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Fearing Fat

Exploring the Discursive Links between Childhood Obesity, Parenting, and Leisure

Mike Mainland
Susan Shaw
University of Waterloo

Andrea Prier
University of Windsor

Abstract

This paper explores the dominant discourses associated with childhood obesity, children's leisure, and parenting practice, as revealed through two mainstream parenting magazines. Specifically, critical discourse analysis (CDA) is used to explore the discursive messages associated with childhood obesity, paying particular attention to the implications of this discourse for children's leisure and for parental responsibility. Implicit and explicit messages from a variety (n=70) of different texts (articles, images, advertisements etc.) were analyzed. Three central themes emerged: (a) instilling a fear of fat, (b) the notion of parental choice, and (c) the obligatory nature of leisure. These themes are discussed in light of critical theory and its application to the moral regulation of parenting as well as children's health and leisure.

Keywords: *childhood obesity; critical discourse analysis; critical theory; leisure; parenting*

Mike Mainland is a doctoral student in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo and **Susan Shaw** is a distinguished professor emerita in the Department of Recreation and Leisure Studies at the University of Waterloo. **Andrea Prier** is on the Faculty of Education at the University of Windsor. SSHRC supported study by the Parenting, Health and Childhood Research Group (UW) University of Waterloo, 200 University Avenue W, Waterloo, Ontario, N2L 3G1. Please send correspondence to Mike Mainland, mdmainla@uwaterloo.ca

Obesity has been characterized as one of the greatest public health challenges of the 21st century (Lobstein, Baur, & Uauy, 2004; World Health Organization, 2010). Considerable attention has been given to this issue by epidemiologists and public health researchers, who have reported that the percentage of the population who are overweight or obese has increased dramatically in developed western nations over the past two decades (Anis et al., 2009; Singh, Kogan, & Van Dyck, 2010). This has led to widespread concern about the "obesity epidemic" and particularly the number of children deemed to be obese or at risk of becoming obese (Klein & Dietz, 2010; Shields, 2006; Witaker, 2001). Because of the linkages between obesity and a range of health problems, such as diabetes and cardiac disease (Malik, Popkin, Bray, Despres, & Hu, 2010; Sheilds, Connor, & Tremblay, 2008), it has been predicted that the current generation of children will suffer from elevated rates of disease throughout their lifetimes compared to earlier generations. For example, in Canada, a 2007 government report concluded that today's children are likely to have reduced longevity in comparison to their parents' generation as a result of increased childhood obesity (Canadian House of Commons Standing Committee on Health, 2007).

These widespread concerns about children's short-term and long-term health problems and their relationship to unhealthy body weights has led to discussion of the need for preventive strategies to slow down and/or reverse the obesity epidemic (e.g., Gill, Baur, Steinbeck, Storlien, & Singh, 2009; Margarey, 2008). Often the focus is on the promotion of healthy lifestyles through improved nutrition and increased physical activity for children, based on the "calories in-calories out" notion (Janssen, Katzmaryk, Boyce, King, & Picket, 2004) and on reducing body weights through controlling food intake and activity output. Clearly these strategies have implications for leisure and leisure lifestyles.

While some leisure related strategies for weight reduction involve environmental change, such as an increase in park space and in other recreational facilities (e.g., see Potwarka, Kaczynski & Flack, 2008), considerable attention has been given to parental practices and the need to facilitate behavioral change within the family (e.g., Dalton & Kitzmann, 2008; Shannon, 2013). Moreover, in terms of behavioral change, it is often mothers rather than fathers who are seen to be at the forefront of the fight against obesity, especially in their roles as leisure facilitators and as role models for their daughters (e.g., Shannon). Indeed, the prevention of childhood obesity has been characterized as a relatively recent extension of mothers' responsibilities for their children's health and wellbeing (Maher, Fraser, & Wright, 2010).

In addition, parents are seen as central to these strategies. Not only do parents purchase and prepare most of the food that children consume, but they can also be regarded as the leisure facilitators and educators (Shannon & Shaw, 2008), influencing children's level of involvement in physically active and inactive leisure pursuits. Thus parents, and especially mothers, are often seen to be at the forefront of the fight against childhood obesity.

While these research findings, concerns, and suggested solutions are often taken for granted, some commentators have been critical of their ideological underpinnings. For example, some have suggested that the "obesity epidemic" has been exaggerated (e.g., Gard & Wright, 2005), leading to an overly heightened sense of risk, and to the increased moral regulation of behavior (Fullagar, 2009). Further, it has been suggested that the focus on children's body weight may lead to greater anxiety among children as well as parents and higher levels of body weight dissatisfaction (e.g., Campos, 2004; Hesse-Biber, 2007). These concerns suggest the need for a more critical approach to the issue of childhood obesity, and to the potential negative as well as positive aspects of the dominant discourse on this topic.

Accordingly, the purpose of this paper is to critically examine the discourse around childhood obesity. Given that parents are seen to play a central role in terms of children's nutrition, activity level, and lifestyle in general, the focus of this study is the on the discursive messages directed at parents with regard to these issues. Specifically the paper reports on a critical discourse analysis of the content of selected parenting magazines, designed to reveal both the overt and hidden messages to parents about issues and concerns associated with childhood obesity. Thus the paper looks at the discourse surrounding parents' roles and responsibilities with regard to healthy and active lifestyles and the implications for children's and parents' leisure.

Review of the Literature

The Obesity Epidemic

Widespread concerns about the "obesity epidemic" among children have led to the search for the underlying causes of this ongoing health problem. As mentioned previously, this search has focused on two main issues, namely physical activity and diet. Indeed, as early as 1998, the World Health Organization (2010) classified changes in dietary habits and declines in levels of physical activity among children as the most probable causes of the rapid increase in childhood obesity.

More recently, research has documented a further decline in rates of physical activity participation among children (e.g., Bassett, 2008; Shields, 2006). This includes a decline in organized or structured physically active leisure, such as organized sports, gymnastics, and dance classes, as well as in unstructured active leisure such as walking, biking, and outside play. Participation in sedentary leisure has also been documented, revealing an increase in physically inactive leisure such as television watching, video games, and other computer or Internet-based activities (Vandewater, Shim, & Caplovitz, 2004). Further, a number of researchers have concluded that the growth in unstructured sedentary activities is the primary or most pervasive cause of increasing obesity levels (Shields & Tremblay, 2008; Tremblay et al., 2011). This may be because while increased sedentary leisure suppresses physical activity levels, decreasing sedentary behaviors does not necessarily lead to more active leisure involvement (Epstein, Smith, Vara, & Rodefer, 1991; Roemmich et al., 2006).

Alongside the research on physical activity, nutritionists have shown a decline in healthy eating patterns among children and teens (Colley et al., 2011; Wu, Ohinmaa, & Veugelers, 2011). This includes an observed increase in high fat content and high sugar content foods, as well as unhealthy snacking behavior, and an increase in fast food consumption and eating out (Langlois & Garriguet, 2011; Moreno, 2009). Moreover, these dietary changes have been linked to leisure behaviors since television watching and video game play increases excessive eating, unhealthy snacking, and fast food consumption (Ludwig, Peterson, & Gortemaker, 2001).

Various solutions to these problems have been proposed by experts in the medical, health promotion, and educational communities, as well as by government and other agencies (e.g., Frieden, Dietz, & Collins, 2010). These solutions are often presented as prescriptions or "how-to" approaches. For example, ensuring that children participate in regular and vigorous movement four to five times a week is advocated. This type of participation could include recreational, organized, and/or competitive activities as long as they involve "significant energy expenditure" (Tudor, Williams, Reis, & Pluto, 2002). Reducing time spent in unstructured sedentary activities (television watching, video games etc.) is also recommended. In other words, emphasis is placed on the need for children to lead much more active and healthy lifestyles on a regular

basis. Prescriptions for improved nutrition for children are also common (e.g., Health Canada, 2011). These typically recommend diets that include less fat, less fried foods, less sugar and other "empty calories," and more fruits and vegetables.

Not surprisingly, just about all of these recommendations are directed primarily at parents, who are seen to be central in terms of constructing and monitoring children's lifestyles through the provision of opportunities and sanctions. For example, parents are urged to enforce time limits for children's television watching and other sedentary activities, while providing more opportunities for active leisure involvement (Dowshen, 2011). In addition, parents are encouraged to make time for family members to be together, to get active together, and to participate in structured family leisure, regardless of the time barriers that they may face (e.g., Dowshen, 2011). Other recommendations include providing nutritious foods, cutting back on snacks while watching television, not using food as a source of reward for children's accomplishments, and reinstituting family mealtimes (e.g., Millington, 2010; Woodruff & Hanning, 2008).

The notion of parents as role models is also evident as an important part of the move toward healthier lifestyles. That is, parents are urged to reduce their own television viewing and to become more active themselves. A publication by Active Healthy Kids Canada (2012), a nongovernmental organization that promotes participation in physical activity, reflects this sentiment. The publication places emphasis on "the key role" that parents play in influencing children and youth activity levels, and states that:

> Parents need to make a "physical activity-friendly home" for the sake of their kids. Turning off the screens and getting active are the right things to do as role models, and will also help parents achieve a healthy balance and meet the demands of parenting (p. 49).

It can be seen, therefore, that much of the mainstream research on obesity reflects the notion of obesity as a major health crisis caused by unhealthy eating and a decline in physical activity. In terms of reducing childhood obesity, emphasis is placed on the need to bring about significant increases in levels of participation in physically active leisure, on reducing time spent in inactive leisure pursuits, and on the important role that parents need to play in bringing about these changes in lifestyle.

Taking a Critical Perspective

The mainstream epidemiological and health research on obesity has gained widespread acceptance and considerable coverage in the media. With some notable exceptions (such as the Gard and Wright (2005) and Wright and Harwood (2009) books that challenge the notion of an obesity epidemic), few commentators have taken a critical stance. In addition, relatively little has been written in the academic literature about possible complications or difficulties that might arise from the suggested strategies to prevent childhood obesity. A critical perspective, though, may provide additional insights into issues surrounding childhood obesity, parenting, and leisure. With its focus on critique and transformation (Guba & Lincoln, 2011), critical theory addresses issues of power and inequities, for example, how time and economic resources may disadvantage some families more than others in terms of opportunities for healthy lifestyles. For example, Harrington (2013) provides a powerful argument for the need to focus not only on gender inequities, but also on disparities based on class, when conducting research on leisure and families. In addition, Fullagar's (2009) work on healthy family lifestyles revealed the many problems faced by low-income mothers as they struggled to provide healthy leisure for their children. Critical theory also puts emphasis on how notions of choice and autonomy may mask

underlying systems of power. This theoretical paradigm may therefore be useful for exploring dominant ideologies of parenting and parental choice (e.g., Coakley, 2006; Johnston & Swanson, 2006), as well as the complexities surrounding issues of freedom of choice in family-based leisure (Shaw, 2010).

One branch of critical theory that is of particular relevance here revolves around the notion of the "risk society" (Beck, 1992). This conceptualization is one in which members of society believe themselves to be at risk or in personal danger in various ways, including risk of such phenomena as disasters and violent crime, as well as risk of ill health and disease. The argument is that "moral panics" (Rohloff & Wright, 2010) are being constructed through various discourses leading to the experiential sense of being at risk. While the media are implicated in these processes, particularly in the construction of dominant discourses of risk (Critcher, 2003), this process is not necessarily deliberate. Rather it is molded and moderated in various ways and through various voices, as new discourses are constructed and adopted. Nevertheless, it is argued, the process leads to the moral regulation of individual behavior (Hier, 2008) as risks become taken for granted and as proposed strategies for prevention and reduction become accepted as common sense.

Within the risk society literature, a number of researchers have discussed how notions of risk are often disproportionately applied to children (e.g., Beck & Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Lee, 2008; Munro, 2007; Parton, 2006). Children are seen to be particularly at risk and in a wide variety of ways, such as abduction and physical harm, as well as failure to achieve healthy growth and development. Further, it has been noted that the at-risk concept is often applied to all children, in ways that suggest that no child can be considered safe (Lee, MacVarish, & Bristow, 2010). Thus, parents become "risk managers" (Furedi, 2002; Lee, 2008) with responsibilities to protect their children through adhering to strategies prescribed by experts (Knaak, 2010; Reese, 2005). These concepts provide insight into how notions of "good parenting" are constructed and perpetuated (Lee, McVarish, & Bristow, 2010), and how good parenting and particularly good mothering has become difficult and stressful in the risk society (Knaak, 2010).

Applying these theoretical ideas to the issue of childhood obesity suggests the need for a better understanding of the dominant discourse or discourses surrounding this public health concern and the notion of healthy family lifestyles (Fullagar, 2009). This is because dominant discourses or "knowledge claims" (Rohloff & Wright, 2010) typically reflect expert or elite perspectives, but influence social practices at all levels of society. Thus, understanding the extent to which childhood obesity is seen as a major health risk for children and the extent to which prevention is seen as a moral imperative can provide insight into the potential impact on parents' and children's lives.

Given that the media are central to the ongoing construction and reconstruction of dominant discourses (Critcher, 2003), analyzing media directed specifically towards parents of young children can be a useful way to examine and reveal underlying messages about good parenting, healthy lifestyles, and weight control. Discourse analysis can help to accomplish this through analyzing the ways in which childhood obesity is presented, described, and talked about. This analytic approach, and critical theory in general, also focuses attention on the difficulties and inequities that particular discourses might perpetuate. For example, it directs attention to the ways in which discursive messages may lead to increased responsibilities and stress for parents, and the ways in which these messages might ignore and/or perpetuate social, economic, and gendered disparities. Implications for children may also be discerned, such as stigmatization. In addition, the discourse on childhood obesity, and on the use of physical activity as a preventive

strategy could have implications for leisure. For example, this discourse can be assessed in terms of the ways in which it places value on the importance of leisure and/or the ways in which notions of risk and regulation may stand in contradiction to the idea of leisure as choice, autonomy, and freedom.

The research questions for this study address these issues. Using critical discourse analysis to understand the messages to parents about childhood obesity, the study sought to answer the following questions:

- What are the discursive messages to parents about their role in obesity prevention?
- What are the implications of these messages for parents, parenting, and social inequality?
- What are the implicit discursive messages to parents about leisure?

Methods

The methodological approach chosen for this research project was Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). This method is typically utilized by critical constructionist researchers since it sheds light on the "discursive aspects of social disparities" (Wodak & Meyers, 2009, p. 15). CDA centers its analysis on the inherent politics of language and the ways in which expressions, values, and meanings embedded in language help to construct and reconstruct power relations (Wodak, 2010). Thus, consistent with critical theory, CDA focuses on social inequities, analyzing both the overt and "hidden" messages in written or spoken language to reveal how these messages relate to or potentially perpetuate unequal power relations. Researchers are urged to examine not only what is said, but also what is excluded as attention is paid to the tone of language and how words are situated through a focus on "the contexts of language use" (Wodak & Meyers, 2009, p. 13).

The CDA method can be seen to be based on several underlying assumptions. First, it is assumed that individuals are not creating their own independent discourses. Rather, they are contributing to a collective process of discourse construction. Second, the construction of discourse is not an equal process, but reflects power relations inherent in society. Those with more power (e.g., "experts" and elites) have more control over this process than those with less power (i.e., the non-elite and disadvantaged groups). Third, dominant discourses influence all members of society by implicitly suggesting values and meanings. For example, discourses around issues such as substance abuse, mental illness or obesity shape societal and individual values and are likely to influence social practices and attempts at intervention or correction as well. Thus, one of the central goals of CDA is to analyze discourse in order to reveal ways in which a particular discourse may negatively affect members of society, and especially those who are not members of powerful elites.

CDA is often used to analyze various forms of media, such as television, newspapers, magazines, or social media. While the mode of analysis is primarily qualitative or interpretive, the approach is not as linear as some other forms of qualitative inquiry. In fact, the CDA approach to research is often referred to as "abductive" (e.g., Wodak & Meyer, 2009), suggesting a continual interplay between data collection and theory development and theoretical application. Typically, the investigation starts with a critical theory conceptual framework, but the analysis is not wholly determined by this framework. Further, while researchers make use of interpretive methods of analysis, theory development is not strictly inductive, but influenced by existing as well as emerging theoretical concepts.

An initial pilot study had analyzed text from a variety of media sources (i.e., television, newspapers, parenting magazines, parenting Internet sites). Television and newspaper stories were shown to focus primarily on specific "newsworthy" incidents and underlying causes, while

the Internet and parenting magazines contained more frequent and extensive content related to good parenting. Since the Internet and magazine texts were very similar, and since the pilot study showed that sampling is more reliable for the latter media form, a decision was made to base our analysis on material drawn from popular parenting magazines. Thus, we analyzed the discourse surrounding childhood obesity as revealed in these magazines. Because of our concern about the impact of this discourse on parents, and especially parents living in disadvantaged circumstances, we felt it was important to understand not only the message, but also the implications of these messages for parents and for children's and parents' leisure. For example, we wondered if the widespread concern about childhood obesity, and the way in which it is presented and discussed in the media might be helpful for parents and/or might create stress and anxiety.

Two widely read North American parenting magazines (*Parents* and *Today's Parent*) were used for the analysis. *Parents* magazine is an American-based publication; however, it is easily available in Canada in print or online. With a total circulation of over 2 million copies per year, the magazine claims an overall audience of over 15 million parents ("By the Numbers…," 2013). *Today's Parent* is a leading Canadian publication targeting Canadian parents, yet it is easily accessible through online channels to any English-speaking consumer. It has a print circulation rate of over 160,000 magazines a year and a readership claim of over 1.5 million parents (Munroe, 2013). One of the reasons for the readership numbers being so much higher than circulation numbers is the availability of these magazines in social settings such as in the offices of family doctors and other health care professionals. To illustrate the widespread reach of these mainstream parenting magazines, *Today's Parent* claims that 3 in 10 Canadian mothers have read at least one issue of the magazine, with an average reading time of 38 minutes ("Media Kit 2013," 2013). Both magazines target mothers primarily; for instance, *Today's Parents* claims that 1.2 of their 1.5 million readers are mothers ("Media Kit 2013," 2013). Together, *Parents* and *Today's Parent* represent two key sources of parental information in the magazine format of media.

Initially, four monthly issues were selected from both *Parents* and *Today's Parents* in the second half of 2009. For both magazines, the four issues were selected to represent summer vacation time (August), early fall and back to school (September), late fall (November), and early winter and vacation season (December). Interestingly, the August and September editions of *Parents* featured a two-part article entitled "Parents Fight Fat." The August edition also included the banner heading "Fat Proof Your Kids" on the cover and the September edition had a banner, which read "So-Easy Healthy Lunch Ideas." These features indicate an editorial interest on topics related to children's diet and children's weight. However, the choice of journals and issues for our analysis was not influenced by this or any other specific content.

The first step in the analytic process was to identify all magazine documents (including articles, regular columns, advertisements etc.) that addressed children's health. This process produced a total of 283 documents. A second selection process was then carried out to determine which of these 283 documents were related directly or indirectly to childhood obesity. Individual research team members reviewed each of the documents for words, images, or topics that were connected with children's body weight problems and/or obesity. That is, team members looked not only for words and images that suggested "fatness" or obesity, but also documents that used related wording such as "fat free," "diet," "low calorie," "healthy body weight," etc. All selection decisions were discussed and reassessed at weekly group meetings. This process led to the selection of 70 documents (24.7% of the initial collection of 283) that addressed the issue of obesity either directly or indirectly. Perhaps not surprisingly, 54 of the 70 documents that addressed obesity (77.1%) also focused on issues related to nutrition, while 20 of the 70 documents (28.6%) had a focus on sport, physical fitness or other forms of physically active leisure.

Further coding of the 70 documents was then conducted to determine each document's location within the magazine (i.e., section, page number), size (i.e., length and width), document category (e.g., advertisement, featured article, expert column), and the presence or absence of an image or picture. After four months of data collection, and with some evident consistency within the messages as revealed through initial analysis, no further magazines were selected

The next analytic step was to use CDA and interpretive analysis to explore the discursive elements within the selected documents. At this point, all aspects of the documents were taken into account, including image, language, and emphasis (e.g., through placement, headlines, size and bolding techniques). The analysis involved Charmaz's (2006) constructivist grounded theory, supplemented by theoretical ideas and insights drawn from CDA. Charmaz recommends initial open coding of all relevant documents, followed by focused and then theoretical coding, and we made use of these three steps. CDA researchers (e.g., Wodak & Meyers, 2009) recommend the use of specific theoretically based analytical questions as the data analysis proceeds. The questions that we used, consistent with CDA included, "What are the explicit and implicit messages and images of childhood obesity embedded within these documents?", "What are the messages about leisure?", "What are the messages about parenting and parenting practices?", "How are these messages constructed and produced?", and "To what extent, if any, are messages structured in ways that reflect social divisions, such as race, class, or gender?" In practice, this combined approach meant that after each round of grounded theory coding we returned to our theoretical questions to see whether and in what ways these questions enhanced our understanding. At times these questions led us to look more deeply and more critically at the emerging codes. At other times, the questions alerted us to issues that we may not have otherwise addressed, such as the lack of representation of the diversity of family forms and structures in the magazines. Together, these coding processes allowed us to identify, define and redefine our categories, and to develop central concepts, while at the same time maintaining a focus on the discursive components of the magazine.

As anticipated, the first analytic steps led to a considerable number of initial descriptive themes. Subsequent revisiting and reanalysis facilitated the development of broader conceptual themes which, in turn, led to the identification of three core themes, namely "*instilling a fear of fat,*" "*the idea of parental choice,*" and "*the obligatory nature of leisure.*" These three themes and their subcomponents are presented and described below.

Findings

The three dominant themes that we developed were not completely independent entities. While we discuss each of these themes separately, they also relate to each other. As is often the case in discourse analysis, both consistencies and contradictions were found.

Instilling a Fear of Fat

A dominant thematic message throughout all of the documents that related to childhood obesity, or obesity in general, was that this was something to be feared. At times, explicit reference was made to the dangerous consequences of obesity, such as the short- and long-term health risks. For example, an advertisement for a local Public Health Unit contained text that read, "Childhood obesity has been linked to serious health problems, including type 2 diabetes" (*Today's Parent*, Aug. 2009, p. 80), and went on to talk about the need to "prevent obesity to improve your kid's long-term health" (*Today's Parent*, Aug. 2009, p. 80). This warning about the health risks of childhood obesity was also reinforced in various articles and advice columns, such

as a six-page spread entitled "Raise a Slim Kid in a Supersize World" (*Today's Parent*, August 2009, pp. 128–134). Across the first two pages was a picture containing many large, chubby-looking, gingerbread boy cookies, with only one small, slim cookie. Clearly the picture, combined with term "supersize world" was sending a message about the widespread risk of obesity and the challenge of being the rare parent who is able to raise a slim child in today's society. The article goes on to say that "Americans are eating their way to record rates of obesity" (p. 128), that there is a "new urgency" (p. 129) about childhood obesity, and that "the way we are feeding our children is laying the groundwork for a lifetime of heart disease, diabetes, and other serious health problems" (p. 130).

Within the magazine discourse, the problem of childhood obesity was primarily discussed as a physical health issue. Nevertheless, there were also "hidden" messages that suggested a link between being happy and being slim. Numerous advertisements for food products of all kinds (e.g., "low-fat pop tarts", *Parents*, Nov. 09, p. 45; "low-sugar apple sauce", *Parents*, Aug, 09, p.23; and "low-fat bagel bits", *Parents*, Nov. 09, p. 177) were overwhelming filled with implicit references to the "weight problem" or "weight risk" faced by children. Further, many of these advertisements, as well as articles on children's health, contained images depicting children who were not only slim, but also happy. For example, an advertisement for a popular fabric softener contained an image of two, notably slim, young girls laughing and enjoying candy apples on a nice fall day (*Parents,* Sept., 09, p. 161), and a column entitled *5 Secrets to Happy and Secure Kids* was accompanied by an image depicting a young, and discernibly slim, female child playing happily at the beach (*Parents*, Sept., 09, p. 186). There was an evident lack of pictures of overweight or obese children. In addition, while none of the documents explicitly addressed issues related to stigmatization or possible emotional distress for overweight children, a consistent implicit message seemed to be that slimness is associated with happiness for children and that fatness is something to be avoided.

Reinforcing this idea of fearing fat was a powerful message within the magazine discourse about the need for parents to protect their children from obesity. The notion of aggressively resisting fat came across explicitly in articles such as the "Raise a slim child in a supersize world" article cited above, as well as other articles, advice columns and advertisements which also reiterated the risks associated with obesity and the need for vigilance and action on the part of parents. The use of the banner "Parents fight fat" on the cover of the August edition of *Parents* magazine captured this idea, as did an advertisement for "Fruit Chillers" in the September edition (*Parents*, September 2009, p. 205). This full-page advertisement depicted a mother dressed in a warrior outfit, and with a sword in hand. The mother is seen standing in front of her child, using her sword to protect him from an enormous cartoon monster made out of donuts, candy bars and other junk food. Above the picture is the wording "Freeze bad snacks in their tracks," and below the picture is an image of "Fruit Chillers," with the words "Find' em in the canned fruit aisle." It should be noted, too, that while the messages about fighting fat seemed on the surface to be addressed to "parents," a closer examination of the content and the images revealed that the messages were typically directed at mothers rather than fathers. The warrior mother in the fruit chillers advertisement was a good example of this.

In sum, this discursive theme presented "fat" (obesity/overweight) as something that is greatly to be feared and something that is an ever-present danger to children. Parents (particularly mothers) were seen to be the gatekeepers and protectors against the outside world of high risk.

The Idea of Parental Choice

The second theme that developed out of our analysis of the magazine content centered on the notion of parental choice. Although obesity prevention remained an important part of this theme, the message to parents had a very different tone compared to that of "fearing" or "fighting" fat. Instead, the message was one of encouragement and optimism, suggesting to parents that obesity can be avoided simply by making the right choices. That is, implicitly or explicitly, the indication was that it is not difficult for parents to provide healthy family lifestyles, since they just need to choose appropriate nutrition and healthy activities for their children.

This theme was evident in a variety of forms and a range of documents, including advertisements, advice columns, recipe suggestions, and articles. Not surprisingly, there was a considerable amount of advice provided about food and nutrition. This included, for example, a column on "How to create a salad that your kids will love" (*Parents*, Aug. 09, p.69), and another column entitled "Your child: healthy eating" (*Parents*, Aug. 09, p. 66) which advised parents about how to choose cheeses that are high in calcium but low in fat. Interestingly, there were also food product advertisements that were constructed to look like expert advice columns. For example, an advertisement for fruit juice that contains DHA (omega 3) was written as an advice column providing information about the importance of "getting enough DHA" (*Today's Parent*, Nov 2009, p. 40).

An important component of this notion of parental choice, as mentioned above, was that it was easy to make the right choices and that good choices did not have to take extra time or extra work. This could be seen in advertisements for ready-made foods, such as low-calorie applesauce, which suggested that children's lives are "sweeter with less sugar" (*Parents*, Nov. 09, p. 58). Similarly, prepackaged ready-made soup was advertised as containing "natural sea salt," "high levels of vitamin A", and "zero trans fats" (*Parents*, Nov. 09, p. 59). Easy-to-cook foods were also promoted for time stressed parents. For example, an advertisement for Minute Rice, contained the caption "Got ten minutes? . . You have time to play." (*Today's Parent*, Sept. 09, p .46). It should be noted, though, that while some attention was paid to this issue of time stress for busy parents, the magazine content did not address the problem of the additional costs to parents if they opted for healthy food choices.

A comparable message about parental choice was also evident, though not as common, with respect to physical activity. Again, this was seen in diverse types of documents. For example, an advertisement for garden tools suggested that these products provided the "perfect way to get your child to help with yard work" (*Today's Parent*, Nov. 09, p. 67), and an article on "Raise a healthy child: Smart advice for every age" discussed a variety of physical activity choices for children at different developmental stages (*Today's Parent*, Aug 09, p. 42-45).

Apart from explicit parenting advice for easy foods and easy activities, another way in which the notion of choice was routinely perpetuated was through pictures and photographs. Whether articles, advice columns, or advertisements, there was a preponderance of images depicting happy, healthy children and families taking part in physical activities, primarily in the outdoors. For example, an advertisement for cleaning products (*Parents,* Aug. 09, p. 172) showed a father playing soccer with his three children. Another common image was a family enjoying healthy activities together, such as swimming or playing at the beach (e.g., an advertisement for a digital camera; *Parents*, Aug. 09, p. 53). One indoor photograph in an advertisement for a large retail store (*Parents*, Sept. 09, p. 4) showed a mother and daughter enjoying yoga together at home. These images were clearly chosen to represent the "happy child," who was always slim and active, and the "happy family" group, enjoying activities together.

This idealized representation of the family, then, was one in which the parents were making healthy and positive choices for locations and activities, and thus creating, with ease, what could be characterized as the "perfect family." The unspoken subtext seemed to be, "you, too, could enjoy this lifestyle if you choose to do so." At the same time, it should be noted that just about every family and couple represented in these magazine images (all but two) was white and apparently middle class or upper middle class. For example, the image mentioned above of the mother and daughter doing yoga showed a very luxurious home setting in a large, perfectly uncluttered living room, with picture windows looking out over a beautiful landscaped garden. Indeed, across all of the documents analyzed, we did not see any families who were clearly represented as single parent, low income, gay or lesbian families in either the text or the accompanying image. Thus, the representation of choice in these magazines was one that failed to address issues of cost or income and failed to represent or take into consideration the diversity of families in North America.

The Obligatory Nature of Leisure

While the previous section described the notion of choice over healthy versus unhealthy lifestyles, another distinct but related theme arising out of our analysis addressed the obligations of parenthood. Sometimes the concept of obligation was intertwined within the discourse of choice. For example, while parents were seen to be able to choose a healthy diet for their children, they were at the same time encouraged, if not pressured to make the "right choice." This was sometimes evident in advertisements, including an advertisement for pastries, which contained the text, "Make the Right Choice . . . Baked or Fried" (*Parents*, Nov. 09, p. 45). The notion of risk of not doing the right thing was also raised in an advice column about getting an early start on vegetable eating for very young children. In this example, parents were warned about the need to take advantage of the brief "window of opportunity" in order to make their baby a "veggie lover" (*Parents*, Nov. 09, p. 38). A similar message about parental responsibility was evident in an article entitled "Guarantee your child a healthy lunch" (*Parents*, Sept. 09, p. 199), which emphasized the problem of parents ignoring their children's unhealthy eating patterns during their early school years, and linked this problem to the dramatic rise in childhood obesity rates.

The concept of obligation was also strongly and routinely applied to physical health and fitness and the need for parents to ensure that their children participated in physically active leisure. Advice related to parental responsibility to ensure that their children were physically active and fit were common in articles and other texts. For example, a local Public Health message in the Toronto insert of "*Today's Parent*" (Aug. 09) included an image of a rusty bike leaning against a wall and a line which read, "Used regularly, it can help to prevent type 2 diabetes" (p. 2). These messages were further reinforced by images of children and families (albeit white, middle class, heterosexual families) participating in bike riding, swimming, soccer or other ball games. In one advertisement, for example, the need for laundry detergent seemed to be justified by an image of three boys mountain biking in a rugged and muddy outdoor setting (*Parents*, Aug. 09, p. 87).

In addition to these implied obligations of parenthood, there were also explicit messages detailing exactly what "good parents" should do and the "commitments" that parents should make to ensure that their children are healthy and not obese. For example, one "how to" guide prescribed, "at least an hour a day" of physical activity (*Parents*, Aug., 09, p.130), adding, "it's best to spend some of that time outside" (p. 130). The guide also advised parents to place strict limits on "dangerous" inactive leisure, such as television and video games. Perhaps the most explicit message about obligatory leisure came in an article entitled "The Parent Pledge?" (*Parents*, Dec. 09, p. 2) which came in the form of "pledges" from parent to child. Here it was suggested that

parents make a pledge to keep their children healthy through a series of formal promises. Some of these related to healthy nutrition, while others, such as "We will play outside every day even if it means stomping in puddles" and "I won't allow my children to have a TV in their bedroom" addressed exercise and physical fitness.

This example of the "parent pledge" also serves to point out the gendered nature of the magazine content regarding obesity prevention. While the magazine text in general often talked about "parents" and "families," almost all of the advice was explicitly directed at mothers rather than fathers. And, indeed, it is mothers who are the primarily consumers of these magazines. While mothers were clearly seen to be responsible for diet and nutrition, fathers were often depicted as participants in physically active family leisure. Nevertheless, it appeared, from at least one article, that it was deemed to be mothers' responsibility to ensure that fathers were actually involved. In an article to mothers about how best to ensure that fathers also participate in healthy physical activities with their children, it was suggested that the first step may be for mothers to change their behaviors. If they were acting like "super moms," and trying to do everything themselves, fathers may feel excluded. In the author's words, "the biggest roadblock to getting your partner more involved in parenting could be you" (*Parents*, Sept. 09, p. 112).

Overall, there was a strong discursive message in the magazines as a whole about the need for parents to ensure that their children have sufficient physical activity on a daily and weekly basis. Thus this theme suggests, in contradiction to the previous theme, that physically active leisure is not really a choice. Rather, because of the looming threat of obesity, physical exercise is an obligation for children and a responsibility for parents.

Discussion

Our analysis of the content of two parenting magazines revealed some powerful discursive messages related to childhood obesity, which have implications for parenting practices and for leisure. The dominance of the message that "fat" (specifically childhood obesity) is an ever-present risk that parents need to fight is consistent with notions of the "risk society" (Beck, 1992) and "moral panics" (Critcher, 2003; Rohloff & Wright, 2010). The discourse suggests that everyone—or in this case every child—may be in personal danger. The two apparently contradictory themes of "parental choice" and "obligatory leisure" are also consistent with these theoretical positions. The argument that widespread perceptions of risk lead to "moral regulation" (Hier, 2008) can also be seen in the discourse about the need for parents to ensure that every child is active and healthy. Moreover, a central theme in critical theory is that systems of power and regulation are not necessarily overt, but are hidden by ideologies of choice and autonomy (see Calhoun & Karaganis, 2003). Thus, the emphasis in the magazines on the choices that are available to parents can be seen to obscure, or at least soften, the obligatory messages, making the "regulation" of parenting seem more palatable. Critical theorists such as Calhoun and Karaganis argue that these processes of social control are not necessarily deliberate, but do function to influence social practices in ways that support dominant relations of power. Our study supports this notion, also, in terms of the hidden gendered messages and the lack of recognition of the challenges faced by disadvantaged and low-income families.

The findings of this study, then, provide support for a critical approach to issues related to childhood obesity. Nevertheless, the study raises the question of whether the messages to parents are harmful in some way, or whether they are beneficial and/or necessary given the increasing rates of childhood obesity in North America and elsewhere. There is little doubt that childhood obesity is associated with short-term and long-term health risks. There is also empirical evi-

dence, such as the research cited earlier, of declining rates of physical activity among children as well as poor nutrition. This helps to explain the support by public health and other experts of sending strong messages to parents about the need to change parenting practices.

Despite this dominant body of opinion, though, our argument is that critical theory does have important insights and understandings that are often overlooked in the discussion of childhood obesity. First, we suggest that widespread fear of obesity sends the message that every child is at risk (Lee et al., 2010). This in turn creates anxiety and suggests that normal weight or slightly overweight children may also have a problem that needs to be "cured." Anxiety about weight issues is also easily communicated to children, and may well lead to high levels of body image dissatisfaction and unhealthy dieting at a young age (see Hesse-Biber, 2007). Indeed, the rising concern about childhood obesity seems to have taken public attention away from other health problems, such as anorexia nervosa and bulimia which have also been on the rise in recent years (Evans, Rich, Davies, & Allwood, 2008). These health risks, associated with low body weight, but also with anxiety about getting fat, were not addressed in the magazines we analyzed.

Second, related to the point above, the magazines that we analyzed did not include any discussion or other content related to the lives of children who are overweight or obese. This was an unexpected exclusion, since there is evidence of the emotional or psychological problems that can result from the stigmatization of fat, such as bullying, low self-esteem, depression, or unhealthy dieting (e.g., Campos, 2004; Hesse-Biber, 2007). There is also evidence that parents of overweight girls do worry about their daughters' self-esteem (Shannon, 2013). Indeed, we would suggest that the exclusion of attention to the problems faced by overweight children and the dominant focus on the "war" on obesity may actually perpetuate some of these problems. In other words, the war on fat may be hurting those children who are already disadvantaged due to a perceived weight problem.

Third, the emphasis on children being at risk has the potential to increase the anxiety and worry of parents, who are already experiencing high levels of stress (Knaak, 2010). Hardyman (2007), Gillies (2008), Lee (2008), and others have addressed the increasing demands of parenting—especially mothering—fueled by new and expanding notions of parental responsibility. The current emphasis on childhood obesity and the need for constant vigilance about diet and physical activity adds to this expanding list of responsibilities (Shaw, 2008). This could have negative as well as positive consequences for families as parents struggle with the demands. Moreover, previous research has indicated that lack of economic and other resources do limit parents' ability to implement recommendations related to healthy body weights for children (e.g., Sonneville, La Pelle, Taveras, Gillman, & Prosser, 2009). Thus, the increased stress of parenting demands is more likely to affect disadvantaged families, especially low income and lone parent families. A particular concern, then, is the lack of attention given to low income parents in the mainstream magazine media.

Another critical concern that we have as leisure researchers relates to the impact of current discourses about parenting and childhood obesity on leisure. The magazine messages to parents about physical activities, and the prescriptions about how much physical activity is required to combat obesity, could have unintended consequences for leisure. The notion of exercise requirements seem to go beyond "purposive leisure" (Shaw & Dawson, 2001) in which family activities are selected based on their benefits for children. Instead, these prescriptions suggest a much more regimented, obligatory tone, which is clearly at odds with the idea of leisure as freedom of choice, intrinsic motivation, and enjoyable activity.

In terms of future research directions, one of the issues raised by this study relates to the intersection between leisure, parenting, and the media. While there are studies on time spent watching television as well as time spent in other sedentary leisure activities (e.g., Vandewater et al., 2004), surprisingly little attention has been paid to the content of media and media messages on leisure practices and beliefs. This study indicates that parenting magazines contain powerful messages about children's leisure. Expanding this line of research to other forms of media and other aspects of leisure may provide valuable insights.

It should be noted, though, that at this point little is known about how consumers of parenting magazines respond to the messages embedded in the content. Indeed, discourse analysis can be criticized for typically focusing on the content and meaning of messages and ignoring, or making assumptions about, the effects of these messaged on social practice. To assume that the audience simply accepts and adopts behaviors to conform to media messages is to ignore the issue of agency, and to ignore the structure-agency debate that is central to critical constructionist theorizing (Shaw, Hilbrecht, Mainland, & Prier, in press). At the same time, to assume that the impact of media messages is always negative is also unwarranted. Mothers (and fathers) may well find the information in parenting magazines to be helpful in terms of advice about healthy family lifestyles. Indeed the high level of readership suggests that parents find these magazines to be interesting and useful. Thus, another fruitful avenue of future research would be to examine parents' responses to media messages about childhood obesity (and/or other issues). Such research could focus on the extent to which parents attempt to conform to these dominant messages and struggles that they may face. At the same time, the research could also explore possibilities and instances of resistance (c.f. Shaw, 2006) through or in relation to leisure. For example, do parents distinguish between media messages from "experts" and those perpetuated by marketers seeking to sell their products? Do responses depend on the source of these messages? Do images seem to be as powerful, or more powerful, than the written word? To what extent do media messages affect opinions, intentions and/or practices related to leisure and parenting?

Another potential line of research arising out of our study would be to look at changing patterns of children's leisure. Are children's leisure practices and experiences changing? And, if so, are these changes linked to health and other risks that have received attention in the media? Is there, as some authors have suggested (e.g., Louv, 2005), a decline in free play and an increased in organized, structured activities for children? Is there evidence of increased "obligatory leisure" for children? If so, what are the implications of this for children, for parents, and for families? Are some families more disadvantaged than others in terms of children's leisure? This study raises the specter that certain types of leisure may be at risk of being "tainted" through compulsion or lack of choice. If so, this is an important issue for leisure researchers to address.

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