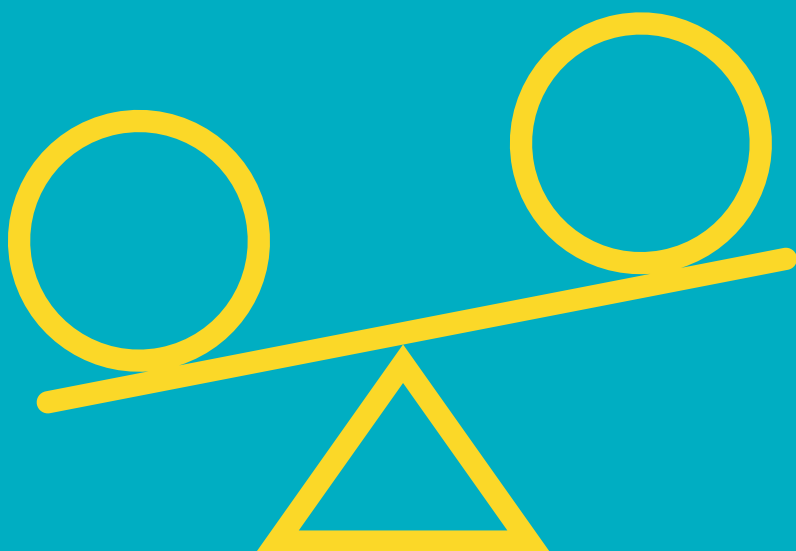


AMELIA MORRIS

THE POLITICS OF



WEIGHT

FEMINIST DICHOTOMIES
OF POWER IN DIETING



The Politics of Weight

Amelia Morris

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Feminist Dichotomies of Power
in Dieting

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*This book is dedicated to the memory of Geoffrey Morris.
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1

Watching Our Weight: An Introduction

In *The One with All the Thanksgivings*, an episode of the US sitcom *Friends* (1998), two characters, Ross Gellar and Chandler Bing, talk at the kitchen sink about how Ross can successfully win the heart of Rachel Green. As they discuss their plans, Chandler pleads with Ross not to be left on his own with Ross' fat sister. The "fat sister" to whom the men are referring is a character called Monica Geller, a beautiful perfectionist with "OCD" traits. However, throughout flashback scenes, the audience is repeatedly informed that "svelte and athletic" Monica was once fat (Richardson 2016, p. 83). Played by Courteney Cox in a fat suit, the purpose of "Fat Monica" (as she became known) was two-fold. Firstly, she was there to be the punchline of a running joke, with quips about her weight being a constant across all ten series of the show (Harris-Moore 2016, p. 93). Secondly, "Fat Monica" provided substance to the character of Monica: haunted by her experiences as a fat child and young woman, Monica develops her trademark control-freak tendencies. Indeed, this particular scene marked the turning point for her character: after overhearing Chandler's remark, Monica is seen rejecting her Mother's offer to "finish off" two pies (with the response from her father: "she's finally full!"), marking her initial decision to diet.

In a later scene, Monica enacts her “revenge” by revealing her newly thin body to Chandler (to the sound of excited claps and “whoops” from the audience), who instantly pursues her romantically. When watching this episode of *Friends* as a teenager, I remember laughing along with the fat-girl jokes and feeling happy for Monica when she got her “big reveal” revenge. With the benefit of hindsight (and a feminist lens), I now see Monica as a somewhat tragic figure who is reflective of my own body journey, one that is probably recognizable for many other women. As a “chubby” young woman, I constantly sought ways to lose weight, believing that it would make me both a “better” and more attractive individual. In the playground, I recall my 14-year-old girlfriends and me sipping on *Slim-Fast* shakes and nibbling at pieces of fruit, feeling guilty if we strayed over a number of calories. Likewise, I remember feeling embarrassed if I had to eat in front of boys, worrying that they would presume I was a “pig”. Now, as a thin control freak myself, Monica’s desperate attempts to escape the shadow of her “old” body feel painfully relevant to watch. Her former fatness is presented as being part of her character: she is terrified of re-gaining weight, the joke being that this has made her extremely uptight. As the audience, we recognize that these obsessional tendencies are born out of her traumatic memories as a fat girl. This is a narrative that so many women recognize from their own lives, one that has become normalized and even expected from young girls. Indeed, *Friends* is not unique in its depiction of fatness as a curse upon women. In the West, these messages are so ubiquitous that they often go unchallenged. For example, films such as *Shallow Hal* and *Precious* offer “stereotypical, extreme, and obvious” examples of fatness; the fat women characters are unattractive, lonely and seemingly stupid (Harris-Moore 2016, p. 1).

The purpose of this book is to explore why women diet and what this can tell us about operations of power and gender in relation to the body. In order to do so, the project will explore the discourses that construct the body and dieting, subsequently analysing the potential impact for women. Moreover, the book asks how power’s relationship to the body is carried out in the everyday, exploring the processes of self-surveillance that are integral to dieting. This will be done through an exploration into the dichotomy of power that has often governed

feminist debates, drawing upon the work of post-structuralist feminist scholars to understand the complex relationships that women have to their bodies (see Deveaux 1994; Bartky 1990, 1997; Bordo 1993).

Context: Feminist Debates on the Body

The question of why women diet gets at the heart of feminist understandings of the body. It is a question that many feminists have sought to answer that is deeply wrapped up with notions of power. Thus, the importance of the body to feminism cannot be overlooked, as McLaren (2012, p. 95) notes: “feminists view the body as an important site of political struggle”. Yet, within feminist scholarship, the body is an extremely contested area that has been explored through a vast web of perspectives, ranging from radical, Marxist and liberal feminist thought¹ (see Wolf 1999; Orbach 1986, 1998; Chernin 1981; Greer 1971; Millett 1970; Roiphe 1994; Bolton 2013). The different stances on the body, within topics such as sex work or the beauty industry, have led some scholars to suggest that feminism is amidst an “identity crisis” (Alcoff 1988; Grosz 1993).

Although there is massive diversity within feminist scholarship on the body, the debates have often centred upon the question of oppression and liberation. On the one hand, some radical feminists view power as an oppressive force that works upon the body, with feminine practices being symbolic of a patriarchal form of control and subjugation. These scholars subscribe to an essentialist understanding of “womanhood”, with women’s biology rendering them subject to male-dominated control (see Greer 1971; Bolton 2013; Millett 1970; Brownmiller 1984; Jeffreys 2005, 2014). On the other hand, some liberal and post-feminist scholars view the body as a vessel for liberation; feminism should enable women to take control of their bodies and embrace traditional

¹I am indebted to Dr. Nicola Smith for the many fruitful conversations we have had throughout the research process which helped formulate these points.

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understandings of femininity without judgement. This purposely sits in stark contrast to the feminism of the second-wave, which some scholars have referred to as a “victim” ideology (see Wolf 1993; Roiphe 1994; Paglia 2011). Of course, there are multiple positions that don’t fall within this dichotomy, such as post-colonial and post-structuralist feminist scholarship, which challenge monolithic understandings of power (see Collins 1986, 2000; hooks 1981; Davis 2003; James 1996; Bartky 1997; Bordo 1993). Nevertheless, this dichotomy is still in operation throughout feminism. For instance, whilst scholars such as Bindel (2004) view sex work as a degrading act that oppresses the female body, liberal feminists such as Hardt (1999, p. 100) suggest that it can be an empowering “choice” for a woman to make. Likewise, whilst Jeffreys (2005, 2008) sees beauty practices as a form of self-mutilation dictated by patriarchal understandings of the body, Davis (2013) understands seemingly extreme beauty procedures, such as cosmetic surgery, as being: “first and foremost...about taking one’s life into one’s own hands”.

This book situates itself within these debates, building upon the work of post-structuralist feminists, who have sought to overcome this dichotomy in a variety of different areas (see Butler 1990, 1993; Grosz 1993; Gatens 2013; McLaren 2012; Ramazanoglu 1993; Turner 2000). For instance, Dellinger and Williams’ (1997) piece on make-up in the workplace sought to “move beyond the depiction of women as either oppressed victims or freewheeling agents”, concluding that make-up could be both a hindrance to career progression *and* a form of subversion. Likewise, Bordo (1993) calls for the abandonment of the categorization of bodies into “oppressors and oppressed, villains and victims”. More widely, Butler (1990, p. 93) is highly critical of feminist thought that speaks of liberating the body from the shackles of patriarchy; the body has no “natural past” that it can be liberated to due to being constructed through culture. This book draws upon this work, noting that the everyday nature of gender means that we must understand it as “the mundane ways in which the bodily gestures, movements, and styles of various kinds constitutes the illusion of an abiding gendered self” (Butler 1990, p. 93).

More specifically, the book grounds itself within *Discipline and Punish* (1977). At first glance, this does not appear to be a strong feminist text; Foucault seemingly dismisses gender, consistently referring to the body as if it were “one”, rather than reflecting upon the intersecting identities that power works “through” (Bartky 1990, p. 11). Arguably, for Foucault, men and women have the same relationship to power, despite the long history of women’s subjugation both socially and economically. This has led some scholars to question Foucault’s relevance within feminism, contending that his position as a privileged-white-male is part of the problem in the silencing of women (see Balbus 1987; Meyers 2014; King 2004; Blumstein 2001). For Balbus (1987), this gender blindness means that feminists should reject his work, viewing a Foucauldian feminist approach as a “contradiction of terms”. Moreover, Gosetti-Ferencei (2006, p. 224) dismisses the concept of women bowing in submission to Foucault’s understanding of power relations, encouraging feminists to resist the presentation of the feminine body as a site for “cultural inscription”.

Despite Foucault’s reputation within feminism, some post-structuralist feminist scholars have successfully wielded *Discipline and Punish* (1977) to interrogate gender and the body. Indeed, his analysis of power has been highly useful in exploring the construction of femininity (Deveaux 1994; King 2004; Duncan 1994; Chapman 1999; Germov and Williams 1996). For example, building on Foucault’s (1977) definition of power, Jagger and Bordo’s (1993) work explores how normalized acts of femininity are deeply intertwined with social control, asserting that “the bodies of disordered women” must be read as a “cultural statement, a statement about gender” (p. 16). For this book, the work of Bartky (1997) has been highly influential: drawing upon the notion of docile bodies, she explores how disciplinary power is central to the structuring of “femininity”. In terms of dieting, she notes that the relentless “improvement” at the heart of any weight-loss programme is a symptom of the panoptic power discussed within *Discipline and Punish* (1977). Likewise, Bordo (1993) grounds her interrogation of weight and dieting within an understanding of

Discipline and Punish (1977) as speaking to the gendered body. For her, the desire for thinness in women directly relates to disciplinary control, a symbol of “self-mastery” (p. 185). Thus, the substantial scholarship that draws from *Discipline and Punish* (1977) in exploring the body demonstrates why it is an appropriate text to use in a book about gender and dieting.

Not only did Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977) overlook gender, it seemingly ignored race. As Davis (2003) notes, Foucault’s discussion of power of a fractured state ignores the stark differences in the discourses that surround black and white bodies. Indeed, black individuals have long been subjected to racist violence, meaning that Foucault’s discussion of neutral power contributes to the erasure of this history (James 1996, p. 26). Within this book, it is essential to explore how disciplinary powers in dieting impact diverse bodies, rather than discussing power’s relationship to the body as universal. Thus, although I am using his work, I am also contributing to it by amplifying the voices of black feminist scholars who have been incredibly important in challenging Foucault’s understanding of power (see Collins 1986, 2002, 2004; Crenshaw 1990, 1993; Taylor 1998; White 2010; Hammonds 2004; hooks 1981, 1989, 2000, 2006; Cooper 2016a; Rollins 1991; Griffin 1996; Shaw 2006). Indeed, scholars note that black women’s bodies are “objects” controlled and disciplined by slavery, the effects of which are still felt today (Wanzo 2015; Yancy 2004; Applebaum 2010, Mohanram 1999). This is especially pertinent when one explores the relationship between dieting and black femininity. As black feminists have noted, their bodies have been both defeminized and hyper-sexualized by racialized power structures which rely upon a juxtaposition with “white beauty” (hooks 1981, 1989; Wallace-Sanders 2002; Powers 1989 in Bordo 1993; Thompson 2015).

Thus, despite my use of *Discipline and Punish* (1977), the core theoretical positioning of the book is post-structuralist feminism (see Butler 1990, 1993; McLaren 2012; Ramazanoglu 1993; Grosz 1993; Connell and Connell 2005). In terms of gender, these scholars have questioned the notion of a biological “essence”, suggesting that the very concept of “woman” and “man” is constructed via discursive texts (Butler 1990,

1993; Hall and Jagose 2012; Spargo 1999). For Butler (1990), such discourses are constructed and maintained through everyday performances, meaning that gender is “an identity tenuously constituted in time” (p. 519). Through this lens, one can understand gender as a continuous choice that individuals make in presenting themselves as “feminine” or “masculine”. Following on from the work of Bordo (1993) and Bartky (1997), the discourses that surround the “feminine” body will be interrogated through the lens of self-surveillance.

The Approach to Research

In order to explore practices of self-surveillance and the body, this book draws upon the intersections between post-structuralist feminism and *Discipline and Punish*. The work of Foucault (1977, p. 93) interrogated discourses which construct and maintain our knowledge of society, a position that starkly contrasts positivist methodologies that seek to “find” truth and “evidence” (Kolakowski et al. 1993; Gartrell and Gartrell 2002). Yet, in Foucault’s eyes, the very essence of “truth” is a construct which can be deconstructed, a stance which made Foucault deeply suspicious of scientific research which claimed to discover “evidence”. Rather, the goal of the researcher should be to make sense of how subjects are constructed “within a historical framework” (Legrand 2008, p. 281).

When exploring dieting, this theoretical underpinning was an essential perspective for making sense of gendered bodies. Indeed, the methodological and theoretical positions of this book are deeply intertwined; one cannot exist without the other. Some post-structuralist feminists draw from Foucault’s rejection of “truth” in their analysis of gender. For these scholars, gender should be understood as a series of “acts” or “performances” rather than a biological assignment given at birth. This position challenges the dichotomy between “man” and “woman”, seeking to understand the discursive practices that sustain our perception of “femininity” and “masculinity” (Butler 1986, 1990, 1993). Therefore, in a book about power and the body, drawing upon both positions has been an essential tool in making sense of how femininity is constructed.

As has been discussed, although Foucault is not an obvious feminist, his work has been highly influential for some post-structuralist feminist scholars who have used his interrogation of discourse to understand gender² (see Bordo 1993; Sawicki 1991; Rail and Harvey 1995; Davis 2006). Nevertheless, it is important to reflect upon the “sticking points” that arose from drawing from both Foucault and post-structuralist feminist work, the most important being this apparent “gender-blindness”. Whilst scholars such as Ramazanoglu (1993, p. 10) suggest that carrying out Foucauldian methodologies puts feminists in a weakened position, I adopt Sawicki’s (1991) stance that feminist scholars can wield Foucault’s analysis of power in conducting their research and analysis.

Secondly, the choice of interviews does not fit with Foucault’s criticism of “lived experience”. His understanding of discourse means that interview responses are always tainted, because the subjects of interviews are themselves constructed via discourse (Sembou 2016, p. 7). Likewise, some post-structuralist feminist scholars have contested the notion of a “knowing subject”, commenting that individual’s identities are fluid and dynamic (Weedon 1997, p. 33). Such a position sits in opposition to the work of some radical feminist scholars, who believe that research should be conducted on the basis of women’s shared lived experiences. It is important to reflect upon these scholars’ position on interviews because a lot of feminist work on the body has centred around the lived experience of women (see England 1993), especially the work of black feminist scholars (Childers et al. 2013, p. 64; Carby 1996; Collins 1986, 2000; hooks 1981).

Despite this contestation, interviews have been an essential part of his book, providing the project with a strong sense of depth. Here, I follow on from Gavey (1989, p. 464), noting that whilst language does construct one’s subjectivity, the interviewer can approach their project with the understanding that discourse is never neutral. Indeed, interviews were incredibly important in enabling me to understand the everyday

²I am indebted to Dr. Nicola Smith for the many fruitful conversations we have had which have helped to formulate these points.

discourses that surround dieting by exploring the participant's beliefs (Longhurst 2003). From this, then, I was able to analyse the discourses surrounding the body and dieting, which helped to build an overall picture for the book.

The primary methods for the project were interviews with ten women seemingly on either side of the “oppression” and “liberation” debate. Firstly, I spoke with dieters who are on/have been on *Weight Watchers* or *Slimming World*, in order to gain an insight into how they view their bodies and the daily practices of self-surveillance that is involved in dieting. The interviews revealed the processes of “confession” involved in dieting, as well as the narrative of transitioning to a “better” body. On the “liberation” side, I interviewed members of the fat movement who have sought to liberate their bodies from the shackles of dieting and fat oppression by embracing their size. The juxtaposition of both sets of participants allowed me to explore the dichotomy of power within the interview discourse and revealed the similarities between both sets of participants in terms of the body.

I carried out ten interviews with women who are/have been members of *Slimming World* or *Weight Watchers*. The purpose of the interview was to understand dieter's perceptions of their bodies and to question why they seek to lose weight, in order to make sense of the narratives surrounding dieting. The second group of four participants described themselves as either fat activists or body positivity activists, both of which fall under the fat movement umbrella. Whilst members of both groups contend that normative understandings of fat need to be disrupted and subverted, they differ in their approach of how to achieve this goal. For fat activists, the fat body can only be liberated after oppressive systems of patriarchy and capitalism are dismantled (see Cooper 2016b). In contrast, body positivity activists view liberation as a tool that can come from within the individual via acts of self-love and empowerment. It was important for this book to explore how members of the fat movement may attempt to resist dieting in order to speak back to the question of “oppression” and “liberation”. Although members of the fat movement seemingly reside within the “liberation” camp, the analysis of this case study demonstrates how the dichotomy

of power is replicated within anti-dieting movements. Moreover, the juxtaposition between members of the fat movement and dieters was an important one, which spoke back to the question of “oppression” and “liberation”.

The interviews followed a semi-structured approach, meaning that although I followed a question structure, the interviews went “off-track” if the participants wished (Longhurst 2003). This provided me with the flexibility to explore the participant’s answers yet also created direction for the interview structure. I was able to discuss their answers or reactions to questions with the respondents, providing the interviews with a depth that might not have otherwise occurred. Thus, I discussed the following topics with my participants: their experiences and understanding of dieting and the body, the daily practices of dieting/fat activism, their understanding of the dichotomy of power and the future for their body. I did not set a time limit on interviews, feeling that this would disrupt the “flow” of exchange between myself and the participant. Overall, each of the interviews lasted between 50–90 minutes in length and was allowed to come to a natural end. Following from Hesse-Biber (2013, p. 197), I “probed” the participants where necessary, which contributed to the richness of the data.

I conducted an in-depth discourse analysis upon the transcripts from interviews, which involved a critical reading of the language used by the participants. After colour coding the language into themes, I would begin to think about the underlying messages of the language used and how this spoke to the themes of my book. Additionally, it was important that I carried out discourse analysis on complimentary sources, such as magazines and blogs, which supported the information collated from the interviews. For example, I gathered language and images from 20 *Weight Watchers* and *Slimming World* magazines, as well as blog posts from members of the fat movement.

Moreover, alongside interviews, I carried out an in-depth case study into the discourses surrounding Oprah Winfrey’s body “journey” with *Weight Watchers*. The purpose of this is to address the gap on race and gender within Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* (1977), with discussions of the body within this text seemingly speaking only to white men (see James 1996; Davis 2003). Thus, Winfrey was an obvious

choice of case study: she is not only an enormously important cultural figure (see Aschoff 2015; Fellner et al. 2014), she has previously been an official spokesperson for *Weight Watchers*. Moreover, despite being the most successful African American woman in the world, she has been famously plagued by bodily insecurities (Harris and Watson 2015). Consequently, the narratives that surround her body speak to this debate, informing the book about how power disciplines the dieting black woman.

Although Foucault resisted the development of a method for carrying out discourse analysis, I follow Graham's (2005) cry for "methodological anarchy". Whilst I engaged in a "respectful conversation" with Foucault's work, I drew upon the work of post-structuralist feminist scholars (p. 6). Overall, my goal was to understand how dieting discourses govern women's lives (DeLyser et al. 2010, p. 412). Thus, when analysing my data, I hoped to make sense of how language and images construct the body (Given 2008, p. 217; Grue 2016). This was done by looking "beyond" the transcripts and writings, situating the language within wider cultural and social contexts (Waitt 2005, p. 181). This was a constant and active process that carried out at every stage of the project, not just during the analysis. For instance, in my day-to-day life I would notice women's bodies in adverts and magazines, actively considering the underlying meaning. In a sense, then, discourse analysis was not simply a method for this work. Rather, it is an approach that underpins the project and has affected every decision made throughout the research process (Hesse-Biber 2013, p. 46). More generally, it is a way of seeing the world that has shaped my own outlook on myself and others within the everyday.

I'm Not Your Data: Doing Feminist Ethics

Within any research project, it is important to reflect upon the ethical implications of one's methods. Before I carried out the empirical elements of the project, I was granted full ethical approval from the University of Birmingham to conduct the interviews. Once this was approved, I was tasked with approaching the participants. Throughout

the research process, I was consistently aware that dieting is an incredibly sensitive topic for many women, meaning that I needed to treat all the interviews with immense caution. I contacted the members of *Slimming World* and *Weight Watchers* through mutual friends who had been involved in dieting clubs, which allowed the participant contact group to snowball. Some of the participants were acquaintances who I knew had been/were members of the dieting clubs through posts on social media. Although some participants were happy to meet, others did not reply to my emails after the first stage of contact. I believed this was because of the personal nature of the project and, consequently, did not chase the participants for a response. For the participants who agreed to partake in the project, we arranged to conduct the interviews in a comfortable setting such as the interviewee's home, a local coffee shop and sometimes via Skype.

Likewise, through a contact at a Brighton theatre specializing in queer performance, I was able to approach members of the fat movement for interview, all of whom were performance artists focusing on fatness and the body. Due to the personal nature of the interviews, it was important to research the potential participant's work before making the initial contact. Once I had established a conversation with the interviewees, I was able to organize a meeting date and point. Again, the topics covered in the interview were sensitive, meaning that I asked the interviewees to choose a place where they would feel most at ease to speak to me openly about their bodies or via Skype if they were unable to meet in person.

McRobbie (1982, p. 5) warns researchers about the discomforts of interviews, noting that it can feel like extracting information from a vulnerable individual for one's own personal gain. It was important for me that I did not leave the participants feeling like I had simply got "what I came for" after asking them to reveal sensitive memories about their bodies (Letherby 2003, p. 11). Yet, I often felt guilty for being pleased when a participant disclosed a personal memory that was "useful" for my project. Indeed, researchers can find themselves in a double bind by not wishing to "holiday on people's misery" (McRobbie 1982, p. 5), but also hoping to draw out interesting topics from the interviews.

Despite this, many of my participants commented that they had found the interview process to be somewhat therapeutic, with one interviewee noting that reflecting on her experiences with dieting had been a calming tool in combating her body issues. For Finch (1993), participants may not be comfortable talking about their personal experiences with friends or family. As the researcher may feel somewhat distinct from their lives, they may be able to provide the participants with a sense of relief. Throughout the research process, I felt the latter point was true: my participants appeared relaxed and willing to talk about their relationship to dieting. Yet, McRobbie (1982) suggests that this openness may be because of women's lack of power within society and the expectation that they should not decline an interview. Although there was no way of avoiding this possibility, it was important that the interviews were structured around the participant's schedules and were made as comfortable as possible for them. Likewise, it was essential that I was hyper-aware of their body language, being constantly aware of any hesitancy to answer questions. If the latter scenario occurred, I would reassure the participant that it was not essential for them to answer every question.

Who Do You Think You Are? Positionality of the Researcher

It is important to reflect upon one's position as a researcher in relation to the project. Such a stance sits in opposition to Foucault's call to write in order to "have no face" (Foucault 1969, in Miller 2000, p. 123). Yet, as feminist scholars have discussed, the ability to erase oneself often comes from a position of privilege. As Bartky (1990) notes, women cannot simply remove themselves from femininity within their writings. Rather, feminist scholarship must reflect upon the identities that we live and breathe in the everyday (McLaren 2012). As Daigle (2016, p. 18) suggests, a reflexive approach to research not only creates transparency, it also builds an ethical relationship with one's participants.