

Please cite the Published Version

Evans, Malcolm (2007) Hardcore dieting – what is it with food that's eating people up? In: UK Community Psychology Conference, 14 September 2007, York St John University, York, UK. (Unpublished)

Version: Accepted Version

Downloaded from: <https://e-space.mmu.ac.uk/14952/>

Usage rights: © In Copyright

Additional Information: This is a slide presentation and accompanying script from the UK Community Psychology Conference, at St John University York, September 14 2007.

Enquiries:

If you have questions about this document, contact openresearch@mmu.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in e-space. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our Take Down policy (available from <https://www.mmu.ac.uk/library/using-the-library/policies-and-guidelines>)

COMMUNITY PSYCHOLOGY CONFERENCE,
YORK, NOTES FOR MALCOLM EVANS
PRESENTATION:

SLIDE 1

My general interests straddle action research in the areas of motivation & performance, addictions, change, wellness, enchantment & happiness; also social enterprise in terms of direct intervention and social justice; academia for what it can offer by way of insights and rigour.

I'm here because I think community psychology may provide a very fine home for me with a specific focus – I am going to show the provisional outputs of my activities in the area of what has become known as the “Obesity Crisis.”

I'm going to talk a bit about my work with weight issues and I'm also going to seek to locate this within a philosophical framework compatible with Community Psychology.

The keynote of all things currently to do with overweight is that are stigmatised into individual deviance – it is an absolute archetype of *blaming the victim*.

Community engagement only begins with community identification.....and self-identification. First and foremost this study begins with a deep empirical scoping of the field. Resilience begins with a contextualisation which can foster options.

Hopefully the presentation will prove at least a little interesting, perhaps even surprising in

places within a personal context. Hopefully I'll meet some new friends. I'd value all feedback, today and later.

SLIDE 2

I don't like this term, the "Obesity Crisis" – like a great deal to do with what's going on in this field, I feel that the terminologies and approaches are more a part of the problem processes than their beneficial reworking.

We'll be looking in more detail at this notion of Hardcore Dieting, all within the context of Fatness – FATNESS with a capital "F" representing all things interrelated with weight, overweight, image, culture, food, eating...dieting, weight loss imperatives....

I've always been interested in body image and how it interacts with esteem and acts within cultural boundaries as a marker and reference. On a personal level I've always lifted weights. I'm fascinated by embodiment and thrilled that sociology has finally co-located itself between society and the individual.

Also on a personal level, about five years I noticed how my wife's conversations with her friends were more and more often circling around issues of weight and dieting. The whole Atkins thing also got a lot of Fatness issues amongst my male friends out into the open. We got a group together

and talked and listened – and started reading what some of the published theoreticians in this area were saying.

What we were seeing and hearing was troubling and did not in many respects seem to match particularly well with quite-widely received theories.

Over the following few years I have facilitated over 50 public sessions in the Greater Manchester area and a couple of years we brought the idea together into a registered charity, The Weight Foundation.

In parallel to this it seemed a project which might benefit from an academic template and I spent considerable time scoping out a PhD project at Manchester Metropolitan University, obviously noted for its particular and radical strand of Community *Social* Psychology. As of this month this is now supported for three years.

SLIDE 3

There's a conundrum at the heart of it all. We are obsessed with dieting – and other weird and wonderful restricted or artificial eating habits – and yet we continue to grow heavier.

And, just as relevantly, even those who are not fully bought-in to the full Fatness thing, do not seem happy about the increase in weight. You only have to look in Victorian museums – the narrow shouldered army tunics and the dresses – to see

that people do change shape down the ages in response to environmental reasons.

But we are dieting and growing, growing and dieting – and a lot of people are uncomfortable.

What's going on?

More importantly again, if people don't want to be part of this – and, as with all activism we have to be incredibly careful that we are neither seeking to corral people within our own mirrored image of the prevailing judgementalism, nor simply exacerbating the issues we seek to address.....so, with all these caveats about our own intentionality to the fore, if people genuinely want to do something about this, where is the point of entry? Where is the point of balance where the inertia may be moved?

- A theme throughout this presentation is if you establish a STANDPOINT, what is suitable guerrilla research to make movement, not merely a collision with resistance to that standpoint.

Let's start looking at some of these issues by taking a look at what people are actually doing – putting some empirical foundations under Fatness.

SLIDE 4

The term “yo-yo dieting” was coined by Yale's Kelly Brownell back in 1988. He is the U.S.'s pre-eminent obesity investigator.

It has evolved into *the* central concept of the dieting and weight gain correlation as currently

espoused. And, as such, I believe it is highly limiting, if not downright damaging.

It has coalesced around the idea that in order to lose weight –all for the virtuous, culture-free and eminently logical reasons of health improvement - people will “overdo” the dieting, inevitably have to relax it at some stage due to survivalist instincts and then, with the body’s metabolism in suppressed mode, will rapidly regain weight – and more.

Like all such trite behaviourist superficialities, there is a kernel of reality (you might find a very similar superficiality, for example, in the official accounts and putative preventions of youth re-offending: a facile and de-contextualised message of “otherwise fill their time, prevent the new crime”...)

Sticking plaster, camouflage intervention

- But back to the dieting cycles and its own total lack of context and relational knowledge:

Why Dieting?

Why “overdo” it?

How and why gaining weight in the first place?

Why getting back on to the Dieting merry-go-round at certain times? – the yo-yo theory assumes a direct, automatic and ongoing correlation between weight-loss and weight-regain within the closed ambit of the yo-yo cycle. As we’ll see, it simply isn’t like this a lot of the time.

Robbed of their context, dieters become weak and contrary fools – sketched cartoon-like and two-dimensional (dense and wide) and, like the solution to all ills, the remedy can be no more than a substantial dose of good-old-fashioned-commonsense and a collective-pulling-ourselves-together.

Problem identified, problem solved!

We'll come back to what people actually appear to be doing very shortly but let's continue this mini-literature and prevailing theory review for a moment.

SLIDE 5

A good deal of the academic literature as it relates to obesity and dieting falls within the umbrella of eating disorders. It's big, exciting stuff – it still attracts legions of new researchers.

There are two grand compendia, re-issuing periodically and slugging it out in this area. There is the largely UK-orientated The Essential Handbook of Eating Disorders, and the essentially US-based Eating Disorders & Obesity: A Comprehensive Handbook.

- It's somewhat a case of Feel My Pain versus Here Are The Facts & Figures.

Not to be overly reductionist, dieting is largely dealt with in terms of the degree to which it can

be seen as a precursor of, or a component of, Eating Disorders.

- Since dieting seems to be involved in what I am describing as a much broader Fatness Culture, I am particularly keen to look at dieting much more on its own terms.....

Anyway, going back its current and major location within the field of Eating Disorders, let's look in another way at the widely espoused relationship with Eating Disorders.....

Eating disorders are generally held to be horrible. In that they kill a lot of young people (and older ones too) and cause a lot of health problems, it might be difficult to argue that they are not, indeed, horrible. Again, individually, I always have this issue of "Whose Viewpoint", which I suppose goes hand in hand with "Whose Knowledge".

Anyway, let's put the likes of Anorexia and Bulimia in here – categorically within what we feel confident are eating disorders. This is an area of study.

And, once you have the makings of new "ology", it will do that only thing which an "ology" can do – it will look out from its boundaries and see potential for new territory.

Read the Eating Disorders websites – the groups, charities, research interests and support groups. Look at their pamphlets and their advice sheets and lists. You will see a trend.

You will see unequivocal pressure moving out into the Eating Disorders Not Other Specified category. You will see the waves of EDNOS lapping around Dieting.

So, am I just being protectionist myself – fearing for my “unique contribution to knowledge” being swamped under a semantic tidal shift?

No: or else all of critical discourse analysis is a blind alley.

SLIDE 6

Let's go through this.

FROM HERE you can maybe talk and think yourself out.

FROM HERE you are a medical case. Rescue is needed. But rescue from what? And how? Think about it. What do we have? A distinct medical condition? Or is it rather a socially constructed stew of contradictions and judgementalism?

If you haven't read, you will almost certainly have heard about – Paul Campos, *The Obesity Myth*. It catalogues the growing momentum of medicalisation which is relentlessly seeking – and radically overstating – evidence of morbidity and mortality to underpin the fundamental moralism of Fatness.

SLIDE 7

So, let's go back to what people actually appear to be doing. I've set out to develop a typology of dieter types.

You see, the espoused theory of dieting is that it works. You might not be surprised to find a stated definition of dieting along the lines of:

"A temporary regime of restricted eating in response to excess bodily fat, with a view to reaching an ongoing lower weight through this period of negative calorie intake."

But we know that plenty of people have been going on diets for over 40 years and they are still going on them. And, as we'll discuss, actual weight seems just one of many possible triggers.

What's more, if espoused Yo-Yo Theory is in play, this is what we would expect.

Draw picture of elevating saw pattern with hand...

.

But this isn't what I've been finding.....in various stages of formal, informal and sometimes quite fleeting data gathering, there several hundred encounters to draw on by this stage.

Draw erratic up & down Swinger pattern. For people who continually return to quite clearly defined bouts of dieting, it actually has tended to look much more like this.

So, both the Yo-Yo Theory and the espoused theory of efficacy seem at variance with real world dieting.

And, again, what's the possible value in confronting any of this?

- Are we just robbing comfort blankets?
- Just because behaviour does not conform to our lofty sense of logic and absolute truth doesn't automatically make it wrong.

Combating fear and embarrassment, for starters.

- The fear that comes from being different and the embarrassment that stems from any public questioning of the purported aberrance.....the seals of quiescence and submission when cultures go wrong.

I have sat with numerous Fatness-issue groups where the dynamic begins like this; take 20 people and a remarkable number of them will be thinking the same way – I'm a freak for becoming overweight and an even bigger freak for failing with dieting god knows how many times.....but these people, they seem much more normal, I wonder what they are doing here?

Isolation held in place with guilt is bad. An empirical exploration of the mechanics of dieting is neither idle curiosity nor voyeurism.

So, a little more about this first putative and emergent category, Swinger Dieting.

There is much less of this automatic crumbling of resolve that attempts to explain the resumption of dieting under the prevailing yo-yo model – which so neatly fits in with tacit assumptions of all-things weight related being, a fickle, weak, irrational, essentially girlie thing.

It extends motivation into the normalisation instincts of needing to be within *The Great Game of Dieting*, as we call it. This is the widespread but unstated intentionality that dieting can often be much more about the optics of being seen to *manage* the Fatness issues, to drink the prescribed yet quack medicine, rather than confront the real issues head on.

Swinger Dieting can be a weight roller-coaster. It most certainly is an emotional roller-coaster.

SLIDE 8

I suppose that as this typology of dieting has begun to emerge, that something comparable as the notion of body types as Endomorph, Mesomorph, & Ectomorph has come to mind; there always seem to be as many hybrids as “pure” types, but it lays down the semblance of a credible benchmark.

Again, the prime motivation is to emphasise to people that they are not freaks. There is causation, there is commonality. There is no blaming of the victim.

The quotes at the heading of each of these categories are from a real person, from which has come the inspiration for the title of Swinger, Flatliner, or Lifer.

“Flatliner” works on two levels. There may well be no significant shifts in weight, like there may be with a Swinger pattern (draw).

But there is also a horrible, constant, intrusive smersh of emotional noise. And there can be an emotional death inside.

Flatliners are constantly under pressure, denying one minute, over-indulging the next – compensating, compromising. Balancing, self-recriminating, agonising, and micro-analysing – it goes round and round in a cycle of eating anchored in guilt and doubt. They can feel this guilt and doubt at the very centre of their existence.

SLIDE 9

READ

The only way to live is keep a solid steel lid clamped tightly shut over all of it.

It is like living inside a pressure cooker.

Micro-counting, lists, and fads have utterly replaced the heart and soul of eating.

OK, that's the emergent typology: Swinger, Flatliner & Lifer, broadly contextualised within some of the keynote existing theory.

I want to now spend the remainder of our time situating this within my wider emergent theories and within a meeting of purpose with what I perceive to be the central tenets of community psychology.

I will be returning to this concept of utility repeatedly, not as philistine but because I have a personal suspicion of research, in already well-trammelled areas, which does not advance beyond emotionalist obviousness.

To explain further: Yes, of course it hurts – we can see that writ large all over the place.

Yes, of course it is wrong – with that ever present caveat that my assumptions of wrong are almost always open to question as to whether they are in fact right.

- and endlessly rehearsing pain and injustice without punting out possible solutions does exactly what, after a certain point? It risks concretising.

So what can be done about it? Which is a good place to open it out to those other usual suspects, Gender, Power & Culture, and see what they have to tell us.....

SLIDE 10

To move any issue into the popular consciousness requires it to be utterly monstered: to be the *issue*, the issue that matters right now where change must happen.

By way of example, it happened with black people as white people's property – and institutional racism by various degrees (and far worse, slavery itself in some places) still hangs around down the centuries. And extreme vigilance is still required.

Again, currently we are witnessing a push to take environmentalism from the margins to central survivalism and sustainability. There is no real tipping point as yet. Exceptional physical and emotional energy still needs to be expended.

Over the last 50 years or so we have seen great pushes to stop women being, if not always the outright property of men, then at least their consistent gender inequals. Again, none of these things is ever a journey completed.....forward momentum is always required.

These quotations are Fat Is A Feminist Issue, an epochal, wonderful, challenging, utterly iconoclastic breakthrough work by Susie Orbach.

But does it speak to the whole picture 30 years later? Is there more that needs to be said? Are there other ways to help people “get inside” and begin to change their Fatness lives, if change is what they want?

(And I am detecting possible subtleties between process of Fatness within men and women substantiating and not denying gendered power analysis)

LIKE MY comments on Yo-Yo’ing, there is no intention to deny for a moment a core truth – my quest is to find soft or malleable spots within an overall truth where something can be seized or moulded, not just unyielding concrete to bang up against. We can’t break down every Berlin Wall, sometimes we have to find ways under or round...

..

We'll return to these issues of strategy, entryism, practicality, feasibility and "**Praxicality**" later on.....

But the edges of debate have moved on somewhat of their own, into the realm of broader culture....

SLIDE 11

Both these quotes are from Susan Bordo's generally tremendous book of 1993 UNBEARABLE WEIGHT, these from the re-presented 2003 10th anniversary edition.

Hers was a head on assault, of the truly radical nature sketched out just now, against a consumer culture making weight-obsessed pawns of people, in her commentary almost exclusively women.

It has sparked a genre of its own, culminating in images of utter pathoplasticity to the canker of weight culture obsession – cyborg-like figures and a creed of only by extreme acts to transform bodily can we hope to conform.

And to my mind – more to the point, from almost 5 years out there now talking to people day-to-day about their hopes and fears, a lot of it is becoming simply far too rich to be a useful bridge of connectivity. Fine musings but.....

I picked this quote up near the start of the new volume not to be controversial or loud but simply because it cast some credibility issues across so much that followed. Maybe the U.S. experience

doesn't neatly translate into the UK which is a simple reason why we need to look at the real, embodied experiences of our local Fatness-concerned.

I have spoken with people in halls in Bolton, Manchester, Warrington and Tameside. They don't talk about cyborgs and mass juvenile erectile dysfunction – and just as importantly, talk of such might not connect with their own issues. But, most assuredly, they are weighed down with pressures. I have spoken by phone and email with others across the world. They all live with isolation, shame and guilt translated into their own local environments.

Let me exemplify a little more. The Frankfurt School did us a great service 40 odd years ago. It showed us that power worked through a great deal more than economics alone. It showed us Establishment and State influence where previously many had assumed freedom.

It also become something of a competition to pour ever more elevated levels of scorn on the proletariat and their myopic ways – such a thesis so easily shifts from the powered suffusion of culture to *our* culture and *their* culture. Sometimes it might behove commentators to realise that some aspects of popular culture are popular for the very reason that they can actually be fun.

Likewise, I detect in my own experiences within the field that there is something of a self-referential and elevating vortex of cultural commentary becoming disconnected with the lived

reality of Fatness lives. The Phantasmagoria. Hence let's start to return this to what we can see actually happening.

BUT before we do that, this is where Susan Bordo is absolutely on the money: READ QUOTE.

AND this is where her hanging call to arms is where - I hope I am among friends here - the community psychology approach picks up the challenge and runs with it.

So, let's quickly locate it within a couple of the specific, headline processes which are determining the Fatness landscape for real people, here in the UK today.

What we are seeking is genuine co-construction, mutual understanding, *the power to rebalance power imbalance*.

SLIDE 12

The first is the political blame game. Political scientists would categorise me as a liberal – very much with a small “l” – but that does not stop me believing that there are things horribly wrong structurally with our processes of representation and allocation.

- Not least is how the process of political confrontation segments along the crudest lines and prohibits further gainful debate.

Viz. Fatness.

So people are alternatively told that they are victims and gutless: not the most useful of messages.

SLIDE 13

Slightly more subtle but perhaps even more invidious is a process people can certainly feel:

READ OUT

ENTRAPPED

- People feel themselves drawn into the full Fatness lifestyle: food & eating obsessions, normalisation via dieting, competitive dieting. Lo & Lite foods everywhere. Something I have termed Nutritional Dislocation – the robbing away of instinctive nutritional awareness, time-honoured eating schedules and foodstuffs by commercial interests. I specifically call it Meal Stealing where it is actual replacement of individual meals with the likes of pot noodles or crunchy nut cornflakes.

CONVICTED

They are “convicted” for their overweight either by the shame of deviancy (ironically with overweight now the norm, not the exception) – or even via the creeping criminality surrounding overweight, e.g. the treatment of various parents of overweight kids and the withdrawal of certain healthcare provisions. Governmentality and Medicalisation go hand.

Power pushes new boundaries. The State is declaring open season on the previously personal space of the body.

RECIDIVISTS

And what is offered and promoted by this very same culture as the “cure” – more of the same, more fad dieting and unsustainable over-exercise. And the net result is the process turns over itself again, and again, and again.....The Great Game of Dieting always seeks new players and is very reluctant to allow anyone to leave the field of play....

- IT STARTS WITH DIETING DALLIANCE AND ENDS IN FATNESS DEVIANCE.....

It is an accelerating merry-go-round, very hard to step off.

There is this defining paradox within Fatness Culture that fine consumers are becoming faulty consumers, failed consumers, even as they outperform in their consumption of junk food and junk Fatness culture.

And so we seek points of entry, we look for tipping points.....we seek the difference which can make a difference.....

SLIDE 14

- A few words now on how some of this might happen, how a community psychology approach can enable:

So we scout out the ecology of the field. We seek the feasible. We trust in collaboration, multi-methods, self-agency, options, strengths and potentialities.

In our movements we must tread carefully between unattainable abstraction and simply a mirroring critique of what we see. I am not interested in staying within the strict boundaries of ethnography. Fatness is already an over-popular tourist research destination.

Conscientization without traction is self-indulgent monologue.

We need to empaphise from that soapbox, not preach....nor abstract to the fantastical.

So, heavily tongue in cheek:

- "Derrida tells us that there are infinite ways to define 'lightbulb' so we will always struggle in this area."
- "The activists are picketing the power station and may be some time."
- "One. Hopefully with a view to why it failed in the first place, what lighting arrangements best suit the actual users and also with a view to how practical improvements can soon contribute to better sustainable energy."

SLIDE 15

- A quick bounce across some of the outputs that may hopefully start off this awareness and self-help process with Fatness:

Hopefully a mixture of accessible, feature-level commentary people can relate to, with some fun but insightful questions along the way:

My Fatness Culture Finder: discovering the extent of your personal entanglement within a Fatness Culture overly obsessed with eating, food, weight, overweight and bodily image.

SLIDE 16

Discuss general Weight Foundation dieting concepts briefly in these three slides.

SLIDE 17

SLIDE 18

Other issues: Food-centredness fixations; Fatness-fixated social circle; Body image sensitivities; Fatness judgementalism in self and others; Nutritional Dislocation; Fatness component of self-identity.

Everyday Fatness embodied and lived.

SLIDE 19

Location with a dieting Lifestyle.

Swinger, Flatliner, Lifer

Not putting excessive faith in catharsis through identification itself, but recognising that through dispelling isolation and a sense of freakishness that much stronger potentiality can be leveraged.

SLIDE 20

A deeper personal examination of cultural pitfalls and routes to freedom: all of the following questions situated within detailed and questioning commentary.

SLIDE 21

- Discuss theses example in here &

SLIDE 22

SLIDE 23

These outputs, I hope, are the makings of a substantial and evolving lifetime of action research in this area.

I'm going for a launch of this in the UK and the U.S. very shortly but, so long as it is only looked over personally and not distributed, I'd be delighted to email this draft version to anyone here. That's not meant to sound remotely grand. I'd value any feedback – and outright criticism.

LOOKING to this – it's not my knowledge and that's one of the key things I really like about the CP ethos.

So back to the question of utility one last time. I restate that I am far from a Philistine. However, I am convinced that there is an untasted and sour bottle on the table of much research, which CP neatly uncorks and pours away.

Sure art-for-art's sake is great. I personally really enjoy the philosophy of the human sciences. I'm trying at the moment to come to terms with the nature and value of Enchantment.

But, going back to the container analogy, it's when things don't do what they say on the tin that we can hit problems.

I recently went to a 3 day ESRC ethics seminar which confirmed my personal suspicions. We have this layer of the God of objective science neatly sandwiched between reflexivity and research dispassion. Value-add? That's something nasty shop keepers talk about!

However, when you scratch the surface of the vast majority of proposals, you will may discover in all-but the most abstracted (which may be of huge value themselves in many ways) that there is an assumption that "good", some "benefit", to some problem area, some area of assumed social injustice, may occur.

If I'm crusading I'd rather do it in the light, where I can see and be seen. My cards on the table.

It reminds me of my passion from my youth – rock-climbing. Like much of the outdoors movement, we kidded ourselves that we were green because we went into places of outstanding natural beauty.

We weren't. We inevitably caused damage. If we had realised and admitted this up front, maybe we could have turned our attention to mitigating better the troublesome nature of our presence – and actively compensating - rather than simply pretending otherwise.

We could have given something back. Or simply given. I think CP is straight-up on these issues.

I have a clear conscience: many people have told me that they are deeply unhappy about their involvement within what we have together established is a pervasive and binding Fatness Culture. Together we are working to unpack and unpick. These are my colleagues, collaborators and friends, not my canvas, nor my meal ticket.

I'm happy enough with that.

We seem to be evolving towards a lingua franca together around Fatness that people can relate to and spark off with their own positive actions – Hardcore Dieting; Swingers, Flatliners and Lifers; Fatness Culture, stepping off the Fatness merry-go-round; Shadow Dieting; Nutritional Dislocation & Meal Stealing; stepping out of the Fatness Blame Game, The Great Game of Dieting. By defining a lifestyle people can see the boundaries and choose to stay in or opt out. Ongoing action research can evaluate and refine.

SLIDE 24

And there's another thing I like. Of course there's culture: of course there is, ultimately, power everywhere, and it sticks like industrial grease to everything and anything.

But there is absolutely nothing more certain that if you believe there is no role for agency in this world, there most certainly will not be!

I don't label people "Judgemental Dopes", any more than did Garfinkel.

And I would also contend that , any serious commentary, any self-selected rescue mission, is utterly spurious if it collapses into blaming the victim:

- In this light, at all levels, the finger wagging at matters Fatness must stop.

In this recognition lies the route to asset based development, not deficit reconfirmation.....we slow the Fatness merry-go-round, we strip the merry-go-round of its superficial glittery allure, we let those who wish step clear.....

And one final thing we all have to remember is:

This is not just food, this is fantasy food.

