Big Losers: The Rhetorical Vision of the Weight Loss Narrative

SONYA C. BROWN

The Biggest Loser, an NBC reality program in which fat people compete to see who can lose the largest body fat percentage and win $250,000 and the title of "Biggest Loser," has enjoyed popular success since 2004. German, Mexican, Dutch, and Australian imitations are now in production, and the show's imitators abound, including Lifetime's "Diet Tribe" and VH1's "Celebrity Fit Club." These shows's popularity demonstrates widespread belief in the importance of maintaining a thin physique. While valorizing lean physiques, the shows mortify fat participants for the entertainment of millions of viewers.

Television, however, accounts for but a fraction of media chronicling individuals's weight loss. Published accounts of weight loss have featured in advertisements, periodicals, and book-length works for well over four decades, while face-to-face confessionals are mainstays of group meetings at organizations like *Weight Watchers*. Whether rehearsed in a magazine or video confessional online, the story's features and central arguments remain the same: a miserable fat person engages in a weight loss effort and, if successful, emerges thinner, stronger both mentally and physically, and therefore ready to enjoy social advantages never previously experienced.

Despite the omnipresence of this genre, the attention paid to "the body" in scholarship in the last few decades, and to fat bodies in particular (See Bordo and LeBesco for examples), the weight loss narrative itself has received little critical attention. The seemingly infinite rehearsals of this story are based on a shared set of beliefs about

The Journal of Popular Culture, Vol. 47, No. 1, 2014

connections between body and mind, conforming to what Ernest G. Bormann describes as a "rhetorical vision."

Bormann's research in small group communication demonstrates the motivating power of "fantasy themes," stories group members create together that may be purely imaginative, or may be based on shared or similar previous experiences, or plans intended to be enacted in the future. Bormann extrapolated that these dramas, or "fantasy themes," in small groups were analogous to stories shared in larger cultural groups. He dubbed "fantasy themes" shared in large cultural groups, "rhetorical visions" (Bormann 398). (Re)tellings of the story can provoke powerful empathy and motivation in vast audiences, leading audience members to re-enact the story and share it once more in a cycle.

The Subway advertisements featuring Jared Fogle, who lost 245 pounds eating Subway's low-fat sandwiches, exemplify how one person's weight loss narrative "chains out," to use Bormann's phrase. Fogle's success, touted in advertisements a decade ago, inspired others. Later ads showed *those people's* weight loss: they were depicted literally following Fogle en route to a Subway. Fogle's narrative was then retold in newspapers and magazines as articles, *not overtly as advertisements for Subway*. He has also appeared on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and in the documentary *Super Size Me*. Subway maintains a link to "Jared's Incredible Story" on its "All About Jared" webpage, which invites readers to submit their success stories (All about Jared). Fogle's well-known weight loss story has even been spoofed by Comedy Central's *South Park*.

Similarly, the winners of *The Biggest Loser* have their stories told, not just on prime time television, but also in other, often synergistic, media. The 2006 winner of *The Biggest Loser*, Michelle Aguilar, was covered by popular magazines, including *Us Weekly,* whose January 5, 2009 headline read: "Half My Size! Wow! The Winner of *The Biggest Loser* Reveals How You Can Do It, Too." The article details Aguilar's weight loss, and also her mother's (not depicted on the show), and describes how the previous "Biggest Loser" has maintained her weight loss (Davis 42–7). The show's Web site (http://www.nbc.com/the-biggest-loser) allows people to obtain an account, track their own weight, get advice from others, and share their success stories.

Why does losing weight have such bandwagon appeal? In part, because it depends on widespread, shared prejudice against fat people,

and prejudice in favor of bodies with limited apparent fat.[1] Such values resonate with health literature that suggests that fat is an avoidable health risk that, by being a risk factor for many diseases (such as adult onset diabetes, heart ailments, and some cancers), often leads to early death. It should be noted, however, that recent examinations of medical evidence makes things less clear on the causes of, and the risks of, fatness (See Kolata, Bacon). For example, a controversial 2005 study led by CDC researcher Katherine Flegal, published in *JAMA*, suggested that, contrary to expectations, a BMI that falls into the "overweight" category does not necessarily correlate to higher risk of mortality than that of "normal" weight, whereas "underweight" may. Higher risk of mortality, according to the same study, was also not associated with "obesity" until BMI was extremely elevated. According to the Flegal study, those categorized as "overweight" had lower mortality rates than those in the "normal" category.

Despite continued debate over the potential health threats of "overweight" and "obesity" within the medical community, however, health does not appear to be the only or even the main motive for weight loss according to the narratives themselves. Instead, analysis of these narratives reveals that an overwhelming number of weight loss narrative authors and subjects have social motives, such as fear of or experience of rejection or criticism for weights loss. Essentially, then, the antifat health and fitness message provides a virtuous but disputed grounding for antifat prejudice that makes social interaction more difficult for fat persons than for those whose bodies appear to be a normal weight or underweight; weight loss efforts are, according to the narratives of those who have undertaken them, often made primarily for aesthetic and/or social reasons.

The weight loss narrative contains first a synopsis of what it is like to be fat (the "before" portion). A shared belief of the before section, expressed succinctly by Kathleen LeBesco, is that fat bodies are "revolting," in both senses of that word: rebellious bodies and disgusting bodies (i–ii). The bodies rebel against social norms and against the subject's desire to manifest adherence to those social norms by controlling the body's contours and size. Thus, the first section of narrative compels readers to endorse the subject's decision to lose weight through its negative or pitiable portrayal of the former fat self. Typically, a "turning point" moment leads to a decision to lose weight and the selection of a methodology. The "after" portion

consists of a brief but glowing synopsis of the new, thinner self's successes and aspirations. The "after" portrait of the thin "self" suggests that thin bodies are Foucauldian "docile bodies." They (appear to) express disciplined behaviors related to activity and appetite, and (appear to) avoid "sins" such as gluttony and sloth; thus, they are rewarded with social acceptance and other life successes.

Surveys and studies spanning forty years of American culture reveal aversions to fat people that suggest that the social motives described in these narratives are not imagined. Psychology Press's 2009 *Handbook of Prejudice* includes "antifat bias." Studies of school children show that overweight children have fewer friends and are less liked than thinner peers (Lerner; Lerner & Gellert; Penick and Stunkard; Solovay 47–63). A 1995 study by Sitton and Blanchard showed that "obese" women were perceived by men as less desirable for romantic relationships than thinner drug addicts. Fat persons receive slower attention from salespeople (Paulery) and often less adequate medical treatment (Joanisse and Synnott; Solovay 189–209), and suffer workplace discrimination (Baum; Register and Williams; Solovay 99–121). A 2003 study by Hebl and Mannix in *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* showed aversion to fat people and even thin people associated with them. Study participants evaluated a male job applicant by examining a strong résumé and one of two photographs. In one, the man sat beside a woman who wore a size 8—in the other, next to the same woman in a prosthetic fat suit making her a size 22. When seen with the thinner woman, the man scored better on likeability, enthusiasm, projecting a corporate image, earning potential, and professional ethics.

Rhetorical Vision: Control the Body, Control the Life

The rhetorical vision of this genre privileges apparent control/discipline over healthfulness in part by equating the body's external appearance as sign of adherence to social norms, sending the social message that the self contained within the body is disciplined (as opposed to "revolting"). The narrative rarely focuses on health measures other than size and sometimes body composition (percentage of body fat); blood pressure, blood sugar levels, and so on, are ignored.

The rhetorical vision that controlling the size and shape of the body is the same as controlling the life overall is implicit or explicit

in most success stories. Bill Phillips articulates this mind-body equation in his 1999 best seller, *Body for Life*: "When you gain control of your body, you will gain control of your LIFE" (emphasis his). An inability to control the body's size and shape, reciprocally, is a sign of inability to control other aspects of life:

> . . .I firmly believe that a strong, healthy mind resides in a strong, healthy body. That, my friends, is a fact. When I see men and women who are out of shape, I see lives not fully lived. I see lost potential. I see people who need someone to help them realize they *can* look and feel better. That's what I see. . . .I just don't believe that anyone in this world sets out on a journey to become fat and unhealthy, just as no one decides to become lonely or poor. What happens is. . .slowly and gradually, without even being aware of it, we give up. . . .When people let go of their bodies, it is, quite simply, the beginning of the end. (Phillips, 2)[2]

Phillips's "Body for Life" contests and related publications maintain a weight loss corporate empire, with follow-up books published in 2005 and 2008 written by other authors for target audiences who might have felt excluded by the bodybuilding-oriented program in the original.[3]

Oprah Winfrey's story at the beginning of Bob Greene's 1996 best seller, *Make the Connection: Ten Steps to a Better Body—And a Better Life*, provides evidence of the efficacy of the titular "ten steps." The narrative begins with Winfrey at an awards show, feeling awkward in a skirt that is "much too short for a fat woman" (1). Winfrey wins, but her belief in the mind–body connection Phillips's describes makes the award a moment of defeat:

> I was 237 pounds, the fattest I'd ever been. The weight was consuming me. Even at what was supposed to be one of the most fulfilling and rewarding moments in my life. . .all I could think about was how fat I was. . . .I felt so much like a loser, like I'd lost control of my life. And the weight was symbolic of how out-of-control I was. I was the fattest woman in the room. (1–2)

Winfrey, notorious for regaining and relosing weight,[4] went through a third public cycle in 2007–2009. Throughout 2007, "as [she] dealt with emotional and medical issues, the number on the scale began to creep closer to 200" ("Oprah's Weight Loss Confes-

sion's"). In January, 2009, Winfrey posed on the cover of *O* magazine, contrasting her 200-pound body with the leaner body she had flaunted three years earlier, asking "How Did I Let This Happen?" Winfrey frequently verbalizes the body–mind equation: "money, fame and success don't mean anything if you can't control your own being. 'It doesn't mean anything if you can't fit into your clothes,' she says. 'It means the fat won. It means you didn't win. . . . I am mad at myself. I am embarrassed.'"

Ryan Kirby's 2000 remarks on his weight loss venture in *Men's Fitness* also echo Phillips's description of the body-mind relationship:

> Over the past few years, I've uncovered the solid, sturdy structure of a life that had been buried by low self-esteem and lack of conviction. I'd long known what I wanted my body and my life to resemble, but reaching that particular promised land always seemed beyond my capacity: The tone and definition I longed for escaped me despite what I thought were my best efforts. But in the two years [since], I've become happier and more content than ever. (111)

Kirby's narrative intrigues for the synecdochal tangle in his assertion that he was searching for "tone and definition," and his success in uncovering a "solid, sturdy structure." Either statement could equally describe physical or mental states. For Kirby and the other writers, failing to achieve visible muscular "tone and definition" indicates that "tone and definition" are lacking in the other, less tangible areas.

Finally, a "Success Story" published on *BodyforLife.com* provides another resoundingly happy outcome to a weight loss venture:

> The main reward for Amy has been becoming the person she wanted to be—feeling vibrant, strong and alive, and being at peace with herself. "Knowing that I did this for myself and that it was my own hard work that made achieving it possible is a great reward. I respected myself enough to set this goal and complete it." After completing the Challenge, Amy graduated college with magna cum laude honors, and knows that she can make all her dreams come true.

It remains unclear whether she was working on her college degree while participating in the Body for Life Challenge, or whether her

achievement of such honors was motivated by newfound confidence after weight loss. Such obscurity seems deliberate; *after* weight loss is when the important life successes must happen if the narrative structure is to be preserved, a narrative structure that suggests that "Amy," while fat was incapable of such achievements. Such a bias resonates with antifat prejudice that fat persons are lazy or incompetent (revolting/rebellious).

Weight Loss Motives

In this genre, the reasons subjects became fat and the reasons they wanted to lose weight intertwine. Such intertwining—that so many motives coalesce in favor of a single act—explains part of the genre's rhetorical power: sharing many aspects of the rhetorical vision affects readers more powerfully than sharing few.

Again, the assumption inherent in the rhetorical vision that losing weight or getting thinner is physically and mentally healthy does, of course, have medical research behind it. Yet despite such virtuous grounding, narratives rarely feature health as the central motive described—and many weight loss narratives include descriptions of behaviors that are dubiously healthful. For example, vivid, repeatedly shown scenes from *The Biggest Loser* 2008–2009 series show contestants working out 6–8 hours a day for two weeks; some lose more than fifteen pounds in the first week; some are shown regurgitating (one woman into a wastebasket and one man out of a window) before resuming their workouts. The show is not alone in promoting methods of doubtful healthfulness. The *Skinny Bitch* books by Rory Freedman and Kim Barnouin advocate a vegan diet providing fewer than 1000 calories per day, but eating <1200 per day is rarely advised by health professionals. While these behaviors venture beyond what is "healthful," *Biggest Loser* contestants are praised for their commitment to weight loss, while Freedman and Barnouin scold those unable to subsist on such meager fare as "lazy" and "weak." While Phillips says, "a strong, healthy mind resides in a strong, healthy body," these works imply the health of the body is less important than its external appearance.

The Social Motive

Perhaps the primary motive for weight loss is real or feared ostracism. On the first episode of season seven on *The Biggest Loser,* contestants Daniel and Kristin remark separately having been chosen last for team sports and other activities. Many subjects say they felt ostracized by potential romantic partners, or reluctant to visit gyms or clubs where they expected antifat bias. Aguilar, in a *Us Weekly* interview, says, "I've always worked with a lot of guys, but I feel like probably they're now like, 'Hey, there's Michelle. Oh, hey, *there's Michelle*. I never noticed her before!'" (emphasis hers, Davis 47).

"William," whose story was chosen as one of five "Inspiring Stories" for 2008 by *WeightWatchers.com*, expresses how being a fat man affected his social life:

> Despite my size then, I've always been active. From my college years and beyond, many people were surprised by my strength and ability to walk most anywhere, carrying the weight. This shaped my identity as the active jolly fat guy of the group. I felt compelled to be entertaining, energetic, able to drink large quantities of alcohol and would frequently treat my friends to food and drinks. I was one of those happy-go-lucky people on the outside but confined to a private restricted world in which I knew I was different and felt undesirable. ("Reaping the Rewards")

"William" struggles to adapt to expectations based on his size, even linking some potentially unhealthful behaviors he engaged in while fat to his sense of fulfilling stereotypes, suggesting that fat bias is a self-fulfilling prophecy. (The "jolly fat guy" is an alternative identity to the depressed and lazy (revolting) fat person.)

Nikki Rutherford was motivated to lose weight when she was insulted by a stranger:

> [She] was on the bus on her way to work when she heard the cruel words: "You're too fat to share a seat." She stared in horror at the man who'd said them, then burst into tears. "When I got off the bus I said to myself, 'No one is EVER going to say that to me again,' and that was the start of everything. I was very, very upset at the time but now I wish I could meet that man again and thank him, because without him this might never have happened."
>
> (Rutherford)

In this genre, a fat person's real world and imagination are panopticon-like, peopled by witnesses to their crime of being fat. Critics are encouraged because the leaner subject is ultimately rewarded by social acceptance.

Many subjects assume that readers or viewers already have an anti-fat attitude and therefore list few or no motives but their size. The result is an "I was fat so I wanted to lose weight" motivation.[5] Though other measurements are often provided, like Body Mass Index (BMI), narratives typically focus on weight or clothing size:

> As a 10-year-old, I weighed 190 pounds. In seventh grade, I was 235. By my sophomore year of high school, I weighed 300 pounds, and on the day I graduated, I tipped the scales at 345. By February 1994, I weighed an eye- and button-popping 455 pounds. The circumference of my waist (five feet) was closing in on my height (six feet two). (Demangone 60)

> Janice gained a whopping 80 pounds while pregnant, and after her son Brandon was born she gained 10 more, bringing her up to 220. (Latvala, "From Hefty" 62)

> Tami, who's a petite 5'3", has weighed as much as 160 pounds. And although that was obviously too much for her small frame, she had begun to accept being overweight as her fate. (Greer 64)

> When her size 16 jeans got tight, Jen stopped buying new clothes, wearing makeup and looking at herself in the mirror. (Kramer 132)

Verbal stress is added in written narratives with adjectives: Demangone's weight is "eye- and button-popping," Janice's is "whopping," and Tami's is "obviously too much." On television programs, weigh-ins emphasize this tautological motive. *The Biggest Loser* weighs contestants throughout the contest. The camera zooms to contestants's and trainers's faces as pounds are calculated sluggishly on large screens beside the contestants's bodies. Contestants appear stricken with anxiety, the trainers with shock and dismay, during and after the calculations. Contestants frequently weep during initial weigh-ins, before weight loss begins. "Confessionals" often depict

them weeping copiously and describing the experience—both of being fat and being weighed—as humiliating.

Though contestants on *The Biggest Loser* have gotten progressively heavier with the beginning of each new season, often in these narratives it seems that perceived "overweight" has the same effects regardless of actual weight or fatness. Above, for example, having clothes perceived as large become too tight causes Jennifer Spivey to stop caring for her appearance in other ways, though American size 16 is not considered a special "plus size." As Susan Powter writes:

> "There is no difference between an extra 10 pounds of fat on someone's body or an extra 100 pounds." That's a big statement coming from an ex-260-pound woman who had to face changing a very fat, unfit body instead of just losing a couple of pounds. Physically there's a big difference. Emotionally it seems to be exactly the same. (23)

Many narratives, like Powter's in her 1993 best seller, *Stop the Insanity,* overtly stress the motive of becoming more attractive and practically dismiss health concerns altogether:

> Forget your health. . ..I didn't lose 133 pounds to have a healthy heart. My motivation was to look better than my ex-husband's girlfriend, and my motivation now is to look and feel the way I want to look and feel. Getting healthy is a side effect. . .. Do it for your thighs. Do it to feel sexy and pretty. Do it to spite all the people who think you can't. (15)

An advertisement for Nutrisystem in *Fitness* magazine, featuring the weight loss narrative of Jillian Reynolds, suggests that by "losing 20 lbs. in 8 weeks!" readers will "Look amazing in shorts, sundresses, tank tops, even [their] bikinis." The only possible allusion to good health is a reference to the program providing "good carbs and high fiber to help you *feel fuller longer.*" While "good carbs and high fiber" are typically recommended in a diet plan, the goal here seems to be preventing additional eating.

Another weight loss success story that particularly highlights the superior aesthetic quality of the leaner body is that of well-known fashion designer for Chanel, Karl Lagerfeld. Of his weight loss motives, he writes:

> One morning I woke up and didn't like my looks any longer. I wanted to dress differently. . ..
> I decided to become a perfect 135-pound, five-foot 11-inch hanger. My desire to lose weight was only about clothes—not about health problems or because I wanted to be more attractive to others. I admit my reasoning is considered superficial by some, but I think fashion—for women as well as for men—is the healthiest motivation for losing weight. What is important is that you take the superficial and use it in a creative, productive and finally self-preserving way. (130)

The healthy effects, then, were for Lagerfeld less goals than fortuitous byproducts, much as they are for Powter. Intriguingly, at one point in the article quoted above, he suggests that one should not "diet because [one] want[s] to change [one's] life," yet three paragraphs later, he says, "Take your time; *there is no deadline for a new life*!" (emphasis his, 131). It is as if the change-your-body-change-your-life rhetorical vision overrides Lagerfeld's desire to refute it.

Each subject typically describes a turning point, such as trying on multiple outfits that do not fit (Bollinger 58). These moments of revelation can also be prompted by mirrors, mirror substitutes such as windows and photographs, especially when the unprepared subject happens upon them. Laura J. Hansen-Brown writes: "My turning point came when I saw photos from my sister's wedding and didn't even recognize myself. I looked overweight and out of shape. Pictures don't lie and I realized I needed help" (126).[6]

When success stories cite a visual image as a turning point, the subject's mental self-image and physical appearance in the photographs are different. The fat body thus appears somehow both not real and too real. The subjects had perceived themselves as thinner, a point that gives the lie to the assertion that fat people feel out of control *before* they literally see themselves as fat. In these examples, the visual representation of fatness surprises the subject, and the unexpected image *causes* an out of control feeling that motivates toward weight loss. For instance:

> Susan Koegel thought her June 1999 wedding was perfect—until she got the pictures back from the photographer. "I almost didn't recognize myself," says [Susan]. At 257 pounds, Susan knew that she was overweight, but it took seeing a photo of herself in a tight bridal gown to jolt her into action. "I realized there was a whole

> different person underneath all those extra pounds—and at that moment I decided I would try and find her." (Latvala, "I'll Never," 27)

Mirrors sometimes function in the same way as photographs. As Janice Clayton says, "One day, I looked in the mirror and said, 'How in the world did I let this happen? This is not me'" (Latvala "From Hefty" 64). Le'a Kent's analysis of the persuasive effects of the "before" photograph that always accompanies this portion of narrative is compelling: "In this scenario the self, the person, is presumptively thin, and cruelly jailed in a fat body. The self is never fat. To put it bluntly, there is no such thing as a fat *person*. The before-and-after scenario both consigns the fat body to an eternal past and makes it bear the full horror of embodiment, situating it as that which must be cast aside for the self to truly come into being" (135).

Many self-help weight loss programs insist that there are hidden or subconscious reasons people choose to be(come) fat. In other words, they deliberately choose to appear to others as "revolting." Although they are not aware of the hidden reasons they sabotage their conscious desire to appear attractive. These hidden reasons must be revealed before they can lose weight. One example comes from the famous book, *Fat Is a Feminist Issue*, by Susie Orbach, first published in 1978 and reprinted with its sequel in 1997. In this *Anti-Diet Guide for Women*, Orbach suggests women may subconsciously choose to be fat to avoid sexual attention from men, be seen as equals in the workplace, or assert their right to take up space: "Fat is a symbolic rejection of the limitations of women's role, an adaptation that many women use in the burdensome attempt to pursue their individual lives within the proscriptions of their social function" (27-28). Likewise, Phillip C. McGraw, known popularly as "Dr. Phil," identifies several key factors necessary for long-term weight loss, including a need to assess psychological patterns that make people overeat. In an issue of *O*, McGraw uses "Sandra" to highlight such a pattern:

> Sandra, a former patient of mine, was a clear example. At 5'2" and 195 pounds, she professed to be desperate to lose weight. Consciously, she hated her appearance and feared for her life, knowing she was at high risk for a heart attack or stroke. Yet despite repeated attempts at dieting, she would put the weight back on every time she got close to her goal. It was clear to me that Sandra

> was getting some kind of payoff for this self-sabotage. Somehow, some way, she unconsciously felt uncomfortable giving up her obesity. . ..[After discussing how her uncle molested her] Sandra and I began to see that remaining overweight insulated her from the opposite sex. (236)

Stories like this are fascinating from a rhetorical perspective. They certainly conform to LeBesco's description of fat bodies exhibiting an intent to "revolt" or "rebel" by becoming "revolting"/repulsive to the opposite sex or at least appearing to "revolt" against the heteronormative assumption that women who wish to attract men will maintain a particular desirable shape, which is currently thin. Explaining that people, primarily women, may be using fat as a means of self-preservation and/or self-expression may give those people a sense that, however unconsciously, they have been "in control" all along, building a sense of agency that can be channeled into weight loss efforts. Yet such "hidden" motives simultaneously suggest that the fat person/woman is, indeed, very much "out of control," unaware that they had been sabotaging their own weight loss goals (and, thanks to the mind–body connection, their social/life goals simultaneously) the whole time.

Health: Fear of Death

While many narratives mention health concerns peripherally, if they mention them at all, there are subjects whose primary cited motive was to improve their health or longevity, including Jerry and Estella, a team of contestants who were the oldest ever accepted on *The Biggest Loser* in season seven. They note that they want to live long enough to enjoy their grandchildren. In fact, Jerry is rushed to the hospital after the first workout of the contest.[7] His emergency treatment seems to highlight, for both contestants and viewers of the show, the serious health concerns being unfit may cause. (The obvious assumption made by this show is that fat persons can never also be fit, although contestants with obvious body fat remaining at the end of the program are shown engaged in strenuous exercise for hours at a time.)

Similar fear of death is recorded in narratives by Kevin M. McKinney and John Wells, both published by *Men's Fitness*, who begin

weight loss at disparate weights, yet list similarly severe health threats. McKinney writes of his before stage, at nearly 400 pounds: "At age 30 I was a borderline diabetic and I was suffering from hypertension that required daily medication. The prospect of death didn't frighten me as much as living with the blindness or the loss of limbs that diabetes can bring. And it was all due to my weight" (93). Wells writes:

> A routine visit to my doctor showed that, even though I was only about 30 pounds overweight at 187 (still porky enough to fit the clinical description of an "obese" person), I had extremely high serum-cholesterol levels—I was over the 255 mark, and my "bad" LDL cholesterol was way up there. . . .my doctor got pretty blunt. . . "John," he said, "you're on a fast track for a heart attack by the time you're 40." The words hit me like a sledgehammer. (98)

Often, as in these two passages, when health is cited as a primary motive, the revelation that subjects' weight (and presumably related eating and exercising habits) threatens their health is delivered by a doctor. Curiously, however, doctors themselves rarely supply weight loss methods. This narrative trait may have less to do with actual doctor visits than with the commercial aspect of the genre, as weight loss success stories appear within other publications that benefit financially by being the method selected by the genre's readers.

Weight gain caused by pregnancy, injury, and illness also often tie weight loss motives to regaining physical health—though as the following excerpts from narratives suggest, these motives intertwine significantly with the desire to regain control of both and with social motives for weight loss.

Many women are encouraged to gain between 25 and 35 pounds during pregnancy to have a healthy infant. However, weight loss narrative subjects who complain about pregnancy-related weight often gain many more pounds during pregnancy than recommended, such as Janice Clayton's 80-pound pregnancy gain. The difficulty of losing this weight, even several years after giving birth, especially if the woman has another child before returning to prebaby weight, is often cited. Often the woman who is the subject of the narrative explains how she felt obligated to achieve her former slenderness out of concern for being attractive to her husband, or to be a role model or

active parent for her children. For instance, *WeightWatchers.com* features a story by "Cathy," who writes:

> After the birth of my second child my husband sat me down to express his concern about my health. He was clear about the fact that he loved me and didn't care about what I weighed, but hoped that I would make an effort to be more active and make healthier choices in my life. It was then that I realized at the rate I was going I might not be there for my kids one day. I also felt that my husband was getting the raw end of the deal in our marriage. I definitely wasn't the woman he married and he probably never in a million years thought that I could ever get to more than 100 pounds overweight. (Easy Does It)

Although "Cathy" repeatedly assures readers that her husband's goal in speaking to her about her weight was motivated by concern for her health rather than for her attractiveness, her narrative dedicates more space to her fear of disappointing his expectations than it does to her own concern over her health.

Injury and illness feature as often as pregnancy as reasons for weight gain. One example of this is Lynn Lingenfelter's success story, published in Phillips's *Body for Life*. Lingenfelter, infected with HIV through a blood transfusion after an accident in 1983, writes:

> "I basically dropped out of life. I was in denial, then I was angry, then I hit rock bottom. I was very depressed. I'd sleep 15 hours a day. Sometimes I wouldn't leave the house for a week. I drank beer and ate junk food and watched a lot of TV. In no time at all, Lynn ballooned to 230 pounds. He tried stemming the tide, but there was no stopping it. (Phillips & D'Orso 7)

His depression and subsequent self-isolation and unhealthful eating are caused by his disease and fear of imminent death, but the symptom of weight gain rapidly becomes a cause of still more depression and sense of defeat/being out of control. Similarly, Stephanie Adams, in her narrative published in *Fitness*, entitled, "I Beat Cancer and Got My Body Back," describes enduring a mastectomy in her twenties, chemotherapy, reconstructive surgery and radiation, accompanied by a weight gain of twenty pounds. She says "it was a struggle to get through the day," but it remains unclear exactly how weight gain causes her understandable difficulty (Mantica 58). Such a

conflation of quite different physical obstacles (chemotherapy vs. weight gain) is typical of weight loss narratives that feature illness or injury.

Pregnancy, injury, and illness *do* cause people to be/feel less in control of their bodies, and may cause them to be less active, require steroids, and so forth, which might contribute to weight gain. Because each can contribute at times to weight gain and the subject's perception she/he is physically out of control, the narratives merge weight gain with being "out of control." The genre—and those who publish it to inspire people to purchase weight loss and fitness products—benefits from the collation. The perception that fat people are out of control does not depend on unilateral causality. What is stressed is that weight loss is the route to resuming control.

Conclusions

This genre is powerfully motivating precisely because the myriad advantages of being thin in contemporary culture are already obvious to most of the culture's participants. The genre provides a vehicle for viewers/readers to confirm potential antifat bias: millions watch shows like *The Biggest Loser* and read magazines and books on fitness, seeking stories of people like themselves who lost any quantity of weight and gained everything else. The genre essentializes individual experiences into routine patterns while offering readers enough variation to accommodate individual experience, crossing ethnic and social class lines.[8]

Publishers whose magazines promote weight loss via these narratives are selling their own magazine and the products endorsed therein. Similarly, *The Biggest Loser*'s advertisers have rampant product placement on the show—everything from water filters to chewing gum apparently supports weight loss. The fact that this genre helps generate billions in sales of weight loss products and services means that its content and structure are unlikely to deviate without massive evidence that, not only is it possible to be both fat and healthy (evidence which is already accumulating), but more importantly that fat persons no longer face prejudice in their daily lives. If, as Foucault suggests in *Discipline and Punish*, publicly punishing one criminal aims to prevent others from committing the crime, these narratives

threaten readers/viewers by showing them what others who were fat suffered before reforming themselves.

The rhetorical vision of the weight loss success story is not illogical. Fat people living in a culture in which fat is perceived as a physical sign of mental flaws *are* likely to experience prejudicial treatment, causing them to feel aberrant, unsuccessful, and unhappy; wish to escape that state; endeavor to lose weight; and, if successful, find that success leads to greater feelings of self-efficacy and less experience of prejudice. Yet people inclined to believe fat people are depressed and "out of control" will, in these narratives, find ample evidence for that prejudice, rather than for the plausible argument that the prejudice fat people endure becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy on a cultural scale. Meanwhile, the practical invisibility of fat people in media *other than* weight loss narratives (or as butts of jokes) suggests that fat people are, indeed, socially insignificant.

Learning you are fat leads to learning how to behave like a "fat person;" learning how to be thin after being fat would require another role change, the adoption of an altered identity (Degher and Hughes). Becoming thin after being fat would probably change one's life—but perhaps not for exactly the reasons indicated by the weight loss success story.

Notes

1. An exception to the "less is more" rule may apply to female breasts.
2. It is intriguing that antifat bias seems to lead to fat persons having less social and financial opportunity, and Phillips equates fatness as being as undesirable as being "lonely" and "poor."
3. Phillips' own follow-up book was published in 2010.
4. As she did in 1988 (prior to working with Greene), when she lost a large quantity of weight on the Optifast program.
5. Contrast this belief, which may seem "natural," to the title of Marilyn Wann's pioneering work of fat acceptance, *Fat! So?*
6. An interesting statement considering that two-dimensional images, like photographs, in fact do not show the body as is but rather tend to enlarge the body slightly.
7. This first workout is unsupervised. Most contestants perform at low intensity, but Jerry is highly motivated throughout the season until his expulsion from the show for not losing enough weight. (His teammates agonized over rejecting him, and in fact, their reason for expelling him over another contestant is their belief that Jerry will continue to lose weight on his own precisely because he is so highly motivated—they are proved correct.) Jerry possibly exercises too vigorously considering his age and fitness level. This is another example of the show's failure to encourage healthy behavior in its quest to provide evidence for antifat bias.

8. Although diverse attitudes toward fat exist in American subcultures, these narratives feature people of diverse ethnicities without altering the rhetorical vision. The narratives also ignore sexualities other than heterosexuality.

Works Cited

"All about Jared." Official Subway Restaurant Website. 2009a. 25 Feb. 2009. Web.

Bollinger, Caroline. "Real Life Success Story." *Prevention* Jul. 2008: 57–58. Print.

Bormann, Ernest G. "Fantasy and Rhetorical Vision: The Rhetorical Criticism of Social Reality." *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 58 (1972): 396–407. Print.

Davis, Carolyn E. "Biggest Loser: Half My Size!" *Us Weekly*. 5 Jan. 2009. Print.

Degher, Douglas, and Gerald Hughes. "The Adoption and Management of a Fat Identity." *Interpreting Weigh; The Social Management of Fatness and Thinness*. Eds. Jeffrey Sobal and Donna Maurer. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1999. 11–28. Print.

Demangone, Joseph. "The Better Half" *Men's Fitness* Sept. 1996: 60–61. Print.

"Easy Does It." *WeightWatchers.com*. 9 Nov. 2009. Web.

"Extra Pounds Can Weigh Down Your Career." Businessweek 3010 1987: 96. *Business Source Complete*. Web. 17 Mar. 2014.

Flegal, Katherine, Barry I. Graubard, David F. Williamson, and Mitchell H. Gail. "Excess Deaths Associated With Underweight, Overweight, and Obesity." *Journal of the American Medical Association* 293.15 (2005): 1861–67. Print.

Freedman, Rory, and Kim Barnouin. *Skinny Bitch*. Philadelphia: Running Press, 2005.

Greer, Jennifer. "Model Behavior." *Weight Watchers*. May. 1999: 64. Print.

Hansen-Brown, Laura J. *Shape*. Jul. 2000: 126. Print.

Hebl, Michelle R., and Laura M. Mannix. "The Weight of Obesity in Evaluating Others: A Mere Proximity Effect." *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin* 29.1 (2003): 28–38. Print.

Joanisse, Leanne, and Anthony Synnott. "Fighting Back: Reactions and Resistance to the Stigma of Obesity." *Interpreting Weight: The Social Management of Fatness and Thinness*. Eds. Jeffrey Sobal and Donna Maurer. New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 1999. 57–58. Print.

Kent, Le'a. "Fighting Abjection: Representing Fat Women." *Bodies Out of Bounds: Fatness and Transgression*. Eds. Jana E. Braziel and

Kathleen LeBesco. Berkeley: U of California P, 2001. 130–51. Print.

Kirby, Ryan. "Resurrection" *Men's Fitness* Jan. 2000: 110–11. Print.

Kramer, Pamela S. "Goodbye Size 14, Hello Size 6!" *Woman's Day* 4 Mar. 2008: 128–32. Print.

Lagerfeld, Karl. "3-D." *Bazaar*. Feb. 2002: 130–32. Print.

Latvala, Charlotte. "From Hefty to Healthy." *Fitness* Jan. 2000: 62–65.

——. "'I'll Never Go Back'" *Fitness* Feb 2002: 27. Print.

LeBesco, Kathleen. *Revolting Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 2004. Print.

Lerner, Richard M. "The Development of Stereotyped Expectancies of Body Build Behavior Relations." *Child Development* 40.1 (1969): 137–41. Print.

Lerner, Richard M., and Elizabeth Gellert. "Body Build Identification, Preference and Aversion in Children." *Developmental Psychology* 1.5 (1969): 456–62. Print.

Mantica, Ana. "Fitness Fix." *Fitness* Oct. 2009: 58. Print.

McGraw, Phillip C. "The Ultimate Weight Solution." *O*. Oct. 2003: 236. Print.

McKinney, Kevin M. "Sink or Swim." *Men's Fitness* Aug. 1990: 93–94. Print.

Nutrisystem. Advertisement. *Fitness* Sep. 9, 2009: 171. Print.

"Oprah's Weight Loss Confession." www.oprah.com. 10 Nov. 2009b. Web. Print.

Orbach, Susie. *Fat Is a Feminist Issue: The Anti-Diet Guide For Women*. NewYork: Galahad Books, 1997. Print.

Pauley, L. Lynn. "Customer Weight as a Variable in Salespersons' Response Time" *Journal of Social Psychology* 129.5 (1989): 713–14. Print.

Penick, Syndor B., and Albert J. Stunkard. "Newer Concepts of Obesity." *Overweight and Obesity: Causes, Fallacies, Treatment*. Ed. Brent Q. Hafen. Provo, UT: Brigham Young UP, 1970. 17–26. Print.

Phillips, Bill, and Michael D'Orso. *Body for Life: Twelve Weeks to Physical and Mental Strength*. New York: Collins Living, 1999. Print.

Powter, Susan. *Stop the Insanity*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993. Print.

"Reaping the Rewards" *WeightWatchers.com*. 9 Nov. 2009. Web.

Register, Charles A., and Donald R. Williams. "Wage Effects of Obesity Among Young Workers." *Social Science Quarterly* 71.1 (1990): 130–41. Print.

Rutherford, Nikki. "Success Stories" *WeightWatchers.com*. 20 Dec. 2000. Web.

Sitton, S., and S. Blanchard. "Men's Preference in Romantic Partners: Obesity vs. Addiction." *Psychological Reports* 77.3 (1995): 1185–87. Print.

Solovay, Sondra. *Tipping the Scales of Justice: Fighting Weight-Based Discrimination*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2000. Print.

"Success Stories" *BodyforLife.com*. 9 Nov. 2009. Print.

Wells, John. "Life or Death" *Men's Fitness* Dec. 1991: 98–99. Print.

Winfrey, Oprah. "Oprah's Story." *Make the Connection*. Ed. Bob Greene, New York: Hyperion, 1996. 1–2. Print.

Sonya C. Brown is an associate professor of English and Director of Writing Across the Curriculum at Fayetteville State University, in Fayetteville, NC. She earned an MA from Auburn University in 1998 and a PhD from the University of Maryland in 2005, both in English Language and Literature. Her publications have appeared in *Feminist Media Studies*, *Southern Communication Journal*, and the *Journal for the Study of Popular Romance*. She lives in Fayetteville with her family.