

FROM THE MAGIC BULLET TO FAMILY MEALTIME: AN ANALYSIS OF THE
OBESITY EPIDEMIC IN *TIME* AND *NEWSWEEK*

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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Title: From the Magic Bullet to Family Mealtime: An Analysis of the Obesity Epidemic in *Time* and *Newsweek*

This thesis examines news articles to see if obesity has been framed as a moral panic by looking at how the coverage understands the causes of obesity and its solutions. A qualitative textual analysis of 100 articles and 28 images from *Time* and *Newsweek* was done spanning 1986 to 2012. I found that the obesity “epidemic” was first discussed as problem of individual responsibility and that the best cure was medicine. The narrative shifted to childhood obesity around 2004 and cited parents as the responsible party while suggesting family bonding as a solution to childhood obesity. I find that the media dialogue around obesity points to individuals rather than systemic factors as the cause of obesity and, in so doing, takes the focus off of social and economic inequalities that are also factors in the obesity epidemic.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Center for Disease Control's (CDC) website states, "During the past 20 years, there has been a dramatic increase in obesity in the United States and rates remain high. More than one-third of U.S. adults (35.7%) and approximately 17% (or 12.5 million) of children and adolescents aged 2-19 years are obese."¹ The CDC's website does not mention that the threshold of Body Mass Index (BMI), the indicator of obesity, was lowered by the National Institutes of Health in 1998 from 27 to 25 for those considered overweight, and those considered obese as greater than or equal 30. Because of this switch, over 30 million Americans went from "normal" to overweight instantly.² The change in BMI spectrum dramatically affected the current national statistic that 60% of Americans are obese.

The Metropolitan Life Insurance Company (Met Life) began using BMI as a measure of ideal height and weight in 1943 under the assumption that this measure was predictive of mortality.³ Since its inception by medical profession in the mid in the 1970's BMI has become the defining factor of obesity, and ultimately a measure of health.⁴ BMI has since become the standard of a healthy weight by default. Even the U.S. Department

¹ Center For Disease Control, "Overweight & Obese: Facts." Accessed April 26, 2013.
<http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/facts.html>.

² Natalie Boero, "All the News that's Fat to Print: The American 'Obesity Epidemic' and the Media." *Qualitative Sociology*. no. 30 (2007): 41-60.

³ See Boero, 2007 pg 8.

⁴ Jeremy Singer-Vine, "Beyond BMI Why doctors won't stop using an outdated measure for obesity." *Salon*, 07 20, 2009.
http://www.slate.com/articles/health_and_science/science/2009/07/beyond_bmi.html (accessed April 26, 2013).

of Health and Human Services announced, “until a better measure of body fat is developed, BMI will be used as a statistically derived proxy measure for obesity.”⁵ Obesity came into prominent view based on these statistics and has since been framed with alarmist language by the news media and labeled as an “epidemic.”

The central question this thesis addresses is the role the media have played in relaying information about obesity. Did the news convey information about the change in BMI? Is obesity talked about differently before and after 1998 when 30 million Americans became obese overnight? These questions spurred my research and I will answer them by analyzing articles about obesity spanning from 1986-2012.⁶ Addressing questions as to whether or not Americans are getting “fatter” is beyond the scope of this analysis. Instead I focus on how obesity is framed as an epidemic by the news media.

I became interested in this subject because I previously conducted a quantitative study on the use of the term “epidemic” in the news and “obesity” emerged as the most frequently named epidemic in 300 articles from the top selling news and science magazines in the United States from 2000-2011. Obesity was identified as an epidemic in 19% of the articles, whereas AIDS was identified as such for only 10% of the articles. There are two definitions of the term *epidemic*: the medical and the metaphorical. The medical definition is an “outbreak of infectious disease that spreads through a human population at a faster rate than what has been recorded in recent incidences.”⁷ The

⁵ See Boero, 2007.

⁶ These years were chosen since this thesis was written in 2013 and a full year’s worth of articles was available up to 2012. Since 2012 is 13 years after 1998, 1986 was chosen since it is 13 years before 1998.

⁷ Christopher Mari, *Global Epidemics*, (New York: H.W. Wilson Company, 2007), vii.

metaphoric term is used to describe an outbreak of non-infectious diseases, and commonly used by the media as an outbreak of societal issues.

Obesity was the only “metaphorical epidemic” (a disease which is not virally contagious) in the five diseases most frequently referred to as epidemic in the articles from my previous study. Boero notes the prevalence of “postmodern epidemics,” which are socially and culturally constructed, rather than based on quantifiable biomedical evidence. Metaphorical or postmodern epidemics “rely on the application of medical frameworks to phenomenas that are not inherently medical in nature.”⁸ By framing obesity as an epidemic—obesity is declared a medical disease and significantly raises the stakes of the problem. This preliminary research led me to focus on this project which specifically examines the construction of obesity as a metaphorical epidemic in American news.

The urgent and alarmist language associated with epidemics calls for immediate action, and provokes fear. By framing obesity as an epidemic, a biological problem is conflated with a sociological one. The phrase “obesity epidemic” is not only used by the media, but also by medical and health policy institutions to talk about overweight people in the US.⁹ The use of this frame designates obesity as a crisis, establishes the reality of the problem, and calls for immediate solutions.¹⁰ This problem frame also inhibits the asking of alternative or critical questions because of the urgency of the issue being labeled an epidemic.

⁸ See Boero, 2007.

⁹ Natalie Boero, *Killer Fat: Media, Medicine, and Morals in the American "Obesity Epidemic"*, (Rutgers, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2012), 2.

¹⁰ R.V. Ericson, P.M. Baranek, and J.B.L. Chan, *Visualizing Deviance: A Study of News Organization*, (Maidenhead, UK: Open University Press, 1987).

In order to deconstruct the framing of the obesity epidemic, I analyzed news 100 articles spanning 26 years (1986-2012). The number of articles in this time period was low and steady until about 2002 and peaked in 2004 and tapers off around 2008 (See Figure 1.1). This pattern of coverage reflects what Best calls an “issue-attention cycle,” where “coverage rises when the media learn of something seemingly new, a dramatic issue, but inevitably declines as the story becomes familiar and therefore less newsworthy.”¹¹

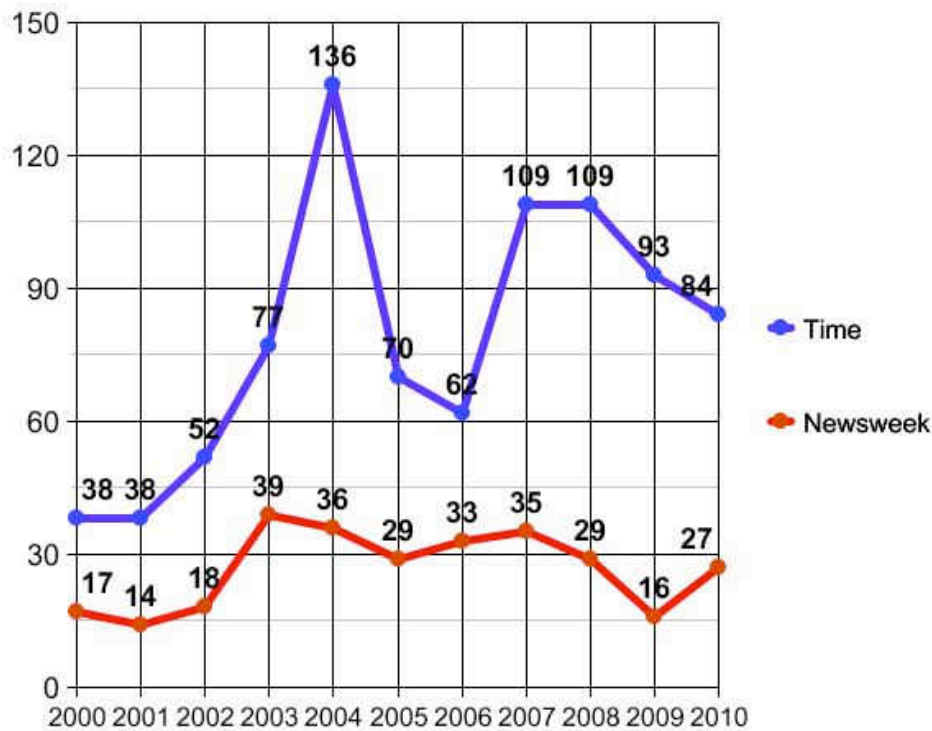


Figure 1.1: # of Articles about Obesity per Year

Figure 1.2 shows the period of time in this “issue attention cycle,” with a dramatic rise in 2004. *Time*’s Michel D. Lemonick declared 2004 “The Year of Obesity,” and pointed to several political, public health and cultural factors that lead to this declaration. In 2004 the CDC announced that lack of exercise resulted in 400,000 deaths in 2000 and

¹¹ Joel Best, “Locating moral panics within the sociology of problems,” *Moral Panics and the Politics of Anxiety*, ed. Sean P. Hier (London: Routledge, 2011), 39.

that obesity was the number two cause of preventable death in the United States. The World Health Organization put forth a strategy to “fight obesity” worldwide, and two dozen US states took steps towards phasing out soda and junk foods in schools in 2004. Filmmaker Morgan Spurlock released the documentary, *Super Size Me* in 2004 which led to the discontinuation of the “Super Size” option at the fast food chain McDonald’s. Dr. Robert Atkins’ low carbohydrate diet became more popular than ever after his death in 2003, which brought public attention to diet trends and nutritional standards.¹² NBC’s weight-loss themed reality television show *The Biggest Loser* debuted in 2004. These events appear to have spurred the dramatic increase in articles about obesity in 2004.

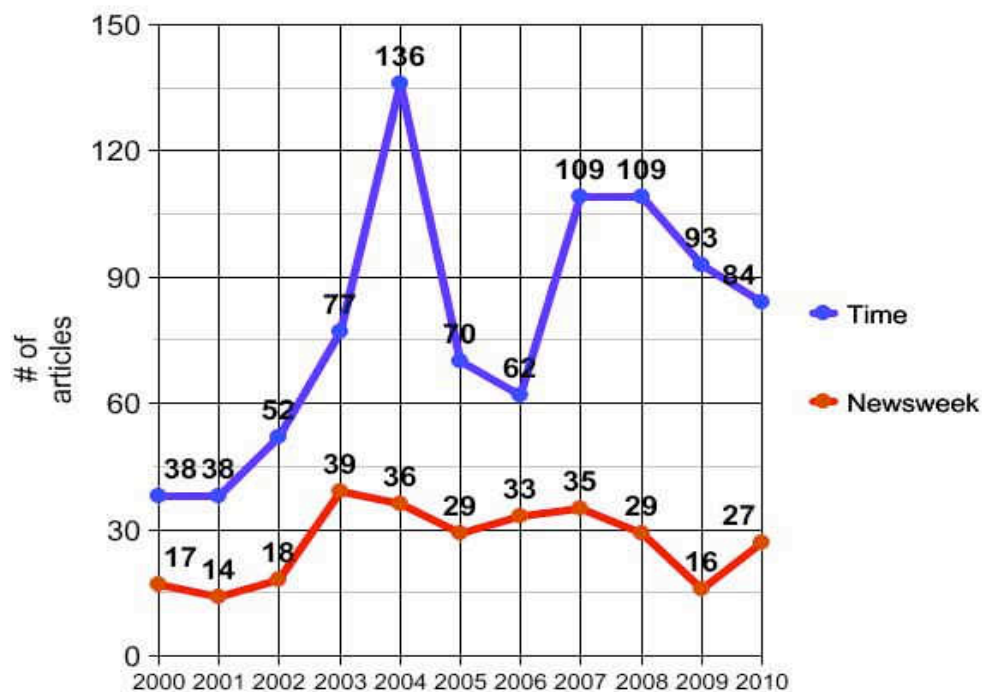


Figure 1.2: # of Articles about Obesity 2000-2010

With this increase of articles in the early 2000’s there was a distinct shift in the framing of obesity by the news. I will deconstruct the coverage of obesity after the

¹² Lemonick, Michael D. "Health: The Year of Obesity." 12 19, 2004.
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1009907,00.html> (accessed April 28, 2013).

“overnight” increase of the number of people deemed obese in America and the ensuing label of obesity as an “epidemic.” As obesity is labeled an “epidemic” I will see if obesity is framed as a social problem, where the individual is blamed, or as a medical problem, in which obesity is explained as a medical problem beyond individual control.

In Chapter I, I first review current literature on obesity in the news from the communications field. These studies look at the new narratives of obesity and question the “war on fat” and how images in the news media perpetuate stereotypes of overweight people and proliferate the stigmatization of fat¹³. Next, I review sociological literature on moral panic and framing. I focus on literature about both the problem frame and a medical frame, since obesity is labeled as an epidemic which brings connotations of biological problems rather than societal ones.

Chapter II presents my research questions and method which seek to deconstruct how obesity has been framed by the news media. I approach these questions with a textual analysis of articles about obesity from popular news magazines. I analyzed articles to see how the coverage of obesity understands the causes and solutions to the “epidemic.”

In Chapter III, I look at the results of the pre-epidemic news coverage of obesity, which I propose is before the year 2002 when the attention to obesity began to increase (See Figure 1.1). I analyzed this time period before 2002 in order to provide a comparison to how the coverage differed after obesity became an epidemic in the news. Chapter IV is the results of the coverage of the “epidemic,” which I found surfaced around 2002. In both of Chapters III and IV, I identify the common themes of the articles

¹³ I use the terms, obesity, overweight, and fat throughout this thesis with the assumption that these terms are socially constructed.

and how they contribute to framing obesity as an epidemic. I also analyze how the both the pre-epidemic and post-epidemic articles understand the causes, solutions and problems to obesity which uncovers the construction of obesity as an epidemic.

Chapter V is a visual textual analysis of the images placed in the cover stories and the cover stories themselves. The goal of this chapter is to see how these images add to the framing of obesity. I use Williamson's method of deconstructing advertisements to identify the signifiers of obesity.

In my concluding Chapter VI, I synthesize my findings and how they add to the criticism of the model of "epidemic" as it is applied to social rather than biological problems. As stated earlier, the goal of this thesis is to deconstruct the framing of obesity, and is not about establishing the statistically realities of obesity in America.

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Many studies have recently been conducted on how the media discuss obesity and point to the individualistic nature of American public health. Attaching the word “epidemic” to an issue raises interest and concern about the issue. This chapter will first highlight studies that look at the framing of obesity in the news and pose the causes of obesity as individual or societal. These studies add to how the news media frame the “war on fat” and how images in the news media perpetuate stereotypes of the overweight and therefore stigmatize fat people. Next, I draw from sociological literature about moral panics for an overall theoretical foundation. The term “moral panic” has been used to understand how many behaviors, issues and disorders are discussed by the media and it thus serves as a model for understanding how the news media cover these types of issues. These studies provide a historical timeline of the study of moral panic and its applications lend to the critique of the epidemic framework. Literature on medical framing and American public health are also included in this chapter in order to expand on the implications of labeling obesity as an epidemic.

Recent Studies on the Obesity Epidemic in the News

Kim and Willis (2007) took a quantitative look at how the news frames responsibility (who is “to blame” for obesity) and found that personal causes significantly outnumbered social attributions of responsibility. Solutions are more often said to be up to individuals than to society. The authors relate back to framing and how the focus is on individual behaviors rather than trying to understand the wider causes of and solutions to

social problems.¹⁴ This is an example of the news media's focus on individual responsibility.

Mastin and Campo (2007) also conducted a quantitative study on print and TV news about obesity, and followed a constructionist approach which understands that problems are defined as such by claims makers. They state, "journalists should provide balanced and complex news stories when making claims about obesity."¹⁵ This research suggests that the news media plays an important role in the framing of the obesity epidemic and has the power and ability to construct problems.

News framing of obesity in Swedish newspapers was studied by Sandberg (2007) who also used a constructionist method.¹⁶ Her comprehensive analysis of the newspapers aimed to discover the themes "that dominate the newspaper's content and thereby present how overweight is viewed." She asked of each of the articles:

- What are the linguistics of the article?
- Which metaphors are used—and what thoughts do they evoke?
- What is the overall text about?
- What is the "aftertaste" of reading this article?

Sandberg's questions lend to the method of this thesis, which will identify the themes, metaphors, and overall understanding of obesity in each of the articles.

Identifying the language of an epidemic is crucial to this thesis because it illustrates how obesity is framed as critical and immediate problem. Saguy and Ameling (2008) analyzed medical journals to identify obesity "buzz words" such as "epidemic"

¹⁴ SH Kim, and Willis LA. "Talking about Obesity: news framing of who is responsible for causing and fixing the problem." *Journal of Health Communication*, no. 4 (2007): 359-376.

¹⁵ Teresa Mastin, and Shelly Campo, "Conflicting Messages: Overweight and Obesity Advertisements and Articles in Black Magazines," *Howard Journal of Communication*, no. 17 (2007): 17.

¹⁶ Helena Sandberg, "A Matter of Looks: The Framing of Obesity in four Swedish Daily Newspapers," *Communications*, no. 32 (2007): 447-472.

and “war,” along with other evocative metaphors. They found that the media focuses on scientific articles that are alarmist and individual-blaming.¹⁷ These findings suggest that the media uses the medical language of an epidemic, but frames obesity as an individual problem.

Saguy and Riley (2005) also look at the framing of obesity in the news, hoping to uncover if it is presented as a preventable health risk or as an illness beyond individual control.¹⁸ They conclude that “notions of morality play a central role in the obesity debate and illustrate how medical arguments about body weight can be used to stymie rights and claims and justify morality-based fears.”¹⁹ This research showed that news claims about lack individual responsibility as the reason for obesity legitimize the stigmatization of overweight people in the news.

Similar to Saguy and Riley, McClure, Puhl, and Heuer (2011) were interested in the media’s role in the stigmatization of fat people. They studied the reception of fat images on TV news and examined photographic representations of obese people in the news media and their effect on generalized attitudes towards obese people.²⁰ They call to exercise caution when selecting photos that will be used for stories about obesity because they found that health communication and journalistic news reporting is biased against those who are overweight. Without this caution, news makers will simply be reproducing

¹⁷ Abigail Saguy, and Rene Almeling, "Fat in the Fire? Science, the News Media, and the “Obesity Epidemic,” *Sociological Forum*, no. 23 (2008): 54-64.

¹⁸ Abigail Saguy and Kevin Riley, “Weighing Both Sides: Morality, Mortality, and Framing Contests over Obesity,” *Journal of Health Politics, Health Policy and Law* 30 (2005): 873.

¹⁹ See Saguy and Riley, pg 870.

²⁰ HA Heuer, KJ McClure, and PM Puhl, "Obesity Stigma in Online News: A Visual Content Analysis," *Journal of Health Communication*, no. 9 (2011): 976-987.

stereotypes of obese people.²¹ This study will lend to my analysis of the images used in the articles and on the covers of the magazines that featured stories on the obesity epidemic.

In a similar vein to Saguy and Riley, Saguy and Gruys (2010) looked at how widely shared cultural values shape social problem construction and in return can reproduce social inequality. They compared American news reporting about eating disorders to how the overweight and obese are represented in the news.²² The social inequality they looked at was the belief that “thin=high social status and moral virtue” whereas “fat=low status, gluttony and sloth.”

The historical change around fatness as a sign of wealth is important in understanding how the meaning of “fat” is stigmatized. Before the agricultural and industrial revolutions, the larger the individual, the wealthier he or she appeared. But after these revolutions, food shortages were less common and “skinny” was no longer a sign of low class status. The poor got “fatter” and the symbolic meaning of body size flipped. The elite “disciplined their bodies to attack fat.”²³

Saguy and Gruys found that in reporting on obesity (contrary to reporting on eating disorders), even when articles mentioned more than one cause for obesity, individual blame usually predominates. For instance, a *Newsweek* article explains that “you can’t pick your parents, but you can pick what you eat and how often you exercise.”

²¹ See Heuer et al. pg 361.

²² Abigail Saguy, and Gruys Kjerstin, "Morality and health: News Media Constructions of Overweight and Eating Disorders," *Social Problems*, no. 57 (2010): 231.

²³ See Saguy and Gruys, pg. 233.

Thus, genetics does not provide an excuse for body weight.”²⁴ Once again, the individualistic nature of American public health translates into cultural ideas about obesity.

Saguy and Gruys write: “Stereotypes of fat people as gluttonous and undisciplined echo similar stereotypes of the working classes as ‘the archetypal’ body in public health discourse as lazy, dirty immoral, incapable of resisting urges.”²⁵ The connection of body type and class is not only a concept that changed with time, but also one that changes over cultures, for instance, Rebecca Popenoe found that fat women are the epitome of beauty in a Nigerian Arab tribe.²⁶

Thinness is highly prized in contemporary U.S. society, and news articles are less likely to blame individuals for being (or trying to be) *too thin* than they are for being *too fat*. Cultural values shape how the news media assign blame and responsibility.²⁷

Though obesity is not a contagious disease, the “epidemic” label is the vehicle by which the fear is transferred. Moral panics individualize deviance as they define it, assigning moral (individual) rather than societal blame.

The authors conclude that stories about anorexia and bulimia discussed factors beyond individual control, whereas media attribute poor individual choices and treat binge-eating disorder as ordinary overeating and a blameworthy issue. They also reported that poor and minorities were seen as more likely to be heavy which reinforces social

²⁴ Saguy and Gruys, pg 244.

²⁵ See Saguy and Gruys 233.

²⁶ See Saguy, 2013 pg 6.

²⁷ See Saguy and Gruys pg 247.

stereotypes of minorities and fat people as lazy and out of control.²⁸ The work of Saguy and Gruys helps situate the way the media frames obesity as an epidemic due to personal choice and behavior.

Campos, Saguy, Ernsberger, Oliver, and Gaesser (2005)²⁹ concluded that there are four central claims made by those calling for action on the “war on fat:”

1. that obesity is an epidemic
2. that obesity and overweight are major contributors to mortality
3. that the higher than average adiposity is pathological and a primary direct cause of disease; and that significant long-term weight loss is both medically beneficial and practical.

They also point out that focusing on obesity has support across the political spectrum. Discussions of obesity in the U.S. usually take place within the context of increasing moral laxity, arguing that the overweight and obese people play significant role in driving up health care costs. Those who are ideologically committed to focusing on ‘individual responsibility’ are attracted to this reasoning, rather than to the “structural factors that continue to drive health care costs ever upward, and leave one out of every seven Americans without health insurance of any kind.”

Campos et al.’s study conveys the significance of labeling obesity as an “epidemic,” since with this label, the stakes of the problem become higher, and the solution is in the hands of public health officials. By attributing the rise in the costs of health care to individuals the blame is shifted away from structural or societal factors.

The collective focus of looking at individual blame versus structural blame in these studies solidifies the paradox that the media creates about the obesity epidemic. By labeling obesity as an “epidemic” the media attributes a biological or medical cause to the

²⁸ See Saguy and Gruys pg 231.

²⁹ See Campos et al. pg 55

problem, but by blaming individual behaviors as the cause of obesity, the media shies away from the structural and public health factors that the term “epidemic” evokes.

Moral Panic

The news media, not personal experience, provide Americans with their most dominant fears.³⁰ Altheide writes, “Our use of fear is collapsing important symbolic meanings and boundaries...topics pass through the problem frame and have fear in common.”³¹ In my previous research I found that media points to “obesity” as the most prominent “epidemic” of the 21st century. In this thesis, I will attempt to expose how placing a problem frame on obesity creates panic and stigma about those that are classified as obese.

In order to understand the origin of a moral panic, we must understand how framing is used in the news media. News framing is “the process where communicators act--consciously or not--to construct a particular point of view that encourages the facts of a given situation to be viewed in a particular manner, with some facts made more noticeable than others.”³² The problem frame is a staple of news and that is built on a dramatic narrative structure, making some problems seem more immediate than others. The media has the ability to create a hierarchy of issues because it uses drama to make some problems seem more urgent.

³⁰ Barry Glassner, *The Culture of Fear: Why Americans are Afraid of the Wrong Things*, (New York: Basic Books, 2009).

³¹ David Altheide, *Creating Fear: News and the Construction of Crisis*, (New York: Aldine DeGruyter, 2002), 5.

³² Jim Kyupers, "Framing Analysis from a Rhetorical Perspective," *Doing news framing analysis: empirical and theoretical perspectives*, ed. Paul D'Angelo and Jim Kyupers (New York: Routledge, 2010), 300.

According to Cohen, a moral panic occurs when “a condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests.”³³ By labeling obesity as an epidemic, it emerges as a foreboding danger and is framed similarly to a moral panic. Cohen specifically studied moral panics as responses to the “mods and rockers” of British society, but this term has since been applied to various other problems, such as the “crime waves” of 17th century Massachusetts, marijuana in America in the 1930’s, Teddy Boys in the United Kingdom in the 1950’s, and the drug scares in the Notting Hill neighborhood of London in the 1960’s.³⁴

In these panics, experts or knowledge holders become the “crusaders” for a particular problem and identify the groups or persons that emerge as the threat to the values and interests of “normal” society. The rules they create in response to this problem takes the shape of a “moral enterprise.”³⁵ Cohen asserts that deviance is created by dominant social groups; these groups create rules, and those who infringe on these rules are considered deviant and their behaviors must be policed by the forces of social order.

When moral crusaders succeed in convincing a broad section of society that deviant problems exist, they also disseminate their distinctive worldview to an audience.³⁶ Philip Jenkins writes, “Different groups perceive social problems differently,

³³ Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1972).

³⁴ See Cohen, pg 13.

³⁵ See Cohen, pg 11.

³⁶ See Jenkins, 1998

depending on how far a behavior or phenomenon contradicts their ideal of how the world should be and what values should predominate.”³⁷

Constructing a social problem as a moral panic thus begins with defining the problem in terms of deviance. Moral crusaders try to link that issue to other harmful or threatening conditions to support a moral or political lesson by weaving cultural cross-references into the narrative.³⁸ In moral panics, the use of the flexible term “epidemic” results in an increase in incongruous “problems” being lumped together as public health problems by the media. For example, violence and avian flu have both been labeled epidemics by the media, but flu is biologically contagious while violence is not. Though violence is not contagious like the flu, the fear of contagion of the flu is transferred to violence by the epidemic label.

The media serves as the vehicle for the dissemination of expert opinions to the public and literature on moral panics consistently points to media's prowess in spreading fear, fomented by so-called media experts.³⁹ Once manifested in the media the panic is amplified by audiences' knowledge of other panics. Goode and Ben-Yehuda assert that “there must be some latent potential on the part of the public to react to a given issue to begin with, some raw material out of which a media campaign can be built.”⁴⁰ The

³⁷ See Jenkins, pgs 8-9.

³⁸ Philip Jenkins, *Moral Panic: Changing Concepts of the Child Molester*, (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1998).

³⁹ See Boero, 2012.

⁴⁰ Erich Goode, and Nachman Ben-Yehuda, *Moral Panics: The Social Construction of Deviance*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994), 26.

public's association to prior epidemics influences the way they think about and react to anything labeled "epidemic."

For instance, the language used in media coverage to frame obesity is very similar to that of crack cocaine in the 1980's. Humphries writes, "It is important to keep in mind that moral panics and drug scares have a natural cycle. Interest builds, peaks and then tapers off, until the drug and its associations seem to disappear entirely."⁴¹ In seeing the coverage of obesity in *Time* and *Newsweek* from 2001 to 2006 in Table 1.2, the number of articles per year increases around 2001 and peaks at in 2004. Then around 2008 the coverage tapers off. The cycle of the obesity epidemic in the news mirrors that of other moral panics, and garners similar reactions to that of other moral panics.

An example of the news creating a dominant fear by way of a problem frame is elucidated in Hall et al's work on the British press' coverage of "mugging." In *Policing the Crisis: Mugging the State and Law and Order* they argued "mugging" was defined as a category of crime by reporters and their repeated use of the term caused mugging to be at the forefront of official and public imagination.⁴² They write, "At the height of the mugging scare the police lost their sense of history, it is worth recalling that, to the end, no legal category of 'mugging' as a crime exists."⁴³ Although there was no official category of "mugging," British media consistently referred to official statistics. Hall et al. called this the "equation of concern...which rests on an implied chain of argument."⁴⁴ In

⁴¹ Drew Humphries, *Crack Mothers: Pregnancy, Drugs and the Media*, (Columbus, OH: Ohio University Press, 1999).

⁴² Stuart Hall, Chas Critcher, T Jefferson, J Clarke, B Roberts, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State and Law and Order* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1978) pgs. 3-5.

⁴³ See Hall et al., pg 5.

⁴⁴ See Hall et al., pg 9.

the case of obesity, once the statistic that 60% of America was obese was released, the epidemic was assumed and solidified by that number, and therefore not questioned.

The work of these sociologists relates to this study because statistics are constantly referred to in news articles about obesity. Hall et al. argue that statistics have an ideological function: “they appear to be *ground*, free floating and controversial impressions in the hard, incontrovertible soil of numbers. Both the media and public have enormous respect for ‘the facts--’ *hard facts*.”⁴⁵ The media’s constant use of statistics to identify problems creates an expectation with the public: once the numbers are shown, the fact is created. These “facts” increase public anxiety and lead to the over-reporting of certain panics. Obesity and crime reporting are similar since crime statistics are based on legal definitions and BMI is based on insurance definitions; neither are based on sociological terms, and can therefore be arbitrary.⁴⁶

Because moral panics tend to overshadow other pressing problems, it is important to note that obesity is identified as a health problem, which the media give special attention to. Framing obesity as a medical issue takes focus away from structural factors that contribute to it. Jensen says, “At the nexus of science, society, and politics are news media, which play a central role in publicizing science and managing the interface between science and society. The press helps to frame the popular definitions of science risks...”⁴⁷ These scientifically-hyped media messages lead to a dialectic of fear in which

⁴⁵ See Hall et al, pg 9.

⁴⁶ See Hall et al., pg 10.

⁴⁷ Eric Jensen, "Scientific Sensationalism in American and British Press Coverage of Therapeutic Cloning," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly*, no. 84 (2012): 40-54.

the risks in today's society are represented as uncontrollable, uninsurable, and unseen, yielding pervasive uncertainty in society.

Using the medical frame to construct obesity as an "epidemic" can alarm the public of the ensuing risk. "During health scare episodes, alleged public health threats are constructed as major issues that require prudent individuals and responsible collective actors to manage risk."⁴⁸ Health threats constantly receive media and political attention, and therefore are the way that risk is spread to the public on a global or local medium.⁴⁹ The fear frame and health threat frame intersect in much of the media's coverage of the obesity epidemic to amplify panic.

Health issues are framed in scientific terms that usually explain the risks and concerns surrounding health. Framing obesity this way medicalizes fat, which is eloquently summarized by Saguy:

A medical frame implies that fat bodies are pathological. It has become so pervasive and taken-for-granted in the contemporary United States and elsewhere that most people do not even realize that it is a frame and that there are alternative ways of understanding fatness, as, for instance, beautiful, sexy, healthy, or a positive form of human diversity.⁵⁰

Campaigns against obesity provide an illustration of how a moral crusade turns a physical condition into a moral threat. The crusade seems to have good intentions, since it encourages people to be healthier, but in many cases, health and morality are inseparable.

⁴⁸ Daniel Beland, "The Unhealthy Risk Society: Health Scares and the Politics of Moral Panic," *Moral Panics and the Politics of Anxiety*, ed. Sean P. Hier (London: Routledge, 2011), 224.

⁴⁹ See Beland, pg 224.

⁵⁰ Abigail Saguy, *What's Wrong With Fat?* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 5.

This is a moral crusade that openly boasts of its goal to alter people's personal behavior and as Furedi asserts, "public health officials have no problem turning a health issue into a moral one."⁵¹ He continues:

The message of eat less and thereby save yourself and the planet is endorsed by moral entrepreneurs... American public health experts and environmentalists frequently join up the two panics. The merging of the two scares is regarded as an effective way of reinforcing the message and thereby strengthening a crusade that is self-consciously targeting people's lifestyles.⁵²

Furedi's comments bring me to an important point in my thesis: I am not interested in proving whether or not people are becoming heavier, I instead seek to elucidate the moralistic tone that is commonly applied to "epidemics" and how the patterns of a moral panic are seen in the news media's coverage of obesity. The media covers epidemics in a formulaic way: a threat and its causes are identified, and a solution to fight the problem is sought. News narratives about obesity simplify its complexities and suggest biological rather than structural solutions to the "epidemic."

In looking at the "obesity epidemic" in the news, it is vital to understand American values of public health and personal responsibility. At different times in the history of American medicine, certain diseases have been thought to have resulted from individual actions.⁵³ Up until the late 19th century, the cause of disease and sickness was

⁵¹ Frank Furedi, "The Objectification of Fear and the Grammar of Morality," *Moral Panics and the Politics of Anxiety*, ed. Sean P. Hier (London: Routledge, 2011).

⁵² See Furedi, pg 100.

⁵³ Alan Brandt, "Risk, Behavior, and Disease: Who is Responsible for Keeping Americans Healthy," *Major Problems in the History of American Medicine and Public Health*, ed. John Harley Warner and Janet A. Tighe (Boston: Wadsworth, 2001).

thought to be sin and immoral behavior of an individual. After the the “bacteriological revolution” of the early 20th century, disease was no longer a result of personal moral behavior, but rather because of germs and bacteria in the body. But certain diseases continued to have certain moral meanings: mental illness, alcoholism, and sexually transmitted diseases. These diseases imply “a lack of volition or, at least, a failure of individual agency.”⁵⁴

By the 1970s the meaning of disease shifted radically as a critique of medical technology and biomedical medicine came to the surface. The “right” to health became an individual moral obligation to preserve one's health as a public duty. As Brandt notes, “No longer would disease be viewed as a random event; it would now be viewed as a failure to take appropriate precautions against publicly specified risks, a failure of individual control, a lack of self discipline, an intrinsic moral failing.”⁵⁵ Cigarette smoking (which obesity is often compared to in the news), alcohol and drug abuse, and sexually transmitted diseases (especially AIDS) were morally reprehensible diseases. like addiction and STDs are, by being made out to be a matter of personal lifestyle choice in the news media.

The presumed consequences of the obesity epidemic are seen in the current public health debates around the health of the military, obesity's impact on the economy, the environment and education reform.⁵⁶ According to Cohen, a folk devil is the group or person in a panic that is blamed. I will also see the extent to which obese people are seen

⁵⁴ See Brandt, 533.

⁵⁵ See Brandt, pg 536.

⁵⁶ See Boero, 2012.

as the folk devils for bringing obesity on themselves through bad choices and lack of will and are thereby creating larger problems for society as a whole (a public health crisis).⁵⁷

Previous studies on the obesity epidemic in the media serve as a model for this thesis to identify how obesity is framed. Theories and previous applications of moral panics in the media help understand the use of an “epidemic” framework to conflate the contradicting causes of obesity. The literature in this chapter points to the individualistic nature of health narratives in the United States and how they may overshadow the structural issues contributing to obesity. This chapter serves as the starting point to analyzing articles from *Time* and *Newsweek*.

⁵⁷ See Saguy, 2013, pg 20.

CHAPTER III

RESEARCH QUESTIONS & METHODOLOGY

Research Questions

1. Has obesity been constructed as a moral panic in the news?
2. How does the coverage understand the causes of obesity and its solutions?

Methodology

This thesis is a textual analysis of articles about obesity. The goal of this thesis is to determine if obesity is constructed as a moral panic in the news. Taking a systematic qualitative approach to these articles will serve to deconstruct them. Van Zoonen writes:

Central questions thus concern how human beings negotiate about definitions of situations and how such definitions guide their acts and experiences. In mass communication research this process of “reality construction” has been studied with respect to media institutions as well as to media audiences.⁵⁸

She also notes that other researchers have shown that the work of journalists can be seen as routinized professional forms of reality construction, that is, creating reality through the news.⁵⁹ This will follow an interpretive research design where the task will be to reconstruct the meanings in the articles and understand the process that created them.⁶⁰ Frame analysis is also an influential way of studying the ideological and thematic

⁵⁸ Liesbet van Zoonen. *Feminist Media Studies*. (London: Sage Publications, 1994) pg 132.

⁵⁹ See van Zoonen pg 132.

⁶⁰ See van Zoonen pg 134.

structures of the news and will be a way of defining “situations and identities, to frame issues and problems, to legitimize interpretations and experiences.”⁶¹

The concept of framing “consistently offers a way to describe the power of a communicating text.”⁶² Analyzing frames illuminates the way the transfer of information from a text (such as a news article) influences the human consciousness.⁶³ Frames highlight certain information and make this information more noticeable to audiences, and therefore frames increase the probability that receivers will perceive the information, discern the meaning and process it.⁶⁴

To uncover the way that obesity is framed in the news media, a textual analysis of 100 magazine articles was conducted to explore how popular general news sources frame obesity. General news magazines were chosen because they publish about panics more frequently than newspapers (See Table 2.1) and because they reach a larger and more national audience than newspapers. The top two news magazines overall maintain a higher rate of circulation than the top two newspapers (See Table 2.1).

Table 2.1: Circulation of Leading News Publications

Publication	Circulation in 2011
<i>Time</i>	3,337,308
<i>Newsweek</i>	1,524, 989
<i>Wall Street Journal</i>	2,069,169
<i>New York Times</i>	1,150, 589

("State of the News Media 2012: Magazines" & "Newspapers by the Numbers")

⁶¹ See van Zoonen, pg 134.

⁶² Robert Entman, "Framing: Towards Clarification of a Fractured Paradigm," *Journal of Communication*, 43, no 4 (1993): 51-58.

⁶³ See Entman, pg. 51.

⁶⁴ See Entman, pg. 53.

The top two newspapers have daily editions while the top two news magazines are weekly. News magazines also cover epidemics (metaphorical or medical) more frequently. When searching Academic Search Premier's database in the years from 1986 through 2012 for “epidemics,” news magazines overall generate more articles than newspapers (See Table 2.2). Though the *New York Times* featured more stories about epidemics than *Newsweek*, *Newsweek* reported over three times more metaphorical (non-contagious) epidemics than the *New York Times*.

Table 2.2: # of Articles about Epidemics 1986-2012

Source	AIDS M	Crime m	Crack m	Pregnanc y m	Violence m	Flu M	Total	Total by source type
<i>Time</i>	440	150	116	69	124	100	999	Magazines 1606
<i>Newsweek</i>	262	93	74	39	75	64	607	
<i>Wall St Journal</i>	60	6	1	0	5	74	174	Newspapers 824
<i>New York Times</i>	374	35	17	3	28	193	650	

**A capital M under the epidemic type denotes a medical epidemic, and a lower-cased m denotes a metaphorical epidemic*

Magazines from the years 1986-2012 were searched in Academic Search Premier’s database to look at 13 years of articles before and after the BMI threshold for obesity was lowered in 1998. Thirteen was chosen since it is only possible to get a complete year sample of articles through the year 2012, which is 13 years after the BMI was lowered. The two top-selling news magazines in the U.S.were chosen to represent American media: *Time*, and *Newsweek*. The keyword “obesity” was searched for in each of the two magazines’ full text, meaning that if the word appeared in the body, abstract or headline of an article it would appear in the search results.

As noted, the number of articles on obesity pre-1998 are nearly sixfold of the number of articles on obesity post-1998 (See Table 2.3). As shown in Table 1.2 of the introduction to this thesis, the coverage of obesity began to increase around 2002, peaked in 2004, and began to taper off in 2008.

Table 2.3: # of Articles about Obesity pre-& post-1998

Source	1986-1998	1999-2011
<i>Newsweek</i>	82	320
<i>Time</i>	153	962
TOTAL	298	1577

In order to deconstruct how the obesity epidemic is framed in the news, Cohen's method for analyzing the British media's coverage of "Mods and Rockers" was modeled for this thesis. Cohen's focus was on the genesis and development of moral panic, and the social typing associated with this group. He was concerned with the media's initial interpretation and the effect of the societal reaction to the Mods and Rockers as deviant.⁶⁵ Cohen described his method as taking "media inventory" of the press' coverage of the Mods and Rockers by asking how it was 1) exaggerated 2) predictive and 3) how it symbolized cultural values. He felt that this inventory highlighted the elements of the composite picture of how the Mods and Rockers were presented in the press.

This textual analysis will similarly try to highlight the elements of the construction of obesity in the news as Cohen did for the mods and rockers of 60's Britain. The central question of this thesis is to see if obesity coverage conforms to the moral panic formula. The 100 articles were analyzed twice. First, they were read through with the intention of

⁶⁵ See Cohen, pgs 24 & 30.

identifying common themes, phrases, and relevant quotations. These were recorded with additional notes about the “feel” of each article.

The second analysis was more systemitized in order to take inventory of the articles’ content. Objective details about each article (source, title, date of publication, number of pages, and whether or not it was a cover story) were first compiled. Next, the most prominent theme of the article was identified, then the three following questions were asked of each of the articles: 1) How does the article describe the problem? 2) What causes of obesity are identified? 3) What solutions to obesity are proposed?

To interpret the visual aspects that magazines provide, any cover that featured articles about obesity and the photos of each cover story were analyzed. The articles were identified by Academic Search Premier as “cover stories.” Some images were found electronically and others were found in the hard copy of the magazine.

Though Williamson wrote about interpreting advertisements, her theories about the power of *images* underpin the visual analysis of the photographs used in this project. She writes,

Advertisements are one of the most important cultural factors molding and reflecting our life today...[an image] forms a vast superstructure with an apparently autonomous existence and immense influence. It is not my purpose to *measure* its influence...I am simply analysing what can be *seen* in images.”⁶⁶

⁶⁶ Judith Williamson, *Decoding Advertisements: Ideology and Meaning in Advertising* (London, Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd, 1978) pg.11.

The purpose of interpreting the images was to get closer to the ideology surrounding obesity. Williamson states that “Ideology is the meaning made necessary by the conditions of society while helping to perpetuate those conditions.”⁶⁷

The images were grouped by theme, just as the articles were, in order to categorize how obesity is framed with images. As the images were analyzed by theme, certain symbols were repeated. Williamson would call these signifiers. She writes,

A sign is quite simply a thing—whether the object, word or picture—which has particular meaning to a person or group of people. It is neither the thing nor the meaning alone, but the two together. The sign consists of the Signifier, the material object, and the Signified, which is its meaning. These are only divided for analytical purposes: in practice a sign is always thing-plus-meaning.⁶⁸

The portion of this analysis characterizes the signifiers of the obesity epidemic in the news and how they add to how it is framed.

Textual analysis of news articles from popular sources sought to uncover the framing of the obesity epidemic. Visual textual analysis of images from popular news magazines adds to this analysis as it provides insight into how the media stereotypes overweight people and how the use of symbols on the images adds to the framing of obesity. One of the limits of this thesis is that I will only be interpreting the magazine articles and images themselves, not analyzing reader’s reactions to them. This thesis attempts to create a composite of the news media’s perceptions of obesity. The next chapter will outline the results of the methodological approach outlined in this chapter and analyze how these results elucidate the framing of the obesity epidemic in the news.

⁶⁷ See Williamson, pg. 13.

⁶⁸ See Williamson, pg. 17

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS: PRE-EPIDEMIC COVERAGE

The results of this study will be grouped and discussed by the main theme. The theme of each article was found by answering the following questions: 1) How does the article understand the problem? 2) What causes of obesity are identified? 3) What solutions to the problem are suggested? As predicted, there was a shift in content in these articles around 2002, when the coverage of obesity increased. The shift was from talking about the solution obesity as “finding the magic bullet” to the labeling of obesity as an epidemic, and most pressingly about the childhood obesity epidemic. The main themes of the articles will be presented with details and evidence from the articles. Lastly, the photos from selected stories will be analyzed and shown in text.

Table 3.1: Most Prevalent Themes for 100 articles

Theme	Child Obesity	Epidemic	Magic Bullet	Dieting / Fitness	Causes	Apathy	Food Industry	BMI
# of Articles	23	22	15	11	9	5	4	3

Pre-Epidemic

In the earlier articles (pre-2000) the most common way of discussing obesity was about dieting and diet pills, which makes sense considering the most common theme of these articles was “finding a magic bullet.” The influence of the diet industry is prominently seen in these articles with many about Fen-Phen and Redux. These all add to a medical frame for fatness, since a cure/antidote for obesity is suggested. Promoting obesity as a personal choice furthers the sales of diet pills, fat-free foods and other diet and exercise products.

Stories about “lazy Americans” were another way many of these articles understood the obesity as an issue and a way of framing obesity as an individual issue. A condescending tone is used and the volition of Americans is non-existent in these articles. The use of the tone may be on purpose: to challenge the individual readers to “get moving” and fight against obesity.

The most cited cause of obesity in these articles was fatty, sugary, or unhealthy diets. The eating habits of Americans seemed to be spinning out of control, with fast foods, too many deserts, and too little willpower. Americans are also too apathetic to change their diets or to start exercising according to these articles. In framing obese people as lacking knowledge, their intelligence is also questioned, if not completely disregarded.

Seeing that the majority of the articles were about finding a “quick fix” for weight gain, the most common solution suggested in this first group of articles was a pill (diet, cholesterol, or mood stabilizers) to control the desire to eat. To continue to frame obesity as a solely medical issue, doctors are quoted to give a scientific or medical perspective to using a diet pill, but many of these expert sources have ties to the pharmaceutical industry.

The Magic Bullet

For the pre-epidemic articles, “finding the magic bullet” was the most popular theme. Most of the articles from this group were about dieting and diet pills. “Finding the magic bullet” refers to discovering a quick fix for weight loss, which in most cases, means stifling hunger. Other terms to describe this were “magic potion,” “stealth missile,” “quick solution,” “quick fix,” “zap fat” and “wonder drug.” Fen-phen and

Redux were two diet pills being debated in the 1990's. The prominence of this theme in these articles is a result of the influence the diet pill and weight loss industries have in the framing of news narratives about body weight and health as medical issues.

A *Time* article, "Don't Go Back to Butter: the less-cholesterol campaign is under fire, but not discredited," from October 1989 by Andrew Purvis reads, "...many doctors are too quick to reach for the prescription pad. Reason: patients find it easier to take pills than to give up steak and eggs." This statement gives little agency to patients and suggests that the last hope for them is to take a prescription pill. Framing weight this way suggests that there is nothing to be done about obesity except take a pill, which takes focus off prevention.

An article called, "Diet Pills are coming back" also by Anastasia Toufexis and Alice Park from *Time* in May 1996 also alludes to this lack of agency: "This is the season when Americans gingerly try on bathing suits before bedroom and dressing-room mirrors and wish their were a diet pill that would erase those fleshy bulges." Americans, according to this article, are desperate for a "quick fix" to "zap fat." Here, the authors frame the solution to this person's "fleshy bulges" as a medical one.

Another example of putting a scientific frame on obesity is *Newsweek's* article, "Getting Fatter"⁶⁹ from December 1994, which asks, "will we discover an 'obesity gene'...or do we wait for low-fat shakes and pizza?" which suggests that Americans are incapable of losing weight themselves and need a pill or a fat-free version to do so. *Newsweek* also ran an article in January 1996 by Lemonick and Jordan Bonfante titled, "Are We Ready for Fat-Free?" that is mainly about the calorie-free fat substitute Olestra, which it calls the "stealth-missile of fat molecules." The article justifies the use of Olestra

⁶⁹ *Newsweek*. 12/26/1994, Vol. 124/125 Issue 26/1, p109.

since Americans “don't want to eat right. What we want is to eat whatever we feel like, in whatever quantity we want, without gaining weight or clogging up our arteries.” The article concludes with Olestra as an antidote to fat. “If Olestra could help drive down fat consumption, it could literally save lives.” Instead of trying to research the causes of obesity or trying to implement structural changes, these “magic potion” articles claim that the only way to lose weight is to create a new pill or a new chemical to replace fat and sugar in our foods.

A disturbing comment in many articles is that other physical and health dangers that could result from taking diet pills are better than being fat, which frame a pill as the best solution. The September 1996 *Time* article by Michael D. Lemonick, “The new miracle drug?” reads, “Redux can help [obese] people get thin, it might be worth the risk [of brain damage],” because, despite “diet foods and health club memberships, the flab still remains.” Taking diet pills is framed as the last resort. Geoffrey Crowley and Karen Springen quoted Wendy White, a woman who lost weight on diet pills, in their September 1997 *Newsweek* article, saying, “If the treatment killed me, at least I would fit in my coffin.” Framing diet pills this way suggests that they are a viable solution. Even if it causes other health problems (including death), at least your body will fit the socially acceptable standard of weight.

The tone of the apathetic-themed articles is individualistic, placing the fault and lack of self-control squarely on the fat person. K. Hecht for *Newsweek* in September 1990 claimed that fat people “love to wallow in failure and believe that in the end, they really have no control over their weight. The fact is, we have more control over what we put in our mouths than over almost any other aspect of our lives.” This article continues with a

personal account from Hecht, who was once obese, “Don’t tell yourself you don’t look so bad. You do...I’ve lost and kept off 128 pounds. I did it, and so can you, fatties.” By having a person who was previously obese call out those struggling to lose weight as apathetic, the harsh tone becomes belittling to those “fatties” and blames them for their physical state.

Overweight people are commonly framed as lazy and often unintelligent. Laura Shapiro and Springen for *Newsweek* in December 1994 quotes Lisa Young, a PhD in Nutrition, commenting on the wake of “fat-free” junk food, one of the “magic bullets” America hoped for: “In the 80s and 90s portion sizes blew up, and that is when people blew up too...I saw a lady in a grocery store buying a box of Entenmann’s fat-free cookies. She must have eaten 14 cookies in the line.” Young’s tone is of pity for this woman who “isn’t intelligent enough to know that she should not eat 14 cookies, even if they are fat-free.” Laziness, a stigma associated with being fat, is reproduced.

The “magic bullet” is also framed by use of hopeful and personal narratives. A *Time* article from February 1988 by Toufexis called “Have Your Cake—and Eat It Too: A New fat substitute heralds a dazzling era of phony foods,” quotes secretary Beverly Hearn of Cincinnati: “I can’t wait to eat all the fun foods and still fit into my clothes.” Actor Helmar Cooper of New York City is also quoted: “Soon we’ll be able to eat all the kinds of nos-nos with no adverse effects, that will be an eternal holiday.” These exclamations reflect the desire to physically relax and take pleasure in food. This is a common feeling throughout any fitness or diet narrative—the hope that we can eat whatever we want without any repercussions because science will come up with a way to

do so. Though not as overt as some articles, this one is framed in a way that it relies on confidence in science.

Most of the articles about the “magic bullet” imply that a diet pill may be the solution to losing weight, but there is never a firm conclusion that diet pills truly are the antidotes to obesity. A July 1997 *Newsweek* article by Adam Rodgers states that, “Until the pills' effects are better understood, the gym and that salad may be the way to go.” Though these articles frame obesity as an issue that can be solved with a pill, they still call to the individual to take responsibility for their weight.

Diet and Fitness Culture

Many pre-epidemic articles discuss American fitness and diet culture. *Time* published “A Nation of Worrywarts? Two books charge that America has gone haywire over staying fit” by David Brand in July 1988, which criticized fit culture. According to Psychologist Rita Freedman this culture is filled with “fattism—an inclination to associate thinness with prettiness and goodness, and obesity with lassitude and lack of discipline.” Freedman suggests that obesity is framed as lazy and apathetic, which is a reflection of American cultural values about fitness.

Arthur Barsky, a psychiatrist at Harvard medical school, is also quoted in this article, saying that in this fit culture, the way to salvation is a “tanned, trim, taut, toned body.” The culture these psychologists describe reflects an elitism that calls for those who are not thin and fit to act more like those that are. The cultural value placed on thinness is prevalent in fitness culture and the news published about it.

Apathy

Many of the pre-epidemic articles point to the laziness of Americans and accuse them of being apathetic. The tone of these articles mirrors that of the “magic bullet” articles, in that a person’s agency is taken away and unaccounted for when trying to lose weight. Medical journalist Michael Fumento claimed that, “Obesity is a voluntary problem...Americans are becoming fatter because they are becoming more slothful and self-indulgent. And those attributes are no longer stigmatized” in a July 1997 *Newsweek* article by George Will called “Sex, Fat, and Responsibility.” This suggesting that fat the solution to obesity is actually to increase the stigmatization of fat people. Here, obesity is framed with a neoliberal undertone that places fault on the individual and shames them into turning their lives around. “So click off the Internet and go for a brisk walk,” suggests Will, “you look as those you could use the exercise.” Framing obesity as a lack of personal responsibility legitimizes the stigmatization of obese people.

Personal responsibility is certainly the solution to obesity in articles about fitness and diet. Another *Newsweek* article by Stephen Williams, called “Design your Digital Diet,” from August 1997 similarly condemns Internet use as part of America’s apathy: “Even the most frenetic Web surfing won't burn as many calories as running, walking, or riding a real wave at Malibu.” Technology is often cited as a reason for obesity, from the Industrial and Agricultural Revolutions, to the invention of the car; these advances gave Americans a choice. *Times*’ September 1996 piece by “Tune In, Fill Out” by Benedict Carey and Michael Mason concludes that there is a direct correlation between body weight and the number of hours of television watched, concluding that watching TV makes you fat. In her 2005 *Time* article, Claudia Wallis urges Americans to stop being

“couch potatoes” and to start getting into fitness instead. The nostalgic images of “how it used to be” are seen as Wallis describes the lumberjacks and railroad men who built America with their muscles instead of power tools. This nostalgic vision is once again suggesting that technological advances and our choice to use them have made us overweight. Obesity is framed as a problem of personal will, and in framing it this way it provides the simple solution to turn off the TV, click off the Internet, or go do yard work. These articles assume that there is one problem and one solution to the complex issue that is obesity.

Causes

In contrast to the accusatory narrative of the articles about apathy, the debate about what causes obesity came to the surface in a number of the pre-epidemic articles. A “nature vs. nurture” debate was how this discussion was framed. A *Time* story from June 1990 called, “Chubby? Blame those genes,”⁷⁰ suggested that “People may inherit a propensity to obesity, but it need not be their destiny,” projecting a hopeful tone that those who are obese may have more options than articles with a “magic bullet” theme suggest they do. An article from *Time* in March 1988 by Denise Grady is titled, “Is Losing Weight a Losing Battle? Studies find that obesity is not entirely the fault of the fat.” Another article from *Time* 1995 is aptly called “The skinny on fat genes.”⁷¹ The titles themselves suggest that the cause of obesity is rooted in science. Framing obesity as a biological condition takes blame away from the individual and looks to science for a solution.

⁷⁰ *Time*. 6/4/1990, Vol. 135 Issue 23, p80

⁷¹ *Newsweek*. 6/12/1995, Vol. 125 Issue 24, p68.

Another way the cause of obesity was framed was through ethnicity. The Pima Indians of the Southwest United States are mentioned in a few of these articles since they have the highest occurrence of Type II diabetes in the world, and have a hereditary tendency to fall into the obese category. In *Time*'s November 1990 article "A Slow, Savage Killer," J.M. Nash writes:

Diabetes is endemic among many American Indian tribes, notably the Pima Indians of southern Arizona, who have the highest incidence of Type II diabetes in the world (50% of those over age 35). It is also alarmingly common among Hispanics. In some neighborhoods of San Antonio, one person in five has diabetes...yet many cannot afford the equipment that would enable them to keep track of their blood sugar. Often they are so badly informed about their disease...

This quote is troubling since it places minorities as uneducated, poor, and even genetically (naturally) helpless. Rather than framing ethnicity as the central factor for obesity, it would behoove the authors to also frame this alarmingly high rate of obesity among Native Americans as a result of socio-economic status and other structural hardships minorities face.

This chapter deconstructed articles about obesity before the news coverage increased dramatically in 2002. These pre-epidemic articles place a lot of attention on finding a "magic bullet" which assumes that there is a medical cure for obesity. In focusing on the diet industry, the articles shy away from understanding what the complex factors of obesity are. The harsh language used in the articles of this timeframe is belittling, condescending, and assumes that obese people are apathetic to "getting fit." By perpetuating negative stigma associated with being "fat" these articles obesity as deviant,

which Jenkins notes is a beginning stage of constructing a social problem as a moral panic.⁷² The following chapter shows the change in tone after obesity was labeled an “epidemic.”

⁷² See Jenkins, pgs 8-9.

CHAPTER V

RESULTS: THE EPIDEMIC

This chapter analyzes the articles about obesity epidemic around 2002, when the number of articles about obesity in *Time* and *Newsweek* increased. This surge could be a result of the BMI threshold reduction in 1998 that caused millions of Americans to become obese “overnight,” and the ensuing studies and funding that went into the cause. Changes in government in the late 90's, like the creation of the International Obesity Task Force (IOTF), reflect the emphasis public health took on obesity. The increase in funding for the IOTF between 1993 and 2005 was over \$300 million, which also might have contributed to the spike in media attention to obesity.⁷³

The industrial influence on the media is still prevalent in this group of articles, but critical commentary on the food industry and structural issues also exist in this later group of articles. Lifestyle and technology were also pointed out as a change that contributed to “bulging waistlines.” By looking at the numbers in Table 3.1 the focus on an obesity epidemic (especially childhood obesity) is prominent.

The causes of childhood obesity were many; from junk food, to advertising, to school lunches, to the breakdown of family rituals and bonding, the childhood obesity epidemic was a result of many complex factors. Not much blame was put on the individual—but a lot of responsibility was placed on parents. Structural factors such as school lunches, class welfare, and the No Child Left Behind Act were pointed to as reasons for childhood obesity. Though changes in diet and lifestyle were suggested as

⁷³ Tina Moffat, “The ‘Childhood Obesity Epidemic’: Health Crisis or Social Construction?” *Medical Anthropology Quarterly*. 24 Issue (2010) 1-21.

solutions, the responsibility to implement these changes was placed on either the parents or on governmental/structural powers to solve the “crisis.”

Epidemic

The notion of obesity as an “epidemic” was only mentioned once before the obesity epidemic was prominent in the news. An article from *Newsweek* in August 1994 by Melinda Beck, called “An epidemic of obesity” uses health-risk language (like “outbreak”) to highlight obesity’s prevalence: “An ongoing federal report confirmed that more Americans are overweight than ever, and that the outbreak of adipose has increased dramatically in recent years.” Using language like “outbreak” to describe obesity frames it as a contagious disease. This article also uses war words like “combat” to frame the problem of obesity as a war that needs to be fought.

Another example of using war-like words to frame obesity is *Newsweek*’s May 2004 article called, “A Summit on Obesity” by Elmer-Dewitt. It is an announcement that Time, ABC and major health organizations that are collaborating figure out how to deal with obesity. They call to “ban together to come up with a solution to this great health challenge.” The urgent language used to devise a “plan of attack” legitimizes taking action on obesity.

In *Time*’s December 2004 article “The Year of Obesity” also points to the Summit on obesity. Lemonick writes:

[Obesity] got more attention in 2004 than ever before from health experts, government agencies and the media--including Time and ABC News, which jointly sponsored a conference on obesity in May. And that's why I've decided--on my own authority--to declare 2004 the Year of Obesity.

Highlighting the Summit on Obesity as a reason that 2004 is the year of obesity gives the news media the authority to declare the year of the problem as its worst, which simultaneously situates the news media as experts.

According to Beck, former surgeon general C. Everett Koop declared obesity a national crisis in 1994, and claimed that obesity was a “greater threat to the nation’s health than terrorists.” The panic and militaristic language frames obesity as a critical problem. Koop initiated “Shape Up America” (SUA) in 1995 and received over one million in funding from Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig and Slim Fast. The pharmaceutical company Wyeth-Ayerst also supports SUA.⁷⁴ Koop’s framing of obesity as a threat is strategic; the more urgent and pressing obesity is spoken of, the more funding will flow to SUA and the more dieters will begin Weight Watchers, Jenny Craig, and Slim Fast.

Dr. Xavier Pi-Sunyer is another highly quoted source in articles about the obesity epidemic. He is a longtime consultant for the pharmaceutical companies Hoffman-LaRoche, Knoll, Eli Lilly, and Wyeth-Ayerst, and for Weight Watchers. He is also the chair of the Obesity Task Force. In a *Time* article from January 1995 by Philip Elmer-Dewitt and Janice M. Horowitz, Pi-Sunyer states, “If this were about tuberculosis, it would be called an epidemic.” Quoting consultants for weight loss and pharmaceutical companies is problematic because their status as medical physicians overshadows their industrial connections. But since Koop and Pi-Sunyer are only referred to as medical professionals in the articles, they are seen as experts of medicine and therefore of obesity.

⁷⁴ Pat Lyons. “Prescription for Harm: Diet Industry Influence, Public Health Policy, and the “Obesity Epidemic.” in *The Fat Studies Reader* Eds. Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009).

Using medical and scientific sources is a common way these articles frame obesity as a biological problem. Kluger's 2008 *Time* article quoted Penelope Slade-Royall, director of the U.S. Office Disease Prevention and Health Promotion; "Sit down on a bench in a park with a person on either side of you...If you're not overweight, statistically speaking, both of the other people sitting with you are." This quote is an example of speaking directly to the reader: asking them to decide if they are the "one in three" people that are obese. Though Slade-Royall is simply relaying a statistic, she is assumed to be correct because of her status at the Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion.

When obesity is framed as a health issue it becomes a cause for a variety of other health issues. In December 2006, *Newsweek* published the article, "Why Heavy Isn't Healthy," by JE Manson. This article details the negative effects on a person's health being overweight can lead to, which include hypertension, heart disease and diabetes. Mortality is constantly referred to in articles about obesity—a reflection of American public health's focus on risk of death. The risk of disease and death make the "epidemic" seem more real and pressing and worthy of being "battled." *Newsweek's* April 2006 article "Lifestyle Changes May save your Life" by Dean Ornish similarly details the risks of being overweight/obese. Heart problems are the worst of the issues, says Ornish, and the ongoing debate about the solution proliferates in this story, asking: Are drugs (prescription pills) or lifestyle changes the more viable solution to the epidemic?

Lemonick's *Time* June 2004 piece "How We Grew So Big" seeks to historicize eating by discussing the evolution of the hunter-gatherer human. This article suggests that a campaign similar to the anti-smoking campaign is needed to fight obesity. Obesity is

blamed for a host of other diseases and therefore could be blamed for high medical bills. The article reads, “The total medical tab for illnesses related to obesity is \$117 billion a year--and climbing--according to the Surgeon General.” Putting a tab on obesity illustrates the urgency to fix it and also covers up other problems and structural issues with healthcare that may be adding to this overwhelming tab.

Another article that discusses the costs of the obesity epidemic is *Time*’s May 2006 article: “How Bill Put the Fizz in the Fight Against Fat” by Jeffrey Ressler. Dr. William Dietz, the head of Nutrition and Weight at the Centers for Disease Control is quoted as the expert in this article. Dietz was formerly a consultant to Hoffman-La Roche and Knoll pharmaceutical companies. He says: “Kids are most vulnerable to ballooning weight in early childhood and then again in adolescence... We can't even imagine the medical costs we will be seeing in the future. It feels like Armageddon.” The use of the term Armageddon suggests impending doom, the end of the world, and a great catastrophe. Associating this catastrophe with the vulnerable population that is children exacerbates the panic.

Some articles refer to the epidemic as an issue of lifestyle. Claudia Wallis’ June 2005 article for *Time* called “Get Moving” quotes Dr. Tim Church, medical director of the Cooper Institute, a fitness research center in Dallas: “We have two epidemics in this country. One is obesity the other is physical inactivity...One is a topic of cocktail conversation and the focus of best-selling books. The other is ignored.” This suggests that exercise is the solution to the obesity epidemic but that steps aren’t being taken to combat it (both literally and figuratively). Church frames obesity as an issue of individual fitness, which is most likely due to his directorship at fitness research center.

Former president William J. Clinton is the poster boy for waging a personal battle with obesity by changing his eating and exercising habits. Ressler sums this battle up:

A big-boned Southern boy couldn't help plumping up on such fare, eventually growing into a teen who, by his own description, was "fat, un-cool and hardly popular with the girls"...From his McDonald's joneses to the quadruple-bypass surgery that eventually laid him low, Clinton has long been a one-man case study of the U.S.'s food crisis--the compulsiveness, the consequences, even the shame.

Using an inspirational story from a public figure like Clinton may allow the reader to sympathize with Clinton's struggle and overcome her own war with weight. This is an example of a reformation story that frames obesity as a battle that can be conquered if the individual pushes herself to do so.

This "can do" attitude is a reflection of neoliberal ideology. A *Time* article from March 2010 by Claire Suddath called "Does Obesity Rehab Work?" discusses a type of adult "fat camp" where you will get enough outward motivation to develop personal responsibility to lose weight. This "rehab" is similar to NBC's *The Biggest Loser*, a reality television show where the contestant who loses the most weight is rewarded with a cash prize. The show has been on in the United States since 2004, has had twelve seasons in the US, spawned to 27 other countries, and produced a spin off with the show's longtime host Jillian Michaels.

In May 2010, *Time* published a question and answer session with this famous host of *The Biggest Loser* called "10 Questions for Jillian Michaels." who uses neoliberal language to motivate the overweight to get their lives under control, just like she did: "You can be predisposed [to obesity] genetically, but it's not a sentence. I'm genetically

predisposed, but I manage my weight. The root of obesity, though, is usually emotional. The poor habits are a symptom of a deeper emotional issue,” Michaels claims. Michaels simultaneously frames obesity as a biological issue, and one that can be solved by the will of an individual to overcome emotional battles.

Obesity was talked about as a problem in not only America, but also in other countries, particularly other wealthy nations on whom America has a cultural impact. Urgency is felt through combative verbs (like fight) and dangerous nouns (such as Armageddon). Many of these articles have the same theme as those about childhood obesity, but are meant to reach a greater, more general audience, because in these cases, obesity affects everyone.

An example of this global urgency is Nash’s August 2003 *Time* piece, “Obesity goes global” discusses that eating too many potato chips and watching too much TV has resulted in a global crisis. Nash boldly claims that obesity is “bigger than AIDS,” simultaneously branding obesity as a moral panic, since AIDS was framed as such. Nash also writes that people “around the world are eating more like Americans--and getting dangerously fat as a result,” as if obesity was “spreading” like a contagious disease. This article also discusses the formation of the International Obesity Task Force, modeled after the US’s Obesity Task Force. Framing obesity as a global problem means that no one is safe, and the most vulnerable must be protected: namely, children.

Childhood Obesity

Prior to William Dietz’s decision to use BMI scales on children (including infants) in the mid-1990s, the child obesity “epidemic” was relatively untouched in *Time*

and *Newsweek*.⁷⁵ Articles since the early 2000s discussed children of all ages: from fetuses in-utero to college age students.

The future is viewed with anxiety in discussions of childhood obesity. *Time*'s September 2003 article by Claudia Wallis called "Guess What F is For? Fat," quotes Dr. Kelly Brownell, the director of Yale University's Center for Eating and Weight Disorders: "This could be the first generation of American children to lead shorter lives than their parents." This phrase is included in much of the media discussion about childhood obesity. By framing obesity as the sole cause of lowering mortality age, Brownell disregards all other factors that may contribute to obesity like socioeconomic status and access to healthcare.

Former Arkansas governor Mike Huckabee comments on the ensuing dangers of childhood obesity in his article for *Time* in May 2006 called "Battling America's Obesity Epidemic." Huckabee writes, "With healthcare costs rising faster than even gas prices, obesity is a health crisis that could cripple our country for generations to come unless significant changes are made." By comparing the obesity epidemic to gas prices, Huckabee is borrowing language associated with an economic recession. Though Huckabee labels obesity as a "health crisis," he neglects to mention other systemic problems that are at the root of the high cost of healthcare.

Rather than deconstruct the socioeconomic or systemic factors that lead to the "high cost of obesity" and the "first generation of American children to live shorter lives," the news media chooses to profile obese children. *Newsweek*'s July 2000 article "Generation XXL" by Crowley uses statistics to back up the claim that Generation X is

⁷⁵ Centers for Disease Control, "Recommendations for using BMI to assess overweight." Accessed April 29, 2013. <http://www.cdc.gov/nccdphp/dnpa/growthcharts/training/modules/module1/text/page3a.htm>.

heavier than those preceding it. One of the members of this heavier generation is “Happy Jack Horvis,” a little boy who never fussed about food and ate. He enjoyed “fried chicken and green beans cooked in fatback.” But the story gets dark. Happy Jack was “so rotund” at the age of four he had to go see a heart specialist, and eventually he was admitted to a hospital-based weight clinic. For Happy Jack, “slimming down isn’t an aesthetic issue. His health—even his life—may depend on it.” This story is emotional, and takes a dramatic turn, which urges the reader to feel for this child, and for all children, especially one’s own. But, this emotional story about Jack takes the focus off the structural issues that may have lead to his obesity.

Some media coverage does address the structural issues that may be a factor in obesity. The November 2010 *Time* article by Josh Ozersky called “Pint Sized Me,” is about a San Francisco city ordinance to ban McDonald's Happy Meal toys. The claim is that the toys encourage unhealthy eating habits in children. This is not the first ban of this sort in San Francisco, which is known as a progressive city, especially when it comes to health. For example, in 2010, the mayor banned soft drinks from vending machines on public property.⁷⁶ These structural changes are unique to this city, and at the time of this article (2008), San Francisco was ranked as the ninth healthiest city in America by AARP magazine.⁷⁷ San Francisco is exemplary in terms of health and progressive government actions, so without any comparison, this example does nothing but promote the idea that other cities should easily be able to follow suit when tackling obesity.

⁷⁶ Cote, John. "Sugary Drink Ban Begins to Affect SF Sites." *San Francisco Chronicle*, 07 06, 2010.

⁷⁷ "AARP The Magazine Names the Top 10 Healthiest Places to Live in America." *AARP Magazine*, 07 23, 2008. http://www.aarp.org/about-aarp/press-center/info-07-2008/aarp_the_magazine_names_the_top_10_healthiest_pla.2.html (accessed April 29, 2013).

Schools and Obesity

Unhealthy lunches, short recesses, and other problems in schools are often pointed to as a cause of childhood obesity. *Time's* June 2008 issue includes the article "School Cuisine" by Carolyn Sayre. Sayre evokes an image of school lunches of the past, saying, "Fifty years ago, kids would gulp down helpings of fatty pot roast and butter-soaked mashed potatoes without thinking twice about the impact on their waistlines. But that was before the rise of super-sized portions and sedentary lifestyles." By illustrating children carelessly eating a fatty meal from the 1950's and not gaining any weight, Sayre is framing childhood obesity issue of today as an issue of portion control and lack of exercise, namely, an issue of individual choice.

An article that attempts to look at structural issues with school lunches is the December 2002 *Time* article by Jodie Morse called "Flunking Lunch." Morse profiles a school that implemented a program where students grow their own food. "Instead of going to McDonald's, our students want to go to the farmer's market," says Tracie Thomas, Santa Monica district's food-services director. Growing school gardens is an option only for schools with the time, money, space, and environment to do so. By interviewing a source from a city with a median household income over \$75,000, the article frames improving school lunches as something only attainable for the wealthy.⁷⁸

In Dr. Sanjay Gupta's (who is the chief Medical Correspondent for CNN) *Time* article from December 2008, "Slender in the Grass" (a reference to the 1961 film *Splendor in the Grass*), Gupta suggests that the lack of parks and public recreation areas are a key factor in the childhood obesity crisis. This is part of the "No Child Left Inside

⁷⁸ Santa Monica Housing and Economic Development, "Santa Monica Facts and Figures." Accessed April 29, 2013. <http://www.smgov.net/Departments/HED/eddContent.aspx?id=23577>.

Act,” which was proposed as a way of amending the Bush Administration’s 2001 “No Child Left Behind Act” which is blamed for shortening recess time.⁷⁹ More “green space” equals healthier kids, and fewer public health concerns to deal with. Gupta assumes that lack of green space is the cause of childhood obesity. Gupta writes, “Safe places to play mean less weight gain and even a decrease in ADHD symptoms.” Mentioning ADHD is strategic—it piggybacks on the increased awareness of developmental disorders starting in the early 21st century.⁸⁰ Developmental disorders like ADHD have also been labeled as “epidemics” by the news media, and are also metaphorical epidemics. Gupta suggests a simple solution to two complex issues by framing them as epidemics.

Parent Responsibility and Family Bonding

Parent responsibility in the childhood obesity epidemic is highlighted in many of the articles sampled. *Newsweek*’s April 2005 article by Claudia Kalb and Springen, “Pump Up the Family” points to parents to model their behaviors around diet and exercise to positively impact their children. “Family bonding” is the cure for child obesity. Dr. Nancy Krebs, the co-chair of the American Academy of Pediatrics’ Task Force on Obesity says, “The best way to enhance your child’s health is to run a healthy home.” This solution assumes that the family is a nuclear one (with two parents), which allows the parents to split the duties of running this “healthy home.”

Similarly, *Newsweek*’s January 2007 piece, “Not Hungry, No Problem?” also by Springen, addresses the need for family mealtime. Obesity expert Dr Robert Kushner says, “Food should be a source of family bonding.” This presupposes that the family has

⁷⁹ As of May 2013, No Child Left Inside is still not in effect.

⁸⁰ Seth Moonkin, *The Panic Virus: A True Story of Medicine, Science, and Fear*, (New York, NY, Simon and Schuster, 2011) pg. 228.

the time, money, and resources necessary to create a family bond over food. Framing the cause of obesity as a lack of family bonding suggests that there is a singular solution to a complex problem.

“Generation XXL” ends by suggesting that the solution to child obesity lies in the parents’ hands. “Setting limits is important, but parents can often accomplish more by setting an example.” Yet again, the assumption here is that parents are the solution to the issue of childhood obesity and the article individualizes the problem. Crowley illustrates this solution by telling the story of a mother who joined Weight Watchers and dropped 55 pounds, prompting her daughter, Kate Harned, to join as well. Harned, 14, dropped six pant sizes after joining. The moral of this story is that losing weight is attainable at any age, and though it may be dangerous to drop six pant sizes as a 14 year old, it is OK because she is “fat.” This anorexic behavior is legitimized because obesity has repeatedly been framed as a medical issue that needs policing.

In 2004, Wallis wrote “The Obesity Warriors” for *Time*, which also urges parents to take responsibility for their children. Parents must be vigilant and stay attentive to how their children are marketed to by food companies. Leading American nutritionist Marion Nestle is quoted:

Children are supposed to have their own foods and not eat boring adult foods.

Kids are supposed to have things like Lunchables. There's your personal responsibility for you. It's your personal responsibility to fight this level of marketing. It's you against them, and they have bigger resources.

The tone of Nestle's statement suggests that there is a war to be fought on marketers and that it is the parents who must fight this war for their kids. By framing parents as the obesity warriors, the article downplays the responsibility of the food industry.

Pregnancy, Breastfeeding and Infancy

Pregnant and new mothers are often central to much of the media discussion around childhood obesity. The mere decision to breastfeed is promoted as an ideal way to prevent overweight children, but what happens when a breastfed baby is obese? The September 2009 *Newsweek* article, "Born to Be Big" by Sharon Begley discusses factors associated with "infant obesity." It cites a 2006 study from the Harvard School of Public Health that concluded obesity in infants less than 6 months has risen 73 percent since 1980, reaching epidemic numbers. The opening of the article reads:

It's easy enough to find culprits in the nation's epidemic of obesity, starting with tubs of popcorn at the multiplex and McDonald's 1,220-calorie deluxe breakfasts, and moving on to the couch potatofication of America. Potent as they are, however, these causes cannot explain the ballooning of one particular segment of the population, a segment that doesn't go to the movies, can't chew, and was never that much into exercise: babies.

This clearly frames obesity as a biological problem with distinct causes. Obesity is unavoidable to some babies for unknown reasons in this article. Babies are perhaps the most vulnerable group of all the human population. Begley's introduction frames the cause of obesity in babies as different than the cause for adults and children. The cause of infant obesity is invisible, unknown and ultimately something to be feared for its elusiveness.

Time's October 2010 piece "The Womb. Your Mother. Yourself" by Annie Murphy-Paul is a six-page cautionary tale for expectant mothers and women in general. Most of the article is about epidemiological research of problems that may stem from the womb and what pregnant mothers can do to avoid these problems. Murphy-Paul discusses several of these problems at length: obesity, depression and other mental health issues, diabetes, and heart disease. John Kral, a professor of surgery and medicine, suggests that these problems may begin in the womb:

It may be that the intrauterine environment is even more important than genes or shared eating habits in passing on a propensity for obesity...If that's so, helping women maintain a healthy weight before and during pregnancy may be the best hope for stopping obesity before it starts.

This may invoke fear and paranoia about pregnancy because it leaves the responsibility on the mother to prevent their child's obesity. Ozersky (*Time*, 2010) asserts, "Americans have been conditioned, starting in-utero, to prefer high-fat, high salt, high-sugar concoctions to their less exciting, more natural culinary cousins." Framing obesity as a problem that begins in the womb puts completely responsibility on the mother carrying the child and disregards other factor that may contribute.

Newsweek's July 2000 article, "What Families Should Do" by Begley is also directed at parents and extends the age range of children at risk for developing weight problems to teens. The article touches on the physiological factors that may lead someone to gain weight. Begley writes, "Teens, even more than children, are at risk of substituting cookies for companionship." In this vein, no child is safe.

This chapter explicates the extent to which obesity has been framed as a moral panic in the news media since the early 2000's. With the language of an epidemic, obesity became a pressing problem with high stakes that needed solving. Obesity was framed as the reason for some complex systemic problems, like high health care costs in the U.S. and was also compared other complex health problems like ADHD.

When these stakes concerned children, the media attention surrounding the obesity epidemic exploded. Because childhood obesity is commonly framed as an issue of individual responsibility, parents are accountable for their children and are blamed for the epidemic. The disturbing categorization of some infants as obese illuminates the panic about the genetic origins of obesity and the anxiety about the possibility that obesity may develop in the womb.

Doctors, nutritionists and other scientific professionals are poised as the experts in the "fight against obesity." Their expertise overshadows any pharmaceutical connections or monetary incentives they may have in perpetuating the obesity epidemic. The interest in finding a medical cause and solution for the obesity epidemic takes focus away from the other structural and social factors that contribute to obesity.

CHAPTER VI

RESULTS: SIGNIFIERS OF THE EPIDEMIC

This chapter analyzes the images used in articles about obesity. Similar to the text, the photographs from the articles had recurring themes, symbols, and a shift in content after the late 1990's and early 2000's, mainly having to do with children. This photo analysis isn't as extensive as that of the articles since it only evaluates photos from cover stories in *Time* and *Newsweek*. The images tell a different story about obesity than the words of the articles. Some of the themes found in these images were: close-ups of food, cartoon and caricatures of obese people, representations of family and youth, and shapes mimicking the globe.

Williamson's theories about the power of *images* underpin this visual analysis: "The sign consists of the Signifier, the material object, and the Signified, which is its meaning. These are only divided for analytical purposes: in practice a sign is always thing-plus-meaning."⁸¹ These definitions of signifiers and signifieds will guide the deconstruction of the images used in articles about obesity.

Close-ups of Food

As shown in Figures 5.1 and 5.2 many close ups of food were presented in the articles or issues from the early 1990s. From pizza, to chicken nuggets, to chocolate in all forms, these images look tempting and "sinful." In *Newsweek's*, "A Food Lover's Guide to Fat" calorie counts are displayed right next to the image of the food. Both of the covers and headlines contain the word "fat" in bold, capital letters as if it were labeling the food

⁸¹ See Williamson, pg. 17

as dangerous. The delicious-looking food item (the signifier) is tempting, but with calorie counts and the word “fat” next to it, the food becomes off limits (the signified). These appetizing images frame obesity as a result of gluttony and therefore of lack of personal will.



Figure 5.1: Newsweek December 4, 1994 cover



Figure 5.2: Newsweek December 4, 1994, "A Food Lover's Guide to Fat"



Figure 5.3: Time's January 8, 1996 cover



Figure 5.4: Time January 8, 1996, “Are We Ready for Fat-Free?”

Cartoons

Most of the images from the 1990’s contained cartoon images of obese people rather than actual obese people. Figure 5.5 is a *Time* cover that uses Colombian artist Fernando Botero’s 1989 painting, “A Family.” Botero is famous for drawing exaggerated human figures and animals. The word “girth” hovers over the center of the family, and the headline plays on the 1915 D.W. Griffith’s film *Birth of a Nation*. The use of famous art and film serves to grab the attention of potential readers.

This *Time* cover includes the signifier of a “nuclear” family: one with two parents and two kids—one boy, one girl and one dog. Though this family represents the “ideal structure” of a family, it doesn’t show an ideal appearance of one since the entire family (including the dog) is characterized as being obese and unhappy. Obesity is framed as contributing to the breakdown of the “normal” American family in this cover image.



Figure 5.5: Time January 16, 1995 cover

The 1996 cover seen in Figure 5.6 shows another side of the “cartoon” look—the ideal “tanned, toned, trim, and taut” body. This body (the signifier), which is only a torso, is wearing a high-cut leotard or bathing suit and appears to be posing like a fitness competitor. The headline about Redux diet pills also contains the word “hot” suggesting that this body is a desirable one that can be attained. The subhead reads: “But is [Redux] too good to be true?” Weight loss is clearly being framed as having a simple medical solution: a pill.

The actual story inside this issue contains a much different cartoon. Figure 5.7 is of another Botero-esque man, holding an over-sized Redux pill. The man’s body nearly takes up one entire spread. Again, obesity is framed as an issue that can be solved with a pill. The man is smiling and the pill (the signifier) is shining, suggesting that the “miracle drug” has arrived. The expression on the man’s face implies that he is relieved to have found this solution to his obesity.



Figure 5.6: Time's September 23, 1996 cover



Figure 5.7: Time September 23, 1996

It's a Global Problem

Newsweek fomented the fear of a global epidemic with their August 2003 and 2004 covers. Figures 5.8 and 5.9 show a round image (symbolizing a globe) with the word “fat” highlighted as the largest word on the cover. Figure 5.8 shows a middle aged-white male with a mustache looking “pregnant with the world.” The man wears an A-Shirt, which shows his arms and is tight to his skin. The cover image mimics that of

Vanity Fair's much replicated image of the actress Demi Moore naked and pregnant on their 1991 magazine cover. This is what Williamson would call a referent sign because it mimics other images or signs from popular culture.⁸²

Though Figure 5.9 is not actually of the globe, its representation of a fat cell that looks like the earth: round, multi-colored, and with a blue atmospheric layer around it. The headline “When Fat Attacks: How Fat Cells are Waging a War on Your Health” parodies the language of a science fiction B-film (example: 1996’s *Mars Attacks!*) Both of these covers use popular culture references to engage the audience. The urgency of the words used, paired with the symbols of the globe make the obesity epidemic very compelling and pressing. In both Figures 5.8 and 5.9, obesity is framed as a pressing issue.

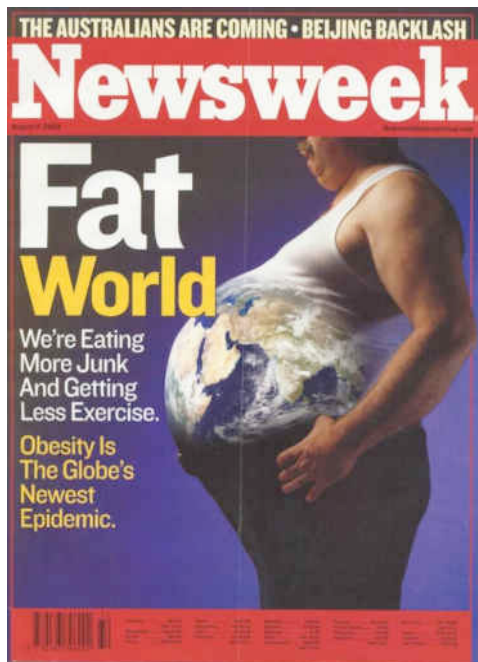


Figure 5.8: Newsweek, August 11, 2003

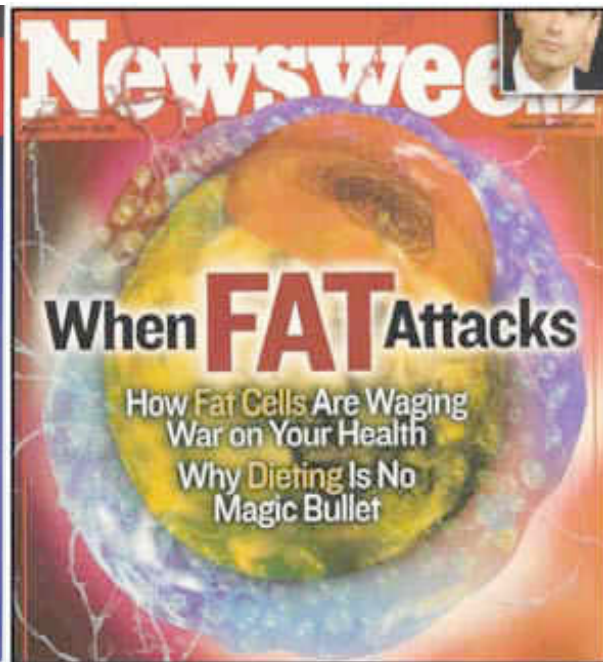


Figure 5.9: Newsweek August 18, 2004

⁸² See Williamson, pg. 19

Time's June 2004 cover (Figure 5.10) similarly calls for timely action. Again, this issue is deemed a "Special Issue" and is of a weigh scale with the letters for "Obesity" replacing half its letters. The hand on the scale is pointing to about 280 pounds. Though not as overtly about a "global crisis," the cover reads "Overcoming Obesity" implying that this crisis needs to be defeated.

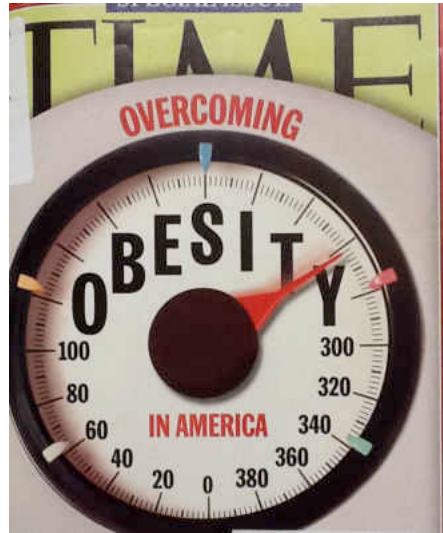


Figure 5.10: *Time* June 7, 2004 cover

The Unidentified Fat Person

In the sample used, most of the "unidentified" people in the photos were male. The most used image of a fat person of a white, pre-teen male (see Figure 5.11), often with shabby chin-length hair (see Figures 5.13, 5.18 and 5.24), wearing a backwards baseball cap, (see Figures 5.18 and 5.24) and holding an ice cream cone (see Figures 5.11, 5.12, 5.13, 5.18). This young male is often smiling and wearing warm weather clothes (t-shirts and shorts) suggesting that it is summer. These signs are symbols of childhood, and together create signify innocence. Paired with the headline "Fat for Life" this image signifies the loss of innocence of being a kid due to his obesity. The *Time* and *Newsweek* covers below (Figures 5.11, 5.12) both present a young man indulging in an

ice cream cone, and in the case of the latter, bending a skateboard with the pressure of his body weight. The bending skateboard suggests the young man's impending immobility due to his weight. The headlines, "Fat for Life" and "Our Supersized Kids" frame obesity as a permanent condition.



Figure 5.11: Newsweek July 3, 2000 cover



Figure 5.12: Time June 23, 2008 cover



Figure 5.13: Time June 12, 2008

Figure 5.14 also has a “summer” signs in it (nearly all of the cover-stories about childhood obesity were printed in June or July) and the subjects are also wielding a desert (popsicles). Again, these are signifiers of summer, the innocence of youth, and of indulgence. The two young women are wearing shorts and tank tops with the straps of their bathing suits showing. Throughout the sample of images, both male and females are shown in summer clothing, but females were more likely to be shown wearing bathing suits. A bathing suit is revealing to the body, and can be a sign of beauty, confidence and sexuality. These two girls appear happy and confident in the photo, but situating this photo next to an article that frames obesity as an epidemic questions how long these girls will remain content with their bodies.



Figure 5.14: Time June 12, 2008

Figure 5.15 is another image of an overweight, pre-teen, white male in a bathing suit. This young male is looking at the camera, expressionless as his body is being used as a science lesson about the dangers of obesity. Translucent organs and bones fill the boy's body as text blocks point out all of the health problems that stem from his obesity. An article in the same issue as this picture (Kluger, *Time*, 2008) reads,

Obese boys and girls are already starting to develop the illnesses of excess associated with people in their 40s and beyond: heart disease, liver disease, diabetes, gallstones, joint breakdown and even brain damage as fluid accumulation inside the skull leads to headaches, vision problems, and possibly lower IQs.

Framing obesity as the leading cause in all of these diseases assumes that weight is the only factor attributing the ill health of the individual. The translucent organs make skeleton appear within his body. A skeleton ironically is associated with emaciation, but can also symbolize death. This image serves to foreshadow for this obese boy's future.



Figure 5.15: Time June 12, 2008

Children were not the only unidentified “fat people” in the images collected. As seen in Figure 5.16, a middle-aged man--slightly balding, wearing shorts and a t-shirt--represents a “couch potato.” He watches television, drinks beer, and eats potato chips, which are signifiers of laziness. The angle of the camera and the position of the man’s legs put him in a vulnerable position, perhaps suggesting that he is unable to save himself in his “battle with fat.” The image as a whole frames this man’s laziness as the reason for his obesity.

Figure 5.17 is an example of what is typically shown in news stories about obesity: headless fat bodies. This particular example is of three women sitting at a picnic table, assumed to be eating. They too, are in summer (warm weather) clothing with their buttocks’ slightly hanging over the picnic bench. By cutting the subjects’ heads off, their agency is taken away, and they are left as only bodies, to be looked at with pity.



Figure 5.16: Time January 16, 1995



Figure 5.17: Time June 7, 2004

Figure 5.18 is perhaps the most disheartening and cruel stereotypical image from this sample. The scene is clearly summertime (or in a warm climate). It shows a “nuclear,” white family (including a dog), in bathing suits by a pool. A pre-teen male with chin-length hair and a backwards baseball hat unknowingly feeds an ice cream cone to his golden retriever. This image symbolizes the nuclear American family and is made to look ridiculous, like a cartoon.

The entire family is smiling at the subject assumed to be the father who looks clown-like with sunscreen covering his nose. This father is the only one of the subjects looking at the camera and is doing so in a mischievous way as he motions to dive into the

pool. The color and clichés in this scene make the subjects appear as a caricature of an obese family as if they were a sideshow.



Figure 5.18: Time June 7, 2004, "How We Grew So Big"

Time's "Too Heavy Too Young" features multiple images of campers at Camp Shane, a weight-loss camp for children and teens. One image is a two-page spread of four young females sitting on beach towels on some grass (see Figure 5.19). The main subject is white, has short hair, and is wearing a red bathing suit. She looks at the camera with a sad expression. The caption reads: "THINK THIN: Amelia, 9, waits for her swim class. The campers range from as young as 7 to as old 17."

Amelia is sitting near another white girl, an African American girl and one other girl, all of whom are positioned so that their thighs are showing. Again, these subjects are photographed in summer apparel with revealing clothing to show their skin. Though not directly cited underneath or near the photo of Amelia, the article reads: "There must be a

lot of lonely kids in America these days, judging from the skyrocketing rates of childhood obesity.” This statement proposes the idea that Amelia, or other “overweight” children who are sitting alone, have no friends because they are fat. The image and text charges Amelia’s weight as the reason she is sitting alone, which conflates social issues with physical ones and reproduces stereotypes associated with being fat.

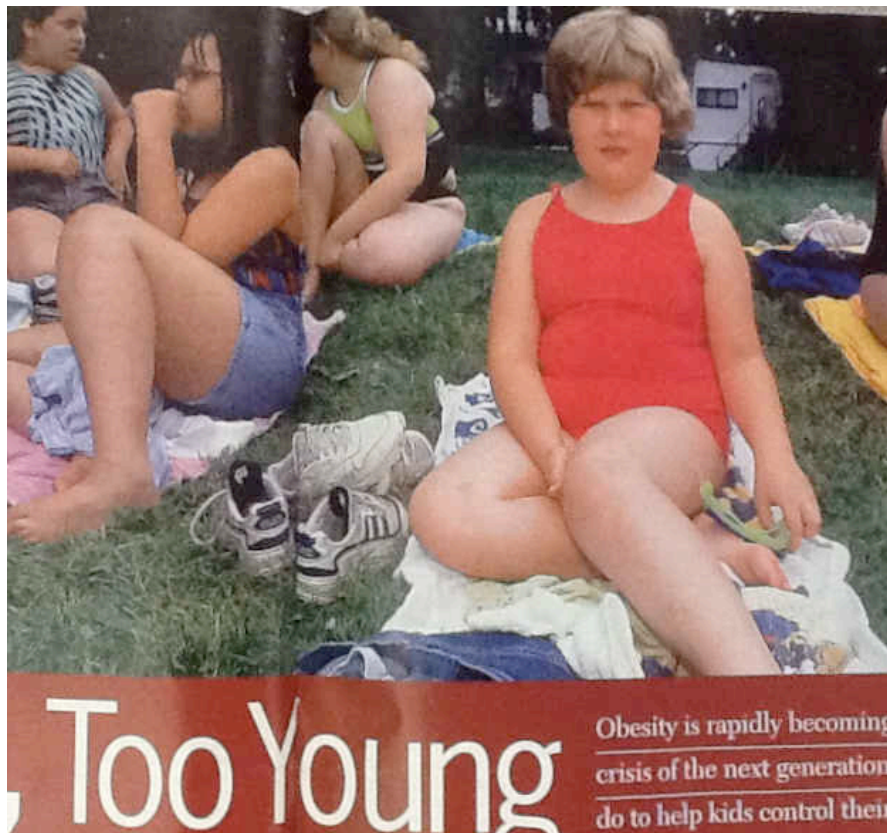


Figure 5.19: Time January 21, 2002, “Too Heavy Too Young”

Though not from the sample of articles used in this study, Figure 5.20 is from a 1954 article that appeared in *Life* called, “The Plague of Overweight,” which told the story of Dorothy Bradley, an overweight female in post-WWII America. The image is of Dorothy, shot from behind, in a bathing suit, about to walk by a conventionally attractive female. You cannot see Dorothy’s face. The caption reads: “Bulging at beach in 1949,

197-pound Dorothy self-consciously leaves locker room for swim. She covered up embarrassment by being jolly and gregarious."⁸³

The image, headline and caption of this article have nearly the same signifiers as some articles from this study do, such as a bathing suit, a person by herself and a faceless body (see Figure 5.19: “Too Heavy Too Young” *Time* January 21, 2002). This is an example of how the media has been representing overweight people for decades: in a formulaic way that reproduces cultural stereotypes and biases associated with being fat.



Figure 5.20: Life March 1954, “The Plague of Overweight”

School Lunches and the “Good Old Days”

As discussed in the texts of many of the articles, school lunches are a prominent factor in the issue of childhood obesity. *Time*’s “School Cuisine” plots out the history of school lunch from the post WWII-subsidized lunch programs to the present day infiltration of fast-food chains and vending machines into school cafeterias. Two two-page spreads (Figures 5.21, 5.22) detail the past and present of school lunch.

⁸³ Time Life, Accessed April 30, 2013. <http://life.time.com/culture/obesity-in-the-usa-photos-from-the-early-fight-against-a-plague-1954>.



Figure 5.21: Time June 12, 2008, School lunch of the past



Figure 5.22: Time June 12, 2008, School lunch of the present

The photographs that accompany these images of lunch trays seem to have nostalgia for the 1950's (see Figures 5.23 and 5.24). Looking at the amount of milk, butter and vegetables in Figure 5.21 the involvement of the US Department of Agriculture in school lunches is seen. President Harry Truman passed the "School Lunch Act" in 1946, which stated, "No nation is any healthier than its children or prosperous than its farmers."⁸⁴

⁸⁴ United States. Dept. of Agriculture. Production and Marketing Administration. *Participation of Negro children in school lunch programs*. Washington, D.C. UNT Digital Library. <http://digital.library.unt.edu/ark:/67531/metadc6225/>. (Accessed April 13, 2013).

Interestingly, much of the food shown in the “present” lunch (Figure 5.22) like canned fruits and vegetables was contrived right around the same time as Truman signed the School Lunch Act. The adoption of the dietary and lifestyle habits of “good old’ days” is framed as the solution to the obesity epidemic by the media, but the contradiction is that some products of the era are what the media also blames for the epidemic today.



Figure 5.23: Time June 12, 2008

This *Time* article also includes a Figure 5.24, which shows two pre-teen aged males on a teeter-totter. One half of the image (right side) is sepia toned and the other is in color (left side). The boy on the right is wearing cuffed jeans, a button up short-sleeve shirt and what appear to be Converse All-Star sneakers: all signifiers of the 1950’s. The boy to the left is wearing shorts, a T-shirt, has long chin-length hair and a backwards baseball hat on: all signifiers of the present-day American “fat boy.” The image implies a yearning for the fit youth of the past that wouldn’t weight down the teeter-totter. Again, the 1950’s are framed as the pinnacle for childhood health when put next to the child of the obesity epidemic.



Figure 5.24: Time June 12, 2008

Families Bonding Over Mealtime

Because family bonding was proposed as solution to obesity in the articles of this sample, it is no surprise that there were many photographs of families sitting down for a meal, or preparing a meal together. *Newsweek's* 2010 piece called “Divided We Eat,” by Lisa Miller, provides anecdotes about family meals in different neighborhoods in Brooklyn to explain how class disparities affect family mealtime. Two of these families are featured in the photos below.

Figure 5.25 is of the Fergusons—a locavore Park Slope family who drink “politically correct Nicaraguan coffee,” raise chickens in their backyards and whose children “choose from an assortment of organic cereal.” Miller says, “In Park Slope, the contents of a child’s lunchbox can be fodder for a 20 minute conversation.”

Figure 5.26 is of the Davises--an African American single mother-family living in subsidized housing in a neighborhood of Brooklyn. The Davises illustrate the other side of the food spectrum since they are food insecure—a term that means a family sometimes runs out of money to buy food. Tiffiney, the mother, earns \$13 an hour and receives food stamps for her family. Their breakfasts are described as being from a bodega and

consisting of egg and cheese on a roll or a muffin and a soda. Several nights a week they eat take-out and Tiffiney does not buy vegetables “because they are too expensive.”

These two images of families eating together at a table serve as a modern-day Norman Rockwell “Freedom from Want.” The dining room table surrounded by family members is a signifier of family. The issues surrounding family dinner, family bonding and nutrition appear to seamlessly disappear for these families that eat together. But in taking a closer look, race and class stereotypes are perpetuated in the images. The family that has a father is the white family, who also is wealthier than the other family and has space in Brooklyn for a large dining table in their house. The family on food stamps in subsidized housing that cannot afford vegetables is African American.

These images of family bonding contradict the solutions many articles suggest: that poor nutrition can be simply be halted with the reintroduction of family mealtime. Without two parents, enough money, and access, family mealtime is unattainable for some families. By framing obesity as a crisis of the “nuclear” family, the media scapegoats families that do not have the means to function as such.



Figure 5.25: Newsweek November 22, 2010, The Fergusons



Figure 5.26: *Newsweek* November 22, 2010, *The Davises*

Babies

Several articles involved warnings and studies about infants, the womb and the risk of obesity. Figures 5.27 and 5.28 illustrate these warnings for both pregnant women and parents of infants. Figure 5.27 shows a pregnant white female, naked, in the fetal position and floating against a white background on the cover of *Time*. The woman and her unborn child are vulnerable in her naked state, and the woman covers her right breast in order to prevent further exposure. Many articles convey that without their mother to shield them, the fetus is defenseless against obesity.

The logo covers the woman's neck and shoulders as if to make her anonymous to the audience--allowing them to relate to her. This woman, and all women who are pregnant or will become pregnant must be sure to stand guard and protect their unborn child from all that could happen to them while in-utero: including being susceptible to obesity.



Figure 5.27: Time September 22, 2010 cover

As Figure 5.28 illustrates, if parents do not take heed, their child may grow up to “Weigh 300 pounds.” The smiling, naked, blonde-haired and blue-eyed infant is a signifier of the “an all American baby.” This baby innocently holds an envelope of French Fries, a signifier of fast food. *Newsweek*’s headline is worded in first person, which makes this infant call out to the reader to help prevent the reader’s own children from becoming obese.

This is a blatantly manipulated photograph. It acts as a parody of the future of America’s children if “we don’t do something about obesity.” Will children this young, with only two teeth, be eating French fries someday? This baby eerily looks like Figure 5.7 from 1996, where a cartoon image of a man is holding a giant Redux-pill and smiling wide. Together, these two images say that if nothing is done; this baby will become an overweight adult who succumbs to diet pills to manage his weight. Because the subject of this image is an infant the parent is charged as the responsible party.



Figure 5.28: Newsweek May 14, 2012 cover

This chapter of image analysis identifies the many signifiers of obesity: ice cream cones, bathing suits, French fries and headless bodies. The media tends to provide photographs of obese people rather than the non-biological causes of obesity. The images from this sample shifted from representing obese people as cartoons or caricatures to actually showing pictures of obese or overweight people in an often comical or perplexing way. Images of obesity in the news media mainly serve to reproduce stereotypes of obesity and to permit discrimination against obese people.

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

As a complex health, social and political issue, obesity is a very present problem in American news. This thesis analyzed *Time* and *Newsweek* articles to study their framing of obesity. Though not representative of all media or journalism, the audiences for these two magazines are large and are therefore significant in their impact.

The coverage contained in these articles constructed a crusade to “battle” obesity as a health issue, singling out those considered “fat” as the classic folk devils of moral panic fame. The articles use similar expert sources, namely, C. Everett Koop, Dr. Xavier Pi-Sunyer, and Dr. William Dietz, who are portrayed as moral crusaders for the cause of combating the obesity epidemic. Other doctors, scientists and politicians are also enlisted as experts in this war. These crusaders feverishly wage a war on fat and encourage individuals to “shape up” in order to improve the well being of the American public.

As this “war on fat” was discussed in the articles sampled for this thesis, there was no mention that 1 in 6 Americans are affected by hunger.⁸⁵ Lisa Miller’s 2010 *Newsweek* article is the only one from the entire sample that mentioned food insecurity: “According to data released last week by the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 17 percent of Americans—more than 50 million people—live in households that are ‘food insecure.’”

The aforementioned crusaders have a vested interest in a calling attention to obesity rather than hunger. As this thesis has demonstrated, the experts used as sources often have ties to pharmaceutical, commercial or entertainment industries and therefore

⁸⁵ “Hunger Facts,” Feeding America, accessed May 28, 2013. <http://feedingamerica.org/hunger-in-america/impact-of-hunger.aspx>

have a different agenda: to perpetuate the obesity epidemic in order to benefit their respective industries. This not only questions the validity of such moral crusaders' claims, but also questions the strength of the articles in which they are quoted.

The narrative of the moral panic of poor nutrition further labels mothers as the folk devils of childhood obesity. In these narratives, those without the time and resources to produce healthy family meals as housewives did back in the "Good Old' Days" are scapegoated for the child obesity epidemic. The discussion of the infants and fetuses in the articles and images of obesity further reflects anxieties mothers must be aware of in order to protect their child from obesity and further deflects the focus off structural inequalities.

The effect of this media attention on the obese and the poor exacerbates the stigma associated with being overweight. Quartelet, the creator of the BMI scale, warned of using a single measurement to describe a human characteristic, but that is exactly what the media has feverishly done with the statistics from the CDC and other health institutions. Campos et al. write:

The current scientific evidence should prompt health professionals and policy makers to consider whether it makes sense to treat body weight as a barometer of public health. It should also make us pause to consider how propagating the idea of an 'obesity epidemic' furthers the political and economic interests of certain groups, while doing immense damage to those whom it blames and stigmatizes.⁸⁶

This serves as a caution not only to health officials and policy makers, but also to the journalists who propagate the idea of the obesity epidemic in a moral panic framework.

⁸⁶ Paul Campos, Abigail Saguy, Paul Ernsberger, Eric Oliver and Glenn Gaesser, "The Epidemiology of Overweight and Obesity: Public Health Crisis or Moral Panic?" *International Journal of Epidemiology* 35 (2006) pg. 59

The media framing of obesity as an individual issue perpetuates the existing cultural values of “normal” body weight and sanctions discrimination against overweight and obese people.

Only four of the 100 articles from the sample addressed weight discrimination which reflects the media’s lack of attention and concern. One of these articles, an August 1993 *Newsweek* article by Jennifer Coleman, claims that “Fat is the last preserve for unexamined bigotry.” Coleman’s statement invokes further research on weight discrimination by the news media and as a caution for those researching and reporting on the obesity epidemic.

By framing the obesity epidemic as a moral panic *Time* and *Newsweek* present the obese as a threat to the health of our nation and its future. Though the discussion changed from an issue of finding a chemical cure to reinstating the “family meal” as a solution to obesity, the media narrative scapegoats the obese. By concentrating on the obese rather than the structural inequalities that contribute to poor health, the news media shifts the focus of blame and legitimizes and perpetuates the stigmatization of the obese.

Analyzing the framing of obesity is just one way of unraveling the representation of obesity in the news. A suggestion for further research would be to find out **why** the CDC lowered the BMI threshold, a change that was never explained in the articles sampled for this thesis. Looking deeper into institutional decisions such as this may uncover further agendas.

Judging from the repetitive use of specific statistics and expert opinions, it appears that many of these articles were produced from the same press releases. Analyzing press releases from health institutions like the CDC and the NIH would be

very helpful in deconstructing the media panic surrounding obesity and is a suggestion for further research. The press releases from 2004 and other years when many articles about obesity were produced could be particularly fruitful.

The relationship between hunger and obesity needs to be further developed and discussed in the media. Suggesting family bonding, parent involvement, or expensive organic foods as the solution to obesity does not close the gap between those with access and funds for food and those without. Revealing the relationship between hunger and obesity may be beneficial for newsmakers and abate the dominate the news discourse about obesity.

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