on *The biggest loser* forum, the disciplinary process of dieting—including participating in humiliating weigh-ins—has the potential to increase the individual’s personal and social capacities. Based on some of the comments in the threads on *The*

biggest loser forums, I would agree that the communication and collaboration the forums provide can be supportive and enabling for individuals who are dieting. In this sense, for some participants, the forums become part of the discipline enabling an “exercise of self on self” (Foucault, 2005, p. 315) which ultimately permits a remade slim self. Through this “self-transfiguration” the individual can begin to take “happiness . . . in oneself” (Foucault, 2005, pp. 319-320) evident in the contestants’ comments, which I will now discuss.

One of the main messages from the program and the contestants themselves is that thin people are *happier*. For instance, Meaghan (8 Feb 2009), speaking about her 6.3 kilo weight-loss says, “makes me a hell of a lot happier. The happier I get, the freer I will feel”. When Sean was evicted, his parting words were that he is a lot “more confident”, a “thinner and happier” person (2 March 2009). Tiffany (18 March 2009), another contestant, says she wants to be like past winners—Alison, Cosi and Sam—who are “happy, slim [they have] got their life on track”. In a later episode, where contestants are having a total body makeover, Sharif remarks that my wife and I “are going to have a life other people are envious of”—losing weight for him meant that his life with his wife was going “to be perfect” (1 April 2009).

Michelle, one of the personal trainers, declares that the four top male contestants are moving “into a future full of health and happiness” (2 April 2009). In one of the final episodes, Sammy states that now Julie has lost the weight her “marriage is going to be amazing” (20 April 2009). Similarly, Nathan says the work he has put into losing weight is a “lifetime effort” and his “happily ever after” alongside his forthcoming marriage (27 April 2009). In the final episode Ajay, the program presenter, asks the contestant Andrew: “how bright is your future?”; he responds: “I have to wear sunglasses now . . . way too bright” (27 April 2009). In the same episode Shannan says to another contestant, Sharif: “You’re the man who has been hidden away from life by fat” (27 April 2009). Michelle adds: “[Sharif] is now the man he always wanted to be and he truly is free”.

What does free mean in the context of the program? Often in *The biggest loser*, the view of the personal trainers and the contestants is that thinner people are freer. Thinner people are freer to go to the beach, live the lifestyle they choose, go out in public, without being judged because of their weight (Meaghan, 9 April 2009), and be active with their children (Andrew, 22 Feb 2009). Early on in the series Meaghan says “once I am free from my own emotions, nothing will stop me” (8 Feb 2009). Later she goes on to say that she has “never felt free” because she has always been overweight (9 April 2009). Meaghan explains that she would “literally shut” her bedroom door and would not come out because she felt so judged about her weight (9 April 2009). Tiffany, after successfully completing the challenges in New Zealand, says “I feel free” (7 April 2009) because “I have conquered my fears” (9 April 2009). Towards the end of the series, Sharif discloses that he thought he was “disgusting” and that he did not realise “how unhappy” he was, but now he knows what “it means to be free” (21 April 2009). For Sharif being free means “you don’t have self-loathing, you have self-respect” (21 April 2009).

Following Foucault on technologies of the self, successfully completing challenges and having respect for oneself is also about moving towards a more complete relationship with oneself (2005, pp. 319-320). The activities and challenges contestants undertake have potential benefits, not only for losing weight, but also as the contestants (and some of the

forum participants) claim, for the betterment of the “whole” person. Yet there are new constraints in which neither the trainers nor the contestants are self-reflective.

The contestants talk mainly about freedom in the psychological sense. Yet as their bodies diminish in size, contestants appear to replace one kind of mental prison for another. The first prison for most of the contestants was an emotional and psychological one: where contestants were imprisoned through their own self-beliefs and their desire for food. But a new kind of prison emerges when contestants slim down and become a thin body—they begin to obsess about every morsel of food they put in their mouths. This is evident in the constant counting of carbohydrates and fats consumed. Here the contestants internalise the surveillance of trainers, forum participants and people in the public realm. Furthermore, contestants must regulate their bodies through intensive daily exercise in order to maintain their new slim selves, and through physical and mental perseverance to control their desire for food. Once certain skills and attitudes are attained, these are the technologies of the self (Foucault, 1988, p. 18)—the lifelong “exercise of self on self” (Foucault, 2005, p. 315)—which come into play.

Where contestants may also become *un-free* is in the financial outlay to stay slim. The weight-loss industry is a multi-billion dollar business in Western societies, and its promotion is often done by celebrities.¹¹ Merchandising on *The biggest loser* official website is a part of that billion dollar industry (see <http://www.thebiggestloser.com.au/the-club.htm>). Thus contestants internalise the phrases of the trainers as well as “the *logos* or discourses” of losing weight on the program so that they are “ready to hand” and can routinely draw on them in any situation, at any time (2005, p. 326). The “phrases” which form the discourses (Foucault, 2005, p. 326) are the equipment—that is, the technologies of the self—in which contestants transform themselves into *thinner* people. Weight-loss discourse also encompasses purchasing weight-loss products, such as paying for personal trainers, buying replacement meals (when one is too busy to cook), buying exercise equipment or joining a gym, buying low-fat cookbooks and, at the extreme end, paying for surgery. Therefore, weight loss has material economic costs, which can commit the individual to continually outlaying money.

Conclusion

Through attaining knowledge about exercise and mental strength, contestants on *The biggest loser* program can reshape themselves so that a “metamorphosis” occurs (Bratich, 2007, p. 18) turning an ugly duckling to a swan. But like other makeover programs, *The biggest loser* promotes products as well as promises of transcendence (see Miller, 2008, p. 589; Fraser, 2007, pp. 188-189), and for most of the viewers this is a journey they cannot afford.

¹¹ The use of celebrities plays a very important part in who is accepted as having the authority and credibility to speak about weight loss and acceptable body size. A study by Forbes has shown that people tend to trust celebrities (like Oprah Winfrey) more than politicians, which suggests that celebrities may be given more authority to speak on certain subjects than experts (see Rose, 2006).

The main claims made explicit in the program—through the views of personal trainers and contestants—is that thinner people are *happier* and *freer* than obese people. However, this claim to freedom does not account for the regulations contestants are required to internalise and impose on themselves to maintain their slim body. So, the transcendence is only possible if contestants internalise practices to regulate their mind and body, consume diet products, exercise equipment, gym membership etc. over a lifetime. Thus this transcendence becomes a lifelong project on the self.

The final section of the paper on psychological freedom opens up two interesting philosophical ideas: the first is the complexities of selfhood; and the second, the tension between freedom and constraint in everyday weight-loss practices. These ideas shed light on which practices are at the core of contemporary weight-loss discourses. And point to new research avenues about the function and power of discourses in the weight-loss industry.

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