

War on Weight: Capturing the Complexities of Weight with Hermeneutics

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Abstract

In professional practice, body weight issues are typically considered from an individual-level standpoint. In contrast to this dominant perspective, we highlight that body weight has prominent social, economic, and political influences and connotations. An examination of the social complexity of weight provides opportunity to shift focus from individual to societal and structural influences on perceptions of weight. Seven renowned experts in weight-related issues with at least 10-years-experience in various fields from across Europe, Australia, the United States, and Canada participated in interviews about their professional experience with weight. Interviews were analyzed using hermeneutic methods via an iterative interpretive process. The interviews revealed a battlefield, a war waged on weight. War emerged as an overall metaphor that included aspects of war on obesity, bodies as battlefields, war camps, war fronts, entrenchment and negotiation and, finally, the phenomenon of “no man’s land.” In many ways, language itself limits us from capturing the complexities of weight. The war metaphor provides a way of understanding the intensity of the firestorm surrounding the construct of weight. New understandings from what we might refer to as veterans of the war on weight offer hope for transformation, not just win or lose, but a hermeneutic wager of possibility.

Keywords

weight, body image, weight bias, hermeneutics, qualitative research

A few years ago, I (principal investigator and first author) stared at images of a mother in Northwestern Africa force-feeding over 18 litres of goat milk a day (i.e., the gavage diet) to her

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young daughter to “plump her up” to make her more appealing for marriage (Jazeera, 2008). The same day I was asked to speak on a panel about a mother in New York who put her 7-year-old daughter on a diet and went on to describe her success in fighting her daughter’s hunger in her top-selling book (Weiss, 2013). My experiences on this day forever changed how I thought about weight and how I practice within fields related to weight (i.e., obesity, eating disorders, body image, weight bias). My professional journey working with weight-related issues has always been influenced and fueled by a deeply personal and sometimes troubled relationship with my own body. In this moment of contrast where one mother is “fattening up” while another across the world is “slimming down” their daughters, I realized that the problem is so much more than one individual’s response to an environment; weight is about individual interaction with social, relational, and environmental complexities. No one is immune to cultural discourses, whatever they may be, about weight. I wanted to better understand the systemic issues that has mothers, with the best of intentions, purposefully manipulating their children’s bodies in an attempt to meet a cultural expectation. I reflected on the personal, professional, and political “situatedness” of my research and knew I would need to enlist the help of experts if I wanted to better understand weight in all its complexities as I aspire to embody the change I wish to see in the world.

As a team of researchers, we gathered around the topic, bringing our varied expertise. We come to this from different personal and professional positions and have worked with individuals who struggle with weight. Our personal and professional experiences have taught us that this is complex terrain in which there are no simple answers. In the absence of answers to the complexities of weight, we have remained intensely curious about how weight as a construct has influence in the world and how it might be understood.

Weight issues are socially complex and at the core of our humanity. Concerns about what foods provide appropriate nutrition for fetal development situate people as subjects of body-related discourse before we are even born. How we feed our children and our relationships with food and our bodies have become fundamental to how we live. However, the solution to the force-feeding taking place in Mauritania, Africa is not to “educate” mothers about the dangers of this practice just as the solution to the problem of putting children on diets is not to educate about the dangers of dieting. A fundamental change in our collective understanding of weight is needed because the “social problems” of weight are more complex than how we feed ourselves or our children. We need to frame these issues in larger social contexts to capture the challenges our world faces in relation to food, gender, power, status, and social inequity.

It is perhaps not surprising, given the complexity of weight when framed in the larger social context, that even within the fields that study weight (i.e., eating disorders, obesity, weight bias research), there is division about how weight ought to be studied. Historically, researchers from the obesity and eating disorder fields were often working in silos and at times at cross-purposes (Russell-Mayhew & Grace, 2015). “Early efforts to prevent obesity were seen as dangerous in promoting precursors to eating disorders (O’Dea, 2005) and efforts to prevent eating disorders were seen as encouraging complacency about healthy behaviors” (Russell-Mayhew, 2006, p. 254). More recently, integrative approaches have been proposed to ensure consistent messages around health and growth across the weight spectrum with a focus on ecological and systemic

change (Ireland et al., 2021). Framing the issue as weight allows input from multiple fields of study including obesity, eating disorders, and weight bias.

Within the fields of weight and in popular social discourses about weight, there are tensions, debates, misunderstandings, contestations, and silos. Literally hundreds of social discourses are implicated in weight issues (e.g., van Amsterdam, 2013), including but not limited to: obesity epidemic (Mann et al., 2015); obesity as a disease (Rich, 2015); healthy weights (Rodgers, 2016); sizeism (Chrisler & Barney, 2017); size matters (Cameron, 2016); supersize versus superskinny (Leadley, 2015); cult of thinness (Hesse-Biber, 2007); pro-ana and pro-mia (Knapton, 2013; Schott & Langan, 2015); body positive (Sastre, 2014); and everybody matters (Canadian Obesity Network, 2016). Frederick et al. (2015) offered four ways to frame how people organize their understanding of weight. First, the public health crisis frame situates obesity as a crisis requiring government intervention. Second, the personal responsibility frame places blame on the food and exercise choices of each individual. Third, the health at every size frame denies weight and/or body mass index (BMI) as a useful indicator of individual health and emphasizes that health exists across the weight spectrum. The final frame, the fat rights frame, is a social movement that rejects the medicalization of body size and the use of terms such as obesity to describe bodies in favor of reclaiming the term fat as a value-free descriptor. While these four frames are not exhaustive cultural accounts of how weight is framed, they demonstrate that the conceptualization of weight can influence the perceived health risks of certain weights and how one might treat someone who lives in a large body (Frederick et al., 2015).

Colloquially, these different views or opinions about weight are often referred to as “camps,” which is of interest given the metaphor of war that emerged from our data. Our purpose in this research was to draw attention to, and invite a deeper understanding about, weight by interviewing expert professionals who work in research, practice, and/or policy in fields related to weight.

Research Method and Design

This research was conducted using the research method of hermeneutics, as guided by the philosophy of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1997). Gadamerian hermeneutics asks questions that emerge from practical day-to-day experiences in language and historical spaces (Moules et al., 2015). The construction of weight is at a critical point in history. Looking at the obesity and eating disorder fields in silos, they can be regarded as ordered, where weight-loss and weight-gain are the main goals respectively. However, taken together, and at more than face value, these issues of weight have many layers. The contested conceptualizations and language about weight invite chaos or disorder, leaving open the possibility of new interpretations and understanding. As human beings in the world, exposed to a multitude of messages about weight, professionals in weight-related fields have much to offer in terms of how they make sense of weight and how that influences their practice.

We were guided by our research question: *How might we understand the social complexities of weight?* We recruited weight experts who were members of a listserv consisting of 530 members from 30 countries at the time of data collection. This listserv is the only international collection of interdisciplinary professionals across varied fields related to weight (i.e., obesity, eating

disorders, body image) and has been operated by a professor emeritus in the US for over 20 years. Membership to the listserv is free and includes researchers, practitioners, policymakers, and advocates from across disciplines. This study was approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Research Ethics Board for the project, “REB18-0684” All participants provided consent to participate.

Given the eligibility criteria (at least 5-years’ experience; able to participate in the interview in English), the operator of the listserv hand-picked the 24 most elite members and sent the recruitment email. Nine initially responded to the call for participation and ultimately seven were interviewed. Seven renowned experts in weight-related issues with 10-37 years’ experience in various fields including psychology, psychiatry, counselling, and public health from across Europe, Australia, the United States, and Canada participated in interviews about their professional experience with weight. Interviews were conducted in-person (2) or by phone (5) by the first author, given her background, expertise, and reputation as a researcher in the field of weight, and lasted approximately one hour each.

All interviews were audiotaped for exact transcription of data. In hermeneutics, analysis is synonymous with interpretation, which occurs in the complex dialectic of research interviews with participants, intensive review of the transcriptions, and interpretive memos based on the transcripts. “The initial individual interpretations were then raised to another level of interpretive analysis in the research team’s conversations through in-depth, rigorous, reflexive, and communal attention to the data” (Moules et al., 2017, p. 1).

Analysis involves careful reading, re-reading, and writing around significant interpretations that arise from the data, attending to the criteria of sound interpretive work that allows understanding of the topic to emerge. The criteria involve context, agreement, coherence, comprehensiveness, potential, and penetration (Madison, 1988, as cited by Moules et al., 2015). Unlike some other qualitative methods, hermeneutics is not in search of themes, semantic coding, constructs, or theories, but “rather seeks to deepen understanding of a topic so that it can be seen differently and, ultimately, practiced differently” (Moules et al., 2015, p. 119).

In the following section, we offer one interpretation that arose from the data. In hermeneutics, participants are not identified individually but are used to collectively contribute to our understanding of the topic. Participant quotes, then, are not named individually but appear in italics throughout the interpretation to ground the interpretations. While a number of interpretations emerged from the data, we focus on the initial and most prominent—that of war.

Interpretation: War and No Man’s Land

While not surprising or different given the decades long “war on obesity” we have seen globally, a developed interpretation of war in relation to weight can offer new insights into our understanding of weight across the diverse and sometimes controversial tensions, debates, misunderstandings, contestations, and silos. “Declaring war” was a phrase used by one professional that provoked strong imagery, and in the context of her mention of history, brought to the forefront ideas about how the metaphor of war might extend our understanding of the construct of weight.

I think it would take a historian to write a whole book to really reveal all the different kinds of forces that led to this situation now. But certainly, if higher weight was not stigmatized the way it is, I don't think it would have the, society would have responded by declaring war on it...the declaration on the war on obesity and then billions of dollars of funding going to the healthcare industry and going to researchers to then solve this "obesity epidemic."

The metaphor of war has previously been used to understand and make meaning of weight. Both academic literature (i.e., war on obesity) and popular culture (i.e., battle of the bulge) enlist this metaphor in an attempt to describe and more fully understand our complex relationship with weight. It is not surprising, then, that during World War I, gaining weight was written about in magazines as an unpatriotic act (Smith, 2004) and, while not because of food shortages, weight gain today is still linked strongly to notions of citizenship and morality. Laws, ethics, and cultural mores emphasize that being a good citizen is important at all times, including during war times, but it seems there is not a good time in recent history of the West to be a person in a large body.

While this provocation spoke to us, we were still surprised to see a recent connection to the war on obesity and the military. A number of prominent figures including a former first lady and a former US surgeon general declared obesity a threat to national security because fat people will not make good service men and women (Welsh, 2018). Indeed, obesity is one of the most common disqualifiers for military service (Welsh, 2018). In the context of this study, we imagine it difficult to enlist for military service if our own bodies are a daily battleground; we are conscripted into a war that we do not always know we are fighting.

"The battlefield is our bodies. No better way to keep the enemy occupied than to cause infighting. Each camp keeps the other occupied while the enemy wins the war." This reflection from the research team member interviewing the professional experts echoes the sentiments around "entrenchment," "captives," and "prisoners of war," and of particular relevance to many of the professionals interviewed, these different "camps" that have emerged in the academic literature. As one participant voiced, *"I'm still trying to figure out where I stand."*

To simplify a complex interdisciplinary phenomenon, weight is often framed in one of two opposing ways: through the lens of body diversity (sometimes referred to as health-centric or body acceptance approaches), or through the lens of excess or deficit weight as a preventable health risk (sometimes referred to as weight-centric or medicalized approaches; Colls & Evans, 2014; Nutter et al., 2016; Saguy & Riley, 2005). The weight-centric perspective often includes researchers, practitioners, and policy makers from health care and psychology. The health-centric perspective often includes researchers, practitioners, and policymakers from interdisciplinary fields (i.e., sociology, women's studies) who identify in scholarly areas such as health at every size (Bacon, 2010), critical weight studies (Bombak, 2014), and fat studies (Cooper, 2010; McPhail et al., 2016; Nutter et al., 2016). Researchers from various disciplines and theoretical positions also have different approaches to language, with some using the word *fat* to refer to individuals who live in large bodies, while others using the words *overweight* or *obese* (Nutter et al., 2016). Furthermore, with regards to language in the literature, researchers differ in terms of

use of either person-first (e.g., “person with obesity”) or identity-first (e.g., “obese person”) language (Nutter et al., 2016). Weight is contested, even within and among the professionals who work with and study it every day. However, if there was agreement and certainty within the fields about weight, then a quest for deeper understanding of truths would not be needed (Moules et al., 2017).

Discussions with professionals about “camps” were approached carefully and with trepidation. Participants were uncertain where the interviewer stood on these positions and were treading lightly in the discussion. One particular participant seemed especially “gun shy” about taking a position despite several invitations from the interviewer. It was later discovered that this individual was “under fire” from a particular camp both privately and publicly because of some controversial research of which she was a part, which may have influenced her unwillingness to take a stand. Nothing invites chaos and division like war. The metaphor of war allows us to look at the war on weight from many fronts including the ideological wars of the different camps in the professional context. In this sense, war, or at least the different camps in a war, has potential to unite individuals, to gather around a cause, and create safety.

Questions about the complexities of weight were met by participants with thoughtfulness and with wondering. Many expressed the tension about different camps and the messiness that results. *“I feel an obligation to be in the mess, to try to help clean it up...”*, *“We have to be able to figure out how to have dialogue and find common ground if we are gonna change...”*, *“you try to find a middle ground between two positions you know.”* No easy solutions were found but the idea of common ground and dialogue was often discussed. Furthering the metaphor of war, in war at some point, negotiation is inevitable. Stepping out of extreme or entrenched positions must happen for war to end. Indeed, weight seems to invite extreme positions; professionals seemed to agree that room must be made for all the variations and complexities, yet many people seem to be “dug in” about their views and positions. In war, soldiers “dig in” to withstand attack or to consolidate a position (Mugglestone, 2014). The war on weight here is extending to a war on each other leading to trenches in the battlefield of social inquiry and service provision. What are we all fighting for that is so different? What are all sides fighting for?

In war, where warring sides meet has been referred to as “No Man’s Land.” The term No Man’s Land describes “disputed ground between the front lines or trenches of two opposing armies,” “an indeterminate or undefined place or state,” and “land or area that is unowned, uninhabited or undesirable” (Oxford Languages, n.d.). The idea of a No Man’s Land related to weight is interesting when thought about alongside the gendered nature of social and clinical discourse about weight.

Occupying No Man’s Land is ambiguous and dangerous; it is a disputed position in war. The difference when we consider this phrase in light of the war on weight is that in the middle of war, there are positions, fronts, weapons that are constantly changing. In the war on weight, we have found ourselves asking who are the wounded, who is the enemy, and who prevails? History books about war and war stories have, until recently, overlooked the impact of war on women and ignored or undervalued female contributions to war efforts (Simpson, 2020). In thinking about the war metaphor and weight, we have also asked, what does it mean to win or lose a particular war? At what cost? If “No Man’s Land” is a useful construct to understand weight –

what is it that we might be able to see differently from this vantage point? If we step out of the front lines, out of the extreme positions and camps to find common ground, what is No Man's Land asking of us?

Importantly for this hermeneutic study, we wanted to ask, what possibilities for understanding and practice does No Man's Land offer? Hermeneutics calls upon us to question what we know, to think about and critique our historically and socially derived understandings in a way that informs how we live. Perhaps the middle ground of No Mans' Land is one vantage point from which to view the complexities of weight. However, No Man's Land might pose different dangers to those on the front lines. At least on the front lines a soldier knows which direction to face to confront the enemy.

Just as when we fight a war, when we try to understand the complexities of weight, we realize that the outcome of any war is really beyond any one individual. As one participant stated, "*so many of the things that determine outcomes are actually not within the individual's control.*" The war on obesity might be harmful in so much as it is seen as a war against people with obesity. To date, the war on obesity has had little impact on prevalence but has had unintended consequences (O'Hara & Gregg, 2012). The problem is that the war has been targeting individuals to the neglect of socio-environmental policies and programs and that the war on obesity has focused inappropriately on weight—as an individual attribute and phenomenon—and not health (Russell-Mayhew, 2006). The consequence of this war campaign has been weight preoccupation and fat phobia which can lead to stigma, body dissatisfaction, dieting, disordered eating and weight-based bullying (Mensing et al., 2021; Ramos-Salas, 2015). As in the case of an opponent in a conventional war, the war on weight has resulted in weight being demonized. When an opponent is dehumanized and to be defeated "at all costs," soldiers will do things they would never dream of doing in regular daily life (Bruneau & Kteily, 2017). In the war on weight, it is not that weight, as a construct, is dehumanized, but rather it seems to dehumanize, bringing large and apparently unwieldy (or small and apparently fragile) bodies into the world. In doing so, weight interrupts and stands as a visual counterpoint to dominant discourses about healthy bodies and good citizenship. In such a context, the body can become one's own enemy against compliance with social expectation: an exhausting and lonely war where the boundaries of the trenches quickly fall away.

Implications: From War-y to Wary

One of the characteristics of hermeneutic research is its capacity to join understanding with practice. Understanding is always understanding of *something* and the "somethings" we try to understand in our practice disciplines are things of human concerns and how we make sense of our lives so that we are capable of "living well with and for others in just institutions" (Ricoeur, 1992, p. 172).

To live well, hostilities need to be put to rest, even if war cannot be ended. Perhaps a shift from war-y to wary, which means to be watchful, to watch out for, be on guard for, and attentive to (Merriam-Webster, n.d.), acknowledges the need for vigilance, balanced with a concerted self-facing in light of experiences gained in the war on weight. The metaphor of war might be helpful in revealing understandings about the complexities of weight in ways that have not yet been considered. It is not new knowledge to state that experts belong to camps. However, thinking in a

more focused way about how camps form around the real-world practice concerns of experts offers room for movement within and between camps that are erected, dismantled, and reformed over time. For example, the movement toward person-first language in medical journals focused on obesity, while still a contested practice, demonstrates some compromise among conflicting camps in the field.

Most wars eventually end, and this offers hope for the construct of weight (Flusberg et al., 2018). Even in the midst of war, a pause in hostilities can bring people together in unexpected and humanizing ways that resist constructing the other as deviant, dangerous, or inhuman. Several months into hostilities in the First World War, an unofficial ceasefire was struck along sections of the Western Front. The “Christmas Truce” of 1914 transformed No Man’s Land into a space where the troops’ various needs could be, albeit briefly, met: they met and talked, they shared food and, together, they buried their dead. Perhaps this historical moment is a call to reinvigorate No Man’s Land in the modern war on weight. These kinds of truces are their own acts of resistance to accepted norms and practices, which can be cultivated and sustained on a changing landscape (Wiedemann et al., 2018). In this space, professionals may be able to step outside of disciplinary custom and convention in our conceptualization about and responses to weight. If this is an act of reclamation of capacity to respond to weight complexities, then it is also the possibility of reclamation of spaces that shape weight, and of the body that has been subject to gendered discourse.

There are reasons to be wary of the war metaphor despite its ability to capture attention, elicit emotions, and provide a shorthand. These include the risk of hyperbole, the combative side-taking nature of the metaphor, and its overuse over time (Flusberg et al., 2018). The findings of this study also call for a measure of caution in applying martial metaphors in the helping professions. Numbers are a portal that permit weight into the world but numbers, in and of themselves, are an abstraction; there is no instance of 200 anywhere in the world, but there are people whose bodies weigh 200 pounds. Waging war on abstractions may be something akin to an exercise in futility, leaving us proverbially war torn and without direction. Numbers and measurements can only be apprehended in the world of practice when they are located upon and within bodies (human or otherwise) and, as such, the body itself becomes either battleground or foe. If the war is understood only as being against individuals with obesity, it perpetuates an oppositional stance of fear, threat and blame of the other (Flusberg et al., 2018). For weight as a construct, there is no clear enemy, the war is being waged on multiple fronts, and it is a battle we have been fighting for a long time.

Summary: War into Wager

Perhaps the war on weight metaphor is useful as an initial call to arms (Flusberg et al., 2018) but first we need to identify what we are fighting for. The war metaphor can also be a call to lay down arms, even if only for a time, to explore how else we might engage around this complex issue. Through this research, we arrive at more clarity about what is important to understand around this complex issue of weight. Gadamer (2007) suggested that “understanding is an adventure, and like any other adventure, is dangerous” (p. 243) but we offer that “understanding *is the ultimate hermeneutic wager*: that understanding matters and will make a difference” (Moules et al, 2015, p. 196).

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