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Original Article

# Between bodies and collectivities: Articulating the action of emotion in obesity epidemic discourse

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**Abstract** Over the last decade intense concern has developed about what has been characterised as an obesity epidemic in the West. This concern has been accompanied by equally intense debates over the validity of this characterisation. Many critics see the epidemic designation as part of an intensifying 'moral panic' about fat in which emotions about fat shape the public and scientific debate. In this article we explore the critical literature on the obesity epidemic, noting the way in which it draws attention to the role of the emotions in discourse on the epidemic. We argue that the action of emotions in this context invites further theorisation, and that this theorisation needs to be undertaken via concepts that: (1) explicitly integrate the body and the emotions with the materialisation of political discourse, (2) avoid individualising and psychologising accounts of the emotions and (3) analyse the action of emotion in political debate without implying the need to eradicate emotion in generating more just and accurate perspectives. To this end, we turn to the work of Sara Ahmed, who has developed a sophisticated account of the role of the emotions in constructing social collectivities through their engagement with ideas of the body. We argue that this theory can be used to illuminate both the general relationship between public discourse and subjectivity, and the specific relationship between the self, the body and the oftentimes unmet imperative to slimmness.

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## Introduction

How do emotions work to secure collectivities through the way in which they read the bodies of others? (Ahmed, 2004a, p. 25)

Over the last decade intense concern has developed about what has been characterised as an obesity epidemic in the West. This concern has been accompanied by equally intense debates over the validity of this characterisation, with some critics arguing that while body size is increasing, rates do not constitute an epidemic and, in any case, research is yet to conclusively demonstrate that obesity is universally harmful. These critics generate complex analyses of the discourse of epidemic, and draw attention to the contribution the emotions make to the proliferation of this discourse, often referring to this contribution as a ‘moral panic’ about fat (for example, see Gard and Wright, 2001; Campos *et al*, 2005; Monaghan, 2005; Lobstein, 2006; Oliver and Gaesser, 2006; Stephenson and Banet-Weiser, 2007). In this article we begin by examining several examples of this critical literature, identifying the references to moral panic as an indication of the need for further theorisation of the place of emotion in the discourse of epidemic. In the second section of the article we draw on feminist accounts of fat and the obesity debate as a means of bringing into sharper focus the role of emotions in the construction of the epidemic, and in the complex relations between the body, food and the self, in this context. Seeking to build on the insights offered here, we turn in the final section to the work of Sara Ahmed, who has developed a sophisticated account of the role of the emotions in constructing social collectivities through their engagement with ideas of the body. We argue that this theory offers a rich starting point for illuminating the action of emotion in both the general relationship between public discourse and subjectivity, and the specific relationship between the self, the body and the oftentimes unmet imperative to slimness.

## Obesity and Moral Panic

Critical discussion of the West’s relationship to body fat has been in progress for several decades. Much of this discussion has been conducted by feminists, who, as we will see later in this article, have developed sophisticated gendered approaches to the analysis of fat as a social and cultural phenomenon. Within the last decade, commentary has emerged specifically on the issue of obesity, which, while obviously also concerned with the treatment of fat in the West, responds to a relatively new focus of this concern, that is, a specific clinically defined form of fatness. This literature takes a range of perspectives. Here we wish to consider a key strand of critical debate that has developed within this



new area, one prompted by the rise of discourses of ‘epidemic’ in relation to obesity, and which takes a sceptical, or sometimes explicitly hostile, stance in relation to the idea of the epidemic.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on expertise in a range of disciplines, some of this literature takes to task the many assertions made in both medical and popular forums that obesity has indeed become an epidemic, that it endangers human health on a grand scale and that it can be readily resolved through the application of rational principles of diet and exercise. Other examples of this literature express agnosticism about the reality or otherwise of the epidemic and concentrate on the negative effects of the discourse constituting the perception of an epidemic. This article focuses on this literature because it raises important questions about the role of the emotions in the production of what we will term ‘obesity epidemic discourse’ (following Evans *et al*, 2008), often via the evocative but not entirely satisfactory notion of ‘moral panic’, first coined by Stanley Cohen in his 1973 book, *Folk devils and moral panics: The creation of Mods and Rockers*. As we will argue in this first section, the literature takes the necessary step of placing the emotions at the centre of the epidemic discourse. We note, however, that this placement is not accompanied by detailed theorisation of the emotions. Rather, the idea of moral panic is deployed as a kind of place holder for explaining both the emotional origins of the flawed epidemiology and its effects. In opening up a new place for consideration of the emotions, we argue, this concept creates an opportunity for more explicit theorisation.

### Challenging the ‘Epidemic’

Our first example of the critical literature is Lee Monaghan’s 2005 article, ‘A critical take on the obesity debate’. This article explores the effects of the obesity epidemic discourse, arguing that it tends to reproduce stigmatising approaches to body fat and those deemed to carry too much of it. The article is part of a group of three papers on obesity published together in the same issue of *Social Theory & Health*. It questions the science behind the ‘war on fat’, casting doubt on the perceived epidemic of excess weight among UK men. As Monaghan (2005, p. 303) puts it,

The highly publicised ‘obesity debate’ often focuses upon proposed ‘solutions’ to a taken-for-granted ‘problem’ (or apocalyptic problem in the making) rather than questioning the construction of fatness as a massive public health problem that should be tackled.

The point being made here is that both the rates of overweight and the effects of it on health warrant questioning. Monaghan’s view on the latter point is not that high weights are never harmful to health (although he does query the



assumption that they are *always* harmful to health). Instead he calls for debate that refuses the polarisation of health along slim/fat lines, and observes that (2005, p. 303):

Space exists here for productive dialogue without being forced to adopt an essentialist either/or position that is intertwined with other questionable dichotomies.

This insightful non-dualist approach characterises the article as a whole. Monaghan is careful to avoid common pitfalls when discussing body size and health, for example, he avoids the tendency to either denigrate fat or valorise it.<sup>2</sup> At the same time, the article does not retreat to bland neutrality. Instead it makes a strong argument against the usual assumptions about the alignments between bodies, body size and value. Thus Monaghan locates the obesity debate in a growing horror of fat based not on incontrovertible evidence but on social norms, presenting his point as follows (2005, p. 305):

I question the very public degradation of fatness and, in suggesting possible ways forward, accord due weight to the social body concerning matters of health and illness.

This form of words seeks to reframe 'weight' by reminding us of the sense in which it can confer authority and value as much as stigma in Western discourse. Towards the end of the article Monaghan again draws on metaphors to suggest the related point that food, fat and body size operate as potent objects of anxiety and uncertainty (2005, p. 312):

... because the war against obesity cannot be divorced from economics (there are obviously big fat profits to be made), it is legitimate to ask interested parties on which side is their bread buttered and whether they can afford to leave it without fear of going hungry?

In this extract, the expression 'big fat profits' reminds us of the association between fat and excess and greed in Western discourse, while the reference to bread and butter also reminds us that food still operates as positive metaphors for the essentials of life. Similarly, the reference to 'going hungry' points to the centrality of food and the body (in the sensation of hunger) to notions of well-being, risk and deprivation. All these uses serve to highlight the intensity with which we invest food and body size with emotional meaning, and are especially suggestive in that, as is often noted in the critical literature, simplistic rationalistic understandings of and solutions to overeating, such as those that focus on dispassionate mechanistic calculations of food input and energy expenditure, are often deployed in obesity epidemic discourse. These, it is argued, are unlikely to ever find lasting purchase in the highly emotional



negotiations individuals and communities conduct around food and activity in daily life.

In keeping with these allusions to the symbolics of bodies and fat, Monaghan also pays attention to the operations of power and stigma in the debate:

‘obesity epidemic talk’ is inseparable from social, cultural, political and economic concerns and therefore the exercise of power. (2005: 309)

Monaghan notes that body fat invokes and relies on potent social and cultural concepts and attributes; that it is ‘a deeply personalised corporeal marker for inferior social status’ (2005, p. 310). In making his point, he draws directly on the idea of an obesity moral panic (2005, p. 304):

Given the current moral panic about a global obesity epidemic, and the potentially harmful calls to action it legitimates, alternative views need reiterating.

Later (2005, p. 309) Monaghan invokes moral panic again, this time arguing that the current focus on obesity (framed as the ‘war on fat’) is a form of moral panic derived from power relations of some complexity:

the highly publicised war against fat is about moral judgments and panic (manufactured fear and loathing). It is about social inequality (class, gender, generational and racial bias), political expediency and organisational and economic interests.

In Monaghan’s article, the expression ‘moral panic’ is used to highlight and account for the emotional valence evident in the response to the putative obesity epidemic.

‘The epidemiology of overweight and obesity’, by Paul Campos *et al* also draws attention to the emotions in its critique of the obesity epidemic discourse. The article argues that concern about obesity is unnecessarily high in that it is not supported by evidence. It makes four main points, all of which are based on challenges to conventional interpretations of the available epidemiological data. In brief, the article challenges the following common statements:

1. overweight and obesity have reached epidemic proportions (2006, p. 55)
2. overweight and obesity lead to increased mortality rates (p. 55)
3. overweight and obesity lead to increased morbidity (p. 57)
4. significant long-term weight loss is a realistic attainable goal that will improve health (p. 57)

Alternative interpretations of the data are presented, all of which frame the debate’s interlocutors as inappropriately obsessed with fat and its supposed



harmful effects. Like Monaghan, the authors refer often to 'the war on fat' (for example, pp. 57, 58), and offer a range of reasons for the widespread misinterpretation of data and the accompanying 'rhetoric', arguing that it is driven by 'cultural and political factors' (p. 55).

Also like Monaghan, the authors use metaphor at times to make their point (for instance, they describe the claims about obesity as themselves constituting an 'epidemic' (p. 58)). Their attention, however, is far more explicitly directed towards the evidence and the interpretation of epidemiological research. The argument hinges on the objection that there is not enough evidence to support current claims about obesity, and that the evidence that *is* available is not being treated objectively. In this respect the article enacts a particular, if implied, relationship to emotion, one in which emotions risk compromising objectivity and proper comprehension of the facts. The article builds on this implication by devoting a section to the idea of moral panic – 'Social and political contributors to the obesity panic' (2006, p. 58) – offering the following explanation of the term and its relevance to the obesity debate:

The exponential increase in mass media attention to obesity in the US and abroad seems to have many of the elements of what social scientists call a 'moral panic'. Moral panics are typical during times of rapid social change and involve an exaggeration or fabrication of risks, the use of disaster analogies, and the projection of societal anxieties onto a stigmatised group. Despite the very weak evidence that obesity represents a health crisis, scientific studies and news articles alike continue to treat the population's weight gain as an impending disaster.

The definition of moral panic provided here leaves some key issues unclear. For instance, the idea of 'fabrication' suggests an intention to mislead, but the volitional status of other elements (projection onto stigmatised groups, exaggeration) is not spelt out. Later in the article speculation about motives becomes much more explicit, as the authors cite the commercial funding of research as a factor in the production of the 'war on fat' (2006, p. 58):

Many of the leading obesity researchers who have created the official standards for what constitutes 'overweight' and 'obese' have also received sizeable funding from the pharmaceutical and weight-loss industries.

In short, Campos *et al* propose a primarily economic explanation for the production of obesity epidemic discourse, but combine this with references to the role of 'ideology', 'anxieties' and 'morality'.

The article also refers to the important relationship between negative judgments about fat and negative attitudes towards minorities and the poor, and



relates these to broader social and political issues such as immigration and the economy (2005, p. 58):

Public opinion studies also show that negative attitudes towards the obese are highly correlated with negative attitudes towards minorities and the poor, such as the belief that all these groups are lazy and lack self-control and will power. This suggests that anxieties about racial integration and immigration may be an underlying cause of some of the concern over obesity.

Here, Campos *et al* highlight (if briefly) an issue which will be drawn out in more detail later in the article: fat is part of a material and symbolical chain of associations that links ideas of gender, the body, race and class with ideas of emotion.

Both articles described here challenge key components of the obesity epidemic discourse, in the process gesturing towards the contribution of emotion (concern, horror, fear and loathing, obsession, panic) to the construction of this discourse. Both draw on the notion of moral panic as they do so. In this, they are not unusual. Emma Rich and John Evans (2005, p. 342) also make many references to moral panic, suggesting early on in their discussion of the debate, the heightened emotions associated with obesity by describing the press as 'engendering alarm and moral panic around the nature of the obesity problem', arguing (p. 344) that the public are rarely encouraged to consider the negative impact of this moral panic, namely its ability to harm health through shaming and stigmatisation. The authors accord the emotions substantial power in shaping obesity discourse (p. 349), and explicitly acknowledge the need to consider emotions more in analysing how obesity is thought. Bethan Evans (2006, p. 259) also refers to the panic surrounding obesity, arguing it has prompted new interest in healthy lifestyles among medical geographers. Her article alludes to the emotions at a number of points, referring for instance to the role of guilt in reactions to obesity (p. 261), and noting that the emotional aspects of eating and body size are largely ignored in the policy material she analyses, save to list shame and guilt as causes of overeating (p. 263). She advocates a different approach to body size that puts emotion at the centre of designations of well-being by focusing on 'an alternative, non-medical reading of obese or fat bodies where being healthy is about *feeling* healthy ...' (p. 265, emphasis in the original). Stephenson and Banet-Weiser (2007) likewise mobilise the expression 'moral panic', arguing that it is this emotional reaction that is driving attacks on the media, blaming it for encouraging weight gain in children. The authors argue that, 'This latest moral panic draws upon a dichotomous understanding of children as *either* innocent victims of media influence *or* savvy media users' (p. 277, emphasis in the original) and they return to moral panic frequently throughout the article.



The expression 'moral panic' is in many respects an effective one in these articles in that it communicates the idea that unexamined values and emotions can generate powerful social and political effects. For the most part, however, it inspires in the literature only rather sketchy accounts of the origins, nature and functions of the emotions within obesity epidemic discourse. More detailed engagement with moral panic theory would be one means of developing this relatively sketchy area, and Stanley Cohen's (1987, 2003) later revisions and clarifications of the concept would be relevant here. Importantly, however, the term has been subject to a range of challenges over time that have not been resolved by later revisions. For example, it has been criticised as potentially dated in its conception of power, and of the operations of the media and its impact on audiences, tending to present the media as monolithic and the audience as passive recipients of media content. McRobbie and Thornton (1995) make two main points in relation to moral panics and the media: first that the operations of the media in society were never as simple nor as direct as is assumed in this theory and, second, that the media are becoming even more complex and fragmentary over time. This process of increasing complexity, they argue, weakens further than ever any scope to make assumptions about the impact of media messages on audiences. The moral panic concept has also been criticised for oversimplifying the range of emotional responses involved in the development and playing out of such controversies. In particular, it is seen as sometimes mislabeling orderly and systematic responses as chaotic and non-rational. As Garland (2008, p. 16) notes, 'We need ... to be careful here lest we attribute too much efficacy to "panics" and too little to rational reactions to underlying problems – although it is often empirically difficult to disentangle the two'. This objection also implies another one in our view – that the term tends to rely on a denigration of the non-rational (or the emotional) in its broad application of the idea of panic. According to Jock Young (2007, p. 59), for instance, 'a visceral reaction, heavy with emotional energy, is a key feature of moral panics'. Young further defines moral panic by implying that its (preferable) opposite is objectivity and the absence of emotion:

The text of panic is ... a transposition of fear – the very disproportionality and excess of the language, the venom of the stereotype, signifies that something other than direct reporting is up. (p. 59)

This appeal to 'direct reporting' valorises objectivity and, by implication, the elimination of emotion from the construction of reports or narratives. Where moral panic emerges as the undesirable alternative to objectivity and rationality (as it does in Campos and colleagues' article on obesity epidemic discourse), an implicit binary is established: destructive emotions and constructive reason. In





the process the need to create a space for debate devoid of emotional input is suggested, as though such a space were indeed possible.

In sum, then, four main limitations to moral panic theory's ability to illuminate the action of emotion in the obesity epidemic can be identified. These are that it:

1. oversimplifies agency and power;
2. tends to treat the media as monolithic and audiences as passive;
3. underplays the role of order in reactions to events, overplaying panic or chaos as the necessarily destructive or inappropriate element; and
4. tends to denigrate and seek to exclude emotion

These factors bear directly on the obesity epidemic discourse and the objections leveled against it. As is indicated in the material discussed above, reference is often made in the critical literature to the place of the media in proliferating the discourse, to judgmental and stigmatising action against those deemed overweight, and to the sorting of 'fat' and 'normal' bodies into categories of healthiness or otherwise. None of these issues is unproblematically addressed by the language of moral panic. Most importantly for this article, the term's tendency to frame emotion as risky or a negative influence tends to burden work critical of the discourse with the implication that emotion must be suppressed if a better approach to body size is to be established. This is important in that, as we will spell out in the next section, emotion is associated in Western discourse with a chain of other denigrated phenomena including femininity, softness and fat. From this point of view, challenging others' contempt for fat is problematic where a related contempt for, or fear of, the emotions is enacted. To put this more broadly, a key issue for critics working in this area is the need to develop analyses that challenge the epidemic discourse and the intensity with which it is circulating without treating emotion as an intrinsically negative or polluting force.

In several respects, then, the notion of moral panic does not necessarily offer the critics of the obesity epidemic discourse the most precise or persuasive means of referring to emotion. Instead, it creates a starting point from which the theorisation of emotion can be undertaken. Of course, the scholars covered here do not set out to offer detailed theorisation of emotion. This is not our point. Nor do we argue that the examples described above constitute the entire critical literature on the obesity epidemic discourse, or comprehensively exemplify its diversity and sophistication (other fine critical work includes Colls, 2006; Guthman and DuPuis, 2006; Boero, 2007). Notwithstanding this range, however, we maintain that, as with the examples discussed above, this broader literature leaves open space for explicit theorisation of the action of emotion.



The remainder of this article concentrates on expanding this theorisation, first by turning to feminist work on gender, fat and the body, some of which explores obesity specifically, while other work looks at understandings of fat in general. In putting body size in social and political context and pointing to the emotiveness of fat, this work begins to open up to consideration the place of emotion in the proliferation of obesity discourse.

## **Bodies, Fat, Emotions**

Feminist scholarship has always been attentive to the intersections of bodies, emotions and social phenomena and has long recognised the figurative and material potency of fat, especially in relation to gender. In particular, Susan Bordo's (1993) work makes a now classic argument about the gendering of fat, and the ways in which it operates as a figure for ambiguity, permeability and unruliness. Utilising Mary Douglas's insight that 'the "microcosm" – the physical body – may symbolically reproduce central vulnerabilities and anxieties of the "macrocosm" – the social body' (1993, p. 186), Bordo argues that contemporary attachment to the slender, toned body engages anxieties around the "'correct" management of desire' (1993, p. 187) and the containment of threatening and unruly flesh. Bordo's articulation locates the politics of fat in the broader social context of anxiety and desire; in her account, the fat/slender body, the bulges and protuberances, are 'a metaphor for anxiety about internal processes out of control' (1993, p. 189). Along related lines, Samantha Murray (2005) argues that social readings of the 'fat' body treat it as a 'site of moral and physical decay' (2005, p. 266). LeBesco and Braziel (2001) too draw attention to the meanings of fat, noting that the 'paradigm of the fat body [as] the symptomatic body' (2001, p. 4) invokes 'reckless excess, prodigality, indulgence, lack of restraint, violation of order and space, transgression of boundary' (2001, p. 3). These descriptions reflect the emotive quality in many discursive constructions of weight.

Bordo's work illuminated the powerful moral and social investments in weight, and opened up understandings of gendered cultural responses to flesh and fat. As Murray (2008, p. 213) puts it, the 'fat' body draws together concerns about 'normative feminine beauty and sexuality, health and pathology, morality, anxieties about excess, and the centrality of the individual in the project of self-governance'. While women are a particular target of these injunctions in that 'women's desires are by their very nature excessive, irrational, threatening to erupt and challenge patriarchal order' (Bordo, 1993, p. 206), Western social frameworks encourage all of us to contain and control the body. In this way, feminist accounts of fat also work to reveal the broader circulation of normative



ideas about what the 'fat' of individual subjects means, since fat also implicitly works to undermine or discredit masculinity (in the form of the generic subject or individual). In this way, female 'fat' materialises women's lesser status as subjects and their greater corporeal entrapment, but fat, wherever it materialises, feminises and compromises rationality. Thus 'fat' men and 'fat' children also materialise as lesser subjects. This insight has had particular value for revealing the racial and ethnic specificities of the tyranny of the slender body (Herndon, 2005; Shaw, 2005), where norms of size are generated in accord with dominant Anglo-American ideals of beauty and body types. Herndon (2005), for example, examines the potential diminishment in citizen participation among black women in the United States as weight comes to be another vector of marginalisation.

Beyond these critiques, feminist challenges to normative and proscriptive representations of body size have also included celebrations of the non-normative 'fat' body. In their edited volume, *Bodies out of Bounds* (2001), Braziel and LeBesco aim to 'reconceptualise and reconfigure corpulence' (LeBesco and Braziel, 2001, p. 1), challenging phobic and simplistic responses to fat bodies. Murray (2005) examines 'the fat pride' movement and its invitation to women to stick out and be proud. These are strategies in a common and important mode of feminist response to gendered social and political constraints, where restrictive social prohibitions are flouted, and new emotional engagements with fat are forged; it is 'fat activism ... reclaim[ing] the word fat' (Saguy and Riley, 2005, p. 870). But contemporary feminist investigations of fat have also engaged with broader questions about the global focus on obesity, and social responses to it. These scholars have sounded notes of caution about framing fat as resistance. Yancey *et al* (2006) challenge the feminist focus on the perils of the slender body, arguing that fat is negatively affecting the health of the least advantaged women and that feminists are failing to address the social inequalities manifest in weight. Probyn (2008) has recently been very critical of the 'semiotic reversal' (2008, p. 402) suggested in the reclamation of fat. For Probyn, 'there is something seriously wrong with an analysis that leaves untouched the socioeconomic structures that are producing ever larger bodies' (2008, p. 402). For these scholars, feminist celebrations or revaluations of weight against the medical and social controls of bodies fail to take adequate account of the economic and gendered inequities of fat and obesity. Critical examinations of the 'global obesity' phenomenon suggest that body shapes and sizes reflect global patterns of resource distribution as well as individual social locations. Bodies materially reveal what Probyn describes as 'the immense changes in global flows of capital and agribusiness, which are putting millions out of traditional work and forcing them into cities' (2008, p. 402).



Bordo's (1993) intervention into the politics of body size provided a new feminist framework for the recognition of flesh, weight and fat in the cultural and political management of bodies; her argument identified the complex gendered negotiations of social power in fat and slenderness, in loose and taut flesh. Her suggestion that there were 'two different symbolic functions of body shape and size: (1) the designation of social position, such as class status or gender role; and (2) the outer indication of the spiritual, moral or emotional state of the individual' (1993, p. 187) invited consideration of the role of emotions in the meanings attributed to fat. These insights can be expanded beyond the 'symbolic' and the individual in that contemporary social responses to overweight and obesity indicate that fat also draws in and moves the feelings and emotions, bodies and subjectivities, of others. In line with this, Murray's (2005) account of her brief immersion in the fat pride movement reveals the ways in which emotions exceed body boundaries. She shares, for example, the strong negative response others have to her body weight, and contends that 'every time the fat woman hides her eating from others ... she is really eating other people's disgust at her body' (2008, p. 217).

As with Bordo's observations about the symbolic function of fat, Murray's framing of the mobile emotions associated with fat can be read to suggest, as we will explore below, the possibility that emotions emerge and move *between* bodies, affecting those who carry the weight and those who do not in different but related ways, and constituting the boundaries between the two in the process. This exchange and interaction invites analysis of the multiple, uncomfortable and unruly processes of normalisation, desire and feeling expressed in flesh beyond individual overweight bodies.

This invitation – to analyse the complex relations between the body, fat and the social in ways that take account of the mobility and productivity of emotion – carries with it an important corollary: the need for sophisticated conceptual tools able to capture the layered and multiple origins and drivers of the current concern around obesity, and the place of bodies, and emotions, in the proliferation of this discourse. In particular, it calls for ways of identifying the action of emotion in ways that do not treat emotion as corrupting, or, indeed, as dispensable to public debate. In the final section of this article we turn to Sara Ahmed's theorisation of the emotions as a resource for elaborating the action of the emotions in the obesity epidemic discourse.

## Reframing Emotion

There are, no doubt, many entry points through which to build a theorisation of the emotions suited to the obesity debate. The sociological literature is not



lacking in engagements with the emotions. We turn to Ahmed's work, however, for a number of very specific reasons. First, it explicitly brings together the body, the emotions and the social in accounting for social phenomena. Second, it draws together a sophisticated account of power, agency and corporeality as it does so, reflecting the earlier feminist recognition of the fat/power nexus. Third, it exceeds conventional accounts of the emotions which tend to individualise and psychologise emotional states and dynamics and can lead to the conclusion that emotion must be expelled from public debate. In that much of the literature critical of the epidemic discourse is also critical of the oversimplifications of some public health responses to obesity – their tendency to psychologise and individualise the causes of obesity and the means of ameliorating it, and to call for 'dispassionate', 'objective' discussion – this work offers a valuable new resource for thinking through the obesity epidemic discourse in all its complexity. Here we focus here on the insights offered in Ahmed's article, 'Collective feelings' (2004a), which concentrate on the role of emotions in creating and securing collectivities.

The article's point of departure is the role of nationalist fervour and the emotion of hatred in generating national collectivities and the national boundaries on which they rely. This would seem at first glance to be rather far from our area of interest here. Yet, as we argued in relation to the gender, race and class of fat, and as the articles examined above indicate, emotions of fear, disgust and anger can be identified in both areas, and these emotions can perform social and political collectivities (as Campos *et al* point out (2005, p. 58), for instance, obesity epidemic discourse 'is serving to reinforce moral boundaries against minorities and the poor'). In theorising the operations and impact of extreme forms of nationalism and the emotions associated with them, Ahmed argues against commonsense constructions of emotion. These constructions tend to understand emotion either as located (1) in individual subjects and moving outwards into society, or (2) in society and moving inwards into individual subjects. As Ahmed argues, both understandings of the location of emotion reify it as the origin or product of other phenomena, in particular, subjects and collectivities, and therefore miss its performative role.

Finding these alternatives inadequate to the task of understanding the relations between bodies, subjects and society in the context of nationalism, Ahmed argues that emotion emerges *between* subjects, and *between* subjects and society: that it is in this 'in-between' space that these emotions occur and have their effect. Further, in her view, emotions do not 'cross' boundaries of subjects and collectivities (moving outwards or inwards). Rather, they actually work to *define* the boundaries of subjects, and of collectivities – it is in this sense that they are performative. Along these lines, she uses the example of nationalist extremism and race hate to illustrate the ways in



which the perception of shared emotion creates defined collectivities such as nations:

The ordinary white subject is a fantasy that comes into being through the mobilisation of hate, as a passionate attachment tied closely to love [...] hate works to create the very outline of different figures, which aligns those figures together, and constitutes them as a common threat. (2004a: p. 26)

The idea proposed here is that strong negative emotions constitute categories of persons by which some are included and some excluded, some valued and some denigrated, and thereby establish stabilities of belonging and legitimacy. This idea can be put to use in thinking about the material analysed for this article. Indeed, Ahmed's theory is particularly evocative in the context of obesity in that her emphasis is on boundaries – including bodily boundaries – and of questions of movement across, or transgression of, boundaries as defining subjects and collectivities. Thus, hate outlines the contours of a nationalist collectivity by constructing the inside and the outside of this collectivity. By virtue of their race or colour, some subjects belong 'inside' the national collectivity, others belong 'outside' it. She asks (2004a, p. 25)

How do emotions work to align some subjects with some others and against other others?

While Ahmed focuses here on the role of the intensely negative emotion of hate in the formation of racist collectivities, it is possible to read the obesity phenomenon along similar lines.

Ahmed describes emotions as establishing the very subjects and objects understood to generate them, as *constitutive of* subjects and collectivities rather than solely the expression of them. This formulation offers much to critics of obesity epidemic discourse in its flexibility and sophistication. Indeed, it provides new perspectives on some of the phenomena also canvassed by 'moral panic' accounts. These emotions do not, for instance, simply drive negative media discourse via the motives of powerful individuals or interest groups, nor do they simply come to be possessed by the public as a result of this discourse. Emotions emerge in the tensions and contact between embodied subjects, and this space *in between* can be local and intimate as well as global and public. These emotional forces are multilayered and multidirectional. As such, they are not amenable to those tendencies common to public health discourse on obesity that critics often highlight: oversimplified and decontextualised 'solutions' expressed in bland, mechanistic admonishments about healthy eating. Indeed, such admonishments can be seen to serve merely to build and proliferate these complexities by generating and reinforcing further distinctions about proper



conduct and corporeality. Likewise, the emotional forces at work are not captured by available accounts of the origins of epidemiological certainty: the intentional subjects sometimes assumed to be manipulating research data and popular discourse to profit or achieve influence. Instead, the emotions associated with the obesity debate produce the very subjects and collectivities of authority and identity seen to deploy them.

Where emotions emerge between bodies and help constitute collectivities, they also generate intense attachments. Central to the flow of emotions in relation to the obesity debate is, to put it in Ahmed's terms, the creation of collectivities (collectivities that feminist scholars such as Susan Bordo and Samantha Murray have identified) of the fat versus the fit, the virtuous and self-regulating versus the lazy or inadequate, the 'soft' and feminine versus the 'hard' and masculine; collectivities that also entail modes of inclusion and exclusion. It is to these reassuring (for some) processes of inclusion and exclusion that much obesity discourse attaches itself. As Ahmed puts it (2004a, p. 29):

It is through the intensification of feeling that bodies and worlds materialise and take shape, or that the effect of boundary, fixity and surface is produced.

Notions of obesity provoke an 'intensification of feeling' that in turn materialises particular subjects (such as the healthy subject), objects (including the object of obesity itself) and collectivities (such as a responsible healthy citizenry). In this respect, rather than engendering or expressing chaos, the obesity phenomenon can be seen as engendering and expressing particular politically articulated forms of order. In these respects, Ahmed's work helps us begin to think the drivers and effects of the obesity phenomenon as more diffuse and multiple than the moral panic framing allows. It also enables a recognition of the performative role of the phenomenon in articulations of order.

Importantly, Ahmed's theory in this article and elsewhere moves clearly away from a model of emotion that treats it as excess, obstacle or a mere inconvenient by-product of social and cultural life (as is sometimes implied in uses of the expression 'moral panic'). In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, she makes a point similar to that made at the outset of this article, that is that Western thought frames emotion as "'beneath" the faculties of thought and reason' and she goes on to point out that 'the subordination of the emotions also works to subordinate the feminine and the body' (2004b, p. 3). Ahmed's aim in the book is to ask, 'What do emotions do?' (p. 4), and in asking this question she makes the observation that 'what is relegated to the margins is often, as we know from deconstruction, right at the centre of thought itself' (p. 4). This observation is nowhere more relevant, we would argue, than to the



place of emotion in obesity epidemic discourse. As we have argued, the negative reaction to body fat materialised in this debate implies a negative relation to the emotions and, by association, its symbolic counterparts – those very phenomena critics of the discourse often intend to defend: the feminine, fat and even the marginalised groups among whom, as Probyn and others have noted, relatively high levels of body weight are found.

## Conclusion

How best, then, to contribute to the obesity debate, to analyse the emotionally charged pronouncements and strategies produced in the name of the putative epidemic, without implicitly denigrating or seeking to exclude emotion in principle (as can the language of moral panic)? Ahmed's work has provided some clues in its shift away from the individualising of emotions, its recognition of emotion as central to the production of social collectivities via its reading of bodies, and more broadly, its realisation that the social, the emotional and the corporeal cannot be separated. As Ahmed points out in clarifying the relationship between 'emotion' and 'motion', 'What moves us, what makes us feel, is also that which holds us in place, or gives us a dwelling place' (2004a, p. 27). In that emotions both move and secure us, their effects and their value cannot be readily pinned down. Clearly we cannot, and should not, hope to dispense with that which founds us as well as sets us in motion, as is sometimes the case where more 'objectivity' is called for by critics of the epidemic discourse. Clearly, the particular ways in which emotions about 'obese' bodies move us – materialise our fears and our resentments, allows us to construct collectivities and states of inclusion and exclusion – should not lead us to aim for the eradication altogether of emotion from this debate. Obesity, its articulation with many of Western thought's most significant concepts and values, and its symbolic power, is a complex and challenging phenomenon. How we feel about it, and why, needs careful mapping. Even its impact on health remains to some extent unclear. Proper responses will no doubt remain highly contested. In responding to these issues we need analytic tools that recognise that the body, and therefore the subject and the social, cannot exist without emotion, that all four take shape in relation to each other, and that thinking through the action of the emotions in shaping influential discourses constitutes one of the key tasks open to social scientists.

## Notes

- 1 The examples analysed here do not represent all cases in the literature. Space limits the number of cases explored. Those chosen for analysis here offer broadly typical mobilisations of 'moral





panic'. Other works not included also use this language (for example, author 3's own earlier work, Gard and Wright, 2001) but may not do so as frequently or in as much detail as those examples given.

- 2 Indeed, Monaghan's (2008) book engages with emotions and masculinity in the context of obesity.

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