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Unlearning curves: how adult learning about weight loss is constructed through slimmers' stories

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Adult educators have always been interested in learning that takes place outside formal educational institutions. Work-based learning has received particular attention (Malcolm and Zukas, 2006) but learning through leisure such as museum and national park visiting (Taylor, 2006) and participation in re-enactment societies (Coles and Armstrong, 2008) is also recognised. The focus of this research is on what adults learn through attendance at slimming clubs. These are widespread and constitute potentially significant sites for learning. This study examines the readers' stories that appear in *Slimming World Magazine*, to see how they construct the learning that takes place through membership.

Methodology

I draw on two approaches to textual analysis in my treatment of these stories: narrative methodologies and critical discourse analysis. Twenty-one years ago, Donald Polkinghorne located his motivation for developing narrative research methodologies in the relative failure of social science research to provide solutions for social problems. The quotation below seems pertinent for the research reported in this paper:

Our advice on how to reduce criminal recidivism, or teenage pregnancies or even on *how to lose weight* has had little appreciable impact on the problems at hand (my italics) (Polkinghorne, p.ix 1988).

Although narrative approaches to research are well established, much research on obesity and weight management is rooted in scientific methodologies, seeking evidence to validate or critique particular regimes. Obesity rates are soaring and I wanted to see whether a different approach could contribute to understanding the problem.

Readers' 'real life' stories feature regularly in the *Slimming World* magazine. They are designed to inspire members by telling the stories of individuals who have succeeded in losing weight and maintaining that loss. I analysed 42 success stories taken from eight magazines published between January 2007 and December 2008. I also included one magazine from 2006, to check for long term consistency. My readings identified an underlying 'plot' that characterised all

these stories, regardless of the time they were published. Polkinghorne (1988) defines plot as 'the organizing theme that identifies the significance and the role of individual events' (p.18). I sought to examine the ways in which plot connected and created causality between the events that occurred in these lives, so that, although they were stories of separate events and individuals, they presented a common set of meanings and perspectives on the world.

My analysis of the stories also draws on critical discourse analysis, seeking to locate these individual stories within a wider social framework; to connect the 'micro' structures of these stories with the 'macro structures of social institutions and societies' Fairclough (1989) p.12. Fairclough demonstrates that features such as vocabulary, grammar and textual structures are indicative of knowledge and beliefs, of assumed social relations and social identities. In analysing readers' stories I attempt to suggest ways in which features such as these privilege particular beliefs about body image, identity and weight loss methods. An essential complicating factor in such analyses is the reader; meanings do not reside exclusively in the stories themselves, but are inevitably constructed through intertextuality and reader interpretation. My concluding discussion attempts to acknowledge this and discuss the potential for oppositional and variant readings of the stories.

The magazine solicits readers' stories. These are told in the first person and usually one per magazine is written in a diary form, often in the present tense. The stories are not of course simple reflections of individual readers' experiences. The 'diaries' are not actual recordings by individuals, but are reconstructions of experience, made with the help of a journalist. The stories all show journalistic skill in the organisation of material for dramatic effect and a level of grammatical accuracy that would not statistically be found across such a high number of writers drawn from the general public. They have been mediated by the journalist, via the questions asked during the interview that builds the story and afterwards, as the story is constructed into good copy. They are mediated by the individual reader, too, through the expectations and discourses that she or he holds about weight management. These expectations will be partly shaped by Slimming World discourses and by other common sense beliefs about weight management. This mediation is something that needs to be considered as the stories are interpreted.

The Plot

The plot has seven elements. These are not always presented consecutively in the story; quite often the story begins at the end with an account of a triumphant moment, but most of these elements are present in most of the accounts. I am going to outline this overall plot, then concentrate on its first two elements, to illustrate what this combination of narrative analysis and critical discourse analysis can offer to our understanding of adult experiences of, and learning through, slimming clubs.

The first element is 'The Bad Place'. This is an account of life before Slimming World and describes becoming overweight, health problems caused by obesity, previous attempts to diet (including attendance at rival slimming clubs), weight loss and regain, lack of confidence and its consequences and social embarrassment. Next is 'The Trigger'. This is an event or series of events that spurred the story teller to join Slimming World. The text frequently shows signs that the conduct of the interview is prompts the construction of events as a 'trigger'. For example, one interviewee states, 'there was no one 'trigger' as such', as though she had been asked directly by the journalist what the trigger was.

The third element is 'The Meeting'. Here the story is always that the individual was extremely anxious about going to the Slimming World meeting, but the consultant allayed all their fears. The Slimming World message, that no-one announces your weight or humiliates you is often reiterated. Then comes the account of 'Early Success'. The slimmer can't believe how quickly the weight came off. The fifth element is a detailed account of 'What I ate'. The slimmer describes how their eating has changed and what large quantities they eat on the Eating Plan. There are extensive descriptions of the tempting foods they now eat. We hear tips about how they changed what they cook, or take to work, or snack. 'The problem' is next. Slimmers talk about getting stuck – weeks where the weight won't shift or lapsing from the plan because of some external difficulties. Slimming World features as the saviour –the advice and support of the consultant and the group helps the story-teller overcome obstacles and win through to their goal weight. The stories conclude with 'The Transformation'. This tells how life has changed as a result of losing weight. It recounts significant health gains, improved family life, spin-off benefits for the family, increased self-esteem, sometimes leading to new jobs or relationships. Great emphasis is placed on the clothes they now wear and people's reaction to their changed appearance. 'Now I'm a contender for the 2012 paralympic team' (May /June 2008, p.14) 'I lost my baby weight and found my confidence' (May/ June 2008, p.16) 'My patients couldn't believe it either – some of them didn't even recognise me' (May/June 2008, p.30); 'I never expected that losing weight would change my career path as well as my eating habits, but it certainly has.' (October 2008, p. 17) 'I'm a much happier person now' (October 2008, p. 26).

Analysing the discourse

The first two elements, the bad place and the trigger, work closely together as one segues into the other. The description of the 'bad place' has a strong element of the confessional, both in terms of weight problems and sometimes life difficulties leading to it. At the same time the sentence structure often limits the narrators' agency, so that they deny responsibility for their weight problem. They confess and absolve themselves simultaneously. For example, the active subject of the verb can be the food, not the eater: 'Chinese take-aways, burgers and chips were all regulars on our married life menu.' Or the weight takes on a life of its own and attacks the narrator: 'the weight really started piling on', 'my

weight was on the up' (p12, July 2008). In the sentences below, the narrator is the subject of the sentence, but the use of the verb 'find' reduces agency; she doesn't actively choose to eat: 'I find myself eating a handful of chocolates' and ... 'I've found the closer exams get, the more likely I am to turn to the biscuit tin and binge on fatty foods.' (p. 21, July 08. Even when the slimmer uses a direct active verb relating to eating, it is often qualified through sub clauses or connecting phrases that explain or excuse the behaviour:

I raid the cupboards for cheese, crackers and biscuits, before sitting down to a huge dinner, usually a ready meal of takeaway as I am too tired to cook' (p. 21, July 2008.)

In the next example, the verb itself contains the justification 'I reacted by eating too much'. (p. 21 July, 2008) – the slimmer is merely reacting; 'eating too much' is subordinate to 'reacting' which has less pejorative connotations. Sometimes overeating is presented as integral to the eater's identity, rather than something they can be held responsible for: 'I am a real stress-eater' (p.21 July 2008).

Before moving into textual analysis of the trigger stories I did some preliminary content analysis tabulating and coding them, using an inductive approach. They fell into three main categories, those related to appearance (21 stories), those related to health (13 stories) and those that were concerned more generally with escaping a cycle of misery and low self-esteem. (5 stories) There are parallels with Tod and Lacey's (2004) research with sixteen women attending Slimming World in South Yorkshire. They also identified embarrassment, cruel comments and health concerns as triggers for joining, but noted that these decisions were reached gradually and were quite fragile.

Looking at the magazines' trigger accounts in more detail reveals underlying assumptions about bodies and identity. All accounts focusing on appearance rest on the assumption that a slim body is more attractive than a large one. This is never made explicit, or questioned.

Staring at the computer in horror; I couldn't believe that was me. I'd been so looking forward to seeing our holiday snaps, but now they were in front of me all I could think was how big I looked in them (May/June 2008. p.28).

The use of the term 'horror' reinforces the slimmer's underlying assumption that being big is hideous in itself and that the reader will understand this.

Unspoken assumptions also shape the descriptions of going to or preparing for special occasions. The readers construct these occasions as display rituals, where they will be judged according to their conformity to a set of standards. Slimness is central to these. The comment below illustrates this, but is also an example of how these stories often show women judging themselves in comparison with others.

I felt so frumpy in yet another size 22, shapeless, black number, especially compared with a colleague who was looking incredibly slinky in a slim fitting trouser suit (July 2008, p.12/13).

'Frumpy' is set against 'slinky'; the similar word pattern (five letters ending in 'y') reinforces this. Shapeless is set against slim fitting and yet it could be argued that someone whose figure is slender is more 'shapeless' than someone with lots of lumps and bumps. The seriousness of being unable to conform to norms of slimness for these kinds of occasions is embodied in the vocabulary used to describe the tensions of preparing for these big occasions:

(The writer cannot get her best shoes on) I had to face it: even my feet which I'd thought of as my best feature, had got bigger. It was the end. My husband Mark found me in floods of tears, as the one thing I felt good about in myself had gone (Nov/Dec 2006, p.92).

Note the dramatic sentences used to describe having larger feet: 'I had to face it', 'It was the end', 'floods' of tears. The last sentence illustrates something that is entwined throughout the stories – weight and identity are closely related. This woman says that having small feet is the 'one thing' – not something, but the *only* thing, she felt good about 'in myself'. Another slimmer described a shopping trip looking for an outfit for Christmas as a 'trauma.'

The occasion at which women felt particularly on display was their own wedding, and realising they would look fat in their wedding dress proved a spur for slimmers. The stories emphasise the fact that the women getting married are loved *in spite of* their weight but the assumption is that they will not be letting down their partners, if they look slim on that day. The cumulative impression created by the accounts that cite preparing for an occasion as a trigger is that women have internalised a belief that they should be attractive to others, are in competition with other women on all occasions, get much of their self respect from this, and believe that this is unquestionably allied to being slim. They wish to learn how to become someone else; they expect changes in their relationships with others and in their sense of themselves to develop from their diets.

This emphasis on developing a new identity is also apparent in some of the health related trigger stories. Parental, especially maternal, guilt underpinned many of these accounts. Stephanie said, 'my children were the real inspiration for my weight loss' (Mar/April 2008, p.13). She describes the moment of decision:

Today started as the worst in my life – but turned into one of the best. I woke up so exhausted I barely had the energy to make the kids' breakfasts, and my first thought was, 'Stephanie if you carry on eating this way, you'll kill yourself.' I spent the morning in floods of tears composing letters to Martin and my family to be opened if I suffered a heart attack or stroke.

The language indicates that choosing to join Slimming World is seen as a major turning point, 'as one of the best' days of her life. Once again the trigger is intense emotion.

After having a baby, Sharron said, 'Losing weight isn't just about me any more – Matthew needs a healthy mummy.' (July 2008, p 22). There were other examples of similar reactions to parenthood. The writer almost gives herself permission to focus on her health, because doing so as a parent is no longer a self-centred act. The use of the term indefinite article 'a' externalises this emerging new identity – she doesn't say Matthew needs her to be healthy, but needs this new character 'a mummy'.

The focus is not only on surviving for the children, but on being a particular kind of parent – one who can participate physically in a range of activities, and who is not an embarrassment. For Sonia, (Jan/ Feb 07 p. 4) 'The final straw was ... Cameron saying, "Why can't I get my arms around you mummy?2'. Lisa (March/ April 2008, p.16) says:

I wanted to be a fun energetic mum, but my size meant I was reduced to sitting on the sidelines feeling hot and exhausted watching my husband, Jason, playing with the children.

Just as in the 'bad place' examples, agency is given to the weight itself, 'my size' reduces Lisa to the sidelines; 'watching', a passive activity is placed in antithesis to 'playing.' Like Sharron, she describes the mother she wants to become almost as another being 'a fun energetic mum'.

Discussion

The question I am exploring through this paper is whether narrative research methods, combined with critical discourse analysis, have the potential to add to the body of knowledge generated by evidence-based research into weight management.

The common plot I have outlined both creates and reflects commonly held expectations about weight loss and management. The process is portrayed as predominantly linear; there may be stalling and difficulty, but this can be overcome. It is also associated with dramatic personal transformation. The stories demonstrate that self esteem, social standing, being an acceptable parent and even a good employee result from losing weight. This does not mean that the subjects of those stories necessarily experienced their weight loss in exactly that way, given their highly mediated nature. And readers and participants in weight management classes are not passive, nor are they homogenous; observation of classes shows that they respond critically and with humour to some of the dogma and advice. They can read between the lines of these stories. However, the construction of these stories produces/ contributes to a discourse about weight loss that pervades commercial weight loss

organisations and all their communications and helps to shape the way we are able to speak about and classify our own experiences. The stories are labelled as 'inspiration' and feature on Slimming World's web-site under that heading as well as appearing in the magazines. They create a set of expectations against which an individual's personal experience of weight management may seem unsatisfactory. Byrne, Cooper and Fairburn's study (2004) indicated that the one significant psychological factor in determining success or failure in long term weight management was dichotomous thinking. The stories would seem to encourage such thinking, by constructing success in extreme terms. The inspirational tools set up to support slimmers could possibly be undermining them in the long term.

Looking in detail at the first two elements of the plot offered additional insights. The idea of a trigger resonates with Mezirow's work on transformative education (1991). Superficially at least, these stories tell of adult learners who are projected into significant learning either by dramatic/ traumatic experiences, or by the steady accumulation of experiences that clash with existing meaning perspectives. Closer analysis suggests that the changes are in fact of a less significant order. Mezirow (1991) identifies three domains for transformation, the psychic, the socio-cultural and the epistemic. The final two appear to have no part to play in these accounts; the slimmers' deep-seated beliefs do not seem to change. The social stigma attached to being overweight, the association of beauty with slimness and the need to compete with other women are not challenged, or indeed recognised as political or social issues. Knowledge continues to be seen as something external to the knower, it resides in the club, the eating plan and the consultant. Knowledge about weight loss is represented as absolute, rather than something challenging or constructed. In terms of Belenky et al, (1986) these learners begin and end as 'received knowers'. This dependency is, of course, commercially effective.

The change is located in the psychic domain; they change from believing that weight controls them to believing that they control it; from seeing themselves as a fat person to seeing themselves as slim. They become someone who can do new things; talk in front of groups of people, dress glamorously, participate in sports, embark on a new career. The change hinges on thinness, however – the fat person they were could not do these things, which perhaps suggests there is a degree of fragility and contingency in the changes themselves.

These discourses do not merely represent women's experiences; they are part of a productive process that helps to shape the way we conceptualise our bodies and our relationship with food. They reinforce the importance of being looked at and of operating within certain social norms if we wish to be successful in the private and public spheres. Further analysis of the discourses operating in weight management classes, including those that circulate during meetings and those members use when talking about their experiences might deepen our

understanding of the appeal and success of the programmes in promoting initial weight loss, and of the difficulties associated with maintaining that success.

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