
AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH TO THE PROBLEM OF OBESITY*

HORTENSE POWDERMAKER, Ph.D.

Professor of Anthropology, Queens College, Flushing, New York

I AM THE only person participating in the Symposium who has never done any research on the problem of obesity, and who is decidedly not an expert on the subject. My role here as an anthropologist is to attempt to set the problem in the context of the culture. In this day of specialists we cultural anthropologists are the specialists in a holistic approach. In our studies of primitive or preliterate tribal societies, we have asked questions concerning relationships between different elements of culture. How are the functioning of the family, the economic and class organization, the political system, the religious and magical beliefs, the values that men live by, related to each other and integrated in that abstraction we call culture? In this paper I shall give a cultural approach to the problem of obesity, raise questions, and, quite tentatively, offer some hypotheses. These will provide some understanding of the complexities of the problem and a basis for future research.

In setting the problem of obesity in the frame of the culture of contemporary society, my focus will be on the roles of food and of physical activity in our value systems. Incidentally, I wonder why so much of the education designed to reduce the incidence of obesity is centered on food rather than on activity. Is it assumed that food habits may be modified more easily than those of physical activity?

My basic questions are concerned with the symbolism of fatness and thinness in our society and the relationship of each to other symbols and to our values. I would be interested in differences in the symbols and in the relative strength of the same symbols in class, ethnic, religious, sex, and age groups, and among individuals. I would assume that there might be conflicting values concerning fatness and thinness, about eating and physical activity, as there are in many other areas of our life, and that some of this conflict might stem from the fact that we live in

* Presented as part of a Symposium on *Prevention of Obesity*, sponsored by the American Heart Association and held at The New York Academy of Medicine, May 26, 1959.

a rapidly changing society, where traditional values linger beside new ones. I would also be interested in the cultural study of people who are not obese as well as those who are, i.e., some kind of control group in which variables are limited. As an anthropologist, I am naturally interested in a comparative approach, i.e., the symbolism of obesity and thinness in other cultures and the many-sided role of food and eating in them, assuming that this comparative knowledge would illuminate the problem in our society.

Beginning with the last point, let me summarize briefly some relevant facts from pre-literate, tribal societies. In a large number of these societies the economy was a subsistence one, whether characterized by food gathering, hunting, fishing, agriculture, raising cattle, or some combination of these activities. A major part of all activity was concerned with the production of food. Tools were crude—a wooden hoe and a stone axe. The only means of transportation was by foot or canoe. Food-growing plots were often several miles from the village; the clearing of the dense bush in tropical and semi-tropical parts of the world by the men was a strenuous job, as was also the planting and weeding by the women. Strenuous physical activity was the norm for men and for women, whatever the type of economy. But although everyone worked hard and long in the production of food, hunger was a common experience. Famines and periods of scarcity were not unusual. Seasonal changes, plagues, pests, and many other natural causes tended to produce alternate periods of shortage and relative plenty. It is, therefore, not difficult to understand that gluttony, one of the original sins in our society, was an accepted and valued practice for these tribal peoples whenever it was possible. In anticipating a feast a Trobriand Islander in the Southwest Pacific says, "We shall be glad, we shall eat until we vomit"¹. A South African tribal expression is, "We shall eat until our bellies swell out and we can no longer stand"².

The function of food and eating was, and still is, not restricted to the biological aspects. Food is the center of a complex value system and an elaborate ideology centers about it. Religious beliefs, rituals, prestige systems, etiquette, social organization, and group unity are related to food. Throughout the Pacific, in Africa, and in most other parts of the tribal world, kinship groups work together in the production of food. Distribution of food is part of traditional obligations between people related biologically and through marriage ties, between clans,

and between chiefs and their subjects. The accumulation of food, particularly for ritual occasions, is a major way of obtaining prestige. At all significant events in the individual's life history—birth, puberty, marriage, death—there must be a feast, and the amount of food reflects the prestige of those giving it. Less formal but of equal significance, is the relationship of food-giving to hospitality, valued even more among tribal peoples than among ourselves.

The importance of food is not limited to relations among the living. It plays a significant role in relationships with dead ancestors and gods. Offerings of food are made to them, so that they will grant the requests of the living and protect them from sickness and other misfortunes. The spirits of the dead and the ancestral gods presumably have to eat and, among some tribes, observe the same eating etiquette as do the living. In Haiti the gods are very demanding, and providing their food becomes a means of controlling and manipulating them, for the gods depend on men for their strength. In the same country death is symbolized in many instances as being "eaten" by evil gods and, in a modern context of a railroad accident, the locomotive is said to be a machine that eats people. This oral aggression of evil gods (and, presumably, the locomotive, too) is regarded as being motivated by the desire to acquire strength through being fed³. The function of food in magical and religious practices throughout the world is well known, and food taboos are part of many religious rituals in both tribal and modern societies. We could go on almost indefinitely describing the social role of food^{4, 5}.

But we turn now to the more personal role of food for the individual. The infant's first relationship with his mother is a nutritive one. In primitive societies it is fairly common for a child to be nursed at his mother's breast for several years. For the infant in all societies, suckling and eating appear to be among the earliest sensory experiences and pleasures. The psychoanalysts call it the oral stage. We tend to agree with them that early infantile experiences have lasting effects. In some tribal societies such as the one I studied in the Southwest Pacific, the stomach is the seat of the emotions. "Bel belong me hot" is the pidgin English way of expressing deep feeling, whether occasioned by anger, sexual desire, or eating well⁶. The same concept appears in Africa and other parts of the world.

Given the scarcity of food and the ever-present fear of famine in

many tribal societies, the significant social role of food, and the lasting impact of the infant's first sensory satisfactions, it is not surprising to find that stoutness or some degree of obesity is often regarded with favor. This is particularly true for the concept of female attractiveness. Among the Banyankole, a pastoral people in East Africa, when a girl began to prepare for marriage at the age of eight, she was not permitted to play and run about, but kept in the house and made to drink large quantities of milk daily so that she would grow fat. By the end of a year she could only waddle. "The fatter she grew the more beautiful she was considered and her condition was a marked contrast to that of the men, who were athletic and well-developed." The royal women, the king's mother and his wives, vied with each other as to who should be the stoutest. They took no exercise, but were carried in litters when going from place to place⁷.

Among the Bushmen of South Africa, the new moon is spoken of as a man because of its slenderness, and the full moon is a woman because of its roundness. Masculine and feminine endings are given to the same roots to denote sex: male endings for strong, tall, slender things and female for weak, small, round ones⁸. Today in a mining community on the Copperbelt of Northern Rhodesia where I have done fieldwork, in one popular song a young man sings,

"Hullo, Mama,* the beautiful one, let us go to town;
You will be very fat, you girl, if you stay with me".

The standard of beauty for a woman here was not the fatness which we mentioned earlier, but rather a moderate plumpness.

Summarizing briefly for tribal pre-literate societies, we note that hunger was common and that a high proportion of men's and women's energy was spent in producing enough food to stay alive; that food was not only a biological necessity, but that its social and psychological functions were also very significant. The giving of food was a prominent part of all relationships: between kindred, between clans, with dead ancestors, and with gods. Food played a role in ritual, magic and witchcraft, and in hospitality. The accumulation of food was a mark of great prestige. Fatness was a mark of beauty and desirability in women.

We turn now to our contemporary society. It is characterized by an economy of plenty as compared to the economy of scarcity in tribal societies. We eat too much. We have too much of many things. Ac-

* "Mama" is a term of address for a woman.

According to the population experts, there are too many people in the world, due to the decline in mortality rates. A key theme in this age of plenty—people, food, things—is consumption. We are urged to buy more and more things and new things: food, cars, refrigerators, television sets, clothes, etcetera. We are constantly advised that prosperity can be maintained only by ever-increasing consumption. This is in sharp contrast to our own not too distant past, when saving and thrift were among the prized virtues and emphasis was on production rather than consumption.

Another important change in our modern industrial society is that physical activity is almost non-existent in most occupations, particularly those in the middle and upper classes. We think of the ever-increasing white-collar jobs, the managerial and professional groups, and even the unskilled and skilled laborers in machine and factory production. For some people there are active games in leisure time, probably more for males than females. But, in general, leisure time activities tend to become increasingly passive. We travel in automobiles, we sit in movies, we stay at home and watch television. Most people live too far away to walk to their place of work. Walking for pleasure is very rare. Former President Truman's daily walk is regarded as one of his peculiarities. The trend for those who are advised to take exercise and who also have the necessary wealth is a passive form—massage, the electric table which vibrates the body, and other electrical devices.

But while people may exercise less and live in an economy of plenty, they are becoming increasingly aware of the problem of obesity. There is a continuing enlargement of our knowledge of nutrition, of the relationship between obesity and certain diseases, and to health and longevity in general, and a wide popularization of this knowledge. This past month we had a "Nutrition Week", and every day our mass media—newspapers, radio and television—carry information about food and its relationship to health, disease and physical attractiveness.

Our standards of beauty, particularly for the female, have undergone a great change from tribal societies and from our own past. The slender, youthful-looking figure is now desired by women of all ages. The term "matronly", with its connotation of plumpness, is decidedly not flattering. Although the female body is predisposed to proportionately more fat and the male to more muscle⁹, the plump or stout woman's body is considered neither beautiful nor

sexually attractive. Our guess is that a hundred years ago the term "matronly" was not unflattering. The role of a wife today as an active sex mate, as compared to her role in our more Puritanical past with its emphasis on motherhood rather than on the pleasures of sexual experiences, may be significant in this context. For this and for other reasons the contemporary cult of youthfulness appears to be stronger among women than among men. At almost any middle and upper class gathering of middle-aged men and women, a large proportion of the latter will have dyed their hair, while most of the men will have the symbolic grey hair of aging. It is generally assumed that physical attractiveness is more important for the female than for the male in their respective search for a mate. Success, wealth, and vigor are significant eligibility criteria for potential husbands and fathers. Of course, sex appeal is important for men, too, but it seems not to be so much associated with seeming youthfulness as it is for women.

However, the cult of youthfulness is not confined to women. As science enables us all to live longer and longer, men and women want to remain young longer and longer. This is not a new desire. The quest for the fountain of youth is one of the well-known themes in mythology. The desire to remain healthy and "fit" as long as possible seems quite normal to us. Yet our excessive need to *look* young may also be related to other trends in our culture. Middle-aged people often find it difficult to get jobs, and they are faced with enforced, and sometimes unwanted, retirement at a fixed age. The cult of youthfulness may also have some connection with our apparent concern about sexual potency and sexual pleasure. Many books and articles discuss these as a difficult problem, and their large sale presumably indicates considerable anxiety about sexuality in our culture. Do people with this kind of anxiety have more, or less, difficulty in dieting and keeping their bodies young-looking?

We have indicated a number of strong trends in our culture which run counter to obesity. The desire for health, for longevity, for youthfulness, for sexual attractiveness is indeed a powerful motivation. Yet obesity is a problem. Otherwise, we would not be participating in this Symposium. We ask, then, what cultural and psychological factors might be counteracting the effective work of nutritionists, physicians, beauty specialists, and advertisements in the mass media? We have a number of hypotheses. We think there may be considerable ambivalence for many people in regard to being fat or thin, to over-eating or

to dieting. This ambivalence could, in turn, come from conflicting patterns in our culture.

I have a hypothesis that, consciously or unconsciously, our symbolism for a maternal woman is on the plump or obese side. There is the figure of a pregnant woman and, as already indicated, the infantile satisfactions gained from food given by a mother or mother-surrogate. The image for mother and for mate may be in conflict.

Then, too, food is a very significant symbol in our prestige system. The kind of food, the quantity, and the manner in which it is served are among the important criteria of social class. In most tribal societies, even those with a highly stratified social system, everyone—royalty and commoners—ate the same kind of food, and if there was famine everyone was hungry. In our society there are sharp distinctions. Although there are probably relatively few people today who know sustained hunger because of poverty, poor people eat differently from rich people. Fattening, starchy foods are common among the former, and in certain ethnic groups, particularly those from southern Europe, women tend to be fat. Obesity for women is therefore somewhat symbolic for lower class. In our socially mobile society this is a powerful deterrent. The symbolism of obesity in men has been different. The image of a successful middle-aged man in the middle and upper classes has been with a “pouch”, or “bay-window”, as it was called a generation ago. We are all familiar with pictures of this type, resplendent with gold watch chain across the large stomach. Today this particular male class-symbolism is changing, probably because of the increased knowledge of the relationship of obesity to heart-malfunctioning and to other diseases.

Although slenderness becomes increasingly a symbol of social status, the food of the wealthy is still rich and plentiful, and their dinner parties are often, quite literally, a sign of conspicuous consumption. With the ever-increasing diversity of foods, food has become not only a matter of social status, but also a mark of one's personality and taste. More and more people are becoming gourmets, and with the declining number of servants, the hostess—and often the host, too—display their individual style and taste in cooking¹⁰. We become more personally interested in food as we become more aware of the problems connected with overeating.

The giving of food to people who are in trouble is a still widely prevailing folk custom and is reflected in our radio “soap operas”. When

someone is having marital or financial problems, or when there is illness in the family, a good neighbor brings in food and says, "You must eat to keep up your strength". The same correlation of eating with strength runs through many food advertisements, particularly those designed to reach young, growing children in the television audience. It would be interesting to do an analysis of the mass media advertisements of food which are directed toward children. It would be equally desirable to analyze the advertisements concerning reducing foods, pills, and other products, directed toward adults.

Our symbols for fatness or thinness are not clear-cut, as old and new patterns mingle. We have the beliefs that fat people are good-natured, contented, likable, funny, and also that they are foolish, "greasy", and greedy. There is the well-known image from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, in which Caesar prefers his followers to be fat, and fears those who are lean and hungry*. A study of heroes and heroines and villains in our mass media, in terms of their fatness and thinness, might be revealing. I cannot offhand remember any fat movie villains, male or female. But this would be interesting to check.

While the family in our society is no longer an economic unit for the production of food, as it was in primitive society, the family meal remains one of the few times when the family is united and drawn together. Parents still are the givers of food, and most of us are aware of the intense interest with which young siblings watch mother cut a pie and their anxiety over whether the slices are even. This is true in homes where food is plentiful, and obviously food is a symbol for the mother's favoring or not favoring one child more than another.

Eating well, a full stomach, is still one of our main ways of achieving a state of euphoria. A really good dinner sets all of us up. This is probably connected with the fact that one of the earliest forms of security and of sensory pleasure is connected with the intake of food, and that about it are centered the first human relations. The eating of food and the giving of it thus remains a symbol of love, affection, and friendliness, as well as a source of pleasure in itself.

It is often stated and rather commonly believed that indulgence in overeating is a conscious or unconscious compensation for frustration

* "Let me have men about me that are fat,
Sleek-headed men, and such as sleep o' nights:
Yond Cassius has a lean and hungry look;
He thinks too much; such men are dangerous."
Shakespeare, William. *Julius Caesar*, Act I, Scene 2.

or neurotic problems. We ask a further question: why do some people seek this form of compensation rather than another form? Is there, for instance, one type of person who tends to be alcoholic and another to overeat? A number of studies have indicated a comparatively low rate of alcoholism among Jews^{11, 12}. They show that sobriety is a strong moral virtue among orthodox and pious Jews, and that drunkenness is associated with the outgroup, the Gentiles. The Jewish norms of moderate drinking and sobriety are bound up with the ceremonial and ritual observances, with their religious beliefs, and with the value of remaining separate from Christians. It is assumed that Jews have the same proportion of neurotic and other problems that could lead to alcoholism as do Christians. The norms favored by any group for meeting problems are part of its culture and are internalized in childhood. It would be interesting to find out whether overeating and obesity are more common among orthodox Jews than among reformed Jews and Christians of the same class. We think, too, that there could be regional as well as religious differences in attitudes toward obesity. One suspects that there would be considerable difference between the South and New England.

We have a number of other questions concerning possible correlations of cultural and psychological factors with obesity. Is the ability to diet, and to diet consistently, related to belief in a measure of control over one's fate? Is it related to the strength of the belief in science? Is obesity correlated with orientations toward asceticism versus sensory pleasures? Has there been any study of obesity among monks and nuns? Do people who value sensory pleasures in general, such as those derived from perfumes, from physical contacts, from sexual experience, demonstrate an ability to diet more, or less, successfully than others? The degree of emphasis on sensory pleasure may be culturally determined, may vary from one historical period to another in the same culture, and from one class and ethnic group. And within each group there can be variations due to genetic idiosyncratic factors in the life history of individuals.

There are time limits to the number of questions we can raise. We have tried to indicate some of the cultural factors underlying the problem of obesity. Our society, with its economy of plenty and lack of physical activity, as compared to the economy of scarcity and the hard physical work in tribal societies, provides increasing opportunities

for people to eat more food and to become obese. At the same time, other cultural factors, such as the knowledge of nutrition and of the relationship of obesity to disease and longevity and the popularization of the knowledge, our cult of youthfulness and the emphasis on the beauty of the slender body, particularly for the female, our class stereotypes, all tend to keep people from taking advantage of the opportunities to gorge on food. Yet there are many who overeat. We have hypotheses that this may be related to our deeply imbedded desire for the euphoria which comes from a full stomach, with other sensory indulgences or a lack of them, with conflicting imagery about a motherly woman versus a sex mate, with the use of food as a status symbol and as an expression of personality tastes, and with cultural norms about food and standards of beauty in different religious, class, ethnic, and regional groups. We have asked a number of questions relating to possible cultural correlations, for which there is no data. Mainly we have tried to show some of the intricate and complex ramifications of eating and of obesity in the tribal societies of the past characterized by too little food, and in our contemporary culture characterized by too much food.

I am much indebted to my friend and colleague, Dr. George Grosser, for his critical reading of the manuscript of this paper and for his helpful suggestions.

REFERENCES

1. Malinowski, B. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. New York, E. P. Dutton & Co., 1922, p. 171.
2. Kropf, A. *Das Volk der Xosa-Kaffern*. Berlin, 1889, p. 88.
3. Bourguignon, E. Persistence of folk belief: some notes on cannibalism and zombis in Haiti, *J. Amer. Folklore* 72: 42, 1959.
4. Richards, A. I. *Hunger and Work in a Savage Tribe*. Glencoe, Ill., The Free Press, 1948.
5. Radcliffe-Brown, A. B. *The Andaman Islanders*. Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1922.
6. Powdermaker, H. *Life in Lesu. The Study of a Melanesian Society in New Ireland*. New York, W. W. Norton & Co., 1933, pp. 232-34.
7. Roscoe, J. *The Northern Bantu*. Cambridge Univ. Pr., 1915, p. 38. *Ibid.*, *The Banyankole*, 1923, pp. 116-17, 120.
8. Schapera, I. *The Khoisan Peoples of South Africa; Bushmen and Hottentots*. London, Routledge and Keegan Paul, 1930, p. 427.
9. Scheinfeld, A. *Women and Men*. New York, Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1943, p. 147.
10. Riesman, D., Glazer, N. and Denney, R. *The Lonely Crowd*. New York, Doubleday & Co., 1953, pp. 168-69.
11. Bales, R. F. The "Fixation Factor" in Alcohol Addiction: An Hypothesis derived from a Comparative Study of Irish and Jewish Social Norms. Doctoral dissertation. *Arch. Widener Libr.*, Harvard Univ., 1944.
12. Snyder, C. R. Culture and Jewish Sobriety: The Ingroup-Outgroup Factor. In *The Jews, Social Patterns of an American Group*, M. Sklare, edit. Glencoe, Ill., The Free Press, 1958.