Challenging a Separating Obesity Science

The guardian responsibility of a critical social work science

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Introduction

In an era when explanations for complex processes related to wellbeing are increasingly dominated by a reductionistic biomedical narrative, it is imperative that sociologists [social scientists (my comment)] stake their ground and emphasize the irreducibility of social forces as the primary medium of personal fortunes.

-Duster 2006

Fatness – obesity in its medical term- is doubtlessly a ‘complex process related to wellbeing’, such as Troy Duster describes in the quote above; a process impossible to grasp by a reductionist – that is simplifying – approach. Still, it is the medical, reductionist science that leaves its scripts of measurements everywhere along the obesity discourse. One is the BMI (Body Mass Index)\(^1\) concept, applied to help obesity experts sort out different degrees of overweight. Another script is the widespread calorie in/calorie out equation that every dietitian, nurse and doctor have repeated in an endless manner to fat individuals seemingly incapable of putting such knowledge into practice.
In Sweden, the National Board of Health and Welfare urges all caring personnel to advice patients that weighs in with more than 4 pounds overweight about the dangerous associations between obesity and diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and hypertension (Socialstyrelsen 2013). The message behind this information is clear: fatness is presented as the cause of the others, a causality not yet proved by anyone (Campos et al 2005). In addition to this information, fortunes are spent trying to prevent fatness from spreading. At the same time, all interventions directed towards fat people have failed (Parham 2013; Sobal and Maurer 2013; Thompson and Kumar 2011; Walls et al 2011; Lewis et al 2010; Townend 2009; Stuber et al 2008; Mann et al 2007); a fact that by now should have us questioning the intentions behind our approach to this human variation.

More than other sciences, the social ones are in need of continuous redefinitions of terms and points of departure. Its specific research object - human in society - constitutes an ever changing process that social scientists to some extent always have to follow. However, we should not settle with following societal developments. The social sciences is supposed to hold ‘the front row with popcorn’ at the theater of social interactions, urging it to also take on the responsibility of being the first to criticize developments that show signs of becoming threats to coherent society-human relations. Today, drawing from a medical, reductionist science’ interest in measurements, the very governmental actions against fatness have come to designate a threat to the dignity of fat people.

Because fatness is a human variation, with an emphasis on human, a reductionist science cannot be allowed to ‘own’ the knowledge accumulation on this subject. Humans are being pointed out in their bodies. Owing to cultural expectations and an ongoing healthism (a bourgeois health ideology), fatness is not treated as a virus clinging to innocent bodies. Instead, written all over her or his appearance, the fat person has become a deviant (Scambler 2006); an abnormal human being (Goffman 1963); in fact a holder of an overall ‘devalued identity’ (Rice 2007).

Walking around with an abundance of fat on your body, primarily being seen as big and fat, is perceived as carrying the responsibility of the whole nation’s increased prevalence of diabetes 2, high blood pressure, stroke, and myocardial infarction, even though you are fat and fit.

-Malterud and Ulriksen 2010
Argumentative line

This paper should be read as an argumentation for more humane ways to handle human difference. The main argument is that we should challenge the reductionist scientific presuppositions from which questions regarding fatness have been raised. This challenge is critical of the separating pariah position fat individuals have been forced into in regards to a moral discourse comprised by medical, aesthetic and health-ideological concerns. This challenge also has transformative connotations - a change must come.

Along this text I will follow an argumentative line where notions of knowledge and meaning are main components of the case I make; namely that the current scientific knowledge production concerning fatness has contributed, mainly by its legitimizing ‘aura’, to a deterioration of fat individual’s living conditions mostly due to the fact that humans add meaning to things that are said about them.

I argue that a social science should move its position forward in the fatness debate by fully embrace and act upon its role as a guardian of human rights. It is within a socially oriented academic discipline that tools for explaining stigma, shame, hidden moralism and distrust are to be found. Above all, a social science should acknowledge that it is individual’s sense of belonging rather than others’ outspoken efforts to treat them right that truly reveals existing violations. Therefor fat individuals’ response must count. To date, I strongly assert that the negative responses from fat individuals have been devastatingly ignored.

I claim that fatness – as a human variation – has now reached a peaking point of societal interest where it should be investigated on the same premises as for example race, handicap, sexuality or ethnicity. Fat individuals have become deviants in direct adjacent to a reductionist science’ efforts to find the preventive solutions to this ‘threat to humanity’ (Tischner and Malson 2012; Warin 2011; Lewis 2008). This undertaking of the ‘fatness problem’, combined with the fact that most fat individuals fail to become thin, have lead to a reproduction of difference.
Aim

This paper constitutes an explicit negative critique of the reductionist science' penetration into all aspects of vulnerable human life. It is not possible to measure and try to correct people according to these measures without dehumanizing them at the same time. The negative responses from the fat individuals are clear, though explained more as results from personal inabilities to follow or understand directions than as feedback responses to inhumane interventions.

This paper also has a positive agenda. The argumentation implicitly nurtures a hope for a scientific alternative that dares to pose questions that acknowledge human beings' profound social vulnerability in their search for meaning. A social science should challenge the current fatness discourse in ways that at least reveal the point where the so-called objective fact accumulation, by its mere approach, imposes harm on fat individuals.

Knowledge

Knowledge alone cannot be allowed to legitimize action...

‘Knowledge is worth nothing without the ability to act on it’, says a large ad right outside the entry of Karlstad Business School at Karlstad University. And I could not agree more. Meanwhile, over and above, what other meanings does such a sentence carry? Let us consider the current context of fatness interventions where we in hindsight now know that these knowledge-based actions have ended up with people getting hurt - explicitly as a result from these actions.

We now know that fatness has reached an unanticipated level of stigmatization – not least from care givers; a fact that according to me automatically demands from anyone dealing with policies directed towards people’s bod-
ies to take one step back for damage control before threading any further into the matter. We need to remember that what preceded such things as the science of eugenics and the designation of homosexuality as a mental disorder was, at least in part, ‘knowledge’.

There is no room here for a total philosophical investigation of the complex knowledge concept, but I will argue that the neutrality of knowledge – even scientific such - is deceptive. Sometimes it is the urge to act that directs our quest for and even opens our perceptibility to certain knowledge. Governments for example construct policies that need to be substantiated and grounded in research, and this order affects what kind of questions that are posed to begin with. Some scholars even suggest that the rise and fall of technical definitions of desirable body dimensions, and associated methods of assessment, were more correlated with the efforts of experts to establish and defend particular roles in society than any search for knowledge as ‘truth’ (Smith and Horrocks 2013, 90). All such things affect not only which questions that are posed but above all which questions that are left out of the whole process.

The fact that knowledge cannot stand alone as warrant for action is not an entirely bad thing as this acknowledges the complexity of the knowledge concept and hence opens it for challenge of its presuppositions. One of the problems with the prevailing obesity discourse, fuelled as it is by a reductionist scientific knowledge of fatness, is its claim to be value-free (Saukko 2013); as if the gathered knowledge in itself sets the rules for how fatness must be approached. To me, this is preposterous.

The rules are set as knowledge passes through warrants

Stephen Toulmin (1958), not to mention the old Greeks, showed how every argumentative line from knowledge to action passes an ideological ‘warrant’ that legitimates this action, according to the following simple model:

\[
\text{Knowledge} \longrightarrow \text{Warrant} \longrightarrow \text{Action}
\]

Simply put, statistical knowledge of an increasing global waistline (and all its associations to social factors) does not in itself call for a billion dollar
war of repeated efforts to convince fat individuals that they are diseased and then tell them to deal with it themselves – for the sake of society. The warrant that transforms the knowledge of an increasing waistline to the pursuit of individual responsibility to get rid of it is to be found in an extended health- and perfection ideology where thinness in the end is equated with citizen responsibility. Warrants are political, affective and value laden ideologies that point to actions in a deceptively ‘natural’ manner.

The warrant can be changed. An alternative warrant is to embrace a human rights perspective and prioritize the upholding of respect for human vulnerability before any attempts at correcting them. Such a warrant would also recognize an increasing waistline but the ensuing actions would be different. With the main intention being not to violate human rights, harm reduction for people in need of such could replace efforts to motivate weight reduction at the individual level. Further, at the public health level, focus could be directed towards the web of structural, socioeconomic and organizational affiliations in which humans are enmeshed in highly unequal manners.

Response is knowledge – when connected back to its trigger

To anyone interested in viable feedback systems theory, the original model presented before is even more interesting to discuss when adding a fourth element; namely response:

Knowledge → Warrant → Action → Response

In the fatness case, where knowledge has been accumulated almost solely from a reductionist biomedical narrative, the responses from the fat targets have been devastating. Not only has the overweight public become fatter but foremost they have become even more stigmatized from this heightened attention. The already health-devoted individuals, on the other hand, seem to have embraced the calorie in/calorie out equation and are now obsessively – almost religiously - occupied with slimming, training and producing even more toned bodies.
The principle of mercy combined with any insight to cognitive sociology, forcefully tells us that not-fat and fat individuals receive interventions against fatness in completely different manners. What is an inspirational and motivational technique for further self-production to one may be a decree of condemnation to the other. That is why, regarding obesity and public health, says Shirlay Wang and Kelly Brownell (2005) there is an urgent need to marry science with advocacy.

### Meaning

When a science ignorant of meaning deals with things with meaning

A lot of reductionist, positivistic and medicalized research have been conducted concerning body weight (Sobal and Maurer 2013, x). Meanwhile, society deals with weight as a set of social meanings such as social discourses, interpretations, claims, negotiations, management and presentations (Sobal and Maurer 2013, 7). Meaning is meta-communication, and modern social control operates through the creation of meaning. At the same time, meaning is always subtle. For example, when an ideal weight is presented it also enforces conformity to that ideal (McKinley 2013, 111). In the ongoing declaration of war against fatness, sciences are engaged in presenting an ideal weight, unknowingly endowing the thin body with positive meaning.

Largely, even the social sciences have ignored the importance of meaning. Sven-Eric Liedman (1997) considers the ethics debate to be the inevitable reaction to a social science that instead of engaging in fundamental questions of value and meaning has devoted time to make every phenomenon empirically manageable - e.g. possible to measure and/or compare. The opposite progress, what he refers to as the soft, must have an integrating approach and deal with values that cannot be quantified or categorized without losing parts of its inherited meaning.

Loet Leydesdorff (2006) says historically, meaning used to be provided from a hindsight perspective, but today our relevant and meaningful deci-
sions are also made from *anticipations*. This providing of meaning constitutes the social world as an order separate from the psychological order (Leydesdorff 2006; Luhmann 1995). As social creatures, we act both on lessons learned and futures expected. Whether or not we like it, by providing theories of man, science also provides such anticipations – good and bad.

Meaning emerges in social relations (Tilly 1999) when simple reductionist models are put into play and we start reflecting, negotiating and transact them among each other on a daily basis. If following Charles Tilly’s (1999) reasoning, humans interact according to simple scripts only to a certain degree, but in order to make them matter, we add cultural, moral and personal stakes to the interaction in ways that saturate seemingly simple scripts with meaning. Scripts are partly provided by categorizations where the most dramatic one is stigmatization – to distinguish by signs (Tilly 1999). When stigma is put to play we are negotiating at the borders of human decency.

**Avoiding stigma by acknowledging the meaning-oriented individual**

Charles Tilly (1999) argues that to avoid stigmatizing categorizations we need to change how we *organize* our entire society. We need to explore how every kind of organizing also ‘*allows* us to be or to think or to imagine’ in certain ways (Saukko 2013). When knowledge is presented behind the ‘spell of objectivity’ (Saukko 2013), change can only take place in the individual (her weight for example). What both Tilly (1999) and Saukko (2013) do is to recognize that categories are not really individuals carrying specific traits but outcomes of highly variable social relations that have been standardized by someone.

When meaning is considered focal point, scientific analyses of fatness will lead to new descriptions. It will enable us to observe negative consequences, such as stigmatized categories, as results from social relations and practices. Tilly (1999) convincingly argues how a continuous reestablishment of categories, such as the fat individual, in a negative way affects the lives of these individuals far beyond the specific researcher-research subject relation. Stigma becomes stored as a type of individual human capital (Tilly
1999) and parts of that capital are given to us in the form of scientific results.

For sure, a critical social science devoted to focus on the individual’s creation of meaning would also reestablish the same fat individual category, however now with one important (and meaningful) difference. Tilly again, on social movements: it would highlight both the unfair meaning withdrawal treatment of the unwanted target category on the weak side and the meaningful benefits for those on the strong side.

Neil Smelzer (2004) defines culture as when elements such as values, norms, perspectives, ideologies, knowledge and empirical claims together form a meaningful system of solidarity (37). To Jeffrey Alexander (1990), such solidarity constitutes a just as independent determinant for the human society, as religion, politics or economy. He defines inclusion, not as the objective sign of individuals’ engagement in societal practice but, as the process where individuals perceive solidarity inside of a culture’s norm system. Solidarity, he says, is the subjective feelings of integration that individuals sense as members of specific social groups, endowing that membership with meaning (268).

The ‘walking example’

One illustrative example of the difference between a natural science’ reductionist approach and a social science’ leaning towards cultural meaning, comes in the following quotation from one of Sweden’s leading obesity experts, Dr Stephan Rössner.

*If walking becomes the natural way to move around, then we have achieved a lot. It is cheap, safe and simple. It doesn’t require a lot of tools. It can be done anywhere all year.*

-Rossner 2001

Walking is a physical activity that burns calories, everybody knows that. No one believes in not-walking as a great lifestyle. Thus the quote has no reference to all things that make us human; all those culturally created emotions,
intentions, motivations, sorrows, seductions, contemplations, lies, fears and self-referential activities that together make up the human meaning creating process. What Rössner is suggesting is that if some parts of the public could get the fact that walking is good for them, they wouldn’t be fat anymore. In such a case, I have news for the natural scientists – the fat person gets it. Her or his cognitive ability to handle simple information is not harmed by having fat cells in excess. The question should rather be: why this non-compliance to such ‘expert knowledge’? Why do fat people not walk?

Well, there are many possible explanations for not walking. Let us continue to dwell on the meaning concept. For the already active achiever, perhaps walking constitutes just one of all the tools in their entire belief system having to do with being out there, competing, performing, accomplishing and representing a position. Could it be that they experience meaning in the war against fatness this becomes but one component among many having to do with the bettering of self.

To the fat, walking as an intervention in itself, as a remedy against her as an already ascribed non-achiever, loses its natural instrumentality and becomes implicitly infected with moral blame, subsequently leading to a defensive, shameful, state of mind. In such cases, not-walking could represent agency, defence, critique, rebellion or for that matter even depression. The medical sciences are in fact ignorant of the vulnerable human condition that some health policy makers and professionals have promoted shame-based risk discourses as a method to motivate obese individuals to lose weight (Betts 2010; Triggle 2010). Need I say it has not worked?

Self-reference and social awareness

Sociocybernetician Felix Geyer (2002) describes self-reference as when the individual gathers information about her-self and her functions in the social world and then acts upon this conquered knowledge. The individual mirrors her-self against a web consisting of her own biography and future anticipations as well as her current surrounding social and cultural systems, with all their specific possibilities, representations, performances, expressions, messages and hidden signals. Geyer says this ‘march of self-reference’
is a necessary individual response to a world’s ever increasing complexity (2002). Generally, by this self-reference, some people will find themselves representing ‘irresponsibility’. Specifically in this essay, fat people will find themselves irresponsible in a culture saturated by the idea of thinness as purity.

Following Mary Douglas’ anthropology (1966) where every society distinguishes between wanted (pure) and unwanted (impure) human traits, what is impure today is the non-achiever in a culture that frowns upon failures in general. Fatness is perhaps the most visible failure of them all, thus guilt and shame are internalized by fat people as non-achievers. Vessela Misheva (2000) argues how the individual not only has a biological life where her utmost fear is physical death, but also a social life where the individual fears her social death (p. 54). The profound cause of internalized guilt is ‘the individual’s consciousness about herself as a social member, a user of the common good, e.g. her social awareness’ (Misheva 2000, 89).

From reductionism to meaning

Troy Duster (2013) firmly states that one of the most fundamental aspects of scientific theorizing is the vital distinction between reductionism and emergence. Embracing a reductionist stance denotes that any phenomenon should be explained as the sum of different parts. This perspective describes something like a mechanical causality where every single part of an interaction chain simply adds its inherent static property, without any form of emergent meaning in extension to this sum. A reductionist approach from a natural (medicalized) science thus works on the premise that ‘fatness can be fixed’ by simply reversing the equation saying that fatness is the sum of a) too much energy input + b) too little energy output. Let me once again be frank – this also has not worked.

If we instead shift our perspective to that of emergent properties, says Duster (2013), different kinds of concern can be raised. Since many phenomena can only emerge from an interaction of elements, the task becomes to ‘explain political explosions that otherwise seem to come from nowhere when isolated political elements lay inert side-by-side’ (Duster 2013). This cognitive shift from a reductionist view to an emergence perspective may
help to explain the ‘political explosion’ of failed obesity interventions. Perhaps such a shift will help us recognize that human non-compliance never stems from nowhere but are always a result of internal meaning creation in relation to an external demand.

In line with the medical sociologist Aaron Antonovsky’s famous SOC (sense of coherence) theory, negative emergence could even stem from non-events. In our environment we face events like ‘not getting a job’, ‘not feeling loved’ or ‘not getting thin’ and these non-events help shape our actions just as much as factually occurring events (Antonovsky 1987). The same reasoning, however this time regarding identity, comes from philosopher Slavoj Zizek (1989, 176) who argues that all the things you are not are just as meaningful constituents of your self-perception as everything you sense, believe or are told that you are.

The ground possible to stake by a critical social science

What if the current knowledge on the dangers, costs and grieves over body fat was misleading, yet allowed to stand unquestioned in the name of objective science? Regardless, we should investigate the possibility of fatness itself being an over-rated risk and that the mere pointing out of fat individuals is an undertaking far more threatening to their long term well-being - quite up with the discrimination standard of any full-blown apartheid system. In fact, Patrick Baert (2005), in accordance with Slavoj Zizek (2012), pleads for interventions that in a self-referential way question the same presuppositions that made the encounter with difference possible in the first place.

The strength of sociology [social science] today lies precisely in its ability to break with previously established assumptions and regularly to introduce new angles on a given topic. The multitude of methodological options cultivates a sense of self-awareness.

-Baert 2005
What if the legitimacy of such a misleading conduct, with its professional messengers in the form of expert knowledge communicated via mass media instead of mitigating the assumed sufferings of fat individuals helped spreading it? Regardless, I suggest that we instead of placing the fat individual in a category, criticizing this category's whereabouts and offering expert interventions for overcoming them, challenge the entire narrative. From a human rights point of departure we should view the enforcement of a reductionist science' so-called objective knowledge as a problem in itself; as a phenomenon that risks violating the individual.

What if a more profound cause behind the ascribed suffering of the fat is, neither fat cells nor personal character but, a result of a sense of meaninglessness in a culture that, fuelled by objective science, frowns upon visible failures. Such a counter-striking approach would give priority to the individual's own sense of communion and integration. By turning the focal point of the 'problem' away from individual categories and appearance, as an analytical perspective that separates us, towards the social conception of meaning as a structure that integrates, new scientific questions could form the base for actions aimed at harm reduction instead of body perfection.

The challenge

To change the imagery, techniques, institutions and politics in which our bodies are enmeshed requires that we look outside of ourselves and change the world.

-Saukko 2013, 45

No science should escape responsibility when constructing theories of man. 'Facts are theory-laden, theories are value-laden' (Haraway 1984, 79). With the devotion to make human variations possible to measure and compare, consequently contributing to the creation of difference, the current reductionist dominance in fatness research illustrates a social science's avoidance of fundamental questions of meaning.
Following Jeffrey Alexander (1990), instead of any enunciated democratic frame that is supposed to assure equality for all, it is our perceived sense of communion and solidarity that later will have us act as included or excluded members of the greater society. The march of self-reference will have us all search for meaning in a more self-judging way, making us even more vulnerable before violations of different kinds. In a self-referential manner, fat people have responded to the scientifically substantiated interventions against fatness with non-compliance, silence or by simply gaining more weight instead of losing it. In a meta-communicative way, these responses should by now have connoted that we still haven’t managed the accumulated fatness 'knowledge' in any fruitful way. Still, the same interventions are launched year after year.

The on-going measuring attentiveness to the body, always to the detriment of the fat body, endows the fat individual with a sense of meaninglessness. Baudrillard (1988) would say it is not the body that is produced and consumed, but the idea of a relation between bodies; e.g. an apartheid system. The difference between pointing out fat tissue as the threat and fat individuals’ lost sense of communion as the threat is the difference between a hard, specialized science about categories and a soft, integrative science focusing on meaning and human rights.

The current scientific obesity discourse illustrates a hard overall scientific devotion to make human variations possible to measure and compare, consequently engaging in the professional creation of difference. Wallace and Wallace (2003b) express how interventions will never work as long as they follow the same parting pattern that once caused the ‘epidemic’; namely the distinction between people and people.

I have stated how fatness is presented as the impure part of a current cultural discourse. Fatness is something to frown upon, something to resist, combat and control, and we haven’t taken the full responsibility of the withdrawal of meaning this discourse engages in, on behalf of the already fat human beings. We have performed, to the fat and everyone else, the meaninglessness of being fat, and we have done so by the aid of a scientific and mass media organized discourse that, in its own search for meaning, has highlighted all the benefits of being thin and all the downsides of being overweight. In response to such a discourse, social science as counter-science would be a win-win situation.
Win 1. Fat individuals have been made deviants in a health-ideological debate leaning towards holding a lean body production as highest cultural virtue. They need to be emancipated to be able to participate in the creation of new, to them, meaningful research questions. As philosopher Alain Badiou says, if we want change, we need new stories about our-selves. Like it or not, but every science participates in the creation of human stories, and a critical social work science would create stories where deviants could get some sort of vindication.

Win 2. Society needs a critical social work science to establish the seriousness of socio-emotional forces in all of our most debated and acted upon human issues. With the emergence of self-referential, and from this also more sensitive, individuals, we need to acknowledge that their actions, or non-actions, in an increasing manner will depend on sensed possibilities rather than alleged such. Only a critical social science has the theoretical tools to investigate the level of meta-communication where meaning is negotiated on a daily basis.

Of course, the research I advocate and the challenge I suggest have political dimensions. There is no way to prevent politics from permeating a science obliged to take human rights and the impact of social forces in relation to wellbeing, not only seriously but even, as its fundamental point of departure. From this and in accordance with Natalie Boero (2013) we now know that future research on both fatness and the attitudes against it must involve actually talking to fat people themselves. It is in their responses, in their meaning, we can collect the knowledge that will serve them and society the most.

I believe in science. But when science touches upon human beings, it also affects these human beings. Scientific knowledge about our-selves acts as an legitimate script-maker and story provider in our self-referential search for meaning. What I propose is that a social work counter science takes on the responsibility of admitting and act on this function. In times of increasing individual self-reference, Baert (2005) makes the necessary claim that science itself needs to cultivate a deeper self-awareness. A guardian science deeply rooted in a human rights perspective surely cannot be man’s therapist, but the least it should do is to avoid any reinforcement of the withdrawal of meaning from the very research subjects it claims to know something about.
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