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'Some mothers do 'ave them': Mother blame and obesity across differing socio-economic landscapes

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Generation 1 project : Food & Families

- **Aim:** to investigate the ways in which gender and social class intersect in mothers' experiences of obesity, public discourses and policy.
- **Rationale:** Little critical discussion of the socio-cultural underpinnings of obesity
- **Hypothesis:** Constraints placed upon mothers (and children) by gender roles and socio-economic status are ignored in policies and health promotion programs

- **Ethnographic project** commenced in 2005 (part of a broader social epidemiology study of 550 women and children based in Adelaide)
- Thirty mothers who fulfilled the criteria for obesity from **differing SES circumstances** were engaged in 18 months of fieldwork
 - (2008) *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 30, 1, pp. 97-111
 - (2008) *Health Sociology Review (special edition)*, 17(2): 187-198.
 - (2009) 'The Traffic in 'Nature' Maternal Bodies and Obesity'. In *Fatness and the Maternal Body: Women's experiences of corporeality and the shaping of social policy*. Unnithan-Kumar, M. & Tremane, S. (eds) New York.: Berghahn Books.
- In 2009 we recommenced field work with these women, to explore obesity at different family/life stages.
- **Discourse study** of obesity **representations** in Australian newspapers
 - *Journal of Sociology, Special edition on the Sociology of Food & Eating* (forthcoming)

Constellation of politics

- **Child politics** (the innocence of children)
- **Neoliberal governance** (individual responsibility and choice)
- **Mother blame**

We argue that this constellation is **a key orientation device** to trace a set of relations that are useful for understanding contemporary discourses in the ‘obesity epidemic’ and the unprecedented focus on children.

Who is responsible for fat kids?

- “Old know how missing for many modern parents” (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2004)
- “Parents who can’t say no are raising fat kids” (*Daily Telegraph* 2006)
 - Lupton, D (2004) ‘A Grim Health Future’: Food Risks in the Sydney Press’, *Health, Risk and Society* 6: 187-200.
- “Obesity is parents’ fault” (*The Advertiser* 2009)
- “Fat parents blamed for obesity” (*Courier Mail* 2009)

'Parents' is a gender neutral disguise for mothers

- “Fat Kids? Yes, mums the word”
- “Children a weight on mothers minds”
- “Overweight mums putting newborns at greater risk”
- “Weighty problems born of bad diet in pregnancy”

Which mothers? - Mothers from



to

Working mothers

- Working mum's child weight risk (*BBC news, 2007*)
- Working mums – fat kids (*Daily Telegraph, Sydney, 2007*)
- Middle class mothers fuelling child obesity (*Telegraph UK, 2007*)
- Mums who work full time most likely to have obese children (*The Daily Telegraph, 2010*)

A simple explanation for a complex issue

- Women are primary care givers – ‘natural’ relationships
- If obesity is a failure to care for oneself then children who are obese have not been properly cared for by others (their mothers).
- This is neglect, and “neglect is an indication of lack of nurturing; nurturing is carried out by mothers; therefore, when nurturing is absent the problem must be a problem of mothering” (Daniel and Taylor 2006: 427).
- ... and some mothers are perceived to be more neglectful than others.

The dangers ...

- Mothers entrenched in **a gendered web of blame**

'I've been kicked out of mother school (m/c mother of 2)' [Why?] Because sometimes we all sit down together and watch tv while we eat'

Lower SES families are acutely aware of the scrutiny they are under:

'Why are they [the Department of Health] targeting me for obesity?'

Are you nutritionists – coming to tell us how to eat properly?'

- To compensate, the women in our project are heavily invested in **'intensive mothering'** (Hays 1996)
 - Meticulous meal planning, after school activities, actively involved in sports with children, ensuring children have 'choices' in foods and activities ...
- Dominant ideology of intensive mothering at odds with paid workforce (Johnston & Swanson 2006: 509).

Simple dichotomy of good food : junk food

- Perfectly rationale to feed kids junk food if it is going to fill them up rather than waste money on healthy options which will go to waste
- ‘Unhealthy’ food choices are rational to families on a tight budget
- Caring for the family can be expressed through a variety of means including the use of ‘junk food’, freeing time for other activities.

What constitutes 'good food'?

- The demise of the traditional family meal is a contemporary myth that fuels public debate as a way of making sense of the present (despite lack of historical evidence) (Jackson 2009: 14)
- Mothers who prepare traditional 'sit down', family meals conform to the ideology of intensive mothering.
- While women in our project described a variety of eating routines and practices, the sit down, family meal was still a prominent feature of family lives.

Simple dichotomy of good mothers : bad mothers

- ‘Good’ mothers – those who conform to nutrition discipline and surveillance of themselves and their children
- Good mothers choose the right foods and take individual and maternal responsibility (care of oneself and children)



Sydney Morning Herald titled, “Tackling childhood obesity: get mum fit too” (7-8 February 2009)

‘Bad mothers’ : Failed mothering is now a legal issue

- Those who don’t (or who resist) are vilified and in extreme circumstances the power of the State intervenes



Conclusions

- The relationship between children and mothers has become the focus of moral discourses around childhood obesity
- Neoliberal governance encompass *both* State and decentralised forms of power in an attempt to regulate excess bodies.
- Placing weight at mothers feet is disproportionate ...
- Draws attention away from the very real structural inequalities in people's everyday lives; inequalities that are felt the hardest by women, and women from lower socio-economic circumstances.

Acknowledgements

- The mothers and families from the Generation 1 Project
- Life course and Intergenerational Research Group, University of Adelaide
- Fay Gale Centre for Research on Gender, University of Adelaide

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- Johnston, D & D Swanson (2006) Constructing the 'good mother'; The experience of mothering ideologies by work status. *Sex Roles*, 54:509-519.
- Patel, D. (2005) 'Super-Sized Kids: Using the Law to Combat Morbid Obesity in Children', *Family Court Review* 43: 164-177.

