ABSTRACT

OBESITY AS A MARGINALIZED EXPERIENCE

Ms. Hannele Harjunen, M.Soc.Sci, Doctoral student, University of Jyväskylä, Rehtoratit, P.O. Box 35, 40014 University of Jyväskylä, Finland
E-mail: shharjun@adm.jyu.fi, tel:+358 14 260 1035

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This paper is based on my forthcoming PhD dissertation that explores obesity from the viewpoint of social sciences and women’s studies. For decades, obesity has been viewed as a medical condition and the focus of research has been on the health consequences and medical treatment of obesity. The focus of my dissertation is on the social construction of obesity and women’s personal experiences of being fat. I apply Foucauldian thought and consider obesity as a discursive category that is created, produced and reproduced through various social practices such as medicine and health care system, school, religion, and media (e.g. Foucault 1979).

In this paper my hypothesis is that in Western culture obesity is constructed as a transitional space. As thin body is held as the ‘original’, normal body, obesity is viewed as a temporary abnormality. This is in stark contrast with reality, since obesity is becoming more widespread, and increasing number of people is permanently fat. In effect, obese women in particular, are culturally and socially driven into a marginalized position.

I approach obesity through the experience of obese women. From my empirical data (35 autobiographical writings and 12 thematic interviews with Finnish women aged between 21 and 65 years). I have been able to surmise that being fat is considered as a marginal or liminal space on a multiple of levels: discursive, narrative, political and liminal (in Van Gennepian sense of the concept, e.g van Gennep 1960). These levels become intertwined in the experience of a fat subject. In this paper, I will explore these marginalities and women’s experience of liminality from the point of view of embodied fat subject.

van Gennep, A 1960 (1909), Rites of Passage, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.