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Eating with the fear of weight gain: The relationship with food for overweight women in France

Carof Solenn

Centre Edgar Morin/IIAC/EHESS, Paris (France)

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Abstract: The relationship with food is shaped by numerous characteristics such as class, gender or culture. In western societies, where overweight and obesity are increasingly important, several questions emerge: can the concept of over-weight contribute to helping understand the relationship with food? Can differences be found in the behaviour or representations of overweight and obese women?

To answer these questions, 35 semi-structured interviews were undertaken, transcribed, coded and analysed. Fifteen were with obese women (BMI above 30) and twenty with overweight women (BMI between 25 and 30). The objective of the research was to develop an overview of the discourses of what these thirty-five respondents thought. The article then uses some significant cases to better illustrate the complexity of the findings.

These interviews indicate that the desire to lose weight and the fear of gaining weight introduce a binary conception of food, between 'good' or 'bad' foodstuffs. Social influence on the respondents' food practices is not only found in such categorizations, but also in their relationship with food in general. Several eaters' profiles were taken as 'ethoses', in other words as typical profiles, allowing therefore to further understand the possible dynamic answers of individuals. These ethoses demonstrate the various possible links with food, before tackling the issue of the popular spread of certain types of behaviours.

From the analysis it emerged that the relationship with food does not depend solely on the BMI of the individual but rather of a set of factors, which interact with each other. The notion of 'control' in the discourse of respondents proved the influence of media and medical discourses on the representation of food for overweight or obese women, and the increasing trivialization of everyday conflictual relationship with food.

Keywords: Food, Obesity, Weight, Eating Disorders

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Research & Innovation Center - Institut Lyfe

Château du Vivier - Ecully - France
Tel: +33 (0)4 72 18 02 20

Contact

Raphaëlle Mouillefarine
Partnerships Development
[Send an email](#)
+33 (0)4 26 20 97 63

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