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## The Discursive Production of Subjectivity in Television News: Reflecting the Other on the Obese Child's Body

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THE DISCURSIVE PRODUCTION OF SUBJECTIVITY IN TELEVISION NEWS:  
REFLECTING THE OTHER ON THE OBESE CHILD'S BODY

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
University of New Orleans  
in partial fulfillment of the  
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts  
in  
The Department of Sociology

by

Elise Chatelain

B.A. Whittier College, 2001

May, 2005

## **Dedication**

I would like to dedicate this thesis to all the children who have struggled with their socially ‘abnormal’ bodies. Specifically, I would like to make a dedication to the ‘real’ children whose representations I used to analyze childhood obesity discourse in this project: Nick, Brett, Raymond, Sydney, Taylor, TJ, Nanette, Justin, Angie, Gabi, Lashena, Samantha, Reed, Tyreka, and Hannah. I hope that there is a possibility that one day, your bodies will no longer be used as a means for policing you or your parents.

I also want to dedicate this to Justin, who understands my need to do this kind of work and has committed himself to helping me do so.

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I would, of course, like to thank my committee for their wonderful support and assistance both on this project and during my two years in the graduate program. First, I want to thank Pam Jenkins, my chair, who has provided me with an amazing knowledge of qualitative methods and assisted me in every step of this process. Second, I am forever indebted to Susan Mann, for because of her, I finally understand Foucault! She has aided me in my growth as a theorist probably more than she knows. I also want to thank Vern Baxter for his extensive methodological and theoretical assistance, both in our classes together and with this thesis. Finally, I want to thank Rachel Luft for helping me regain a theoretical language about race that I had almost lost, a language without which I could not have completed this project. These four people have been incredibly supportive of me and my work, and I am so grateful for that.

I also want to thank my friends in the sociology department for their friendship, drinking companionship, and group study sessions. I feel so blessed that we had each other these past two years. Specifically, I want to thank Nicole for our cigarette sessions on the balcony. I also want to give a special thanks to Sonia, who has been an amazing friend without whom I probably would have not made it through these past two years. She is also a fabulous workout partner!

Another special thanks goes to Meredith Wallis, my best friend and ‘ghost reader’ on this project. Her friendship has been central to both my intellectual and personal development ever since our days together at Whittier College, and I am so grateful for her extensive contributions to this thesis and my sociological thinking in general. On a similar note, I want to thank two of my most influential professors at Whittier College,

Michelle Switzer and sal johnston, both of whom had faith in my abilities long before I did. I doubt that I would have ever written this thesis without them.

And finally, I want to thank my family for all of their love and emotional support. My mom and dad have always asked me to strive for excellence, and it has been a pleasure to try to never disappoint them. I also want to thank them for their extensive financial support that has allowed me to focus on my goals much more easily than if I had been trying to make it on my own. My older sister is an amazing role model, and I thank her for setting the standards high enough so that when I followed in her footsteps, I attempted to be as successful as she always was and still is. Finally, I want to give a special thanks to Justin, the most wonderful boyfriend in the whole world, who had the unfortunate task of living with me as I struggled through this difficult writing process. Thanks for putting up with all of my frustrations and for always being so patient and loving, even when I am not.

## Foreword

I began this project because I was noticing a lot of attention on the issue of childhood obesity in television news. Further, I thought that there was something seriously *wrong* with the ways in which the new programs were presenting the issue. The underlying problematic throughout all of these representations was the negative construction of the meaning of obesity and the association of these characteristics with negatively constructed subject positions – women, non-white, the working class, and, most significantly, a ‘bad’ family.

After I began doing research, I realized that there was very little critical work that addressed the meaning of obesity. It almost seemed like there had been an acceptance of the term ‘fat’ in both popular and academic discourse, and the issue was only being addressed at the level of the social problem of obesity. That is, I saw no extensive attempt to *deconstruct* what it means to be overweight or to ask *why* obesity has become defined as a social problem. Instead, the discourse simply assumed without question that obesity is a social problem.

What I hope others will gain from reading this project is a desire to question the meaning of ‘fat’ and to recognize that it is a historically bound and constantly changing concept. Most importantly, I want readers to understand the ways in which the negative characteristics and meanings associated with the term affect individual lives on not just a psychologically damaging level, but also on a structurally damaging level, working to maintain power structures and social hierarchies.

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## **Abstract**

In this paper, I expand on poststructuralist and feminist theories of the body, gender, and subjectivity through an analysis of media discourse on childhood obesity. Through textual and narrative analyses of news segments on childhood obesity, I demonstrate that the obese child's body, as an abnormal body, is represented as a text of the 'abnormal' conditions in which that body is produced. Thus, the single-mother family structure and/or non-white and working class families – families saturated with the excessive, out-of-control subjectivity of the Other – are visible on the excessive, out-of-control body of the obese child. I will argue that the discourse surrounding childhood obesity is indicative of a moral panic, where children's bodies are used to express a fear of the destabilization of the normative family structure and a fear of an irrational, excessive, over-consuming society saturated with the subjectivity of the Other.



## Introduction

On the television, a scene opens up with a daughter and mother sitting across from each other at a kitchen table. “Don’t tell me, mom!” whines the girl, protesting her mother’s act of reading a fat gram label in an attempt to stop the child from eating whatever it is that comes from this package. Her mother ignores the protest and continues on, louder this time, overpowering her daughter’s request. As we glimpse at other scenes of this child’s life, we can see that she and her mother are living in a constant struggle over her food intake and her weight. The mother, desperate to prevent her child from becoming obese, frantically monitors her daughter in the kitchen. In response to this constant monitoring, the child whines miserably about anything related to food, also sneaking snacks when her mother is not looking.

The child is Sydney, a slightly overweight eight-year-old girl whose story is one of several used to illustrate what is described as a new “epidemic” of childhood obesity in various television news programs. In the past few years, there has been an overwhelming increase in media interest on this topic, especially in television news, a medium that is central to the construction of social problems. A sudden increase in media attention surrounding a particular social problem often signals a moral panic, a “sudden, brief, but seemingly thoroughgoing anxiety or condemnation concerning particular human subjects or practices” (Miller and Leger 2003, p. 10). In our “risk society,” where risk is a fundamental component of our everyday lives, a primary function of moral panics is to allow for the displacement of larger, less palatable risks onto the subjects or practices around which a panic is constructed; thus, these subjects or practices tend to ‘stand in’ for larger social problems (ibid, p. 11). Therefore, the discourse surrounding childhood

obesity may be less about children's health and more about a larger social concern that cannot be talked about. In this study, I will explore the media focus on childhood obesity as a moral panic and argue that media discourse about children's health and bodies stands in for larger concerns about the disintegration of the family, an over-consuming society, and a society saturated with the subjectivity of the Other.

In order to demonstrate the larger social concerns that are being displaced by the discourse on childhood obesity, I will be focusing on the meaning of the obese child's body and the function of this body in a system of power. In television news discourse, the representation of the child's body serves to produce and reproduce power relations because of the body's role in constructing and policing subjectivity, two processes that are key to the functioning of power in modernity (Foucault 1977, p. 135-8)). A fundamental assumption underlying my analysis is the poststructuralist notion that the body is a text, a discursive medium on which cultural practices are inscribed and can be 'read' by society (Bordo 2003, p. 165) . Specifically, I will focus on the idea that society can read an individual's subject position, or subjectivity, directly on the body. Subject positions are identities that are historically contingent and socially constructed (Malson 1998, p. 28). The Child, for example, is an identity construct that contains a historically specific set of meanings; in our current society, being a Child means that one is innocent, closer to nature, and free from adult responsibilities. This construction is tied to a larger social context in which the institutionalization of the family and the separation of public and private economic spheres create a culture that requires an extended development period and a strong distinction between children and adults (Miller and Leger 2003, p. 18). The meaning of childhood in other societies may be quite different depending on the

historical context, or the subject position may not even exist.

Subjectivity is significant to power relations because subject positions constructed in discourse do not just describe individuals; instead, discourses produce identities to which individuals are expected to conform (Malsen 1998, p.28). These identities are normative constructs, and deviations from these norms create abnormal, or deviant, subjects. A subject's deviance from the norm is tied to the construction of the Other, a process whereby subjugated identities, such as non-whites, the working class, women, and/or homosexuals are constructed as inferior to their hegemonic, normative counterparts (such as whites, the middle class, men, and heterosexuals) (King, in Tuana and Tong 1995, p. 353). Because the body is a text of subjectivity, society can read a subject's conformity to or deviance from normative prescriptions directly on the subject's body, which makes the individual's subjectivity easily visible to others to be policed for its normality or abnormality (Foucault 1997, p. 138). Thus, an individual's Othered subjectivity is visible directly on his/her body. Race, for example, is an identity construct that contains certain bodily characteristics, such as skin color, and on the body one can read whether an individual has an Othered race subjectivity (non-white) or a normative race subjectivity (white).

In my study of the obese child's body, I will explore the ways in which the characteristics of Othered subjectivities are visible on the obese body. Race, class, and gender ideology posits that individuals within 'Othered' subject positions, such as non-whites, the working class, and/or women, are irrational, excessive, and have out-of-control desires and appetites. These traits - excessiveness and lack of control over appetites and desires – lead to a body that is also excessive and out-of-control, and thus

these individuals ‘wear’ their subjectivity on their bodies. Once the connection between the obese body as abnormal and certain race, class, and gender subjectivities as abnormal is established, individuals can be policed for their deviant subject positions as the negative characteristics of these subjectivities are visible on their bodies. Thus, the abnormal obese body is central to the construction of the Other.

I chose to focus on children’s bodies because in our society, children are not viewed as full subjects because the social construction of childhood posits that they are in the process of developing into full subjects under the authority of the family and society. Thus, their bodies do not simply reflect their own subject positions, but also reflect the conditions that are shaping their subjectivity. Most significantly, this means that the subjectivities that produce those conditions are connected to the child’s body. Thus, where a representation of an obese adult may connect this adult’s subjectivity to his/her obese body (for example, when black women or working class ‘ethnic’ Americans are overly represented as obese), an obese child’s body may be represented as the result of his Black/Latino mother’s cooking, a single-mother household, or a household that can only afford to eat fast food much of the time. When this happens, ideologies are still being reproduced about, say, Black women or ethnic Americans, but this connection lacks immediacy because it no longer directly connects problematic ideologies to the subjects of focus – the children. This shift in discourse allows for the displacement of ideology from what it is actually attacking – the Other – onto a more acceptable format – children’s health. Thus, the Other is still being constructed through an association with the obese body. In the case of childhood obesity discourse, though, the Othered subjectivity that is associated with the child’s obese body is not his/her own subjectivity,

but the subjectivities of his/her parents and the family structure that are shaping the child's subjectivity. In a hegemonic move to disguise issues of power, the discourse on obesity has shifted away from a primarily subjective focus in order to mask the problematic connections between ideology and subjectivity while still producing and reproducing these connections.

The significance of exploring the social construction of childhood obesity and the ideological functioning of the obese child's body in discourse, I believe, lies in the understanding that any social construction structures real people's lives. In my analysis, I will examine segments from various television news programs in order to focus on popular discourse surrounding childhood obesity. My concern is with what Dorothy Smith calls "public text-mediated discourse," which she defines as "mass media in all forms, as well as the talk that goes on around and about media; political talk and writing, academic discourse, both in print and talk, and so on" (1999, p. 173). Text-mediated discourse, according to Smith, are not just discourses 'out there,' but actually order the way in which individuals live their lives, coordinating the activities of actual people (1993, p. 50-1). The ways in which these discourses structure reality are not always positive, as they are often tied to a system of power and domination that work to maintain social hierarchies based on race, class, and gender. Thus Sydney, whose story is just one of those that I will analyze, is a real child whose life is affected in very negative ways by social norms that prescribe that she be thin. My goal in this project is to reveal how the discourse that shapes the lives of Sydney and multiple other overweight children is tied to powerful ideologies that not only affect their quality of life, but also work to maintain social hierarchies and power relations.

### ***Purpose Statement***

The purpose of this extended case method is to expand and revise currently existing theory on eating disorders, gender, and subjectivity through an analysis of media discourse on childhood obesity. Through textual and narrative analyses of news segments on childhood obesity, I will explore the ideological significations of the obese child's body to and examine how obese children's bodies come to signify the conditions in which they are produced – conditions that are infused with the subjectivity of the Other. My overall goal is to demonstrate that the media discourse on childhood obesity is indicative of a moral panic, where children's bodies are used to express a fear of the destabilization of the normative family structure and a fear of an irrational, excessive, over-consuming society saturated with the subjectivity of the Other.

## **Theory/Literature Review**

### ***Television and the Discursively Produced Subject***

In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault (1977) argues that modern power establishes itself in part through mechanisms that discipline the body. These disciplinary mechanisms structure the body as both useful, in that it becomes a productive machine, and docile, in that it becomes obedient (1977, p. 138). The latter is the function of the body that is most important to my analysis. In this way, bodies are "trained, shaped, and impressed with the stamp of prevailing historical forms of selfhood, desire, masculinity, and femininity..." (Bordo 2003, p. 166). Society can read any deviance from these normative prescriptions on an individual's body, and thus society easily rules itself through the policing of this deviance. In this way, the body becomes "a locus of social control" (ibid, p. 165).

According to Foucault, there are several institutions that are structured to discipline bodies in modernity, from schools to prisons to judicial systems. In the current information age, though, I would argue that these 'face-to-face' disciplinary mechanisms are also accompanied by mediated disciplinary mechanisms. Thus, the mass media has also become a disciplinary mechanism that subjects individuals through a virtual gaze. Media and its representations serve to regulate the body just as much as the panoptic design of the classroom or the prison. This type of subjection takes place through what Althusser calls "interpellation," when individuals become subjects through identifying with representations of subject positions. Through this process of interpellation, individuals are 'hailed' by ideology and in responding to this hail, become the subjects represented by the ideology (in Rivkin and Ryan 2004, p. 699). For example, a

normative body size for a woman is currently around a size six, and when these women are represented as the norm on television and in magazines, a size twelve woman is represented as overweight. Thus, women who are above a size six become fat subjects when they respond to the representations of the normatively thin woman. Even if they reject this representation and believe that a size twelve woman is thin and beautiful, they still implicitly accept that the standard definition of 'thin' is a size six when they respond subversively to the thin representation.

John Fiske has noted the ways in which television and its representations work to subject individuals to a virtual gaze. He argues that "television tries to construct an ideal subject position which it invites us to occupy" (Fiske 1987, p. 51). Additionally, these subject positions "work so easily in television realism only because they are representations of agencies actively at work in society." Television hails us in the Althusserian sense because we recognize ourselves in it. When we respond to the 'hail' of television, we "implicitly accept the discourse's definition of 'us'...we adopt the subject position proposed to us by the discourse" (ibid, p. 53). This type of subjection takes place whether or not the subject position is positive or negative. Thus, the subjectivity of the obese child and the subjectivities that produce that child are recognized by individuals watching television, and these individuals become subjects that reflect race, class, and gender ideologies.<sup>1</sup> In this way, the television news programs on childhood obesity that I will analyze are significant to the construction of subjectivity in our society and the creation of docile, disciplined bodies that reflect these subjectivities.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a simplistic view, of course, and not all individuals passively accept the subject position given to them on television. Multiple readings are possible. However, I am discussing the 'ideal' situation, that which I believe is intended by the discourse itself.



## ***The Disciplined Body and Eating Disorders***

While Foucault's theory has proven to be very useful for subsequent feminist analyses of the body and eating disorders, most of these analyses focus on the *properly* disciplined body. For example, in "The Body and the Reproduction of Femininity," Susan Bordo outlines that the social meaning of anorexia can be read as women wearing appropriate femininity on their bodies. She argues that anorexia developed out of Victorian gender ideology which prescribed that women control their literal appetites for food so that on their bodies others could read their ability to control their feminine desires. Middle class, white femininity was thought of as out-of-control, irrational, and hysterical. By shaping their bodies as slender and contained, these women could signify to others their ability to tame their feminine desires and thus display their 'proper' femininity on their bodies (2003, p. 171). Bordo further argues that in contemporary society, anorexic women are attempting to display their embodiment of masculine control because of their mass entrance into the public sphere (ibid, p. 173).<sup>2</sup>

Other authors have noted the ways in which gender ideology is maintained by its presence on the woman's body. In *Fat History*, Peter Sterns outlines the historical conditions in which women were prescribed the thin ideal. Through an analysis of 20th century medical and popular literature, he argues that fat women were consistently constructed as pathological and flawed, and this construction created a culture of dieting and restriction among women because of their fear of becoming fat and becoming viewed as abnormal. The cultural disdain for fat became a normalizing function, not simply concerned with body size but with disciplining women into normalcy (2002 79-85).

Helen Malsen has also examined the ways in which anorexic women construct fat as being associated with negative personality attributes and thinness as being associated with positive personality attributes (1998 105-10). Nita McKinley echoes how the stigmatization of "fat women ensures that all women understand the consequences of not watching their bodies. According to dominant culture, fat women are not only physically unhealthy, but also mentally unhealthy, ugly, out of control, and sexually deviant" (1999 119). Thus, for women to be viewed as proper feminine subjects, they must be able to display their normative, properly contained femininity directly on their thin, controlled bodies.

These and other theoretical works on eating disorders tend to focus on thinness and anorexia, and thus the 'properly' disciplined body. I will expand on this theory by focusing on the obese body, which is the body of an individual that has failed to be properly subjected. Utilizing previous analyses, I will argue that if the anorexic body is a result of cultural prescriptions for the control of feminine desires, then the obese body is the result of a failure to properly contain femininity and excess feminine appetites. The obese body signifies excessive femininity even for obese males, who are prescribed to reject femininity altogether and thus are seen as 'masculine failures' when they cannot control their feminine excess and it spills out onto their flesh. The obese person, regardless of gender, wears his/her excess on the body, a result of a failure to control feminine appetites, desires, or hysteria.

Another way I will expand on the currently existing theories will be to focus on the ways that race and class, as well as gender, are reflected on the body. A key point to

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<sup>2</sup> The "mass entrance" of women into the public sphere to which Bordo is referring was an overwhelmingly white, middle class phenomenon, since non-white and working class women were participating in the workforce. However, she is writing about white,

the analyses mentioned above is that femininity and women are disciplined through a cultural ideal of slenderness. However, I believe that gender ideology is not the only ideology maintained by this ideal - race and class ideology is also connected to body norms. In the same way that women and their femininity are ideologically constructed as out-of-control and excessive, subject positions that are just as 'Othered' – such as non-white and working class subjectivities – are also constructed as irrational and out-of-control. This is due to the Western logic of domination that associates these subjectivities with nature, placing them within a hierarchical binary of culture/nature so that these groups can be dominated by the more 'cultured' (i.e., white male) social groups (King, in Tuana and Tong 1995, p. 353). I will explore the ways in which the obese body, as an excessive, out-of-control, abnormal body, reflects the irrational, out-of-control subjectivity of the Other. However, the *child's* obese body does not simply reflect his/her own Othered subjectivity, but the conditions in which he/she is becoming a subject, a point that leads me to my third extension of the theory on the disciplined body and eating disorders.

In my analysis of children's bodies, I will shift from a focus on the ways in which an individual's subjectivity is connected to one's own body and understand the ways in which bodies come to reflect the social conditions in which they are produced. Most analyses of subjectivity and the body focus on the ways in which an individual's own subjectivity is reflected on his/her own body. For example, Bordo argues that the anorexic woman's body is reflective of her appropriation of proper femininity, and this allows society to read her subject position on her body. However, in order for an individual's subjectivity to be reflected on his/her body, this individual must first be

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middle class femininity and the historical conceptualization of this gender norm.

assumed to be a full subject. In our society, the definition of childhood assumes that children are in the process of being shaped into full subjects. Due in large part to the institutionalization of the family, children are constructed as dependent beings who are not yet full, autonomous subjects (Miller and Leger 2003, p. 18). Thus, instead of reflecting the child's own subject position, the child's obese body is more reflective of the subject positions that are shaping that child's subjectivity. Because the family is constructed as the primary unit of socialization, the family structure and the parents' subjectivities are the primary conditions of subjectivity reflected on the child's body.

This idea has been acknowledged by other authors as well. For example, Paula Saukko, in an exploration of Hilde Bruch's work on child psychology between 1930 and 1960, notes that Bruch connected a child's eating disorder to an 'abnormal' home life, particularly a working class immigrant home life, or a hysterical, neurotic mother (in Sobal and Maurer 1999, pp. 32-7). However, Saukko does not analyze the ways in which the child's body became a *text* of his/her parent's subjectivities and family structure, so that on the child's body society can read his/her 'deviant' conditions of subjectivity. I will examine how in television news programs on childhood obesity, the child's obese body becomes a text on which his/her abnormal conditions of subjectivity – parents with Othered subjectivities or non-normative, single-mother family structures – can be read by other members of society.

### ***Family Structure, Containment, and the Saturation of the Other***

Elaine Tyler May argues that in the 1950s cold war era, the cultural construct of the nuclear family became popularized in part because of its function for taming and containing what was perceived as out-of-control femininity and female sexuality (1988).

This family construct was popularized into normativity through fears that women were becoming too prominent in the public sphere, specifically during the years of World War II when women were working en masse outside the home. If women were bound within the confines of the family, then their femininity and their out-of-control female desires could be contained within the walls of the home, thus keeping women outside of the public sphere. The nuclear family also provided a strong, masculine presence in the home that was necessary for balancing the excessive femininity brought on by the mother's presence. This was especially significant for childrearing, where there were fears that overbearing, overly emotional mothers would negatively affect children with their irrational femininity (ibid, p. 96-97).

What May does not talk about is the fact that this family ideal was a mainstream, white, middle class norm prescribed to middle class white Americans in new suburbia. Because the nuclear family was not prescribed as extensively (at least in the dominant discourse and in representations) to non-white and working class families, these families were not viewed as part of the normative construct of the ideal family. This exclusion was (and still is) reinforced by race ideology that, for example, constructed the black family as woman-led and pathological (Baca Zinn, p. 75), as well as an economic reality that necessitated that both parents work outside the home in poor and working class families.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> In the 50s, the median family income increased by 69.3%, an increase in income that was much higher than the rise of prices (Duvall 1967, p. 59). This allowed for a substantial number of working class families to sustain themselves on the earnings of a single employed family member, and thus the number of working class nuclear families with a breadwinning father and homemaker mother was much greater than it actually appeared in the dominant discourse. However, I am concerned with normative representations of the nuclear family, which tended to attribute the nuclear family to middle class, white suburban families.

This failure of the Other to conform to the nuclear family ideal (at least in the dominant discourse, if not in reality), was, in fact, essential to the construction of the nuclear family. According to Slavoj Žižek, a hegemonic (or dominant ideological) construction maintains its dominance through the “ideological practice of disidentification,” where the construction “relies on a disavowed ‘obscene’ particular content of its own” (Butler, Laclau, Žižek 2000, p. 103). That is, in order to maintain its dominance, a hegemonic form does not just have characteristics with which subjects can firmly identify, but also negative characteristics that subjects reject. The association of the Other with these negative characteristics and their subsequent exclusion/rejection from the hegemonic form is essential for the continuing association of the dominant race, class, and gender groups with the normative construction. Thus, in the discursive construction of the hegemonic nuclear family, the exclusion of non-white and working class families – families saturated with the subjectivity of the Other – from this ideal allowed for white, middle class families to be associated with the normative family structure, thus maintaining white, middle class hegemony.

Because the subjugated Other was discursively excluded from the construction of the normative family, non-white and working class families were not perceived as capable of containing femininity in the way that white, middle class families were. However, the 1960’s saw an overwhelming increase in the visibility of previously marginalized social groups, such as non-whites, women, and gays/lesbians into society through social movements such as the civil rights and Black Power movements, the second wave feminist movement, and the gay liberation movements. Due to newly won rights from these struggles, these social groups began to enter into the public sphere and

have a voice in the American mainstream more than ever before (Kimmel 1996). With the increase in working class and minority voices, these groups' cultural practices, including what was perceived as a non-normative family structure (for example, women working outside the home and black 'matriarchal' families) were becoming more visible. Additionally, white, middle class women to which the nuclear family had been prescribed began to enter to workforce and develop power in a traditionally male public sphere, thus taking them outside of the confines of the home where their femininity had been contained. The changing nature of the family was an ideal target for the expression of the fear by dominant social groups that the Other was claiming a voice in the hegemonic order. If the Other could have a role in defining the family, this threatened the hegemonic norm of the nuclear family, a norm that was necessary for both maintaining white, middle class dominance as well as for keeping femininity at bay within the confines of the home and family. With the 'collapse' of the nuclear family, the family was no longer sufficient for containing and restraining femininity.

One of the most dangerous perceived consequences of the collapse of the nuclear family was its effect on children. May points out that the nuclear family tamed cultural fears of "momism" a concept used by social scientists in the 1950s which described the results "of frustrated women who smothered their children with overprotection and overaffection, making their sons in particular weak and passive" (1988, p. 74). The nuclear family ideal was supposed to negate the potential for momism by allowing for a strong patriarchal figure to help balance out the mother's excessive, irrational femininity. However, with the increase in single-mother or woman-led families came the possibility that mothers would have no masculine balance in their family structure and thus their

excessive, out-of-control femininity would negatively affect their children.

In the 1980s, this fear of the collapse of the nuclear family was expressed in discourse about the single mother family and the effect of this family on children. In an article written in the late 80s, Susan Bordo noted that “in newspapers and magazines we daily encounter stories that promote traditional gender relations and prey on anxieties about change: stories about latch-key children [and] abuse in daycare centers (2003, p. 166). These ‘changes’ to which Bordo refers are the increase of women in the workforce, changes that many ‘backlash’ discourses attributed to growing single mother families (ibid.). Maxine Baca Zinn has also written about the 1980s resurgence in academic discourse of the 60s culture-of-poverty debates, with a central notion being that “family disintegration is the source and sustaining feature of poverty” (1989, p. 75). This idea posited that single-mother families, a disproportionate number of which are led by non-white women, are a major cause of poverty, an idea that linked a ‘deviant’ family structure to an Othered race subjectivity. Further, a fear expressed in these culture-of-poverty debates was that the children of these families would reproduce the deviant family structures in which they were raised, thus continuing the cycle of poverty (ibid, p. 72). These discourses indicate a fear that the collapse of the nuclear family was having an adverse affect on the children being raised within these families. The single-mother family structure, with its inability to constrain the mother’s out-of-control femininity, was under attack, with the implicit cause of the collapse of the nuclear family being the increasing influence of women, non-whites, and the poor on defining the family structure.



Currently, these discourses are not as prominent as they were in the 80's and early 90s. The interesting thing about discourse is that it is constantly shifting its strategy, working in subtle ways to maintain its hegemony. I believe that the media discourse on childhood obesity is a new way to express fears about the disintegration of the family, a disintegration that is constructed as due in large part to the saturation of the Other in society. This shift is possible because of the fact that children's bodies reflect the conditions in which those bodies are produced, so that on these bodies society can read whether the family structure in which the child is being raised is a hegemonic, normative family structure or a deviant family structure saturated with the subjectivity of the Other. Thus, even while the discourse on childhood obesity is actually articulating a concern about children's health, the real concern is about the changing nature of the family structure and a fear that society has been overrun by the Other. Of course, an overarching question still remains as to why the discourse began to articulate concerns about childhood obesity specifically. I believe that this answer is related to the meaning of the obese body in late capitalism.

In her essay "Reading the Slender Body," Susan Bordo analyzes the body in the conditions of late capitalism. She argues that consumer capitalism creates a 'split' personality in its subjects; first, these subjects have to be good producers, suppressing desire and cultivating a work ethic in its place. Second, however, subjects have to be good consumers as well, allowing for their desires to have no bounds and "hunger for constant and immediate satisfaction" (2003 199). This constant battle between production and consumption leads to the bulimic personality, an internalization of society's macro dilemma. The bulimic body – a slender, contained body, reflective of its

ability to participate in the realm of production even while it hyper-consumes – is the body of the ideal subject of late capitalism.<sup>4</sup>

Utilizing Bordo's analysis, I would argue that the obese body is the body of an individual that has failed to properly subject him/herself to the contradictory producer/consumer norm. The obese subject consumes excessively, but fails to suppress his/her desires when appropriate. Most significantly for capitalism, this failure to suppress desires threatens the production ethos, when the over-consuming subject continues his/her boundless desire in the realm of production, thus not cultivating the restriction of desires necessary for the work ethic. This failure to suppress desire for production is visible on the body of the obese person, whose wears his/her out-of-control consumption in the same way that the bulimic wears his/her ability to both consume and produce.

The idea that obesity reflects an over-consuming, under-producing subjectivity is significant to my analysis because I believe that the heightened anxiety expressed by the media over obesity demonstrates a fear of a threat to capitalism by these over-consuming, under-producing subjects. This fear is related to anxiety that society has been saturated with the subjectivity of the Other, for most Othered subject positions are constructed primarily as consumers, not producers, within capitalism. For example, women, especially mothers within the family, are constructed as primary consumers while fathers are constructed as primary breadwinners. For female-headed households with no father figure, the primary producer is absent, leaving the mother to fill both the producer and consumer role. However, because the woman is constructed primarily as a consumer, she

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<sup>4</sup> Of course, the bulimic body is not always slender and contained. However, the 'ideal' form of the bulimic body, which should be able to consume without boundaries but also know the appropriate time to 'purge' (e.g., suppress the desire to consume), is one that

is not the ideal subject for fulfilling the producing role, and thus is viewed as creating overly consuming conditions of subjectivity, especially for her children. Race, as well as race and class ideology, also posits that non-whites and especially non-white and white working class subjects consume excessively, with cultural stereotypes of hyper-consumption surrounding these subject positions. For example, race and class ideology posits such stereotypes as low-income housing apartments filled with high-end electronics or the ‘bling-bling’ and name-brand hype surrounding hip-hop culture. These stereotypes construct non-white working class individuals as consuming irrationally, positing that they spend money on extravagant commodities even while they cannot afford to live in a ‘nice’ neighborhood.

These ideologies posit that Othered subjects consume excessively; furthermore, the over-representation of these Othered subjects as obese connects their over-consuming subjectivity to their body, thus allowing their abnormal subject positions and their threat to capitalism to be visible on their bodies. In the discourse on childhood obesity, the Other reflects his/her over-consumption not on his/her body, but on the bodies of the children he/she produces. Even if representations of mothers, non-whites and working class individuals overly consuming commodities and failing to produce sufficiently are not present in the images I am analyzing, the ideology that constructs these subject positions as overly consuming is still present. Thus, I would argue that a fear that is being reflected in the discourse on childhood obesity is a fear of a threat to capitalism by the over-consuming Other, whose increased power and visibility may be viewed as a threat to the delicate balance of production and consumption within late capitalism.

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is slender and contained on the outside.

## ***A Moral Panic***

As noted in the introduction, a moral panic is defined as a heightened, frenzied focus on targeted subjects and/or phenomena, a focus that allows for the displacement of larger, less palatable anxieties onto the subjects and phenomena around which the panic is constructed (Miller and Leger 2003, p. 10). As I will demonstrate in my analysis of the television news programs on childhood obesity, an exploration into the meanings attached to the obese child's body shows that there are much larger social anxieties that are being expressed through the panic over childhood obesity. The moral panic over childhood obesity is really a panic over the social conditions that are shaping these children – the conditions of society marked by a 'saturation' of the Other and over-consumption as well as family structures that are saturated with the subjectivity of the Other. Children who are being raised in these excessive, over-consuming conditions will reflect these conditions on their excessive, obese bodies.

## **Methodology**

My methodological approach was influenced by the extended case method. Michael Burawoy outlines the extended case method as a method that aims for the revision of theory through ethnographic exploration of the connection between micro and macro worlds (1998 20-1). Instead of searching for anomalies in ethnographic research, though, I searched for anomalies in media discourse and utilized these to revise currently existing theories on eating disorders and the body, specifically those from a Foucauldian perspective. There are three main theoretical elements in this current literature on which I extended utilizing news discourse on childhood obesity. I expanded the theories of the anorexic/bulimic body to the obese body, analyzed race and class along with gender, and focused on the connection between an individual's conditions of subjectivity and his/her body as opposed to the connection between an individual's own subjectivity and his/her body.

For my analytical approach, I utilized Roland Barthes' semiotic method to examine the ideological significations of obese children's bodies. Barthes draws on Saussure's framework of the linguistic system to demonstrate how an analysis of signs, or linguistic units, can move from denotation to connotation, and thus from meaning to ideology (what Barthes calls 'myth'). Saussure argued that there are three elements to any terms in a linguistic system: the signifier, which is the sound-image, or the actual word or sound; the signified, or the concept invoked by the signifier; and the sign, which combines the signifier and signified to produce socially constructed meaning. Barthes takes Saussure's structure to what he calls 'the second-order' of signification, where the sign of the first order becomes the signifier of the second order with a more connotative,

mythological signified (Hall 1997, pp. 33-40).

To illustrate, Barthes analyzes the front cover of the magazine *Paris Match*, which features “a young Negro in a French uniform saluting with his eyes uplifted, probably fixed on the fold of the tricolour” [the French flag] (Hall 1997, p. 39). A denotative, or first-order reading of this image would simply be ‘a Black soldier is saluting the French flag.’ However, this image also has a meaning at the second-order level of signification, with a connotation that reveals a wider, historically bound cultural meaning. This mythological (or ideological) message is that regardless of color, every individual within the French empire submits to its colonial rule without question and faithfully serves this empire (ibid).

In television, just as in the above example given by Barthes, signs do not just work by themselves to convey meaning. Thus, just as the Black soldier, the salute, and the French flag are all signs that come together to create meaning on the cover of *Paris Match*, children’s bodies, their parents’ bodies, their houses, and multiple other signs come together to create meaning in the television news programs on childhood obesity. Thus, ultimately my analyses are textual analyses, where utilizing the semiotic method, I have looked at the ways in which different signs in the text work together to give meaning to each other and to create overall meaning.

Finally, while I am looking at representations of the obese child’s body, my goal is not simply to understand the meaning that these bodies produce. Instead, I want to reveal the ways in which discourses create certain types of bodies and the role that these discourses serve in the maintenance of power relations. Thus, I will explore not only the meanings of the obese child’s body, but also the ideological functions of these meanings.

As Hall explains, “semiotics seem[s] to confine the process of representation to language...subsequent developments became more concerned with representation as a source for the production of social knowledge” (1997, p. 42). In this way, representations can be looked at as connected more intimately with “social practices and questions of power” (ibid).

My sampling method was purposive, since the purpose of my project is theory revision and not empirical generalizations. I selected six news and newsmagazine specials on childhood obesity, beginning with a topic search of news transcripts in Lexis Nexis utilizing the search terms “children obesity,” “childhood obesity,” and “adolescent obesity.” I found five newsmagazine segments and about 200 morning and nightly news segments using these search terms. I did a content search of the approximately twenty transcripts of all of the shows that were broadcast nationally (e.g., I bypassed local news shows in the interest of more widespread media). I ordered ten of these shows from The Media Research Center, a research center located in Virginia that has all news programs since 1980 archived in its collection, and after watching each of these ten, found six that fit my criteria.<sup>5</sup> One important criterion for picking these six was whether the program utilized individual children’s stories to talk about the problem of childhood obesity, as opposed to just talking about the problem in general, because highlighting an individual child and his/her family in their everyday lives allowed me to see the ways in which the child’s body was represented as produced within a particular social location and reflected the ideologies of this location (a central theoretical concern of mine). I also picked

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<sup>5</sup> Out of the four that I did not analyze, one focused on multiple children, two gave more time to expert interviews than a child’s individual story, and one was an hour-long special filled with multiple short segments featuring several different children. The first three did not fit my criterion of focusing in-depth

stories that were greater than 1500 words, which allowed enough time for telling in-depth, detailed narratives about these children's lives.

Another criterion for picking my sample was that the shows came from what I consider a 'feminized' news format, most significantly morning news shows that cater to stay-at-home moms and newsmagazines, both of which have formats that tell in-depth, detailed, and private stories. The idea of the feminized news format is based on John Fiske's discussion of masculine and feminine television programs. According to Tulloch and Moran, news, current affairs, and documentaries are more concerned with the (masculine) public sphere, while soap operas and other dramas are primarily concerned with the (feminized) private sphere, especially issues that are emotional and domestic. The masculine television programs are intended to produce "objective" or "intelligent" discussion and conversation, while feminized television programs fuel gossip-like discussion centered around highly dramatized events (1987, p. 282). Following this vein, the nightly news format is intended to appeal to male viewers, assumingly the breadwinning father who is just returning home from work and can be drawn into the television audience (*ibid.*, p. 281). This objective news format presents factual information that is heavily focused on the (masculine) public sphere. Feminine news formats, on the other hand, produce dramas that are typically focused on the private sphere, focusing on emotion and often domestic issues. Morning news programs are targeted to the female viewer, typically covering domestic issues such as childrearing, cooking, entertainment, and consumer information. Segments are typically in-depth and utilize interviews and individual stories to construct a narrative surrounding a topic.

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on a single child or a few children, nor did they feature their private lives. In the hour-long special, the segments on each child were too short to analyze on their own, and too disjointed to analyze together.



Newsmagazines also follow this format, which allows for the kind of dramatization and emotional appeal characteristic of the feminized news show.

Utilizing the semiotic approach, I viewed each television show separately and attempted to record all of the signs and their subsequent significations. I also worked to uncover how various signs worked together to create meanings for one another. What resulted was a full textual analysis of each news program from beginning to end. Further, I found that the texts had very similar narrative structures, meaning that each story was told following a similar format. Thus, I also utilized a narrative analysis approach in order to uncover the meanings embedded in the process of storytelling (Bishop 2001, p. 225).

Although there were many common themes that emerged from the textual analyses, I chose to focus on the themes that were of theoretical importance to me. Thus, I organized my findings and analysis section around the theoretical gaps that I found in the literature. First, I focused on an analysis of the meaning of the obese body, specifically the obese child's body, and how these meanings were not just related to gender ideology, but race and class ideologies as well. Also, I chose to focus on the representation of the children's conditions of subjectivity, and how these conditions, infused with race, class and gender ideology, were reflected on the children's bodies.

## **Limitations and Delimitations**

### ***Limitations***

Whenever I tell people about my topic, they typically respond with something like: "Well, but isn't childhood obesity a real health problem?" I do not deny that there is the possibility that being overweight may result in multiple health problems. However, as Paul Campos has argued, I believe that the real health problem is not obesity per se, but inactivity and the lack of healthy food (2004). Based on medical evidence that supports my position, I propose that there is a reason other than health that obesity has become a discursive target. Essentially, I believe that this reason is directly tied to issues of power and domination. Therefore, I am hesitant to name childhood obesity as a health epidemic, and believe that even if it is, there are ideological reasons that shape its construction as a social problem.

Often, this position is interpreted as denying the material reality of the body and obesity, as if I just threw aside this materiality in the interest of my analysis. This interpretation takes as its underlying assumption the idea that there is a material reality distinct from social constructions. I, however, believe that assumption is incorrect, because even the body and health, which appear to have 'natural' properties distinct from the social world, are objects that we can only know through the lens of our social world and the discourses we use to talk about them. Thus, the obese child's body does not have a natural existence outside of its socially constructed meanings; instead, as soon as we begin to speak about this body and assign it meaning, it becomes a culturally constructed form. As Foucault has pointed out, discourses that create meaning for the body are essential to the functioning of power. Thus, my purpose is to not concern myself with the

material consequences of a health problem, but to analyze the ways in which childhood obesity is talked about and to reveal how the discourse contributes to the production and reproduction of power.

I also want to note that my intention with this project is to do an ideological reading of the television news programs on childhood obesity. I believe that because our society is marked by the struggle for power and domination, every text of culture in society is infused with dominant ideologies that are working to maintain current power structures through the control over the production of meaning (Fiske, in Allen 1987, p. 255). That being said, I acknowledge that my ideological reading of the texts is not the only possible reading. Stuart Hall has acknowledged that “there is always a possible tension between the structure of the text, which necessarily bears the dominant ideology, and the social situations of viewers, which may position them at odds with the ideology” (ibid., p. 260). Thus, the meanings that other individuals may infer from these programs can be heavily influenced by their social location. However, I believe that even if audiences construct oppositional readings to the dominant ideology within texts, they still are being interpellated by this ideology. An oppositional reading still requires a response to ideology, even if this response is negative or subversive. As Althusser has noted, interpellation works not by individuals *accepting* ideology when they are hailed by it, but by *responding to* ideology’s hail. Thus, ideology affects everyone’s understanding of the social world, regardless of how he/she reads it. Furthermore, ideology is almost always inherent in the structure of a text, as Hall and Fiske have acknowledged, so my reading is not so much an act of interpretation as an act of searching for intentional ideological meanings.

## ***Delimitations***

Because I am choosing to study the social construction of the problem of childhood obesity in the media, I am only looking at *representations* of this problem. I am not examining audience response to representations, nor am I looking at the social problem in itself. By representations, I mean the ways in which the problem is constructed and presented to an audience, which implies that the images the audiences see are always manipulated in some way to convey an intended meaning. In television, there are various practices that shape the representations we see, such as editing and narration. These practices contribute to the intended meanings of the representations, meanings that I believe are always shaped in some way by ideology. Thus, even if the representations I am analyzing are using ‘real’ children’s stories to convey meaning, these ‘real-life’ stories are manipulated for the purpose of conveying the intended meaning of the text. When I talk about the children featured in the news programs on childhood obesity, I will be analyzing how these children and their lives are *represented*, not the children themselves or their actual lives.

I am also only examining the issue as it is presented in television news and not on other television formats (such as talk shows) or other types of media. I chose to do this because the news purports to present objective facts, a phenomenon that John Fiske calls the “transparency fallacy” (1987, p. 282). This ‘objective’ presentation of issues affects the ways in which viewers accept the information they are given, making them more likely to receive this information as ‘truth’ and not opinion. Television news is also a more wide-reaching news medium than newspapers and magazines, thus affecting a wider audience.

I have chosen to look at childhood obesity because I think there is something unique in the fact that children's bodies have become a discursive target. Mainly, as I explained in my introduction, I believe that children are in the process of becoming subjects, and do not have the status of full subjectivity in our society. Children's bodies, as texts of their conditions of subjectivity, can convey ideological meanings about their parents and their family structures, allowing for an indirect attack on the 'abnormal' family and/or the Othered subjects that condition these children. Further, the obese body conveys a fear about the over-consuming, under-producing conditions in late capitalism and the fear that the over-consuming Other is having a negative affect on the workings of the capitalist economy.

Finally, I am looking at the discursive production of subjectivity, and thus am not doing a materialist analysis of childhood obesity. To do this would be to approach my analysis from Pierre Bourdieu's perspective, looking at how children's bodies reflect the real material conditions in which they are produced. Bourdieu posits that subjects embody social structures and reflect the distinctions within them, especially class distinctions (Bourdieu, in Rivkin and Ryan 1979). Thus, from this perspective, I could look at how in America, unhealthy food such as fast food is cheaper than healthy food, allowing for lower income classes to become more overweight than wealthier classes. I could also look at how wealthier classes have more leisure time, and thus more time for exercise and meal preparation. However, because I am doing a critical discourse analysis, I am going to limit my analysis to discursive productions of subjectivity. I recognize that subjectivity is not solely produced through discourse and that material conditions contribute to this production. However, acknowledging that I am only looking

at one element of the process, I will forgo any analysis of material conditioning of subjectivity.

## **Analysis of Texts**

In this section, I have performed a textual analysis on each of six television news programs focusing on the topic of childhood obesity. My analytic tool is semiotics, which allows me to identify the elements (signs) within the text and the meanings (significations) those signs convey. However, signs do not work on their own to create meaning. Instead, within the text, they create meaning for one another and also work together to create overall meaning. Thus, a textual analysis, which helps to reveal a text's "economy of meaning" (Lidchi 1997) is appropriate for understanding the ways in which the news programs on childhood obesity utilize various textual approaches to construct a certain set of meanings for the body of the overweight child.

In ordering the textual analyses in this section, I decided to place the news stories about the younger children first and then move on to the teenagers, telling their stories in a rough age chronology. Because the issue of children not having full subjectivity was so central to my theoretical concerns, I ordered the stories based on the extent to which the children in them were developing into their own subjectivities. The younger children and their subjectivities were still closely tied to their parents' subjectivities, and thus because they were not close to being considered full subjects, I placed them first. Some of the teenagers were tied to their parents' subjectivities, but not to as large of an extent as the younger children, so I placed them next. And other teenagers were represented as almost having full subjectivity, so I placed them last.

***Analysis One: “Baby Fat: Two Families Bring Their Overweight Children to Special Classes to Help Them Lose Weight and Gain Peer Acceptance.” 48 Hours, CBS, Thursday, July 13, 2000, 10:00 PM Eastern Time.***

The program’s introduction begins with a shot of the featured overweight boy, Nick, playing basketball in an indoor gym with other boys around his age. The use of the image of him playing on an indoor court with similarly aged peers signifies the idea that this is a more ‘serious’ organized sport and that organized sports are central to the development of a boy’s subjectivity. Because this is a ‘serious’ game, and not a casual playground affair, it is important that Nick be able to participate fully. The other kids are, for the most part, at ‘normal’ weights, and Nick is struggling somewhat to keep up with his peers. He isn’t getting the ball, he’s running around breathless, not smiling or laughing. Thus, he is struggling in a social setting, specifically a social setting that requires him to be thinner and in shape. The immediate visual images that follow are photos of an overweight Nick at various younger ages. His mother narrates the images, saying that her son was always “heavier than the other children,” even as a baby and toddler. She concludes, as the shot focuses in on her, that her child’s weight “used to be cute, but now it’s just unhealthy.”

The first shot we see shows the ‘social consequences’ of Nick’s heaviness (e.g., how it affects his play with peers), and thus illustrates his mother’s final words. Although Nick was able to ‘get by’ with being a chubby toddler and younger kid, he now (at age 9 or 10) must get serious about losing weight or suffer serious social and physical consequences. As Nick has grown up, he has begun to develop his own identity. This identity may be more reflective of his parents’ subjectivities than ever before. It may be because Nick needs to be slightly more autonomous and actually participate more in the



social world than he did as a toddler and young child, and his body must be capable of this kind of participation. His body should reflect his parents' ability to condition him 'properly' as a subject of the social world. Therefore, it is now at age nine or ten that his parents began to recognize his weight as a problem.

After Nick's mom's speech, the narrator pipes in, telling us that Nick's "parents admit they had a hand in their son's early weight gain." There is a shot of the mom talking about feeding her son jambalaya and crawfish etouffee. These words are finalized by a photo of Nick around age two or three, joyfully chomping on a piece of corn-on-the-cob. The stray yellow chunks around his mouth signify the early stages of his overindulging lifestyle. Apparently, it is his parents' fault that Nick is currently an overweight child, because they fed him too much from the time he was a baby. Because it is his mother who narrates these images, we connect the act of parental overfeeding to her, and she, not the father, becomes the primary agent of this act.

The reporter announces an 'epidemic' of childhood obesity in front of a schoolyard fence, and tells us that childhood obesity has doubled in the last 20 years. Now, one in four children is considered overweight. The reporter is the authority over the story, and thus gets to announce the 'facts.' Additionally, he announces them in front of an empty, silent schoolyard, possibly to signify the doomsday possibilities of this 'epidemic' of childhood obesity.

Enter Doctor Melinda Southern, an exercise physiologist who runs a weight loss program for kids at a nearby hospital. In a solo shot of her inside her clinic, she calls childhood obesity a chronic disease, echoing (and thus validating with her role as 'expert') the reporter's claims as to health risks of obesity for children. Additionally, she

talks about how expensive ‘these types of programs’ are – referring to her weight loss program – and how insurance won’t cover them. The narrator tells us that Nick’s parents are willing to pay the 200 dollars a month for the program, indicating the sacrifice that they are making for their son. Thus, even if they contributed to their son’s weight gain, they will also take an active role in helping him lose weight. Additionally, this tells us they have the financial means to place their son in the program, and are thus middle class.

The following shots are of various scenes within this weight loss clinic, and the narrator begins by telling us that “what makes the program unique is the approach. To reach the kids” – shot to center, doctor in front of room of seated parents and kids, set up like lecture classroom, doctor Melinda Southern asking “who’s the most tired mom in the room?” – and the narrator finishes his statement with “you have to first start with the parents.” Of course, since the doctor is asking specifically about *moms* in a scene designed to illustrate parental involvement, the show connects the primary caregiver role – and thus the primary agent of feeding – to the mother, not the father. The classroom-like set-up signifies the teaching approach of the program, emphasizing the parents’ need to learn something (e.g., as if they lacked a certain kind of knowledge before the program). The doctor then narrates, telling us that this approach is the most effective because parents are the primary caregivers. Shot to Nick’s home and his mom cooking turkey bacon as a snack for Nick. Turkey bacon, of course, is a ‘healthier’ substitute for regular bacon, and thus this new snack is part of the lifestyle changes that Nick’s parents have made in the home. Dad and mom talk about other diet changes - the Dad talks about how he can’t “sit down and eat a big bowl of pasta,” while the mother reads foods off of a ‘restricted’ list (shot to the list, big RESTRICTED in capital letters across the top, with

an entire page of things the family cannot eat or use to cook). Mother: “no oils, no salad dressing,” etc.

Shot back to clinic, where a group of kids are doing group exercise. They are doing aerobic dancing to dance/techno music, certainly not the masculinized basketball game we saw earlier. The camera is focused on Nick, and he is doing a very feminized ‘shimmy’ dance, emphasizing his flabby, almost breast-like chest, giddily laughing. This feminized representation of Nick’s new exercise program is interesting because Nick’s story is used to illustrate the process of weight loss, and not success (a point to which I will return), and his mom is represented as his caregiver-of-focus, while his father is given much less attention in the story.

Shot to Nick with two other kids trick-or-treating on Halloween. Back at his house afterwards, his mom tells him he can only have five pieces of candy – “pick the five best pieces,” she tells him. Nick is eating the candy unsupervised, and then asks for more and lies when he says he hasn’t had any yet. While he has this minor setback, his parents are there to catch him in the act. Shot to Melinda Southern, who says with kids and weight loss, there is the “riding the bike and falling off syndrome,” where kids have to learn to just get right back on. Apparently, this Halloween candy incident was a prime example of this syndrome, but because Nick’s parents were carefully monitoring him, they were able to help him ‘get right back on.’ Thus, if parents closely monitor weight loss and are there for support, kids will be able to lose weight.

The doctor talks about how psychosocial problems are one of the main problems facing overweight kids. Shot to Nick getting dropped off at school. The shot is from a backseat viewpoint, and we only see the back of Nick’s head and him stepping out of the

car. Switch to Raymond and Brett, two brothers who are also attending Melinda Southern's program. During these 'current' video shots, the boys are at normative weights, and they talk about being fat in the past tense, so we are to assume that they have already been through the weight loss process. Brett talks about how he used to not eat his whole lunch at school "so that other kids wouldn't think I was a big 'ol hog." Shot to school cafeteria, where hundreds of kids are sitting eating lunch. What is signified here is the large amount of social pressure that overweight kids are under, especially in the context of eating (the cafeteria shot, with hundreds of kids eating together, demonstrates the opportunity for the kind of policing of consumption that Brett refers to).

Interestingly, there is a seamless transition from Nick's story to the brothers' stories, for as Nick gets out of the car to enter school, a peer environment, the story shifts directly to the boys' story with shots of them inside of school at lockers and in the cafeteria. Additionally, Nick's facelessness in his last shot and a failure to finalize his story in the narrative allows the viewer to easily view his subjectivity as parallel to Brett's and Raymond's. The brothers are also white and male, like Nick, and come from two-parent families. They are shown going to school in uniform, and thus we are led to believe that they go to private school, signaling their parents' comfortable middle class standing, like Nick's. Additionally, the brothers are attending Melinda Southern's program, and thus their parents can afford the 200 dollar per month program fee for each child. Nick, Brett, and Raymond have extremely similar subjectivities, and thus they are interchangeable for the narrative chronology of the story. This chronology begins with Nick being overweight as a baby, it becoming defined as a problem as he gets older, and

his parents taking action to help him lose weight. Nick's narrative shows the beginnings of the weight loss process – the changes his parents have to make with his diet, taking him to the weight loss center, beginning an exercise program, and monitoring his 'setbacks.' Brett and Raymond pick up the story at the latter end of the process – they have been in the program, their parents have already made changes, and in their interviews with the reporter, even when we are first introduced to the boys, they are much thinner than in the photographs that we are shown (presumed to be 'before' pictures). The segment finishes with a few-second announcement of Nick's weight loss and a quick flash to a skinnier version of him walking on a treadmill (the only brief flash back to the beginning subject of the narrative) and the fact that Brett and Raymond have "reached their goal weights." The final scene is of Raymond and Brett playing flag football with other overweight kids, all led by Melinda Southern, and the kids are laughing and cheering victoriously as one makes a successful play. This ending signifies the victory of their weight loss stories. This victory, however, is really more Brett and Raymond's than it is Nick's, because Nick's section – the first half of the show – signifies the process of weight loss with no emphasis on success, while Brett and Raymond's section – the second half of the show – signifies the success of their weight loss.

Nick's main parental support in the narrative comes from his mother, which is interesting because his weight loss story only fills the beginning part of the narrative – the start of the weight loss process (even though we briefly see him succeed in the end). While his father is present, he is given less screen time and less talk time than the mother. On the other hand, Brett's and Raymond's main parental figure in the narrative comes from their father, while the mother is much less of focus. The two boys are the focus of

the second half of the narrative, which is the half that signifies the success of weight loss. Thus, the narrative structure tells us that while parental support is important during the entire process of weight loss, the boys will succeed when they have a strong father figure behind their weight loss process.

***Analysis Two: "The American Family: The Number of Overweight Children in American Has Doubled in the Past Thirty Years." Good Morning America, ABC, Monday, October 14, 2002, 7:00 AM Eastern Time***

Diane Sawyer introduces the problem in newsroom, which looks intimate and cozy, like a living room, with warm colors and couches. She tells us that "we have the alarming new statistics" which say that the number of overweight children in the last thirty years "has doubled – has doubled!" Behind the statistics, she says, are stories of children who are "paying a high emotional and physical price." ABC's "American Family" is taking an intimate look at one family who is "struggling" with this problem. Signified by both the living-room backdrop and Sawyer's claim that the story is going to get intimate, we know we are getting a private, in-depth look at this problem.

The first scene is a hidden camera shot inside Sydney's home (the center of private family life), from the perspective right above kitchen table, the assuming 'battleground' for a child's weight problem. Sydney is protesting loudly, whining to her mother, "Don't tell me, mom!" Her mom ignores these protests, reading the fat gram label off of some product that is apparently high in fat ("10 grams!"). Sydney is positioned on one side of the table, sitting, while her mother is opposite her, standing, showing us her higher position in this mother/daughter power relationship (what also signals this is her failure to heed to her daughter's very adamant protests). This is obviously a fight between the mother and daughter, as Sydney is whining loudly while

her mother strains in frustration, her voice getting louder and louder along with Sydney's. The two are not having a good time – they are, in essence, battling about food.

What is signified from the very beginning is that in a 'battle' for your child's weight loss, the parent is the ultimate authority and must be in control. The narrator tells us that Stephanie Lamartina "is fighting with her daughter – fighting to save her from a lifetime of obesity." Thus, this is not just a simple argument between mother and daughter – this is a battle over something much greater and much more important – the child's health and well-being.

Shot to photo of Sydney as a chubby baby. Her mother narrates this by saying that while Sydney was overweight even as a baby and a toddler, it was always 'cute' and "it didn't really go overboard" and become a problem until kindergarten. In an interview in what looks like her bedroom (the safe comfort of her own home), Sydney talks about getting teased in kindergarten by a peer, and how a friend even told her she was "kind of fat." Thus, we hear from Sydney when her weight began to be a problem for her, and we see that this 'problem' was a social issue, affecting her interactions with peers.

Shot to Sydney helping her mom prepare broccoli (a 'healthy' food), while the narrator tells us Sydney's age (8 years old) and weight (104 pounds). We hear that she is 63% over her ideal weight – which sounds extremely high, but of course doesn't tell us what her ideal weight should be or how the number was calculated. Her mom, we are told by the narrator, is 'frantic,' and is 'right,' to be so, because children who are obese are highly likely to be overweight as adults. Shot to graphic of silhouetted fat man, with a large "50% chance of obesity" label next to him. The man is standing with his legs spread apart, stomach poking out, and his wide stance makes him look kind of floppy and

gross, like a lazy fat man. The narrator tells us that without help, children who are obese at age 6 have a 50% chance of being obese as adults without help. Thus, parental support is absolutely necessary.

Back to hidden camera shots of Sydney's home – one of her eating alone at kitchen table, one of her pouring soda at kitchen counter. We see one 'typical' morning (as told by the narrator), where she asks her grandpa, sitting silently at the kitchen table, if he likes oranges. His response is inaudible to the camera, but is reported by the subtitles to be "sometimes." This grandpa, the only male figure that we see in the home, is silent and passive, not participating in the 'battles' over food that we see between Sydney and her mom. Sydney asks her mom for more breakfast even though she has already had breakfast (while the grandpa gazes off into the distance), and visits the pantry (a huge walk-in pantry) three times looking for more snacks. The grandpa does not assert any masculine authority in this battle, and thus the only parental authority responsible for Sydney's food issues is the mother.

Shot to family eating dinner – Sydney, a sibling, grandpa, and mom – Sydney is whining about how she doesn't want to eat healthy food every day – chicken, vegetables, etc. Her mom chides her, "you don't want to be healthy?"

Their house, most likely because of the hidden camera shots, looks dark and dingy.

The hidden camera shots show a constant 'battle' between Sydney and her mom, as if the struggle for Sydney's weight loss is only a struggle between Sydney's desire to eat and her mom's desire to keep her from eating. These scenes signify a mom's difficulty in trying to help her child lose weight, and from what we see, it seems as if



mom is losing the battle. Sydney also looks miserable, whining constantly about wanting to eat something. What we learn is that trying to get your child to lose weight is not easy.

Shot to Sydney on treadmill, with doctor coaching her through some kind of health test. The narrator tells us this is Dr. Melinda Southern, a pediatric obesity expert who wrote a book (we see the book, called *Trim Kids*). She also directs a pediatric obesity clinic at Louisiana State University. Thus, we are introduced to the ‘expert’ of the show and the person who will help Sydney lose weight. Doctor talking to mother, telling her that Sydney has a clinically overweight condition. We see signs of the doctor’s expertise – computer program, fancy testing machines.

Sydney exercises in clinic with other girls, doing a group aerobic dancing exercise; we then see her rollerblading with friends. These are much more feminized exercises than, say, an organized ball game. Shot to Melinda Southern talking about Sydney making good choices about food. Flash to hidden camera shot of Sydney shoving nuts into her mouth, then a shot of her sitting at her kitchen table alone, digging into a bag of something (cookies or crackers). In these shots, she is alone, and we are to think that unsupervised, Sydney will collapse into an excessive food binge. Interviewer asking her if she ever sneaks food – she answers that she does – did – that sometimes, because she “felt like eating a lot.”

We then see Sydney running on playground with other kids, and over the image we hear her answer that she is feeling ‘good inside’ now that she is losing weight.

Sydney is being conditioned into subjectivity by only a mother. There is no paternal figure in this weight loss story (except for the silent, feminized grandfather). The mom is white, very articulate and normatively attractive and thin – she looks very

middle class. However, she creates conditions that are too feminized for Sydney and are not balanced by any masculine influence, and thus this is reflected on Sydney's body. She is also represented as overly neurotic, constantly chiding Sydney (did you eat that biscotti? Don't you want to be healthy?, etc.). She also mirrors Sydney's childlike behavior, whining back at her daughter in their struggles over food, thus demonstrating a similar level of irrationality as her eight-year-old daughter.

We then are taken back to the present day with an interview with the mother, another expert, and Sydney in ABC studio with Diane Sawyer. Mom talks about doing 'detective work,' closely monitoring Sydney's weight and diet. The expert talks about how kids see 10,000 commercials for food (typically high fat, high sugar foods) in one year, and bad food in school, thus alluding to socio-cultural influences. However, we are taken right back to Sydney's personal story, as the mother talks about the entire family making changes. Thus, the signified is that even if there are social influences on childhood obesity, the center for combating these influences is within the home. Funny enough, the expert tells the audience not to turn the kitchen into a battleground (even though throughout the entire program, all we've heard is the rhetoric of battling).

***Analysis Three: "Fighting the Epidemic of Childhood Obesity." Today, NBC, Monday, January 27, 2003, 7:00 AM Eastern Time***

Matt Lauer introduces the problem: In 1999, The Center for Disease Control (expert institution) announces that 15% of children are overweight, and he further tells us that other experts tell us the number could be as high as 25%. He introduces the individual story of one child struggling with obesity, and thus personalizes the statistics for us.

Taylor's story is introduced by a 'dancing photograph' series, where we see photos of Taylor ranging from a baby to a young child gliding across the screen in a choreographed-like sequence. Cabaret music plays in the background. This is a highly upbeat introduction, especially for the kind of serious topic Matt Lauer has just introduced to us. In some of the older photographs, an overweight Taylor is dressed in dance recital uniforms, so this may be the connection to the dancing motif. It is possible that the show is trying to emphasize the absurdity of a fat child (Taylor) attempting to wear a form-fitting dance uniform through the absurd contrast of introducing such a serious topic with such an upbeat introduction. This contrasting introduction could also be connected to a race representation, presenting Taylor as the happy-go-lucky black girl who fails to see how her non-normative body is inappropriate for her activities. This may be true especially in the context of the next scene, where there is a discrepancy in where her mother notes Taylor beginning to gain weight and where the photographs show a chubby Taylor. The mother reflects a stereotype of black cultural ignorance when it comes to weight and health – in this case, her ignorance is exemplified by her inability to see Taylor's weight as a problem at an early age.

Interview with mother telling us that her daughter started to gain weight at what she thought was 'faster than the normal rate' at about second grade, which, as I said above, is interesting since pictures show a chubby Taylor at a younger age. Next, there is a photograph of Taylor next to much 'smaller' peers show just how fat she is compared to fellow children. Here, we see the point at which Taylor's weight began to be a problem: when she began to have significant social interactions with peers (suggested by her mom at around age seven, and signified by the photographs of a fat Taylor next to skinny

peers). Narrator tells us that by the time Taylor was 10, she weighed 184 pounds, “joining the ranks of over 18 million, or 1 in 4 children in America who are overweight.” During the latter part of this narration, the images we see are of various video shots of overweight children’s and teen’s bodies in public settings, such as a school cafeteria or playground. We do not see these children’s faces, just their excessive backsides and bellies, and thus these images represent any of the 18 million children who are overweight – they could, in essence, be any child – even your child.

Flash to expert doctor in lab coat (white male), being interviewed next to a computer who tells us that childhood obesity has become an epidemic. During ‘scientific’ video shots, such as him doing computer work, working with mice, and working with patients, we learn from the narrator that he is a pediatric endocrinologist and works closely with obese child patients. The narrator tells us that according to this doctor, children are facing adult diseases, such as diabetes, because they are overweight. This indicates how ‘severe’ the problem of childhood obesity is to the audience, and emphasizes the unnaturalness of children being overweight (as if it really should be just an adult issue). The doctor then tells us that ‘our society’ is allowing children to develop these serious health risks right in front of its own eyes. The scientific signs legitimize the expert’s words, and we are encouraged to trust this information as objective fact.

Narrator says that although many children are genetically predisposed to be overweight, society is the culprit (video shot on anonymous black family sitting around table together, which suggests that either black people are essentially overweight or, in an ideological move, contradicts the narrator’s genetic explanation by showing a black family eating in a social setting, suggesting there may be a cultural factor influencing this

racial group's tendency to be overweight). Video shots of more fat bellies. Section on society's influence – video shots of kids eating junk food, fast food lines serving popcorn, nachos, hot dogs, etc., sedentary kids in front of television, etc. This brief interlude shows us the cultural factors that influence childhood obesity today. T.V. screen with various junk food commercials. This section is ended with a woman expert in interview who tells us that portion sizes are too large. We learn that this woman is Taylor's nutritionist, which leads us right back into Taylor's individual story – and away from cultural influences. Thus, the focus is not on what socio-cultural changes can be made, but what individual/family changes can be made:

Taylor in interview in bedroom – tells us that her 'real' problem was 'pop and juices.'

Flash to more 'society' pictures, with the narrator telling us the caloric intake necessary for children Taylor's age – obviously a number that Taylor exceeded.

Reporter in kitchen with Taylor's mom, sister. Older sister washing greens, mother baking fish – a healthy meal. Mom and reporter talk about how they used to eat a lot of fast food ("like most people"), especially because they didn't have time to cook with their busy schedules. Now, though, the family has made diet changes, illustrated by this healthy meal, that have aided Taylor in her weight loss. This kitchen scene ends with mom announcing that they have made a "big change – *big* change." This change, of course, could only take place with the aid of experts like Taylor's nutritionist.

Reporter pushing grocery cart full of fresh produce through produce section of grocery store: "It's the parents, not the children, who are responsible for the food that's in the house." Back to nutritionist, who says to 'plan ahead a little bit,' and plan meals

that are healthy for your children. Thus, the solution to our society's obsession with high fat fast food is for individual families to make nutritional changes within the home.

Back to doctor: tells us that childhood obesity can be 'fatal,' and that pediatricians need to be blunt – as if parents are too ignorant to see that their child is overweight and must be told by some expert. The narrator announces that there is not only physical danger with being obese – there is also psychological damage. This announcement is made over video shots of an anonymous overweight adolescent black girl (passively dribbling a basketball, not smiling) and an image of a group of black kids, some of them overweight, sitting at a table together (in a social setting). In an interview, the doctor tells us that children are also at risk for emotional problems – such as childhood depression - from being overweight. He also tells us that these kids “are not going to succeed.” Taylor in interview: “they would call me all sorts of things.”

Transition back to 'cultural influence' – the fact that schools have very few physical education activities nowadays. This is followed not by an appeal to change schools, but to a video shot of Taylor dancing in a dance class with other students. She and her mom also walk through their (working class) neighborhood to the local grocery store (we see shot of this, and Taylor's mom talking about buying fresh vegetables). Thus, once again, the focus returns to individual/family changes in diet and exercise, not a focus on cultural change.

The signified is that the only place for a child to combat his/her obesity is within the private unit of the home with close parental supervision. Thus, it is within the home that all necessary action to effect changes in a child's weight must take place. This subtle

message allows us to focus on the issue of Taylor's success as more directly related to her mother's efforts.

Mom and Taylor in doctor's office. Mom is very proud, excitedly asking her daughter to tell the doctor how much she weighs. Taylor shyly answers, smiling: "162 pounds." The doctor exclaims that she went past her goal (of losing 20 pounds), but we know this is not the end of Taylor's weight loss (she is, after all, still large for an 11-year-old and 162 pounds). Mom says that she is proud of her in an interview. Flash back to kitchen scene, Taylor stirring greens, mom putting fish in oven. This is a continuation of Taylor's lifestyle change and move towards weight loss. She also, in an interview speech laid over a video image of her eating dinner with three other women (an all-female family), offers what the narrator calls "words of encouragement," telling us that "you can do it. You just keep on going and get some encouragement from your parents." In the closing interview, she is asked if she can continue to do what it takes to lose weight. She says that she hopes so. Thus, she suggests that there is more to her weight loss story than we will see – it is not finished here. Although Taylor has reached her goal of losing 20 pounds, she has not completed her weight loss – there is still more weight to lose.

Taylor is black, and comes from a single mother family. Her father is never featured, and there is no mention of his absence – there is just no male figure in her story. Her family's house is clean, bright, and uncluttered, a sign that they are not struggling working class. They live in Seattle, usually perceived as much more white-bred than other American cities. Their accent is very white (or mainstream American). In all, neither Taylor nor her mother perform explicit blackness, which typically is perceived as performing whiteness and thus is read as a middle class, mainstream American

performance, especially when performed by blacks. Taylor's narrative is interesting because while her conditions of subjectivity – her race and her single-mother family – might lead to a representation that shows her failing to lose weight based on the narrative formula, she, in fact, is represented as a child on the way to successfully losing weight. Her successful representation here might be based more on her class standing (read: white performance) than her mom's parenting status or her race. Her weight loss story is not completed in her narrative, though, which leaves the end of her story open and leaving the issue open of whether or not she loses weight.

***Analysis Four: "Generation XL: Three Teenagers Struggle to Lose Weight and Keep It Off," Dateline, NBC, Friday, March 26, 2004, 8:00 PM Eastern Time***

We see Stone Phillips in the newsroom, who introduces the problem to us. The newsroom is very sophisticated, with wood paneling and deep blue blinds on the large windows. The décor reflects Stone Phillips' timeless, classy masculinity and additionally signifies a level of sophistication of the story to come (and thus leads us to trust the story). He tells us that 9 million American children and teens weigh more than they 'should.' This number has tripled from the last generation. We'll meet three teens whose lives may depend on losing weight. Thus, we are introduced to the magnitude of the problem – the large number of overweight kids – as well as the severity of the problem – that they could die.

We get a brief introduction to each teen in interview setting. TJ tells us he doesn't want to worry about diabetes or a heart attack. Nannette tells us that it's not good to be overweight. Justin tells us that he doesn't want to live the rest of his life a 'fat



man.’ Begin techno music, fat camp scenes of fat kids dancing/exercising, which gives us a very inspirational, upbeat beginning.

Narrator tells us that for these three teens, this is their third summer in a row at Camp La Jolla, a fitness camp in San Diego. This is not just about counting calories, but about confronting their lives and parents.

Interview with Justin (Seventeen-year-old white boy): we are told he is from Guthrie, Oklahoma (which signifies a white, rural enclave that is extremely safe and cut off from the rest of the world). Narrator tells us that Justin “looks and acts much older than he is.” Justin speaks over video shot of him playing guitar/harmonica, singing on stage, saying that he is the type of overweight kids who is very social. Narrator says that Justin’s maturity has not extended to good judgment about food. Justin says he is compulsive, and that’s why he is overweight. Picture of him with his huge family in casual setting, as if they often spend quality time together. Narrator says that genetics can be cruel – video shots of his very slender siblings. Thus, it may not necessarily be his family environment that directly contributes to his weight problem, since his siblings do not have a similar weight problem. This idea is further supported by the Narrator’s appeal to Justin’s ‘maturity,’ suggesting that he is a well-adjusted young man who may have just had some bad luck when it comes to dealing with food.

Narrator: If Justin has been the victim of a supportive environment, it is the opposite for his camp roommate, TJ.

Interview with TJ (Latino boy, slight Chicano accent): from a small town in California (stereotypically considered a place where working class Latinos settle). In an interview, says his mom and dad broke up when he was young – he was sad and started

gaining weight – “eating- eating constantly.” Interview with mom – says she wanted to make him happy – white male interviewer: “feeding was what made him happy?” she says yes. TJ in interview: his mom tried to make him happy, and food made him happy. TJ also talks with the interviewer about going to junior high dances and being rejected by girls. This failure to conform to a normative heterosexual framework further feminizes his obese body, since in a heteronormative framework, the inability to attract women is viewed as emasculating and thus feminizing. Going back to the mother’s interview, she calls food TJ’s ‘comfort zone,’ thus once again equating overeating with emotional comfort. She says she didn’t know what to do – and the narrator explains to us “she didn’t know, because she had been that way herself.” Mother was also obese as little girl – interviewer suggests that seeing TJ being overweight is like living it all over again. Connection between overweight mother and overweight son – it is a vicious cycle that can’t be stopped. Food is the only thing she knows that will comfort him, because that is what comforted her. The tendency to treat food as comfort is feminized by returning to TJ’s mother’s issue with food as a young girl and naturalizes women’s tendency to turn to food for emotional comfort; thus, when it came time to comfort her own son when he was emotionally needy, food seemed like the best option.

Nanette (Latino girl): from San Diego (typical suburban setting) narrator: also lives with divorced mom. Narrator tells us that in recent years, food has not been a comfort, but a ‘battle ground.’ Nannette’s mom works long hours. In an interview with both mom and daughter, the mom says that she often isn’t there to “catch” Nanette. We see pictures of Nannette as a chubby young child, and the narrator tells us that obesity, especially beginning so young, can have serious consequences. Nanette has insulin

resistance, and has to take medicine to stave off Type II diabetes – which the narrator tells us was once seen only among adults, but is now epidemic among teens. In an interview, Nanette tells us that food comforts her, and that she often gets into a cycle of eating, gaining weight, getting depressed, and then eating more because she's depressed. Then, she falls into a “black hole of depression.”

Nanette in a (white, male) doctor's office, who asks her “who is supporting you in making healthy food choices?” Nanette has no idea how to respond, and finally laughing, flustered, says somewhat doubtfully, “me!” We actually don't get to hear if this is the right answer, and are left to wonder if maybe Nanette's mother is failing to support her in her food choices (or just who is failing her – presumably her mother). The narrator tells us that Nanette's doctor is an expert on childhood obesity who published a study arguing that obese children have a quality of life as low as children with cancer undergoing chemotherapy. For example, overweight kids miss a lot of school, which the doctor (in an interview) attributes to emotional problems. Narrator says that the only difference is that these children carry guilt for their ‘disease.’ Doctor in interview: this is not their fault. How can they be blamed for something that happened when they were five years old? Thus, the issue of just whose fault this may be is left open, but we are to assume that it may be the fault of those who are responsible for a child's food intake at such a young age – the parents.

Narrator says that obesity is “preventable, but almost incurable.” Parents and teens together can beat the odds of teens not being able to lose weight – but only if they work really hard.

Interviewer asks Nanette if she ever considers surgery. She says yes, when she gets tired of being fat. The narrator asks the audience: if surgery is an option, what are the kids doing at camp? He answers that “they *believe*.” Thus, what is being emphasized is that they are trying to do it the ‘old-fashioned way’ - diet and exercise. We are going to see if they will succeed. The old-fashioned way requires serious work and willpower to control their excessive appetites, as well as parental support (as we have been told previously). Thus, the question is raised of whether or not these kids have the support to do it this way, and we must watch to see what happens.

We see each kid telling us that “this is the year” that they will lose the weight and keep it off. The narrator asks, leading into commercial break over images of kids working out, “*Is this the year?*” Thus, the narrative is set up as if it were about three kids attempting to lose weight once again, and we are going to see if they success.

....*commercial break*

Narrator: Kids return to camp for the third summer in a row. Narrator tells us that in the past, the kids have lost weight at camp, but gained it back during the year.

Justin: He tells us that his goal is about 260. Narrator: He is ‘big all over.’ A whopping 350 pounds. In interview; “My goal for the entire summer is about 260. Can he really lose 90 pounds?

TJ: Tells us he wants to get to about 250 pounds. Narrator: TJ wants to shed 65 pounds.

Nannette: Tells us she wants to lose 30 pounds, which the narrator tells us is more realistic than the boys’ goals. He also emphasizes that she weighs 300 pounds, just slightly less than the boys, but is a foot shorter.

These announcements of weight loss goals are made over images of the kids weighing in, presumably in their ‘before camp’ monitoring phase. Thus, we understand just how ‘fat’ the kids are, as their weight are called out over video images emphasizing their size – showing us their large bellies, backsides, and profiles. We also see the boys’ ‘before’ pictures, which show the boys in just a swimsuit, their bellies flopping over their shorts.

Narrator: tells us the kids’ weight loss goals, then explains process while “I Will Survive” plays in the background. He says that the kids will exercise for six hours a day, more active than they’ve ever been. The video images playing during this narrated “I Will Survive” sequence show us the physical activity that the kids must do. TJ and Justin play sports – basketball, soccer, racquetball – with other boy peers, while Nanette dances with her friends and in aerobics classes. Thus, ‘proper’ exercise for boys is male-only organized games, while for girls, it is feminized dancing and aerobics. They must also eat a strict, low-calorie diet. Girls have to eat 1200 calories, while boys eat 1500.

Shots of kids socializing in various settings; Nanette in talent show. Narrator tells us that kids finally feel comfortable with peers – “they are, for once, not outcasts.” Nanette singing in talent show, saying that it is not embarrassing to perform at camp. Then, the talent show switches to a single girl singing the love song “When I Fall In Love.” The narrator talks about the kids having romantic relationships for the first time. We see a video shot of TJ flirting with a girl and in an interview, TJ tells us that he has never really had a girlfriend so he just wants to know what it feels like. Thus, now we can be relieved that TJ finally has the chance after his junior high dances to experience a heterosexual lifestyle. He has regained some of his masculinity.

Narrator tells us that “back in their rooms, they can have a meeting of minds.” Room of girls, including Nanette, talking indulgently about food – how badly they want to eat a candy bar, their favorite snacks, etc. One girl says that she would rather have a candy bar than ten minutes with her family, which signifies the emotional substitution of family with food.

Narrator tells us that the kids’ success in losing weight will not happen at camp, but after camp, and thus the kids need to learn to control cravings like those the girls were discussing. Camp holds nutrition classes at night and “behavior modification” classes. Shot of Nanette and other girls reading labels in grocery store (but not the boys), probably because of the gendered nature of food shopping. This also connects femininity to consumption-as-buying and thus consumption-as-eating. In an interview, interviewer asks Justin what the biggest lesson he learns at camp is. Justin tells him portion control, and mentions that a “super-sized fries got like 7 portions in it.” This leads into a ten-second fast-food sequence with techno music and flashes of several different fast food restaurant signs, where the narrator tells us that the 90’s were the “super-sized decade,” when portions ballooned. But this is all we get in terms of social influence, and the scene quickly moves back to Justin’s interview, where he says that learning that a single serving of potato chips was twelve chips was “heart-wrenching.”

The narrator tells us over shots of the kids’ weigh-ins that Nanette is steadily keeping up with her goal, but “something strange has happened to the boys” – they have lost less weight this week than in previous weeks. Up until this point, the portrayal of the kids’ camp experience has been very positive. They’ve played, made friends and found romantic interests, and have steadily been losing weight. Things begin to shift slightly,

though, with the announcement of the boys' lesser weight loss. The narrator tells us the summer is "half gone," and emphasizes that the kids will have to continue the weight loss process at home. In an interview, TJ says that he doesn't want to lose control and go out 'binge eating' back at home.

Parents are invited to camp halfway through, and the narrator emphasizes the fact that the parents are children's weight loss support for when they go back home – "they must be totally committed and involved." Video shots of kids hugging parents, smiling, laughing. Justin's parents have flown in from Oklahoma to be there, and in an interview with them (as they talk over family photos), they talk about how hard it is for Justin, especially over the holidays. The use of the family photos and the interview where his parents express awareness of his problems signifies Justin's family's involvement in his weight loss process. Interviewer asks Justin if being fat is his fault, and he says yes. Interviewer suggests that he can't make decisions about food at a young age – then asks the question again. Justin changes his mind and says that it's the folks' fault. The narrator says that one parent is absent from this mini reunion – TJ's mom. The narrator says that lately, she hasn't been there for TJ. TJ even tells us that she hasn't even called him while he was at camp. Finally, she calls him to tell him she is moving away. Narrator tells us that now, "TJ – a seventeen-year-old still in high school - is an angry and grief-stricken mess." TJ, who above mentioned his fear of losing control back at home, is losing parental support for his weight loss, deemed so important by the show. With two weeks left of camp, he hasn't lost any more weight, which signifies the possibility of his upcoming failure after he leaves camp to return to a home with no mother.

Intro to commercial: TJ struggles, and Justin uses humor. TJ and Justin are constantly contrasted this way. TJ is hurting and alone, while Justin is well-adjusted and mature.

.... *Commercial break*

Justin singing with guitar – silly song about working hard. Narrator recaps what the three teens have done at camp, saying that Justin, TJ, and Nanette have worked hard for nine weeks, exercising six hours a day, eating a restricted diet, etc. In their final weigh-ins, we hear that they did lose a lot of weight. All the kids get awards on the last night of the ceremony (image of a counselor placing medals around the three teens' necks. Justin tells us that he has lost "a sack of feed" (once again, demonstrating his charming rural humor). This is the end of camp, and the upbeat techno music playing over their final trips to the scales signifies that they have been successful.

Narrator: Camp reunion in 5 months, where everyone wants to look good. Justin and TJ also have been offered positions as counselors if they can keep the weight off. Thus, the boys have an extra incentive.

The narrator also tells us that now, leaving camp "is going to be the hard part." Talks about living in an 'obesogenic society' – suburban sprawl, drive-through fast-food restaurants, T.V., etc. These surroundings, the narrator tells us, conspire to make our children fat. The narrator's speech is overlaid over images that reflect his words – a suburban setting, fast food restaurants, a child watching T.V...but the last few words, "to make our children fat," are said over an image of TJ and Justin proudly showing off their camp medals to each other. Thus, the reference to cultural influences on childhood obesity takes us right back to these personal stories. This transition is necessary for the



narrator's next speech, for he goes on to tell us that the kids each face their own personal challenges. Justin is going home to a house full of love – and food. TJ's mother – his anchor – has moved to another state with her second husband, and has no home to return to. Nannette is prepared to stay active, eat right, prepare her own meals, etc. – the narrator outlines her goals. But, he says, there is a 'huge problem built into Nannette's life.' Her mother works long hours.

We are taken to a scene of Nanette in her home which is set up to be a follow-up after camp. So far, Nanette has not lost any weight. Video shot of Nanette and her mother eating in a restaurant together "on weekends" (as we are told by the narrator, which leaves us to assume that on the weekdays, the two don't get to eat together), sitting with a few other people. It's not home cooking, says the narrator, but they split a portion. Shot to an early morning scene in a car, and we can hear Nanette yawning. Her mom is dropping her off at a bagel shop before school because she has to get to work. Nanette buys a bagel and tries to just eat half, then caves in and eats the whole thing. The narrator tells us that portion control remains elusive. In the restaurant, with her mother there, Nanette is able to stay within the bounds of her necessary portion size; however, once her mother allows food to be a substitute for parental supervision and is absent, she cannot control herself, even with the cameras watching her. Food is the substitute for parental love and support (very often this is the case for Nanette), and it fills a void left by her mother when she leaves her daughter. There are two significations here: first, we see that a lack of parental supervision leads to overeating. Second, we see that Nanette's mother has made food the substitute for parental love and supervision (a common ideological notion that women misdirect their caregiving within the home by

overfeeding). The narrator tells us that at home, TV is back in Nanette's life, and with it, snacking (TV also substitutes for parental company). Video shot of her laying on couch, passively consuming Twizzlers, gazing off into the distance, presumably at the TV.

Nannette goes to doctor for check-up. There, she meets a nutrition specialist with whom she embarrassingly talks about how little exercise she does. Mom in interview: "She's just a little girl." Video shots in school – narrator tells us she has been missing school. At kitchen table in home, Nanette complains to mother because her mother tells her she needs to walk home on Tuesday. The narrator tells us that sometimes there is 'tension in the house' as mother and daughter try to cope. Here we see Nanette's laziness (she doesn't want to walk home/exercise) and the fact that her mother is not there for her to pick her up. In interview, mom talks about Nanette throwing temper tantrums. In doctor's office, she talks about how her mood has not been good. Interviewer asks mom if she's "overweight because of emotional issues or has emotional issues because she's overweight." Mom says a little of both. Thus, Nanette's psychological health is deeply emphasized, and the narrator talks about how doctors are trying out various antidepressants for her. She is the only child whose emotional issues are connected to a clinical context, which shows how her mother has the resources to allow others to take care of the emotional needs of her child. This is, however, because the mother spends so much time at work and so little time herself caring for her child. On another level of signification, because Nanette is a girl and is being raised by a woman alone, the feminine excess that shapes her subjectivity cannot be counterbalanced by a masculine presence, and thus this excess overwhelms her emotionally and deeply affects her psychological health.

Transition to Justin: Video shot of him walking on train tracks in a rural setting. After camp, returns to his passion for music (fiddle in background, him playing harmonica). Thus, Justin has a healthy extracurricular activity. This introduction to his life back at home is overlaid with upbeat bluegrass music, which is quite a contrast to Nanette's silent, somber presentation. There is something happy in his life, even if he is overweight. Inside his house, he tells us he is determined to lose weight – video shots of him preparing cottage cheese snack, carrots. The narrator tells us that his family is making the commitment, too, and is thus following the recommendations of the camp for parental support. Video shot of large family eating together at dinner table. The narrator tells us that Justin's step-mom drives an hour to get organic food. We see her unloading her groceries from bags, and she tells us that it's expensive to eat healthy. In fact, she says, "it's cheaper to be fat!" Family praying over healthy dinner.

Justin takes an alternate route to school to avoid the fast food restaurants. We see Justin in school, where he "resorts to humor" (narrator's words). In cafeteria, where he eats a healthy sandwich and fruit (shot to apple, carrots), he makes more jokes with peers and teachers. The signified is that he is a well-adjusted boy and has friends and good social skills – being fat does not affect his relationships. This is especially true in contrast to Nanette's school scene, where she doesn't talk to anyone – we just see her alone at her locker – and all the narrator can talk about is how she has missed a lot of school.

The narrator tells us that while Justin's brothers play football, he is in the basement playing music – shot to Justin and a friend in basement, Justin with guitar. Here, Justin may not be playing football, but he is at least socializing with his friends,

something that we do not see Nanette doing at all. In fact, the highlights of Nanette's life make it seem as if she has no friends. In an interview, Justin says that his goal is to at least maintain the weight he lost at camp. At the end of his segment, we hear that he has gained five pounds back.

The narrator tells us that TJ was clearly in emotional turmoil when he said goodbye at the end of camp. Over faint, slow harmonica music, we hear that Dateline can't find him for an update, discover that he has dropped out of school (this is said over a driving image of a dark, empty street at night, as if someone were searching for something but there were nothing to find on the street). This may signify Dateline searching for TJ in a cold, dark world where he has no mother. After commercial, we are told, we will see how TJ has hit rock bottom. Video shots of TJ eating large hamburgers, sitting in fast food restaurant. Thus, we know that TJ has experienced some serious trouble after camp, which is quite a contrast to Justin's upbeat, family-laden segment we have just seen.

....*commercial break*

Narrator: Everyone is looking forward to the camp's reunion. However, as the holidays approach, there is no sign of TJ. Finally, the narrator tells us, they find him – "here." "Here" is a video shot of TJ with friends in a parking lot, hanging around cars, smoking and talking about tequila. Hanging out in a parking lot signifies that these kids have no place to go, or do not want to hang out in an organized, designated hang-out spot. They are loitering, which is viewed as a deviant activity. Narrator says that experts say that overweight teens have no chance unless they're aided by an adult, and we hear (again) that TJ's mom left him while he was at camp. We see an interview with him

during the summer at camp, saying that he will not go back to fast food. Current time video shot of TJ riding in car, while the narrator tells us the he has been on a “month-long fast food binge” (flashes to outside of various fast food restaurants); TJ talks about all the fast-food places he eats at excitedly (maybe him riding in car is supposed to signify him going to binge). Thus, without the support of his mom (or any adult), he has failed on his word to stop eating fast food.

TJ eats tortas (an ethnic food) on Thursday at a Mexican restaurant because they’re large and on special – video shots of him biting into large sandwich several times at different phases. The narrator tells us that “typically” (thus outlining a typical day), TJ wakes up at 2:00 PM and starts eating, then continues until he figures out where home will be tonight (during the ‘figuring out home’ part, shot to TJ looking forlorn and lost, head in hands, staring into space). While at restaurant eating tortas, he asks a friend on the phone if he wants to drink tonight. Thus, we learn that he has started drinking (another excessive, deviant behavior that has happened because he is unsupervised). Has no place to live – is sleeping on friends’ couches. TJ also eats one-pound hamburgers (shot to him biting into huge hamburger).

At a shot inside of a friend’s home (presumably where ‘home’ is that day), TJ tells a very inarticulate friend that he hasn’t stayed on the camp’s program because he has no place to live. Narrator says that his closest thing to a home is his uncle’s bachelor pad (a ‘bachelor’ isn’t a good supervisor), where food options are not good (shot to pantry with junk food). TJ talks about being embarrassed that he has not maintained his camp weight – has not weighed himself, but obviously gained it back. Is ashamed, and won’t

return calls to camp counselors (shot to empty liquor bottles lining shelf in living room, where he is lounging on the couch, watching TV).

The next month, we learn that TJ was also in a fight and got arrested. In an interview, TJ says this was a wake-up call. Moved in with grandma, signed up for college – says he is “trying to get my life straight.” The interviewer asks him about his weight situation. TJ thinks he has gained about 75 percent of his weight back. The narrator tells us that the very thing that TJ wished wouldn’t happen – being fat again – happened, “all the way, he says, struggling with the departure of his mom,” thus directly connecting TJ’s failure to lose weight with the absence of his mom. The interviewer then says that TJ’s mom declined to come to California to interview with them. Her decline emphasizes her failure to participate in her boy’s weight issue (and life altogether).

Narrator: Dateline goes to find his mother and discover why she has abandoned her son.

Transition to commercial: piece of interview with mother saying that she wanted TJ to find himself. Interviewer suggests that TJ feels abandoned – mother looks ashamed and embarrassed.

*...commercial break*

Techno music: Narrator talking over images of parents visiting children at camp: “Good parenting, the experts say, is the best defense against childhood obesity.” The narrator asks: “what choices were made for TJ?” Thus, dateline sets out to find out from TJ’s mother. In interview, Trina (TJ’s mom) tells us that TJ and his stepdad never got along. The interviewer sets up their relationship as very dependent – TJ very dependent on his mother. When she remarried, the interviewer suggests that “it was a whole different ballgame.” The signified is that TJ is very dependent on the crutch of the

feminine – food and his mother. His overly feminized conditions – being raised by his mother – led him to become dependent on the feminine, and when his mother was gone, he resorted back to food as his feminine comfort. Additionally, his working class Latino subjectivity is filled with excess (tequila, smoking, rowdy friends, irresponsible uncles, etc.), and this excess becomes reflected on his large body. His friends are certainly much more ‘wild’ than Justin’s – while Justin and his friend sit quietly in the basement like good middle class white boys, TJ and his friends drink, smoke, talk loudly in parking lots (where they ‘loiter,’ not hang out), and eat together in fast food restaurants.

The narrator says that Trina “loves TJ very much, but there isn’t a thing she can do to change what happened years ago, when she and that little boy looked to food to ease their pain.” Thus, again we hear that from the mother, TJ learned that eating was a form of comfort. Eating for comfort, then, is feminized, and TJ has picked up this habit, thus feminizing his own subjectivity.

The narrator says that these teens, “on the brink of adulthood,” know that good eating habits need to start early. The idea is that it may be too late for these kids, especially someone like TJ, because they are almost fat adults, not fat kids.

It is camp reunion time, and we get to see the teens at the end of the story.

Nanette in interview saying that her emotions were “going all crazy.” The narrator tells us that doctors have found the right antidepressant for Nanette. Nanette represents the connection between fat and feminized emotions. The main feature of her story is that she is emotionally unstable and this is connected to her weight.

Video shot of Justin at dinner table with family. Justin says he has gained only ten pounds since he got back from camp, which the narrator says is “still ahead,” and he

is back on the program. In an interview, Justin says he is tired of the cycle of gaining and losing weight.

TJ shows up at the camp reunion, and the narrator points out his “seeming sudden burst of maturity.”

Closing remarks from narrated over bluegrass harmonica music – reminiscent of Justin’s previous harmonica playing (thus, Justin, who is the most successful, gets the final acknowledgement). While Justin did gain some weight back, the slight tens pounds he gained were much less than the complete failure of TJ and Nanette, who gained back almost all of their original weight. Thus, Justin, with his ideal conditions of subjectivity – a white, middle class, two-parent family – was able to succeed relative to the two teenagers whose conditions of subjectivity are constructed as deviant and abnormal – non-white, single-mother families (and for TJ, the least successful in containing his excessive behavior, a working class family).

Stone Phillips tells us that adult obesity is catching up to tobacco as the leading preventable cause of death in the U.S. Thus, the story has a chronological framework, showing us the teens “on the brink of adulthood” who are soon going to be part of the statistics we just heard.

The other segments on this edition of Dateline are of a mother accused of burning her son to death and teen abuse of cold medicine. This is interesting, since these stories construct more panic about dangers to teenagers (this time, in the form of drug abuse) as well as a focus on bad mothering with the representation of the dangerous, crazy mother burning her son in an attempt to gather insurance money.



***Analysis Five: “Surgery For Fat Teens Dangerous?” 20/20, ABC, Friday, January 24, 2003, 10:00 PM Eastern Time***

This news story opens with Barbara Walters in the newsroom with a ‘live’ cityscape in background and her standing in front of a simple, sleek podium. This newsroom setting signifies a ‘worldly’ public view, and we know we are about to be introduced to ‘real-world’ issues that are of interest to the general public. The fact that Barbara Walters, a famous reporter with high legitimacy, introduces the segment to us tells us that this is a serious issue, and her sleek black business suit and podium display her no-nonsense approach. This isn’t some pansy news show, aimed toward a target (feminized) audience; this is a legitimate story, one that is of interest to everyone.

She welcomes us and tells us that the number of obese kids – those that are at least 50 pounds overweight - has tripled in the past 20 years – announcing the problem. She then tells us that the more shocking news is that some kids are resorting to surgery to lose weight. “Children as young as fourteen are acting like grown-ups – going under the knife to reduce their stomachs? Is that crazy?” To this rhetorical question, we can guess Barbara’s response as she shakes her head in shock and her eyes widen – yes, it is crazy. The emphasis on the ‘shocking’ news about kids getting gastric bypass surgery and Barbara’s own disbelieving presentation of the issues sets up the show’s angle on the issue – they are presenting this as a drastic, almost unbelievable measure, one that they expect the audience to approach with caution and doubt. Barbara tells us that Deborah Roberts is going to tell us the story of a ‘radical solution’ to the growing problem of obese kids.

Flashes of fast food video images: “may I take your order” at fast food window, people driving through, various fast food menus. Narrator tells us that kids are also less active, hanging out in malls, watching T.V., etc. Here, we see society’s influence on kids and why they are becoming overweight – too much fatty food, not enough activity.

The next scene is of a doctor/expert interview, who tells us that “obesity is the new plague” and that “obesity now is the number one disease worldwide nutritionally.” We learn that this doctor is Dr. Christine Grid, a gastric bypass surgeon. Dr. Grid is young, Asian, and very thin and normatively attractive. She is very serious and cold, not smiling at all as she talks to the camera. She doesn’t seem relaxed at all – she is very uptight. She continues on to tell us that obese children have diabetes, asthma, high blood pressure, and sleep apnea – formerly solely adult diseases. Thus, we must be alarmed at the new dangers that children are facing...an issue of them having adult subjectivities before their time? Unnatural because children should not have these kinds of ailments – something is seriously wrong with these kids. Next, we see Deborah Roberts in a ‘library’ type setting, alone in front of camera, and she reiterates that children are now experiencing adult ailments. Once again, we should be alarmed that kids are experiencing things ‘meant’ for adults, as if there is something unnatural happening to our children (who, according to the social construction of childhood, should be ‘closer to nature’ and not experiencing unnatural things.)

Deborah Roberts transitions us into personal stories of obese children who are resorting to ‘drastic solutions’ to lose weight.

We are introduced to two sisters, Angie (sixteen) and Gabi (fourteen), overweight since childhood (we see photographs of them as young fat children). During an

interview with Deborah Roberts, they talk about their highest weights – over 250 pounds each. Deborah Roberts narrates over photographs of girls as children, overweight, telling us that the sisters say they were ‘miserable.’ They talk about getting teased in school, and one of the girls remembers ‘waiting for the bell to ring’ at school so she could get out of there. The narrator tells us that the girls turned to food to cope with their sadness, often ‘running to the basement’ to binge. This narration is overlaid over video images of the two girls eating plates of food at the dinner table, so that we see the girls eating their way into their current state of fat misery (video image focuses in on one girl, absently absorbed into her plate, without looking up, almost staring off into the space of her plate). Back to interview with girls on their couch, one girl talks about how when she was full (after binging), she felt as if “some part of me was full – some part that wasn’t there. A friend who wasn’t there. Somebody telling you that you were pretty.” She starts crying during this speech, displaying how her excess emotions are related to her excess eating and thus her excess body size.

Interview with mother, who is crying (connection between crying mother and crying daughter – their subjectivities – overly emotional, fat women - are paralleled here). Interviewer asks, “It’s painful for a mother to watch, isn’t it?” The mother is so overly emotional that she can barely answer the interviewer’s question through her tears. Her excessive display of emotion mirrors her excessive body size, as well as the fact that she is so irrational that she cannot formulate a rational, articulate answer.

Shot to same daughter in singing lesson, singing a love song. Wants to start a singing career, narrator tells us, but needs to lose weight to do so. In order for this girl to

pursue her dreams, she must lose weight. A further signified is that losing weight is a 'dream' goal, just as much as wanting a singing career.

Therapy group video shot, with therapist asking a group of anonymous kids and teenagers if they have their food diaries. We are to assume that this group of kids is trying to lose weight the 'traditional' or 'old-fashioned' way, with diet and therapeutic support. But, the narrator tells us, some children are resorting to more serious, adult treatments for obesity.

We are introduced to a girl on Meridia (adult prescription diet pill); we see her taking pills and learn that she has lost over 65 pounds since starting the pills. Another girl has lost 15 pounds on the pill, and the narrator tells us that if the pill is not successful, she will consider gastric surgery. Lead into gastric bypass surgery and back to Dr. Grid.

Images of doctor operating. Interview with Dr. Grid saying that she is 'saving their lives.' Deborah Roberts suggests that surgery is very risky (implying that the doctor is going too far) and asks "is it worth it simply to lose weight?" Dr. Grid says that it is not simply to lose weight, but to cure a disease. Deborah Roberts approach to this interview suggests that she is cautious about Dr. Grid's opinion and thinks she may be going overboard. Dr. Grid's continuing dramatic, cold approach (similar to first interview) represents her as detached and out-of-touch with the possible emotional/material risks of this surgery, which constructs her as an abnormal woman as she deviates from gender ideology that posits that she should be emotionally invested in the material consequences of the surgery.

We see animated graphics of what the surgery does to patients' stomachs, which show us how most of the stomach is cut (most of it) and how a small part of it is

reattached to the intestines, thus revealing just how extreme the surgery is. We also see the symbol of consumptive excess – the stomach – and how the surgery can eliminate that physical aspect of an obese child's over-consuming body. And afterwards, the narrator tells us, diets are restricted, excluding fast food. This last sentence is narrated over a video image of the two sisters walking up to a fast food counter, leaving the audience to question whether they actually have the willpower to leave the greasy food behind. One sister in interview says this is her last resort. Talks about health problems in family – grandpa, father, mother – obviously obesity and bad health run in family. Deborah Roberts asks Gabi, the fourteen-year-old, if she knows what she's getting into with surgery (suggesting that she is too young to make this decision). She fumbles over her response, saying that she knows she needs to diet, exercise, and take vitamins to lose weight, but it will be easier to do those things once she gets all the weight off. This scene suggests that Gabi has not really thought through this decision, since she has trouble formulating an answer, and also that she is too lazy (or that her subjectivity will not allow her) to lose weight the 'hard' way – she just wants to take the easy way out.

Narrator announces that the two sisters' Mom is overweight. Video shot of girls and mom in kitchen, which is dingy and cluttered. The stove has pots on it, the table is messy with papers, and mom is going through mail that clutters the table while the girls eat (the signified is that the table, the center for family consumption, is overflowing, excessive, and is thus reflected in the girls' diets and on their bodies). Deborah Roberts suggests to mother in interview that some people will blame her for making her children fat – she says that's not the case. Dr. Grid blames school cafeterias, not parents. Older sister in interview says that people suggest diet and exercise, but she (hesitates) just

(hesitates again) doesn't want to be overweight anymore. Thus, these girls are taking the 'easy way out.' Angie, like Gabi, may not have the proper subjectivity to lose weight any other way. Her excessive appetite is so embedded in her subject position that the only way to lose weight is to physically cut away her center of excess consumption – her stomach.

Transition to Lashena, a seventeen-year-old black girl who is also getting gastric bypass surgery. We see her sitting at her kitchen table, eating with two other women. The kitchen is dingy and cluttered. Interestingly, our introduction to Lashena is not a personal interview where Lashena speaks to us in an interview format (like the white sisters), but a 'real-life' setting where the first image we have of her is of her eating – and eating fried food out of fast food Styrofoam containers. Thus, before Lashena even gets a chance to speak, her image – capturing a negative subject position (black, woman, overweight, overindulgent, greedy) – speaks about her for the audience. Her first words to us are: "I'm not going to be able to eat none of this (fried fast food) no more – no more. Her double negative emphasizes her black working class subject position. She also does not stop eating to talk to the camera, further representing her as an overindulgent fat girl who can't even stop putting food in her mouth to speak. The narrator tells us that this is the 'eve' of Lashena's surgery, and thus this last indulgence into fried food is like a final forage into the delicious world of food excess. As the camera pans out, we see a dingy kitchen with old, yellowed linoleum, outdated wallpaper, and a cluttered counter. There is a deliberate, greasy, dirty stove shot, so that we can see both the dirty, working class conditions in which Lashena lives as well as the unhealthy foods that her family eats.

Lashena tells us in an interview about how she doesn't go on dates, only has one friend – has a limited social life because of her obesity.

The next scene is of an older white, male doctor talking about the surgery's risks. We learn that he is the surgeon performing Lashena's surgery. In comparison with Dr. Grid, he is much older, more open (less cold and serious), and is a white male, all characteristics that grant him more authority than Dr. Grid. The narrator tells us that he only operates on teens who have been evaluated for psychological issues, and we also hear that he has completed one of the few studies on teens and bypass surgery. In an interview, he says that he knows there are risks (a fact that Dr. Grid skirted). All of these factors contribute to a much more favorable representation of this doctor, as if he has not gotten as carried away as Dr. Grid and also has more knowledge in general about the issue. While he is doing the surgery like Dr. Grid, he articulates the risks in a way that she won't, thus making him seem more balanced. Dr. Grid's cold, hard, overly irrational presentation of the issue constructs her as a femme fatale, running wild with scissors, cutting little children open without stopping to think about the consequences. This white man, however, is constructed as someone who has thought carefully about all of the factors involved, and understands things much more clearly than Dr. Grid does with her dangerous, out-of-control femininity.

*....commercial break*

We hear from the narrator that if all goes well with the three girls, they could end up like seventeen year old Zachary Reynolds (video shot of white boy in ROTC uniform performing some military drill with peers in high school gym). We see a photograph of a much larger Zachary from two years ago, and hear that he had a bad case of asthma. He

wanted to pursue an army career, the narrator tells us, but couldn't because of his weight. Flash back to present-day video image of a much skinnier Zachary eating fruit in front of the television. He had the surgery, and it was obviously successful. This is just a brief success story, but it is the only 'finalized' success story in the narrative, where we see a child lose 'all' of its excess weight. Zachary is also the only boy in this segment. Thus, we are allowed to see the white male subject succeed and reach a normative weight, while we do not get to see that with anyone else in the narrative (the girls).

Flash to another white male doctor, who in an interview speaks out against 'adult' cures for obesity for children. This doctor does not perform the surgery, and signifies rational authority over the issue like Lashena's doctor. He talks about how we can't know what adult diet drugs and surgery do to children's bodies, arguing that other kinds of adult drugs react differently in children, thus constructing children's bodies as unique from adults' and also more innocent and fragile. This supports the show's representation that it is 'unnatural' for children to do 'adult' things with their bodies (including being overweight, which is constructed as an adult issue and pursuing adult cures).

The show then returns to the girls a few months after their surgeries. Deborah Roberts finds the sisters shopping (a traditionally feminine activity) and trying on clothes that they wouldn't have been able to wear before the surgery. They are very excited, and one talks about 'getting abs.' One sister has lost forty pounds; the other fifty. We then see a shot of Lashena holding up some very unfeminine plaid pants next to her waist, and it is obvious that these are her 'fat pants' and they are now too large for her (as the extra fabric stretches out past her waist). She has lost sixty pounds, and says that now she wears jewelry and wants "the world to notice me." They have not had any complications,



and they seem happy and on the way to losing weight. Their stories are successful, but we do not see them after they have reached normative weights – they are still all overweight. Thus, the ending is left open, and ‘ultimate’ success is not granted to these girls in the narrative.

We see that the sisters and Lashena are both working class, particularly signified by their homes (as well as the sisters’ overweight mother, which is typically a sign of a ‘lazy,’ working class family lifestyle).

Angie and Gabi’s mother is briefly interviewed, but we do see a man (possibly their father?) featured in the background during a few video action shots (and hear one of the girls talk about his health problems). Lashena’s family is pictured in the background, and there are only women featured. The signified is that all three girls have very little parental involvement, and little or no father/paternal authority involvement. Girls are considered to be their own subjects, making an ‘adult’ decision. But their ability to make this decision is constantly questioned (because of their young age), and the ‘dangers’ of this adult treatment are consistently appealed to by the show. Thus, the signified is that these girls are having to make a decision on their own, without proper parental help, and may be making the wrong decision for themselves.

In the end, all the girls are on the way to losing weight. They have, however, taken the ‘easy’ way out, as emphasized by Deborah Roberts when she repeatedly asks why these teens can’t just do it the old-fashioned way – diet and exercise? This decision to take the ‘easy’ way out is connected to their lazy working class ethic (and for Lashena, her lazy Black ethic). The night before Lashena’s surgery, she is shown eating fried fish and French fries, what we are told is her ‘favorite fast food meal.’ As she sits at the table

dipping her fish into a creamy sauce, the show edits out all other background noise so that all the audience can hear is Lashena smacking on her greasy, fried food. She doesn't even stop chewing to tell the camera that she won't be able to eat any of this food after her surgery – a perfect way for the show to represent her as a glutinous slave to food and consumption. Her deep 'love' for fast food demonstrates that the only way she will be able to lose weight is to take this drastic measure – surgery – in order to restrain herself from her own excessive desires. Lashena – like the two sisters – does not have the willpower or drive to lose weight in any other manner. Instead, they must all take the 'easy way out' – albeit 'dangerous' – in order to lose weight.

Also on this episode is a segment on Keiko the killer whale, a typical metaphor for overweight people.

***Analysis Six: "Teen Diaries: Teenage Girls Trapped Inside Their Own Bodies."***  
***Primetime Live, ABC, Thursday, November 21, 2002, 10:00 PM Eastern Time.***

The first shot is of Diane Sawyer reporting from a newsroom with a live nighttime cityscape as a backdrop, signifying the worldly, public information we are about to receive. This is 'real' news, played at night, at the end of the day when the entire public is watching. The live, moving city behind her signifies that this news story is *current*; this is an up-to-date story. She tells us that we're going to take you into a secret world – teenage girls 'trapped inside their own bodies' (as if their bodies are prisons). She further tells us that in hundreds of hours full of tape full of raw emotion and pain, "girls record the struggle they fight every day to love themselves and to have others love them." Specifically, these girls have a problem with love and relationships. The signified is that we are going to see something that we've never seen before – something very private.

Primetime has found this very private world, and they are the only ones who can show us these very secret emotions. Otherwise, we would never see them, and thus we get the impression that we are ‘let in’ on something very special. The woman reporter introducing us to this secret world attaches a feminine quality to an already feminine attribute – emotion, especially deep, private emotion.

Narrator: “It is a portrait of unexpected honesty,” a statement that introduces a scene of one girl in a video diary shot. The girl is talking to herself, saying “you’re not fat – yes I am. You’re not fat – yes I am.” She is having this argument with herself, as if she has dual personalities. The allusion to schizophrenia attaches mental health/psychological issues to being overweight, especially being an overweight teenage girl.

2<sup>nd</sup> girl, video diary shot, sobbing in front of dark, brown wall inside home: “I do stupid things so that somebody will love me and care about me.” This gives us a more specific look into the psychological issues of being a fat teenage girl – this girl, specifically, is emotionally deprived, and does ‘stupid’ things (we are left to wonder ‘what things?’) for love. The message is that fat girls do not have normal, healthy emotional relationships.

3<sup>rd</sup> girl, self consciously jumping off couch (but struggling somewhat because she is so overweight), running to camera to stop the filming, large breasts jiggling (signifying specifically her excessive femininity with this specifically feminine sign).

Intro shows the deep, private emotion that we are about to see, as well as the painful individual experiences that these girls go through.

We see a video shot of a doctor working with obese child patient, palpating the child's large belly to emphasize the child's obesity. The narrator tells us that this is Dr. Rich, the man who gave his patients, four of whom are the girls featured in this story, video cameras in order to learn more about their personal, private experiences. He wanted to understand the 'condition of their life in which this exists.'

The show, 3 years later, gathered the four girls together to watch each other's diaries. Sound of camera taking snapshots; at the completion of each 'snap,' a photo of each girl pops up. All are smiling, in 'real life' photographs (e.g., not portraits); one girl – the one who is crying in earlier video diary scene, is not smiling.

We meet Samantha first over several of her video diary images. We see several images of her in her home, where she is sitting around with friends and family, smiling and laughing. She tells us in a private video diary shot that she doesn't feel pretty - the only thing that's pretty is her face. The narrator tells us she seems 'spirited enough' (shots of her with friends, laughing, acting silly), but confesses her 'real' feelings in her diary. This leads into a private room shot where she says she is disappointed in herself and doesn't like herself. Her room is well-decorated, with a fancy paint job, which signals that she is well cared for (and that her family has the money and time to help her decorate her room as she wishes).

Next, we are introduced to Hannah, who the narrator says spends a lot of time alone. Narrator: "The more isolated she becomes, the more she eats," thus connecting loneliness with being overweight. The video diary images are of her alone in her room, smoking, eating crackers and hiding them under desk. She is doing an adult thing – smoking – which is also an 'excessive' consuming activity. She is also eating privately,

and keeps food under her desk so that it is readily available to her. Unlike the other girls, she has no friends or family in her video shots. Her room is also dingy, without anything on the walls. She sits in an old plaid chair in one of the video shots. Thus, especially compared with Samantha's bright, sunny, well-decorated room, Hanna's room indicates her working class lifestyle as well as the lack of effort put in by any caregivers. She is also wearing a Parrot Bay rum t-shirt, another sign of an adult interest (as well as a lower class indicator – a typically free liquor t-shirt = lack of 'real' clothes). Finally, Hanna's video diary shots are at night, while the other girls are during the day. You can see the dark sky outside her window, which mirrors the darkness inside her heart.

Third, we meet Reed. The narrator tells us she is popular in school, but is also shy. Her videos shows a supportive and loving family (shot of family at dinner table); however, her family pressures her to lose weight. Narrator: Mother says she is so concerned, she nags. Mother and Reed in interview: Mother says that others tell her 'Reed is so beautiful,' but she knows there's a 'but' (she's too fat). She goes on to say that she wants her to have all the guys she can have. Mother wants her to be a normative heterosexual girl (probably like herself – mother is very thin, youthful, and normatively attractive, with a nice hairstyle and make-up). The mother is very normatively, appropriately feminine, but is overly nagging and very emotionally involved in her child's weight issue. In the interview, she speaks passionately with her hands, leaning into Reed's space as her daughter sits there, silent. The mother's overemotional response is too feminized, which gets translated to her child's body.

Finally, we are introduced to Tyreka, a happy-go-lucky black girl whose mother is also obese. The narrator tells us that Tyreka is well-liked, has many friends, and likes to

dance – even though she weighs over 300 pounds (as if she is too ignorant to know that an overweight girl shouldn't dance). Video shots of her playing sports with peers, dancing with a much trimmer friend. Shot to Tyreka's mother, who tells the camera while cooking, "I've got to put that old-fashioned ham bone in there." The narrator tells us that Tyreka adores her mother, who is also overweight. Obviously, she is not a good role model for a child trying to lose weight. The narrator tells us that Tyreka doesn't have a problem with being overweight – in fact, she can even laugh about it. Tyreka makes a joke with interviewer: being overweight is having your stomach coming out over your breasts. But the narrator tells us that what she doesn't laugh about is her diabetes. Tyreka has to keep a log book to monitor her blood sugar, which demonstrates to the audience just how serious her health problems are.

Each of the girls is introduced to us through a series of their video diary shots strung together with some personal interviews thrown in. What this signifies is that idea that we are seeing a 'raw,' realistic look at these girls' private lives.

Dr. Rich found that 92% of teens studied comforted themselves with food. The doctor says that these patients have a "spiritual or psychological black hole that they try to put food into." Thus, overeating or excess is connected to emotional issues, specifically having an emotional black hole that must be filled with food. This 'black hole' is not an absence of emotion, but a symbol of excess emotional issues. The only way that these patients (and thus these girls) know how to treat their excess is by taking in more excess.

Doctor: end of section, lead-in to commercial and next section: girls are perceived as older and more mature, as 'easy' – trade sex for affection – video image of

Hannah putting lipstick on in mirror; video shot of her talking to camera, saying that she “feels like a fucking whore afterwards.” (Hanna’s cursing shows her working class subjectivity (she is classless, using bad language) and the fact that she is doing ‘adult’ things like cursing before her time. Narrator: When we come back, Hannah does just that.

Hannah is the angsty, lower class whore of the group, the lonely one whose family is invisible. While we see the other girls’ families, hers is completely absent, and her only video shots are of her alone in her room, crying, smoking, or eating. She is the only one whose obesity led her to trade sex for attention and affection.

*...commercial break*

Return: Reporter is a man now in Diane Sawyer’s place, introducing this segment. Says that girls share pain – and would go ‘far’ to get affection. The male reporter’s presence inserts patriarchal authority into to sexuality section. Signified is paternal authority/presence is necessary to reign over this serious issue (and if paternal authority were present in these girls’ lives, maybe they wouldn’t have so many problems).

Female narrator: Wanted to see what the 4 girls would get together to eat. Sent to grocery store – Hanna calls Ben and Jerry’s ice cream a ‘woman’s best friend’ (food replaces love and relationships). Back in the kitchen, the girls have food binge, emphasized by the narrator’s listing and description of the foods they cook for themselves: fried chicken, buttered corn, Caesar salad, baked potatoes – not considered healthy food. This portrayal of the girls’ excessive food appetites leads into a discussion of general psychological issues (with doctor sitting next to interviewer, monitoring), and

then the section on Hannah's sexuality. Thus, there is an immediate connection made with excessive appetites for food and sexuality and the need to fill some sort of emotional/psychological void by satisfying these appetites. The excessive consumption signals that the emotional void cannot be filled completely, and thus these girls have very deep emotional issues that cannot be tamed. Thus, crazy, irrational girls 'wear' their irrationality on their bodies by trying to cure their irrational emotion through consumption. However, instead of 'curing' their irrational, overly emotional states through consumption, they wear their excessive emotions on their bodies so that their subjectivities can be recognized as abnormal.

Next, there is a scene of the four girls sitting around on a couch in front of the female interviewer and the doctor. We see Samantha's "you're not fat – yes I am" video diary clip again, and once again the psychological issues connected to being overweight are brought up (this is also signified by the 'group therapy' type setting, with the girls talking about their emotions facing the 'experts' – the interviewer and doctor). They talk about a 'game' that Samantha plays in order to get people to tell her she's not fat and make her feel better about herself (a coping mechanism for being overweight, and also a 'mind control' issue).

In this 'group therapy' setting, Hannah says that "being overweight is a deeply rooted psychological issue." This leads into a shot of Hannah's video diary. Hannah is talking to camera, telling it, "You know what I realized? I'm sexy." "Who would not want this." Back to group interview, she exclaims, "oh, god, that's horrible!" She looks embarrassed, covers face and starts crying. Narrator: "Hannah's diary invokes bitter memories. In a private interview, she says she "ate because of really deep feelings of



inadequacy...to express something...self-hatred.” Narrator: Hannah found a way to make herself feel better (over shots of her putting lipstick on in a mirror, which signifies a display of feminine sexuality). In a video diary shot, Hannah is sobbing, talking to camera about feeling like a fucking whore after having sex in order to make herself feel better. Shot to Dr. Rich in an interview, where he tells us that fat girls will trade sex for affection. Tells us that overweight young people are perceived as older and more mature, as well as perceived as more ‘easy’ – willing to trade sex for affection. The signified is that their behaviors in all realms will be excessive; additionally, the act of consuming food is equated with the act of having sex, as if sex is an equally consumptive act.

Back in interview with Hannah, she talks about how sex filled a void that food once did, and thus she lost weight during the period when she was compulsively having sex. Here, what is signified is that Hannah, because of her excess emotions, will behave excessively in many other realms. Once again, food and sex are equated as equal acts of excessive consumption.

Switch to Tyreka’s story, where the narrator tells us her battles are not with popularity, but closer to home. Primetime Live ‘invites’ her family to its favorite restaurant, where her large black family eat lots of fried, greasy Chinese food that the narrator tells us is ‘deadly’ for Tyreka. The excessiveness of the Chinese dinner is illustrated by video shots of food preparation in the restaurant’s kitchen, where we see lots of grease and frying pans. Tyreka calls out the food on the table: pork fried rice, chicken fingers; foods, the narrator tells us, that are high in fat and dangerous for Tyreka. Tyreka’s mom says that cutting down this food from a couple of times a week to once every two weeks is “a start” (she says this with a laugh and an emphasized black accent,

thus signifying her mammy-like approach to food – she is too culturally embedded in unhealthy black eating practices to do what is right for her daughter). Thus, while Hannah’s problems are private, personal, emotional problems (probably due to her lack of emotional fulfillment in the home), Tyreka’s problems are related to a family that just makes bad food choices because they are too embedded in bad cultural eating habits fueled by their black culture and her mother’s desire to feed her daughter. The doctor, in an interview, speaks to this issue, telling the interviewer that “the whole family is overweight” and the whole family has certain (assumably wrong) expectations about what kind of food should be on the table.

Reed has a healthy family background, and healthy food choices. Her overbearing, neurotic mom tells her that she needs to be more concerned. Her mom is highly visible, there in their personal interviews, but her dad is invisible except for in family video shots. Her mom is overbearing, speaking for Reed when it is her daughter’s time to speak, leaning over into her daughter’s personal space. In one part of an interview scene with Reed and her mother, the mother puts her hands up, her eyes start rolling around in her head, and with a nodding emphasis on each word, she tells her daughter that “you’re not totally accepting that, you’re like, I’m really overweight.” The mother looks almost possessed by her passion concerning Reed’s weight loss, while Reed sits there, somewhat emotionless and passive next to her excited mother. In Reed’s case, her mother is so overly emotional and neurotic about her daughter that her obsessive behavior is being reflected on her child’s irrational, out-of-control body. Compared to Tyreka’s mom, who is constructed as too apathetic about her daughter’s conditions due to her gendered and raced perspective surrounding eating issues, Reed’s white, middle class

mother is constructed as overly concerned. Both representations are connected to race, class, and gender ideologies, and both of the subject positions that are constructed out of these ideologies are reflected on the bodies of the children these mothers produce.

In the end, the reporter tells us how much weight each girl has lost, but this is not part of the narrative. This does not follow the narrative formula of the other pieces, for it is not about weight loss. Instead of being a typical weight loss narrative, it is a narrative about being an overweight teenage girl. Thus, the girls must be reified in their overweight subject positions, and thus we cannot visually see their success. This is not about who succeeds in weight loss and how it is related to their subject position, but why certain girls are overweight and how their conditions of subjectivity cause their overweight condition.

Being fat (and a fat girl, especially in adolescence), signifies excessive negative emotion, pain, and hyper-sexuality. It is just excessive in all the traditionally feminine ways – emotionally and sexually. The white, male doctor comes in and helps them control this excess emotion by asserting his masculine control into their out-of-control feminine lives.

### ***Narrative Analysis***

An interesting finding I discovered while writing these textual analyses is that each of the stories follows a similar narrative format. Further, this narrative format works to contribute to the construction of meaning within the texts. Specifically, the stories tended to begin with an introduction of the problem of childhood obesity and the individual child/children who would illustrate this problem. Next, there was a description of their weight loss attempts, which included the parents seeking expert advice and the

specifics of the child's diet and exercise program. Finally, the ending of the narrative tended to talk about the level of success of the child's weight loss. This ending of the narrative was the most variable, either showing children who were completely successful, were on their way to reaching a normative weight, or who did not lose weight at all. The variations in the ending were tied to the subject of the narrative and the issue of whether his/her conditions of subjectivity were represented as ideal or inadequate for weight loss. Thus, it is in the ending of the narrative structure that ideological issues became clear.

Thus, I found that it was necessary to add a narrative analysis to my already existing textual analyses. As Ronald Bishop (2001) points out, a conventional narrative analysis approach is focused more on the form the narrative takes than the content of the narrative. *How* a story is told is more important in a narrative analysis because the major concern is how the narrative "functions as an argument to view and understand the world in a particular way" (Foss 1996, cited in Bishop 2001). Thus, a narrative analysis is useful in revealing the ideological functions of a text because it can reveal the ways in which more powerful discourses shape how a story is told.

However, a simple narrative analysis is not sufficient for uncovering the set of meanings that the texts constructed for the obese child's body. First, narrative analyses tend to focus in on one text, while I was focusing on several texts. Thus, I became more concerned with the 'meta-narrative,' the overall pattern of storytelling that emerged as I viewed the various news programs. Second, a narrative analysis tends to leave out what I call the 'narrative elements' – the various signs within the text that convey meaning and ideology – in favor of a focus on narrative *structure*. However, I wanted my analysis to

consider how narrative structure and narrative elements work together to create a system of meaning surrounding the obese child's body.

## **Findings/Analysis**

An important theoretical basis for this study is the idea that children are not granted full subjectivity. Thus, they are viewed as being shaped by conditions outside of their own subjectivities. I call these conditions which shape children's subjectivities 'conditions of subjectivity,' and these include any cultural influences in which the child develops his/her own subject position as well as the subject positions, most significantly his/her parents' subject positions, that shape the child's subjectivity. It is these conditions of subjectivity that are reflected on the child's body, because the child is assumed to become a subject only through the influence of these conditions. Because society can read children's conditions of subjectivity on their bodies, children's bodies can be used for policing the conditions that produce those bodies, most significantly the subject positions that produce those bodies.

In the television news programs on childhood obesity, the idea that children's bodies are significant to disciplinary power was illustrated by the point at which their parents began to recognize that their children's bodies were of concern. Parents typically emphasized in interviews the point at which their children being overweight became a problem for them and/or their children. Generally, when children were babies or toddlers, parents referred to them as being "chubby," a term with a much more positive connotation than "fat." Parents also called their chubby babies and toddlers "cute," further validating their children's overweight bodies at a young age. However, the parents' language about their children's bodies changed when they talked about their children growing older and being overweight. Once the children were older, parents referred to their kids' bodies in a much more negative way, calling their overweight

bodies “unhealthy” or “a problem.” For example, Sydney’s mother tells us in an interview that her daughter was a “chubby baby, a cute, chubby, toddler, and it [her weight] didn’t really become a problem until, say, kindergarten.” This is directly followed by an interview with Sydney where she tells the interviewer that “this girl...she told me I was fat” (the girl, one may assume, is a girl from her kindergarten class). Thus, before Sydney began going to school, her weight was not an issue – in fact, it was “cute.” However, once Sydney entered a social setting, she began to be policed for her abnormal body, revealed by her peer’s statement about her weight. She had entered what Foucault calls a “disciplinary society,” where subjects are policed for their deviance from socially prescribed norms. However, as a child, she still has not acquired full subjectivity. Thus, her mother is the one who becomes “frantic” over her overweight child (as we are told by the narrator), because as Sydney’s mom, she realizes that she is the one blamed for her child’s abnormal subjectivity. Sydney is still being shaped into a full subject, and thus it is her mother’s subjectivity that is also visible on her child’s body.

My original hypothesis was that in the representations, children whose conditions of subjectivity are infused with the subjectivity of the Other – especially single mother, non-white, and/or working class families - will be represented as overweight. The characteristics of Othered subjectivities – such as excessive appetites and desires, irrationality, and an inability to control oneself in the realm of consumption – will be read on the children’s bodies because it is these subject positions that are shaping the child’s subject position and thus his/her body. However, in the new programs that I analyzed, I realized that this connection between abnormal conditions of subjectivity and abnormal children’s bodies was not as linear as I had originally thought it would be. Some children

who have normative conditions of subjectivity – such as those that come from two-parent, middle class, white families - are still overweight.

Thus, in all the news programs, all of the children were overweight regardless of their conditions of subjectivity. What I discovered was that the narratives were not about overweight children per se, but about the *process* of overweight children trying to lose weight. Therefore, I distinguished between two elements in the narratives in relation to the child's body and his/her conditions of subjectivity. First, there was a focus on the conditions that made the child overweight in the first place, which were split into two distinct realms: conditions within the family and socio-cultural conditions. While originally I had theorized that children's families would be represented as the sole source of conditioning children's bodies, I found that the news programs also attributed original weight gain to conditions within society. Therefore, I expanded my definition of children's conditions of subjectivity beyond just the family unit to include socio-cultural influences. I will demonstrate that these socio-cultural influences are represented as over-consuming, excessive, and irrational, much in the same way that families saturated by the Other and/or with deviant, single-mother family structures are constructed as over-consuming, excessive, and irrational. The social influences on children's bodies, I believe, are represented as due in large part to the influence of the over-consuming, under-producing Other in capitalism, an influence that is reflected on the bodies of children produced within this over-consuming culture.

The second element in the narrative was focused on whether the child had the 'ideal' conditions within the family in which to *lose* weight. Interestingly, even though the news shows often acknowledged that society was a contributing factor to children's



weight gain, the private, individualized family unit was represented as the source for overcoming these societal influences. Ultimately, then, regardless of how the children gained weight, the family was expected to provide satisfactory conditions in which the child could lose weight. Thus, the conditions of subjectivity that were of ultimate importance for weight loss were not cultural conditions, but the conditions within the family, most importantly the subject positions of the parents.

***Private Conditions of Subjectivity as the Cause of Overweight Children: Excessive, Over-consuming Families Infused with the Subjectivity of the Other***

The narratives began simply with the issue that the child or children of focus were overweight. While the focus of the narrative was not on why the children were overweight but on the process of their weight loss attempts, the issue of how the children became overweight in the first place was still present. Some of the narratives explicitly outlined the cause of the child's overweight body as the conditions of subjectivity within the family. For example, in "Generation XL," in interviews with TJ and his mother, we learn that TJ started gaining weight when his mother and father divorced. TJ was sad, and his mother, who was also overweight as a child, says that the only way she knew how to make him happy was to feed him. In the same program, the narrator tells us that Nanette's single mother works long hours and is not home to supervise her eating. Here, we have two children whose bodies are produced within non-normative conditions of subjectivity. First, they are both Latino, and the characteristics of the non-white cultural conditions – race ideology that constructs Latinos as closer to nature, less rational, and having excessive appetites and desires – are read on their excessive bodies. This may be more true for TJ than Nanette, for he and his mother's obvious working class status

makes their ethnic identity more prominent than Nanette and her mother's ethnic identity, since their more middle class standing 'whitens' their subject positions.

Second, both TJ and Nanette come from single mother families where there is a lack of a patriarchal figure to balance out their mother's excess femininity. As Elaine Tyler May has argued, the nuclear family, with its breadwinning father and homemaker mother, has developed into a normative cultural ideal in part because of its function for containing and restraining excess femininity within the family (1988, p.96-7). Balancing the mother's femininity through a patriarchal presence serves the function of keeping the mother's feminine excess at bay so that it doesn't negatively affect her childrearing. In the case of overweight children, this negative effect is visible on the bodies of the children that mothers raise with no strong patriarchal figure. The mother's characteristics of feminine excess, irrationality, and lack of control can be read on the children's excessive, overweight bodies. Because the nuclear family is a normative construct, single mother families can be policed for their abnormality because this abnormality is visible on the bodies of the children this family structure produces.

For TJ and Nanette, the news program explicitly outlines how their single mother family structure has conditioned their fat bodies. When TJ's mother and father divorced and TJ was 'sad,' we learn in an interview that his mother fed him because (in a statement encouraged by the interviewer), it was the only way she knew how to make him happy. This, of course, is related to gender ideology that posits that mothers feed excessively in an attempt to make their children happy, an ideology that assumes that women are displacing their own appetites onto their children's appetites (May 1988, p. 96). We also hear that Nanette's mother has left her unsupervised because of her

demanding work schedule, and this is the implied cause of her daughter's overeating. Because there is no father figure inside the home, Nanette's mother (and her femininity) cannot be contained within the home, and has to venture outside in an effort to be the sole provider for her family. This leaves Nanette with no parental support in her attempt to lose weight, a consequence of being raised in a single mother family.

However, for Sydney, the eight-year-old whose story is told on a morning news program, her single mother family structure is not explicitly connected to her overweight body. Instead of blaming the mother for creating non-ideal conditions within the home, the representation of Sydney's mother is simply negative and over-feminized. Sydney's narrative is guided by hidden camera shots inside her home of the child and her mother 'battling' over food. The mother, in these 'real life' shots, whines at Sydney, chiding her to not eat this or that – she basically mirrors her eight-year-old child's behavior. Thus, the mother is represented as excessively emotional and irrational, like a child, and these feminine personality traits implied to have conditioned Sydney's subjectivity and her overweight body. Thus, her mother's excess femininity, characterized by her irrational, child-like behavior, is present on her daughter's flesh.

Similarly, in a *20/20* special entitled "Surgery for Fat Teens Dangerous?," there is an implicit connection between the girls' conditions of subjectivity within the family and the fact that they are overweight. While the show does not explicitly blame the families for overfeeding their children, the representations of the families signify that they are providing excessive and out-of-control conditions for the subjection of their children. For example, Gabi and Angie, two sisters who have been overweight their whole lives, come from a white, working class home. Their mother is the only parental figure

featured in the story, although they do mention their father (only once, and only to talk about his health problems from being overweight). In interviews with their mother, we see that she is overweight as well, and poorly dressed with no make-up. Thus, the mother appears to be working class in her lackluster appearance, and her large body reflects her excessive appetite, which is also reflected on her children's bodies. In one interview, she becomes so overly emotional about her daughters' condition that she starts crying and cannot respond to the interviewer's question. This excessive display of irrational emotion mirrors her excessive body. In scenes inside their home, we see the two girls and their mother sitting around a cluttered, messy kitchen table, and as the girls eat, the mom sorts through this clutter. Thus, in the kitchen, the center of consumption, the mother has created conditions of excess and lack of control, and these conditions are read on Angi and Gabi's out-of-control, excessive bodies.

Lashena, the other teen featured in this surgery special, is black, and like Angie and Gabi, comes from a working class background. While none of her family members are interviewed, only women are featured in shots of her personal life. We also see a shot of her kitchen, which is small, cluttered, and dirty, with yellowed linoleum on the floor and once again, a cluttered kitchen table. We also see a shot of a stove with grease-filled frying pans. Thus, like Angie and Gabi, Lashena's home is out-of-control and excessive, and this is read on her overweight body. Additionally, because Lashena only has feminine influence in her private family life, this excess of femininity and lack of masculine balance is also reflected on her body.

All of the representations mentioned above constructed 'abnormal' or deviant conditions of subjectivity within the family as the cause of overweight children.

However, a few of the news programs presented stories of children who came from normative conditions of subjectivity. For these children, the families were not to blame, but factors outside of the family. For example, in “Generation XL,” we hear that for Justin, “genetics can be cruel,” as his brothers and sisters are all thin. Thus, it is obvious that Justin’s family has not created the conditions in which he has become overweight, because the rest of his family is not overweight. Therefore, Justin, who comes from a two-parent, white, middle class family, might just be overweight because of some bad luck. Or, he may be a victim of an over-consuming society, and the fact that his high school lacks a physical education program or that there are too many fast food restaurants on his route to school may be to blame.

***Socio-cultural conditions of subjectivity as the Cause of Overweight Children: An Excessive, Over-consuming Culture***

Woven through all of the personal, in-depth weight-loss narratives were sections on society’s influence on overweight children. Multiple cultural factors were blamed for making children fat, such as fast food, lack of physical activity, increased portion sizes, television and video games, etc. These sections on socio-cultural conditions shaping children’s bodies tended to be quick, flashy, with fast techno music playing over them, and anonymous – detached from the personal narratives of focus. For example, in Taylor’s narrative, in about a 15-second period, we see at least ten video shots of fast food restaurants, snack bars where workers are dishing out hot dogs, nachos, and popcorn, and people sitting in restaurants being served extremely large portions. None of the people, if we even are shown their faces, are related to Taylor’s story in any way. They simply represent the anonymous members of our over-consuming society. The fast-moving images simulate the fast pace of an excessive, over-consuming society; the

excess number of images in such a short amount of time signifies the excessive consumptive behavior that the images attempt to illustrate.

In “Generation XL,” the narrator also refers to cultural influences for childhood obesity, and even calls our current society an “obesogenic society” – where suburban sprawl, drive-through fast food restaurants, and television come together to “conspire to make our children fat.” This narration is laid once again laid over fast-moving, techno music-driven images of cars driving through fast food drive-up windows, aerial images of subdivisions, and people shoving French fries into their mouths.

These sections on societal influences represent our current culture as over-consuming, and this over-consumption is read on the bodies of the children being conditioned in this society. According to Susan Bordo’s analysis of the body in capitalism, the obese body is the body of the subject that fails to control his/her consumptive desires when appropriate – most significantly, in the realm of production (2003, p. 199). Further, the subjectivity of the Other is linked to this kind of over-consuming behavior, for as I argue earlier, the Other is constructed as consuming irrationally, with little control over appetites and desires. Thus, I believe the blame placed on society in the television news programs on childhood obesity demonstrates a fear of the Other’s influence over consumer culture, suggesting that the irrational, excessive Other has too much power in shaping the conditions in which children are becoming subjects.

Although the news programs acknowledged socio-cultural influences on overweight children, the answer to the problem of our over-consuming society was not a change in culture, but in creating the right conditions for attaining a normative body size

within the family. Thus, Taylor's section on an over-consuming society is ended with an interview with Taylor's nutritionist, thus taking us right back into Taylor's story and the changes that can be made within the family to combat these cultural conditions that are making children overweight. Further, the detached, anonymous nature of this section signifies that the Taylor's weight loss process should be one guided by her family, not by changes made in society. The rest of Taylor's narrative weaves back and forth from the cultural conditions that have made Taylor fat and the individual changes that her family, not society, must do in order to help Taylor combat these conditions and lose weight.

Similarly, in "Generation XL," after the narrator tells us about how we live in an "obeseogenic society," we are led right back into the personal stories of TJ, Nanette, and Justin. The narrator tells us that as they leave camp and re-enter such an obesogenic culture, they each face their own personal challenges. For TJ, this challenge includes his mother moving to another state with her new boyfriend, thus leaving him with a lack of parental support for his weight loss process. Nanette's single mother works long hours and often isn't home to supervise her eating. And for Justin, he is going back to a house "filled with love – and food." Of course, Justin's white, middle class, two-parent family home "filled with love" is represented as the most ideal situation for weight loss, while the other two teenagers, with little parental support and their already non-ideal conditions of subjectivity saturated with the Other, are represented as the ones more likely to fail. This idea that Justin's family structure is more ideal for weight loss than TJ or Nanette's family is further supported by the narrator's constant commentary about how the family is the most important structure of support for a child attempting to lose weight.

### ***The Right Conditions for Losing Weight: Gender Balance, Race, and Class in the Family***

Nick, Brett, and Raymond are three white, middle class boys whose weight loss stories we hear as part of an hour-long CBS *48 Hours* special on obesity. Nick's story makes up the first half of the narrative, and he explicates the story of the weight loss process. Brett and Raymond, who are brothers, tell the second half of the narrative, and they demonstrate weight loss success. Nick goes through the weight loss process within a white, middle class, two-parent family. However, his mother is the primary caregiver of focus, as the father gets much less interview time. Because his narrative starts at the beginning of his weight loss process (e.g., when his parents began to recognize his weight as a problem), the show constructs some blame on his conditions of subjectivity for making him fat. In Nick's case, there is no mention of socio-cultural factors; instead, we hear his mother talking about feeding him rich, high-fat foods like crawfish etoufee and jambalaya. Because it is his mother, not his father, who talks about the foods that Nick ate to make him overweight, she is represented as the primary agent in Nick's overfeeding.

However, the cause of Nick's being overweight is of less concern in his story than the conditions that his family is creating for him to lose weight successfully. What is interesting is that in his section of the narrative, his mother is presented as the primary caregiver and thus the one primarily responsible for creating conditions in which he can lose weight. However, before we get to see whether Nick loses weight successfully, the narrative shifts to Brett and Raymond, two brothers who have already successfully lost weight. In Brett and Raymond's story, their father is represented as the primary caregiver. Thus, Brett and Raymond, with their two-parent background and strong



masculine influence within the family, are allowed to signify weight loss success, while Nick, with his strong feminine influence, is only allowed to signify the weight loss process. At the end, we very briefly see that Nick has succeeded in reaching a normative weight, so we do know that his normative conditions of subjectivity – his white, middle class, two-parent family – have allowed him to successfully lose weight. However, because his mother is the primary caregiver, he is not the ideal candidate for representing weight loss success. Instead, Brett and Raymond, who are shown to have a strong patriarchal figure to balance out their mother's feminine excess within the family, more clearly represent ideal conditions for weight loss: a family structure with a proper gender balance.

The idea that certain types of family structures were ideal for signifying weight loss success is also exemplified by Sydney and Taylor's narratives. Both of these girls were raised in single mother families and thus have strong feminine influences over their subjectivities and their bodies. At the end of their narratives, each of the girls has lost some weight – but neither is close to a normative weight. Like Nick, who has a strong feminine influence in his family structure, these girls are not ideal for signifying weight loss success. However, unlike Nick, who we see succeed in the end (albeit briefly), the issue of whether or not these girls ever reach a normative weight is left open in the narrative. Thus, the representation tells us that families with a feminine imbalance may create insufficient conditions in which children can lose weight. These children's conditions of subjectivity, because they lack a nuclear family structure with a strong patriarchal figure to balance out the mother's excess femininity, will potentially always be present on their excessive bodies.

For Angie, Gabi, and Lashena, the topic of their show demonstrates that these girls may never have the ideal conditions for weight loss. The news program is focused on them undergoing gastric bypass surgery in order to lose weight. As I have demonstrated above, these girls' abnormal conditions of subjectivity – their woman-led families, working class lifestyle and Lashena's black subjectivity - have been constructed as conditioning their excessive, out-of-control bodies. As the news show presents it, the only way that these girls can attain normative body types is through the removal of a large portion of their stomachs. It is this drastic measure that will make them physically unable to consume excessively as they are destined to do under their excessive conditions of subjectivity.

After Justin, TJ and Nanette all lose weight at camp, they are followed up at home to see if they have continued to lose weight. As the narrator tells us over and over again, a strong family unit is imperative for these kids if they are going to be successful in losing weight. In Justin's follow-up, he appears to be doing well. While he gains back a small amount of weight (ten pounds), he is eating healthy food, and his mom goes to great lengths to prepare healthy organic meals for their large family. His ideal conditions of subjectivity – his white, middle class, two-parent family – are represented as successfully creating conditions in which he can begin to lose weight. Nanette, however, appears to be gaining back all of her original weight. As we get an in-depth look at her home life, we see that she spends many hours unsupervised when her single mother is at work. Food even becomes a substitute for her mom's love and supervision as her mom drops her off at a bagel shop before school so she can get to work. Thus, the same conditions that are represented as making Nanette gain weight in the first place – her

single mother family – are also represented as making it almost impossible for her to lose weight. Without a strong father figure to control her mother’s excessive, irrational femininity, her conditions of subjectivity continue to be filled with a lack of control, conditions which are read on her continually excessive body.

In TJ’s follow-up, we learn that since his mother has abandoned him, he has spiraled into a life of excess. He has started drinking, going on “fast food binges,” smoking, and loitering in parking lots with fellow working class Latino friends. Before his mother left him, TJ was being conditioned into subjectivity by a mother with an excessive, out-of-control subject position. As the narrator points out early on in the show, TJ’s mother had also been overweight as a child. Thus, when she saw the need to comfort TJ during her divorce, she taught him the only coping mechanism she knew – eating. The raced and classed gender ideology that posits that TJ’s mother is an out-of-control subject who consumes excessively has also conditioned TJ’s own subjectivity. Thus, the only way that TJ knows how to address his current out-of-control life is to eat in a similarly out-of-control manner. His current conditions of subjectivity, filled with excess, are reflected on his body.

### ***Gender, Emotion, and the Overweight Child***

The idea that excessive consumption is related to excessive emotion is not just present in TJ’s story. Nanette is also presented as an overly emotional subject whose emotion is displayed on her body. Her psychological problems are constantly addressed in her story, as she visits various doctors and they put her on anti-depressants to stop her mood swings. The interviewer asks her mother, “Are there psychological issues because she’s overweight or is she overweight because of psychological issues?” Her mother

answers, “A little of both.” Thus, the representations connect out-of-control emotions with out-of-control consumption, positing that a deviant or abnormal psychological state results in an abnormal body on which society can read this abnormal psyche. Because TJ and Nanette are teenagers, they are closer to becoming full, autonomous subjects than their younger overweight counterparts. Thus, it is both their excessive conditions of subjectivity as well as their own subject positions that are visible on their bodies. Their parents have created conditions where they have emotional issues, and thus these teenagers’ irrational, overly-emotional psychological states can be read on their excessive, obese bodies.

Another news story on *Primetime Live* called “Teen Diaries” presents four overweight teenage girls who are represented as having psychological problems, and this representation gives us a glimpse at children who have almost completely developed into full subjectivity. While some of the girls’ families are featured, the focus is more on their excessive emotional state and their own subjectivities than the conditions of subjectivity that these families have created for their children to lose weight.

One of the girls featured on “Teen Diaries” is Hannah, a white, working class girl whose deeply troubled emotional state is highlighted throughout the show. We are introduced to the four girls through scenes of their video diaries. While the other girls are depicted in happy scenes of their home lives with family and friends, Hannah is shown sitting alone in a dark room at night, smoking and eating food she has hidden under her desk. There is also an entire section dedicated to Hannah’s sexual deviance, as she talks about how she traded sex for affection to feel better about herself.

Hannah is represented as her own full subject. Her parents are not featured, and she talks only about her own emotional issues without reference to any home life. She is, however, still represented as a 'teenager,' and thus we are left to question what her conditions of subjectivity may have been like for this girl who is so psychologically damaged. She is constructed as a white, working class girl who is overly emotional and wears this excess emotion on her obese body. More than any of the other representations of overweight children, we can see how her *own* abnormal subject position is displayed on her body, thus giving us a glimpse of what the future will be like for all other overweight kids developing within abnormal conditions of subjectivity. They, too, will develop into abnormal subjects, because their conditions of subjectivity and their overweight bodies have destined them to a life of excess and irrationality.

### ***A Fear of the Over-consuming Other: The Family and Society***

As evidenced by these news programs, the discourse surrounding childhood obesity articulates a fear about the conditions that are shaping children. These conditions are constructed as being saturated by the Other, as the Other's out-of-control appetites and desires are reflected on the bodies obese children. One of the 'causes' of childhood obesity cited by these programs is an over-consuming society, where excess consumption and lack of activity has created a culture that breeds obese children. I believe this media discourse about our over-consuming society expresses an underlying anxiety about the increasing power of the Other to define culture. Because the Other is constructed as an over-consuming subject, its increased visibility can be viewed by dominant social groups as threatening the delicate balance of production and consumption within capitalism. However, this anxiety over excessive consumption in society and the Others' power to

define culture is not expressed in the television news programs directly, since the primary narrative focus is the children's weight loss processes and society is not acknowledged as a factor in helping these children lose weight. Instead, the programs turn to the family as a medium for expressing fears about the saturation of the Other in society.

In a society where individualism is so rampant and the family is constructed as children's primary unit of socialization, socio-cultural causes for childhood obesity cannot ultimately be to blame. Therefore, the news programs fail to create any substantial link between society and the obese child or suggest possible socio-cultural changes that would help children lose weight. Thus, the discourse constructs the family as the as the only place where overweight kids can find the support they need to lose weight. However, if the family is saturated with the excessive, out-of-control, over-consuming subjectivity of the Other, it is represented as insufficient for successful weight loss. The single-mother family, constructed as pathological and filled with feminine excess, is visible on the children who both become fat subjects and/or fail to lose weight within these families. Non-white and poor or working class families who are constructed as excessive and having out-of-control appetites also produce fat children and/or cannot provide the ideal conditions for their children to lose weight. This representation of the Othered family as unable to guide kids through successful weight loss is a way to construct the pathological, deviant family and the Othered subjectivities within those families. Simultaneously, the representation allows for the expression of anxiety over the increased power of the Other and a fear that the Other will upset the producer/consumer balance so necessary in late capitalism with its over-consuming subjectivity. Thus, the 'moral panic' over childhood obesity allows for the displacement of the fear that the

over-consuming Other has too much power in defining culture and the family onto an issue of children's health and bodies.

## Conclusion

In conceptualizing this study, I utilized Foucault's definition of discourses as social "practices that systematically form the objects of which they speak" (Foucault 1972, p. 49). Discourses, instead of being a linguistic medium through which reality is reflected, produce social reality. My concern here was with the ways in which discourses produce certain subject positions and the ways in which these subjectivities are positioned within a field of power. According to Foucault, power works in modernity through "constituting subjectivities in particular ways, positioning people within discourses and subjecting them to normalizing judgments" (Malson 1998, p. 29). In this way, the construction of subjectivity through discourse is central to the functioning of power in modernity.

In the representations of overweight children in television news, subject positions that are constructed as deviant are connected to a body type that is also constructed as deviant or abnormal. In this way, an overweight body is connected to abnormal subjectivities, so that overweight subjects can display these abnormalities directly on their bodies. When children are the subjects with overweight bodies, it is not simply their subject positions that are being policed, but their conditions of subjectivity that are being policed. This includes, most importantly, the subject positions of their parents, who are presented as the ones creating conditions in which their children become full subjects.

One of the most significant subject positions constructed in the news programs is the gendered subjectivity of the mother. Due to gender ideology that posits a simple binary of masculine rationality and female irrationality, the mother is constructed as excessively feminine, out-of-control, and irrational. If children are being conditioned



into subjectivity within a family structure where this feminine excess is not balanced by an element of masculine control (such as a nuclear family structure with a strong patriarchal presence), the mother's excess femininity will be displayed on the child's body. In this way, an abnormal family structure, infused with the subjectivity of the Other (in the case, Woman as Other), is policed through its visibility on the body it produces.

This process of constructing the abnormal subject by connecting it to the production of an abnormal body also serves to support ideologies of race and class. Subject positions within families that produce and maintain the bodies of overweight children are represented as overwhelmingly non-white and working class. Because the body of the child represents excess and lack of control, and this body in part reflects the subject positions that produce that body, the non-white and working class subjectivities of the child's parents are also constructed as out-of-control and excessive. The non-normative subject positions of the child's parents can be policed because the abnormality of these positions is visible on the child's body.

I believe that childhood obesity as a moral panic allows for children's bodies to be used as a medium for the expression of larger social anxieties about the saturation of the Other in society. These bodies, as texts of children's conditions of subjectivity, display whether children are being raised within a normative or non-normative family structure, as well as if their parents are normative or non-normative subjects. But, as I have argued, the obese body does not just signify abnormal subjectivity; specifically, it signifies an over-consuming subjectivity associated with the excessive, out-of-control appetite of the Other who cannot control its desires in the realm of production. Thus, the panic

surrounding the obese child's body is an expression of fears that the conditions in which we live are being saturated with the subjectivity of the Other, a saturation that is ultimately a threat to the capitalist order. This might be even more frightening to dominant groups because children are constructed as 'the future,' and thus they represent a future society that may be even more heavily saturated by the subjectivity of the Other.

Additionally, articulating a fear of the Other through discourses on the family allows for a reinforcement of white, middle class hegemony. On the television news programs on childhood obesity, the fear of the over-consuming Other is presented as a fear that Othered families cannot provide ideal conditions in which children can lose weight. White, middle class, nuclear families, on the other hand, are represented as creating the appropriate haven for weight loss, even in the midst of an over-consuming society. Here, the 'normative' family – represented as a *white, middle class*, nuclear family – maintains its hegemony through the ideological practice of disidentification: constructing the Othered family as abnormal and incapable of conditioning children into proper subjects for capitalism.

The discursive focus on children's bodies masks the real issue at hand – that the discourse is still creating subject positions that will be subjected to normalizing judgments. As Foucault has shown us, power maintains itself in subtle, ever-shifting ways, as discourse constantly changes its strategy for maintaining a self-disciplining society.

### ***Limitations of the Study***

I would have liked to organize this paper somewhat differently. If I were to rewrite it, I would utilize the theory and literature review section as a framework for presenting the data, thus utilizing examples from the television news programs on childhood obesity to illustrate and explain my theoretical points. This, I believe, would allow me to demonstrate my theoretical ideas more clearly.

I also would have like to include more of my data in the findings/analysis section. In the interest of clarity, I did not cite every single example that I though would illustrate my theoretical points, but in doing this, felt as if the ‘voice’ of some of the data was silenced.

### ***Suggestions for Future Research***

I carefully delimited this study to look at the *discursive* production of subjectivity through an analysis of the representations of obese children and their families. Thus, my concern was with the ideological meaning *within* the texts and with uncovering these meanings through my analysis. An interesting future project might be to study audience reaction to these representations to understand the very ‘real’ affect that these representations have on shaping people’s understanding of the subject positions constructed in these discourses.

Additionally, I bypassed a material analysis of the cultural conditions that shape subjectivity, most notably Pierre Bourdieu’s ideas on bodies reflecting the real, material conditions in which they are produced. I did this because my concern was not with material reality, but with discursive representations. However, it might be interesting to examine the ways in which material conditions contribute to the formation of real subject

positions, and in turn how these subject positions become produced and reproduced in discursive representations. There is, of course, a reflexive relationship between discourses of materiality and discursive representations, and thus to examine this relationship might reveal a more complex picture of the discursive production of subjectivity.

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## Vita

Elise Chatelain was born on September 15, 1979 in the town of Madisonville, Louisiana. Growing up in this small town of 800 people, she longed to experience the outside world, and did so through extensive reading. She became fascinated by variations in American culture when reading books about fellow pre-teens in other regions of the United States, such as *The Babysitters' Club* and *Sweet Valley Twins* (which featured girls in the Northeast and California, respectively). These explorations into other cultures led her to examine her own surroundings more closely, thus planting the seeds for her future sociological inquiries.

In 1997, Elise attended Whittier College in Whittier, California, a decision that was only slightly influenced by the sun-filled images of the *Sweet Valley Twins* series. There, she found her true calling – critical theory – and bypassed the beach for Marx and Marcuse. She graduated in 2001 with her B.A. in sociology and moved back to Louisiana, this time choosing the somewhat more populated city of New Orleans. There, she spent two years waiting tables before attending the University of New Orleans in the fall of 2003 to obtain her M.A. in sociology.

After receiving her M.A., Elise will resume her career as a waitress until she returns to graduate school to pursue her Ph.D. She would like find a program in California and hopes that this time, she might go to the beach more often.