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Social and cultural anthropology
Standard level
Paper 1

Wednesday 8 May 2019 (afternoon)

1 hour 30 minutes

Instructions to candidates

- Do not open this examination paper until instructed to do so.
- Read the passage and answer questions 1 and 2. Choose either question 3 or 4. Answer question 5.
- The maximum mark for this examination paper is **[30 marks]**.

Read the passage.

Passage adapted from Greenhalgh, S. (2012), “Weighty subjects: The biopolitics of the U.S. war on fat”, *American Ethnologist*, **39**: 471–487.

The United States has declared a war on fat, expanding the number of weight-obsessed, self-identified “fat subjects”, whose efforts to lower their weight endanger their health, bringing socioemotional suffering. A fat subject is not the same as an overweight person but is someone who identifies as fat and takes on the fat subject’s characteristics.

5 “Fat talk” has long been a moralizing discourse in which thinness is desirable. The discourse on fat today is a scientifically based biopolitical discourse. Fat talk is a discourse – a complex, historically specific body of knowledge that structures how weight and weight-related behavior can be talked about and that produces effects on subjectivity. No longer are fat people merely “lazy” (and “ugly”); they are also “at risk of disease” and “in need of medical treatment”. Fat talk draws on
10 the cultural authority of medicine. Experts, such as doctors, speak in the name of “the truth”.

For years I taught a course at the University of California. The course became an ethnographic field site for this topic. Weight evokes feelings of shame and personal failure, feelings too humiliating to share. Classic anthropological methods – personal interviews, participant-observation – are not effective at bringing out such feelings. I asked my students to
15 write essays on issues of diet and weight in the life of a person they knew well. The majority wrote auto ethnographies [accounts about their own experiences].

In Margaret’s story, her brother began criticizing her weight in middle school. Taking him as the authority on her body’s appeal to boys, Margaret began to see herself as fat.

20 “While my parents never spoke about my weight, my brother did. He constantly told me that I ate too much and that I was going to be fat... I became scared and started dieting... I remember looking in the mirror and imagining ripping [the excess fat] from my body.”

She documents how she internalized society’s message that, for girls, a beautiful body is the source of happiness and sexual power, and that beauty comes from being thin.

25 “When I saw that all my friends had ‘crushes’ and ‘boyfriends’, I almost felt obligated to get a boy to like me – but was never successful. That’s when I learned that body image played a large [role] in attracting the opposite sex... Realizing this, I became incredibly depressed... Society’s standard punched me in the face.”

Throughout her life, Margaret has heard that a thin body is essential to social acceptance.

30 “When there is so much talk about obesity, you feel bad about yourself. Even if you are a kind person, you feel down because the whole nation is saying that excessive weight is bad... It makes you think that there is something wrong with you.”

John is 22. In his story a doctor plays a crucial role, warning John about his “borderline condition.” His essay relates his profound sadness.

35 “I was what a person would call ‘fat’ or ‘chubby’. My mother took me to see a doctor for a check-up. I was afraid the doctor would measure my weight. He told my mother that I was just over

the borderline... My mother had not thought so of me until she heard this from the doctor, and since then she has taken every moment to remind me to exercise and to lose weight.”

Nowadays, his dormmates act as bio-police, constantly encouraging him to work out, criticizing his eating habits, labeling his mindset “weak”.

40 “Currently I live with four other guys who are all athletic. They always talk about how hard they work out or have fun playing sport. They ask me why I don’t exercise, and I reply because of my busy schedule. When I have time, I like to spend it relaxing and doing nothing. They tell me that my way of thinking is weak and I come up with excuses...”

45 Fat subjects see themselves as biologically flawed, morally unworthy, or unattractive. Their perception of their bodies brings social withdrawal and emotional suffering – including depression, low self-esteem, and insecurities.

Writing enabled these people to find their voice. Fat seems to be the last socially acceptable grounds “justifying” prejudice. Fat individuals are some of the most stigmatized and silenced people today.

[Source: reproduced by permission of the American Anthropological Association from *American Ethnologist*, Volume 39, Issue 3, pp. 471–487, 2012. Not for sale or further reproduction. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2012.01375.x>]

Answer question 1 **and** question 2.

1. Define the term **self** and describe how it is understood in the context of the young people in California described in the passage. [4]
2. Explain how the key concept of **social relations** helps you understand the ethnographic data presented in the passage. [6]

Answer **either** question 3 **or** question 4.

3. Compare and contrast the way in which the key concept of **power** or **belief and knowledge** is evident in this passage with how it is evident in **one** other ethnographic example you have studied.

OR

4. Compare and contrast the approaches to research adopted by the anthropologist in this passage to the approaches to research used by another anthropologist you have studied. Make reference to concepts and ethnographic material in your answer. [10]

Answer question 5.

5. What does it mean to be a person? Discuss with reference to **at least two** sources of ethnographic material and examples from the passage. [10]
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