


The commendable man: an anthropological experience of self-slimming based on health TV journalism

O homem elogiável: uma experiência antropológica de autoemagrecimento a partir do jornalismo de TV sobre saúde

El hombre elogiado: una experiencia antropológica de auto adelgazamiento a partir del periodismo de TV sobre salud

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ABSTRACT:

This article presents the results of an ethnographic research about food, a theme that has gained prominence in Brazilian TV. The author of this work followed feeding tips from the Bem Estar program, Rede Globo; slimmed 25 kg in four months, and noted the sensations he had and the reactions of others. The study considers that Brazilian TV propagates the idea of lean body as "normal" and as a model to be followed. The work uses observant participation. It is an ethnographic research technique in which the researcher not only observes the phenomenon, but also participates in it (in this case, noting changes in the body itself). The manuscript uses an interdisciplinary technique to associate themes from Anthropology to Social Communication. He concludes that the television message in favor of thinness transforms the one who slims into a commendable man.

KEYWORDS: Food; Body; TV; Biopower.

Introduction

This article presents the results of a study that articulates Anthropology and Social Communication. The main subject of the work is food. The objective is to identify what people who try to lose weight feel in order to stay with the "normal" body, according to the Brazilian TV. For this, the author of this work followed the program *Bem Estar*, from *Rede Globo*, for four months; during this period, following tips from doctors and nutritionists heard in reports or studio interviews, he lost 25 kg, going from 109 kg to 84 kg. During the weight loss, he used an ethnographic research technique to note the sensations he had and the reactions of the people he lived with at the time.

Food, basic to the development and maintenance of life, became a prominent theme on Brazilian TV. The theme is in daily journalistic programs, such as *Bem Estar*,

created in 2011. In the perspective of this study, food is not seen as the daily act of nourishing or giving pleasure to the body. It is seen as a point on which power regulates our life, trying to empower it, as the objective of biopower (FOUCAULT, 2012).

Biopower is a power technique that seeks to produce economically active bodies. To do so, it uses discipline (it focuses on the body of each individual, in order to regulate it and make it efficient) and biopolitics (it acts on the body of the population as a whole, controlling births and longevity, for example). In biopower, political power takes over the management of people's lives. For that, it abandons the old technique of making people die, and adopts the strategy of making people live, which seeks to optimize a state of life in the population. "The old right to cause death has been replaced by the power to cause life. Now it is on life and throughout its unfolding that power establishes its fixation points" (FOUCAULT, 2012, p. 151).

In this context, food becomes the path to the economically active body. It is a predominantly lean body, perceived as healthy, normal, resistant, long and beautiful. Food performs this function because it is a natural (biological) and universal (species) data. What has happened with food observed in the media is what has happened with sex. According to Foucault (2012), sex is the point on which both discipline and biopolitical strategies focus (sex is also natural and universal).

The *Bem Estar* program, adopted as the object of this study, usually encourages thinness. On April 25, 2016, for example, when starting a reality show to lose weight to viewers, the program stacked dozens of supermarket trolleys filled with coffee, sugar and rice to measure the weight that those selected should lose. "Here you have half a ton of food," said host Fernando Rocha. The pre-selected celebrated as if they had won the lottery: "It's a gift from God that we won," said one of the participants. "I need help," said another. "I count on your vote to make this dream come true," said another woman.

On April 29 of the same year, the candidates were forced to stack in front of the chambers gray, bulky bags that represented the weight they would like to lose together. "Look at the weight these people carry in life," said the presenter. "They have a disease: they're obese. They have the wrong habits. Let's start all this from scratch, re-educate. Learn how to eat, change their lifestyle," said one guest doctor. As the candidates were eliminated, there was crying on stage. The elected officials celebrated: "The whole of Brazil wants your husband to be able to carry you on his lap, it wants you to be able to tie your sneakers yourself," the presenter said to the most voted

candidate, alluding to the two arguments she had presented when asking for votes from the public. Another selected said she dreamed of being a magazine cover. Next to her photo would be written the kilos she lost and the phrase "example of overcoming".

This article considers that the TV speech that incites slimness resonates in the audience, creating a cult of slimness. This occurs because the mass media "influence their audiences and society as a whole" (DEFLEUR; BALL-ROKEACH, 1993, p. 17). In these terms, the objective of this study is to register the author's sensations and reactions of the public (understood here as a heterogeneous group of individuals in a population) when faced with a slimming experience. Is the person who loses weight praised? Does he become an example to others? Does he give up pleasure? This work believes that weight loss, stimulated by the media, is associated with biopower. It means that, in the media speech, weight loss appears as a sign of health. But it actually serves to produce active bodies.

This research uses observant participation as a research technique. The author of this manuscript has lost 25 kg of weight by following tips from the *Bem Estar* program. And he wrote down sensations he had and what reactions he heard from the public.

Food is a historical source of concern because what we eat becomes ourselves. "The dress and cosmetics are only in contact with our body. Food must cross the oral barrier, introduce itself into us and become our intimate substance. Since the Greeks, food has undoubtedly been the greatest concern of human existence" (FISCHLER, 1995, p. 11). There is a permanent concern with food because "food is, after breathing and drinking water, the most basic of human needs". "In addition to biological need, food is a complex system of symbolic social, political, religious, ethical, etc. meanings". (MEAT, 2003, p. 1).

Ornellas (2000) says that, from prehistory to our days, among the motivations that lead man to search for food are survival (instinctive, basic and permanent factor that has hunger as a normal impulse to search for food), health (health concerns have always been inherent to the human condition itself, resulting mainly from the fear of death), diets (peoples of ancient cultures already established dietary restrictions in special conditions, such as pregnancy), religion (it is not strange that religious factors have influenced certain eating habits, transcending any logical explanation within human reasoning), the social-political aspect (even the most primitive peoples always recognized a sovereign, a leader, a chief, who often converted them into divinities, granting them powers or honors of true gods), longevity (the earth may not be a paradise, but man has not given up his pretensions to prolong life indefinitely),

shortages (fear of the scourges of hunger that plagued humanity, especially in the Middle Ages), science (knowledge of nutrition advances from chemistry, first in Lavoisier), technology (with technological improvement, flours were increasingly refined on the market and varieties of products derived from them multiplied) and culture. The author stresses. "The taste for food, like many other preferences, is not natural, but learned" (ORNELLAS, 2000, p. 274).

The manuscript is divided into two sections. The first section presents the methodological procedures. The second brings the results of the research. The article associates themes from the Human Sciences to Social Communication through interdisciplinary technique, used "whenever we come across a new discipline whose place is not mapped in the great map of knowledge" (POMBO, 2007, p. 6). The text concludes that the food presented on TV reflects on the public. This makes the thin man a commendable man.

Methodology

To prove the sensations and reactions of the public, the author of this study lost 25kg in the first four months of 2017. He did this using "eating less" or "eating better" techniques seen in the *Bem Estar* program. The author of this study measures 1.80m.

The material was written based on observant participation. It is an ethnographic research technique that consists of what Favret-Saada (2005) calls "letting yourself get affected". "Accepting to participate and being affected has nothing to do with an operation of knowledge by empathy, whatever the meaning in which this term is understood". For "when you are in such a place, you are bombarded by specific intensities (affections), which are generally not meaningful. This place and the intensities connected to it must then be experienced: it is the only way to bring them together" (FAVRET-SAADA, 2005, p. 158-159).

For the Favret-Saada, "the very fact that I accept to occupy this place and be affected by it opens a specific communication with the natives: a communication that is always involuntary and unintentional, and that can be verbal or not". "When an ethnographer accepts to be affected, this does not imply identifying with the native point of view, nor taking advantage of the field experience to exercise his narcissism. Accepting to be affected supposes that one takes the risk of seeing one's knowledge project fall apart. For if the project of knowledge is omnipresent, nothing happens. But if something happens and if the project of knowledge is not lost in the midst of an adventure, then an ethnography is possible" (FAVRET-SAADA, 2005, p. 160).

Based on the contents of the *Bem Estar* program, the author used these weight loss techniques:

a) eating less: specialists heard by the program encourage you to eat less, especially at night. It does not mean going hungry. It is a thin line that separates what is hungry from what is desire to eat. Thus, a dish with rice, beans, steak and salad (imagine each portion of these in 1/4 of the dish) nourishes hunger and nourishes the body. The same dish, repeated more than once, loaded with salt or spices made and accompanied by soda and ice cream would be eager to eat.

b) eating raw food: this type of food, according to doctors and nutritionists, increases the feeling of satiety. It means that they help to eat less. This occurs because they require more chewing and because they stay longer in the digestive system. Thus, those who wish to lose weight can exchange cooked carrots for grated raw carrots.

c) complete the diet with salad: in general, the weight loss recipes presented in the program indicate that salad, when not accompanied by manufactured sauces or seasonings with a lot of sodium, can be eaten "at will". They are therefore an option to eat less food rich in carbohydrates and fats.

d) eat fruit between main meals: the consumption of fruit is advised because of vitamins and mineral salts. But fruits can also be eaten in the morning and afternoon snacks, replacing more caloric foods such as bread and frying.

e) chewing more: the ideal, according to the nutritionists' mantra, is to chew the food 30 times on each side of the mouth before eating it. This facilitates the digestion process. It also helps with weight loss because by chewing the food more it gives the brain a kind of message of satiety.

f) exchanging white flour for wholemeal: foods with white flour, such as bread and pasta, slow down digestion and bring less feeling of satiety. Thus, you end up eating more. Changing to wholemeal products helps to eat less.

g) reaching the table with little hunger: experts heard by *Bem Estar* say that one should eat every three hours. This helps to reach the main meals, like lunch, very hungry. When this happens, you end up eating more. Ideally, then, you should eat a fruit to get to the table less hungry.

h) leaving the table hungry: this is a controversial tip, that experts talk more to try to explain an orientation than to teach a technique. One should not read it as "do not nourish the body". It should be understood as "eat what you need".

i) avoid harmful foods: in general, nutritionists and doctors recommend avoiding foods with too much salt, sugar and fat, as these foods put on weight and cause diseases such as high blood pressure and diabetes.

j) insert healthy food: in general terms, it is recommended to eat food. It means that natural foods such as rice, beans and salad should be eaten instead of processed foods such as snacks, fried food and sausages.

l) do not skip meals or try crazy diets: you should not skip meals because in the face of lack of food, the body stores energy instead of processing it. This deregulates the digestive system and interferes with the weight. Crazy diets should also be avoided because there is no slimming without healthy food reconciled to physical activity.

m) doing aerobic exercises: physical activity is as important to weight loss as healthy eating. Exercise does what specialists call a trade-off: fat (fat) comes out, lean (muscle) comes in. To burn energy, aerobic exercises such as walking, running and cycling are the most suitable.

Search results

Weight loss made the author of this study feel ...

a praised man.

"Congratulations" was the most heard word from friends, neighbors and strangers who knew about slimming from the author of this work or from other people. "Congratulations, boy. You look great," said a former co-worker; "Do you realize that you've achieved in a short time what many people try all their lives and can't? You're the best. Congratulations," said a colleague from the skating group. The absolute majority of the praise was about body aesthetics, not health. "Now I'd get it," a boy said in a sexual tone; "Wow, you're a cat," a skating fellow said; "You're younger. You're about five years younger," said another fellow skater.

These aesthetic accolades reinforce what was seen in the *Bem Estar* program (the skinny is considered normal, willing and handsome). The praise, also in the absolute majority of cases, seemed spontaneous. It means that they came naturally from the other, often with a sense of admiration. They were not said to please, or out of education, as has become common. The compliment to the thin body or to those who manage to lose weight indicates a kind of value of a time: in the era of unprecedented exposure of the body in social networks, and in the era when health becomes the

theme of a daily television program on health, fat seems a sin, something that must be fought and kept at a distance.

... a man envied

More than praised, the author of this study experienced the sensation of being envied, especially by those who wish to lose weight. It is used mainly because, even among those who are satisfied with their own body, there seems to be an enchantment with those who lose weight. In part, this may be due to the fact that thinness, as seen in the *Bem Estar* program, is seen as the ideal body model, which inserts the individual in the group of "normal" and takes him away from the condition of sick, lazy and sedentary attributed to the fat.

Unlike praise, which is explicit, envy is something subtle. It appears in the eyes of the other. But sometimes it is confessed in well-formulated phrases: "Wow, how jealous of you. I wanted to have your determination," said a former co-worker who is experimenting with dieting to lose weight; "I also wanted to lose weight, but I can't. You were firm. I admire you for that," said a neighbor who walks five kilometers a day to "try to tune it up a bit"; "How envious! I've tried everything, and the most I've managed to do is lose five kilos," said a former co-worker.

The envy of another's body is not something new. You usually envy someone with white teeth and strong arms, the actress with smooth skin and silky hair. Envy of "thinness" reinforces the value of an era. And since the time in question seems to see individuals as profit makers, it also reinforces the notion that the lean body, the one that can be economically more active, crystallizes as an ideal model.

... one man winner

As seen before, the one who loses weight is usually praised and may even be envied. This possibly occurs because, at the moment the lean body is perceived as a guarantee of health and good appearance, the one who loses weight is seen as the winner. In this case, the winner is the one who endures the sacrifices of weight loss, who manages to maintain the food and physical discipline, who resists the temptations of the good table and, mainly, who puts the body inside the model considered "normal".

The lean or "normal" body tastes like victory because the fat body is taken as a sign of sloppiness, of laziness, of someone who does not take care of himself. The "lean body winner" seems compatible with the classic view of the capitalist world that calls

the winner exclusively the one who enriches, the person who "has won in life. But this is not a material possession, like a luxury car or a house with a view to the sea. It is a symbolic good, which more and more seems to become a distinctive good: the body.

The distinction for the body is not something new either (the fat body, in the Middle Ages, to quote a historical example, was seen as a sign of wealth, a sign of someone who had plenty at the table). But the question now does not seem to be one of choice (something like being thin like the magazine cover model). It seems to be inscribed in a regulation, in a mold that manufactures equal bodies, within the same normality curve, for economic purposes.

... a man who listens

The person who loses weight seems to have a certain authority, and is now consulted on food-related issues. It is common to hear "what did you do to lose weight?", "what is the secret?", "what did you eat?", "what is the recipe?". This is not a medical authority, which speaks based on technical and scientific knowledge, like the professionals interviewed by the *Bem Estar* program. It is, let's say, an authority by example: it is closer to the interlocutor because it is not mediated by TV, because it does not have the status of a health professional and because it looks like "people like us".

The curious thing about this experience is the clear power of influence that can be exercised. Before those who want to lose weight, the one who has lost weight may have the impression that he could influence the diet of many people if he said he lost weight eating this or that food, buying this or that product. It is noticed, in some moments, that those who want to lose weight look for a kind of shepherd, someone who preferably is from the social circle and who, in front of the abundance of media tips about the lean body, can indicate a simpler and less expensive way to the lean body.

It is also interesting to note the idea that slimming is due to nutrition, not physical activity. None of the requests for advice or tips addressed to this researcher focused on the physical face of the process. They all focused on what one takes to the mouth. This particularity is compatible with a common sense, which says that to lose weight one must "sew the mouth".

... an antisocial man

The weight loss process can transform the person who loses weight into an antisocial person. This is the person who moves away from family and friends to keep the focus on diet and achieve the goals set.

The antisocial person refuses to participate in birthday parties (because they have cake, and sweet fattening), asks for soda water when all friends drink Coke (because soda fattening), tries to kill their hunger with lettuce leaves (because this or that food has a lot of carbohydrate or fat), stops eating hot dogs at the end of the ballad (because it is made with sausage, and sausage has a lot of salt, and salt retains liquid, and retention of fattening liquid) and other attitudes of this kind.

In this case, the antisocial is the subject who, in a society of eaters and accustomed to gather around the good table to celebrate the happy moments, opts for his controlled portion of food and his regimented life.

Food refers to the idea of "pleasure". In other words, food reminds us of something good, like moments of relaxation and happiness around the table, without worrying about calories and other indices. Food as something "efficient", which should nourish the body first of all, as the media preaches, seems to fit more in the antisocial dish. In this experience, it was noticed that weight loss is especially difficult when one lives in a group (sometimes it is easier to resist a milk pudding if nobody puts it in sight in the refrigerator), when one has an intense work or study routine (which makes the preparation of healthy meals difficult and induces the ingestion of industrialized food) and when one is a social being (who receives invitations for a beer, barbecue etc).

... a vain man

During the slimming experience, vanity can be proved: in a kind of vicious cycle, body care advances to the choice of clothes, haircut, perfume, etc. In other words, the body is the starting point of all self-care. This perception coincides with what can be observed with gym users: many say that they seek a healthy body when they dedicate themselves strongly to food control and physical activity, but living with them shows that deep down they want to have a beautiful and sexually desired body.

It is natural that sex is the reason for so much effort (in Darwin's evolutionist view, sex is what attracts partners to mating and makes life perpetuate) and that it is omitted in the justification (possibly by religious morality, which associates sex with sin). It is important to remember that in the field of biopowering sex is that which affects the body of the individual (disciplining it) and the body of the population as a whole (through biopolitical acts) (FOUCAULT, 2012).

In the experience of losing weight, possibly because of praise, one may want to prolong this feeling of "vanity", which, it must be confessed, has a pleasurable and gratifying something. But there is a high price to pay. The most notorious of them, in biopolitical terms, is a life oriented towards control.

... an unhappy man

Food is a natural source of pleasure. Depriving oneself of it, to some degree, to have a lean body, can become a source of unhappiness. This may be because, especially for vain subjects, perhaps the greatest pleasure lies in the praise of others, not in the palate. Whoever submits himself to the experience of slimming may have to tame wills. Pizza? You avoid thinking it exists. Hamburger? Three a week, you start eating one every 15 days at the most. Coke? You trade it for passion fruit juice. Chocolate? The 200g bar comes out and a candy bar comes in, 10 times lighter.

In short, little pleasures of the day to day, that an ordinary worker can afford, like a portion of potato chips on Saturday night, need to be abolished or almost so that the body slims down or remains at the weight considered ideal. In this journey, feelings of displeasure are then proved. It is possible that over time, these feelings of displeasure turn into some greater evil, like a permanent feeling of unhappiness.

... a man of no physical disposition

In general, there is a recurring idea that the thin person is more willing to work and play than a fat person. Technically, this disposition is due to lower weight and ease of blood circulation, to quote two medical arguments presented in the *Bem Estar* program. It is to experience this disposition that many people aim to lose weight. As observed in the field, many believe that by losing weight they will have the energy to run, pedal, learn to surf, stretch the ballad. That may be so.

In this experience, although he has reconciled food re-education with physical activity to lose fat mass and gain lean mass, this researcher felt an indisposition he did not used to have. First, physical indisposition, with a feeling of weakness and loss of physical strength. Then, psychological indisposition, with followed cases of irritability from eating too little or from eating what you eat instead of what you enjoy.

... a controlled and calculating man

Controlled subject is the one who controls wills: I cannot eat an extra spoon of that, I cannot take a sip beyond that, I cannot kill aerobic training. The subject who

calculates is the one who counts all the calories and who starts to eat based on mathematics. In this food accounting, you can stop, for example, eating an apple to achieve a weight loss target or not to exceed the daily caloric limit. An apple! The fruit weighs no more than 200g. There are other daily experiences, like a yogurt before bed, a handful of peanuts in the middle of the morning, an extra glass of juice at lunchtime, an extra beer on Friday night, which are controlled and calculated by the one who wants to lose weight.

... a man who buys

Healthy eating is expensive. Wholemeal bread, to quote a basic food, costs almost twice the price of ordinary bread. Chestnuts, salmon, apricots, white cheeses, organic juices and the like also cost more than "ordinary" food, produced on a large scale. But the price is not everything. There is also the appeal of buying, much exploited by advertising, a multitude of "healthy" products put on sale. There is also the belief that these products help to achieve results. To some extent, this drives buying habits.

... a man who suffers alone

He who slims proves a certain kind of lonely suffering. It occurs, for example, when you try to sleep after a "light meal" and sleep does not come because of hunger; when you look at the bean and give up picking up another shell because "it will get fatter"; when you pass through the candy aisle in the supermarket and resist the urge to buy peanut candy; when the host serves a chocolate cake with cherries and the person is served a thin slice like ham. In short, when one fights a kind of battle with one's conscience that, like an attentive guard, warns "this shouldn't", "this can't", "this is bad", "this is fattening". For many individuals, the slimming war is a war that is never won: when conscience prevails, the result is usually displeasure; when conscience is won, the result is usually guilt. In both cases, what remains is a feeling of unhappiness.

Conclusion

Sexuality appears in the work of Foucault (2012) as the device through which the biopower regulates both the body of the individual and the entire population. Food, which has been gaining space in the media and among the general public, also articulates these two areas of power intervention. Above all because, like the sexuality device, food is a natural (biological) and universal (species) datum.

In the device of sexuality, the control of the bodies takes place mainly by moral and behavioral goals that, at the end of the process, determine as the only acceptable model the sex of the heterosexual couple, monogamous, within marriage, with moderation and with a view to the reproduction of the species.

Feeding seems compatible with a control of this nature. It would be, therefore, in the connection of biopolitics and discipline, as the classic case of sex. Food control also has moral and behavioural elements. In practice, it is done by the dish: it tells what one should eat, how much one should eat and why one should eat; it highlights what is risky to eat. All with a view to nutrition, not pleasure.

If in sex pleasure as an end in itself had something abnormal, degenerate, perverse, dirty and risky, in food pleasure refers to the risk of a sick, fat body, incompatible with the labour market; in sex, enjoyment took away the strength of the worker and kept him away from the production lines because of diseases; in food, what is not essentially nutritious or efficient takes away the vigor of the population to work.

In the media discourse, as the *Bem Estar* example shows, food is the term most associated with health. And health, in turn, is the term most associated with life. There is a fundamental link with the ideal of biopower.

The biopower seeks to optimize a state of life in the population. Its expansion results in the disqualification of death, what one wants to avoid with life. In a biopolitical context, "death ceased to be a brilliant ceremony in which the whole group participated to celebrate the passage from an earthly power to a power from the beyond. It has become that which is hidden. It became private, shameful. Death is on the outside in relation to power" (FOUCAULT, 2010, p. 207).

The concern with food does not begin in our days, towing over television programs on health and well-being. But it cannot be denied that there is currently unparalleled media attention around this theme, which reflects on the population. One notorious consequence is the cult of thinness. The one who loses weight becomes an example of success, of victory, a reference or a model to be followed. In other words, a man to be praised.

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RESUMO:

Este artigo apresenta resultados de pesquisa sobre alimentação, tema em voga no jornalismo de TV no Brasil. O autor deste trabalho seguiu dicas do programa Bem Estar, da Rede Globo, e emagreceu 25 kg em quatro meses. Durante o emagrecimento, anotou sensações que teve e reações dos outros. Este trabalho considera que, ao ensinar os segredos da alimentação, a TV propaga a ideia de corpo magro como modelo a seguir. O trabalho usa participação observante, técnica etnográfica na qual o pesquisador não só observa o fenômeno como também participa dele (no caso, mudanças no próprio corpo). O manuscrito usa técnica interdisciplinar para associar temas da Antropologia à Comunicação Social. Conclui que a mensagem televisiva em favor da magreza transforma aquele que emagrece em homem elogiável.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Alimentação; Corpo; Televisão; Biopoder.

RESUMEN:

Este artículo presenta resultados de investigación etnográfica sobre alimentación, tema en boga en la TV brasileña. El autor de este trabajo siguió consejos de alimentación del programa Bem Estar, de la Rede Globo, y adelgazó 25 kg en cuatro meses. Durante el adelgazamiento, anotó sensaciones que tuvo y las reacciones de los demás. Este trabajo considera que, al enseñar los secretos de la alimentación, la televisión propaga la idea de cuerpo magro como modelo a seguir. El trabajo utiliza participación observante, técnica etnográfica en la cual el investigador no sólo observa el fenómeno como también participa en él (en el caso, cambios en el propio cuerpo). El manuscrito utiliza técnica interdisciplinaria para asociar temas de la Antropología a la Comunicación Social.

PALABRAS-CLAVES: Alimentación; Cuerpo; Televisión; Biopoder.