# To be fat or thin? Social representations of the body among adolescent female students in Brazil<sup>1</sup>

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The aims of this paper are (a) to investigate how adolescents perceive and represent the body form with respect to being fat or thin, and (b) to describe the process of how they constructed the social representations for these latter two body conditions. The data were collected by means of individual and focus group interviews with adolescent female students in Brazil who were from 11 to 21 years of age. When the adolescents were questioned about their bodies, they talked about 'being fat' or 'being thin', even though they were not asked about weight issues. Following their own logic, they did not portray 'feeling fat' and 'feeling thin' as related to their 'real' body condition or weight. Furthermore, in the adolescents' discourse, the concept of 'normal weight' was virtually non-existent and was characterised as 'nothing' or 'more or less'. By the end of the interviews, their depictions of these conditions of body weight included links from the body to their social relationships in the form of perceived group exclusion or inclusion. In our discussion we describe the adolescents' collective discourses on being fat or thin as integrated social representations, which incorporate both the physical and interpersonal dimensions of their experiences. We conclude by examining the practical implications of our findings for female adolescent behaviour, especially with respect to obsessive dieting and possible eating disorders. Finally we explore the possibility of educational programs to counter the media and other influences which give rise to the negative aspects of social representations of the body by adolescents.

Social representations, female, adolescents, body image, body weight, health education, Brazil

#### **INTRODUCTION**

Today, being overweight is generally considered to be unhealthy and not attractive. However this was not always the case, as being overweight was once considered to be a characteristic of a healthy or beautiful body. Even across cultures, the valued forms of the body, obese or slender, do differ considerably in terms of health or beauty (Garine and Pollock, 1995; Nasser, 1997; Stearns, 1997).

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In modern Western societies, there has emerged a culture of thinness whereby being thin has become a goal to be pursued for both aesthetic and health reasons. On the other hand, being fat or obese has become a condition to be avoided. Social scientists, anthropologists and historians point out that our perception of the body is a social and cultural construct that depends on the historical and the social context (Sobel and Maurer, 1999). These perceptions of the body are transferred to youth through the media, and have a marked influence on their lives in schools and universities through the activities of the peer cultures that exist in educational institutions.

Body weight is an issue of particular relevance for adolescents in many societies. Not only is it related to their body image and self-identity, but they are particularly susceptible to the negative health consequences of bodyweight extremes, such as obesity, or anorexia and bulimia for those preoccupied with being thin. Preoccupations about weight, diet, and body form are a part of contemporary adolescent culture, and do not affect only the adolescent group that is overweight. The preoccupations about weight affect especially young female adolescents. Dieting is thus one response to the pressure to conform to the ideal image of women to be thin (Chernin,1981; Fallon, Katzman and Wooley, 1994; Germov and Williams, 1999; Orbach, 1978; Paquette and Raine, 2004; Székely, 1988; Wolf, 1990). Some writers argue that in general women tend to be dissatisfied with their bodies (Stinson, 2001) even though their bodies are objectively "normal". Some young women actually dislike their bodies, a phenomenon called "body hatred" (Frost 2001). Body weight is a large part of this dissatisfaction. Frost calls it the "the thin imperative" (Frost, 2001, p.196) In its extreme form, this phenomenon, sometimes clinically labelled as Body Image Disturbance, can lead to disordered behaviours such as crash dieting, fasting, bingeing, purging and more dangerous eating disorders (Posavac and Posavac, 2002).

Preoccupations with weight and appearance have been extensively examined in psychiatric and medical research, especially in the eating disorders field (Bruch, 1962; Gordon, 1990). The connection between the concept of body image and eating disorder problems made an important impact on the studies of how individuals subjectively perceive their bodies, although it has also reinforced a limited notion of body image (Cash, 2004). Body weight concerns are not limited to clinical populations. 'Feeling fat', for example, is a common complaint voiced by females of all ages in Western societies; "... a theme of dissatisfaction is evident in the research on body image among women without eating problems" (Haworth-Hoeppner, 1999, p.91). These issues have been documented, mainly in highly developed Western societies. This article draws on evidence from a society that is a part of Western culture, and indicates that also in a Latin American culture youth are greatly concerned about their body image (Nasser, 1997).

Female adolescents in Brazil are an example of the above condition, as they are subjected to a cultural environment which puts high priority on body appearance. This cultural pressure has been documented in a study by Nunes and her colleagues in Porto Alegre (Nunes, Olinto, Barros and Camey, 2000; Nunes, Barros, Olinto, Camey, and Mari, 2003). They found the following in their research:

...forty-six per cent of the women had an ideal weight lower than their actual weight and 37.8% considered themselves as fat. Among women with normal BMI, 25.2% who were classified as normal, presented risks of abnormal eating behaviour and 5.7% had eating disorder symptoms. Among women that considered themselves fat, 47.2% presented risk behaviour and 19.2% had eating disorder symptoms" (Nunes et al., 2000, p.2, translation ours).

We want to arrive at a deeper understanding of the quantitative results reported by Nunes (Nunes, et al. 2000; Nunes, et al. 2003). In particular we want to know the cause of the feeling that adolescent girls in Brazil have of being overweight without really being overweight. As Cash

(2004) has pointed out, "... individuals' own subjective experiences of their appearance were often even more psychosocially powerful than the objective or social "reality" of their appearance" (p. 1).

In order to explain this phenomenon, we will focus our attention on the underlying social representations of the female body, that is, the socially constructed meanings that young Brazilian women have about their bodies, and consequently about being fat or thin. Thus, we are concerned with how and why young adolescent women, at least in Brazil, disregard the objective weight condition of their bodies and regard them in a way that is consistent with these cultural pressures.

In focusing our inquiry on adolescent women, we do not intend to imply that the constructions of the body occur in a vacuum. We are aware that the representations which they construct must be seen in a context, namely that they are students in schools, they are members of peer groups, and that they are exposed to influences from the wider society, especially the media. While this fact does not deter us from focusing on the construction of the social representations as a process, the interpretation of these representations must take the context into account. We discuss these implications of the constructed representations at the end of this paper.

#### THE BODY AS SOCIAL REPRESENTATION

We will use social representation theory to investigate the meanings that adolescents have about their bodies, body weight and body image. The current concept of social representation has its origin in the writings of Moscovici who originally developed the theory in his analysis of the diffusion of psychoanalytic concepts in French society (Moscovici, 1976). Social representations are an essential part of communication, and as such also can be defined as the "manner in which values, ideas, and practices are structured in and by ordinary communication, allowing people to both communicate and to order their world" (Semin, 1995, p.601). They emerge from conversations in which people attempt to make sense of their social lives (McKinlay and Potter, 1987), or as Moscovici would say, in these conversations people are "creating reality" (Moscovici, 1987; p.517). These social representations serve as "reference points" which make communication possible with another person. In other words, social representations consist of shared knowledge. As Duveen puts it, "representations are the result of communication, but without representations there would be no communication" (Duveen, 2000, p.4).

Social representation theory directs attention to features of daily discourse about a particular idea, value or practice. Because social representations are socially and culturally shared, the search for their ultimate origins often leads to the consideration of agents such as the media, parents, peer groups, and schools, depending on the target group being studied. However, in the course of communication the objects or events from these agents become new 'common-sense knowledge' which is shared and diffused at a new level.

In our case, this discourse is about the characteristics of the body, and how it is related to weight. Therefore the object of our study is the way that groups of Brazilian female adolescents manifest shared understandings about the body and body weight in their daily discourse. We will focus on the content of the discourse, and what happens to the content in the process of discourse.

Thus when we investigate the social representations of the body for Brazilian adolescent girls, we want to know both the *content* and the *process* by which the representations emerged. In other words, we want to know, how the content was arrived at, or the "familiarisation of the unfamiliar" (Semin, p.103; also McKinlay and Potter, 1987; and Moscovici, 1987). In this way, we will not only acquire the knowledge of the attributes or the characteristics of the body which make up the discourse of these adolescent females, but also how these representations of the body come to be understood by them.

According to social representation theory, it is this shared knowledge about the body and its attributes which makes communication possible among a particular group of persons. Also, our knowledge of how the body is understood by these female adolescents helps us understand the pressures that they feel, and the behaviours which are related to them.

#### METHOD OF THE STUDY

The choice of method in social representation research is not dictated by the theory itself. Actual research studies using social representation theory have included both qualitative and quantitative approaches, and both experimental and survey designs. As Bauer and Gaskell comment, "…almost every method known to the social sciences has been used in the study of social representations" (1999, p.163). Our data were obtained through the use of focus group interviews.

#### The Data

Focus group interviews were conducted in 2000 with groups of young women between 11 and 21 years of age, and who were students from the Grade 5 to university, in Porto Alegre, Brazil. The selection of age and grade range was made to take into account their diverse experiences and vulnerabilities with respect to eating disorders. In total, four focus groups, with a total of 25 participants, were formed with adolescent young women of roughly the same age and grade. This is consistent with Morgan (1997) and Bloor, Frankland, Thomas and Robson (2001) who argue that three to five focus groups are usually sufficient to attain "saturation" in the data, that is, that no more "meaningful new insights" would likely occur by increasing the number further (Morgan, 1997, p.43).

The focus group interviews lasted from between 45 minutes to one hour and 15 minutes. They were conducted by the first author of this paper. In addition, two in-depth interviews with individuals were conducted. The first individual interview served as a pilot in order to develop the structure for the focus group interviews. The second interview was conducted after the focus group interviews, and served as a validity check on the focus group interviews and made possible the exploration in greater depth of some of the topics raised in the focus groups. In the analysis, all interview data, both from the focus groups and the individuals, are considered of equal value and are used to illustrate the construction of the social representations. In our analysis, the discourses of the focus group interviews and the individual interviews were cross-validated, and this is the basis for regarding both sets of data as of equal value.

All interviews were tape recorded, and the tapes were transcribed in their entirety, as usually recommended (Stewart and Shamdasani, 1990; Bloor, et al, 2001) and transformed into informal texts, keeping the order of the themes as they emerged in the discourse. In order to describe and analyse the findings, the underlying goal of the project was kept in the forefront, namely the understandings of the participants about the body. The procedure entailed the identification of speech marks, or quotes that related to the question underlying the project itself, namely what is the social representation of forms of the body for these young women? This question was not used to begin the interviews because one of the goals of the project was to confirm if and when the theme would emerge spontaneously. So the first question of the interviews only introduced the topic of the body, as forms of body weight were considered attributes of the body and were left for the participants to bring up. Only after these ideas were mentioned did the interviewer facilitate the discussion. As a result, the process by which the topic of being 'fat or thin' eventually emerged in the discourse of these adolescents also is a part of the analysis and findings. The fact that some ideas were mentioned at an early stage of all interviews represents an important finding in its own right which will be discussed later. Therefore, through this procedure the deeper meanings and understandings of body weight held by the participants, were uncovered.

All interviews began with the same question, namely, 'What comes to your mind when you hear the word body?' There were no structured questions following the initial question.

## **Analysing the Data**

The analysis is built around three fundamental concepts, namely themes, categories and units of analysis (Spink, 1995). The operational definitions of these concepts are given below. In accordance with the primary feature of focus group methodology, namely the interaction between members of the group, we have chosen to include passages which are indicative of this interaction as the social representations of the body emerge in the interview texts (Morgan, 1997; Bloor, et al., 2001).

First, themes are general concepts which relate to the original problem of the study. These themes are made up of a number of categories. A category, as our second analytical concept, is a group of units of analyses that have common meanings. The third concept, units of analysis, consists of speech marks, or short quotes, sentences, or dialogues between the participants, that contained the same meaning and are added together. These units of analysis varied in length. In the focus groups, for example, sometimes more than one participant was talking about the same idea regarding the topic. Therefore the units of analysis could be a series of single statements, or a dialog between the participants about the same idea.

This analytic procedure can be portrayed in the following manner:

- 1. Themes: categories with a similar theme,
- 2. Categories: units of analysis with similar meanings, and
- 3. Units of analysis: speech marks with a common meaning.

We display our findings in an innovative visual and textual manner. The themes and categories emerging from the focus group discussions are represented as concentric rings with appropriate labels. These are accompanied by the relevant 'speech marks' or quotes from the focus group discussion which illustrate and give support to the identification of the themes and categories. The concentric rings indicate dynamism, because the categories are dynamic and not static. This means that each ring represents one category and includes its two opposites. The positive and negative poles portray the dialectical nature of the category in the discourse. This visual display technique will become more clear when we present the first figure of our analysis.

#### **FINDINGS**

In this section we will map out the meanings that emerged in the course of the focus groups, starting with the original theme contained in the question of the interviewer: "What comes to your mind when you hear the word body". The purpose of this procedure is to present in a visual manner the process by which the social representations were constructed by the focus group participants (Puddifoot, 1997). In this way we also make explicit the way the adolescents understand and give meaning to the weight conditions about which we spoke at the outset of this paper.

## Theme 1: The Body

The first theme, the body, was the one that was proposed initially by the researcher. After the original question was asked, the adolescents began their discussion.

## Category 1: My body and the body of others

The first category that emerged from the discussion was the distinction between 'my body' and 'the body of others'. This distinction is reflected in the following 'speech marks' which were taken from the individual interviews and relevant focus group interview. This procedure of data presentation will be followed in all subsequent illustrations taken from the interview material.

Well... (pause) what comes to my mind....(pause). My body. (Interview 1)

Until I turned 13 I did not really care about my body, as I was chubby (pause). Then, after I got my first period (menstruation) and my body started to change, then I began to think about my body ... (Interview 2)

Body? Mmmmm..., let me see... I don't know! Maybe looking at others..., the way they look. I mean looking at a man (everyone in the group starts to laugh). Of course! You guys think that I should look at women's bodies? (Participant 1, Group 3)

Although the adolescents start talking about the bodies of others, the content of their discourse is mainly about their own bodies. However, they talk about their own bodies in association with the bodies of others in order to make distinctions and to define better their own bodies.

Why do these adolescents start talking about 'their bodies' if the stimulus was only the word 'body'? If we go back to the literature about adolescents we find that this first reaction to the stimulus is not new, but even predictable. Adolescence is a time for a rapid and fundamental physical change and it is natural that adolescents are conscious of, and talk about their bodies and their experiences with these changes (Coleman and Hendry, 1999). However, the next category that emerges in association with that of 'my body' and 'the body of others' is that of 'physical appearance'. This category emerged at a very early stage in some groups, like the speech marks exemplified before, and gives an important specific meaning to the previous dialectical category.

# Category 2: The physical appearance of the body

The meaning that adolescents give to the original theme (body) is related to the second category that we call 'the physical appearance of the body'. The participants could have talked about a range of other aspects of the body, such as the function of the body, or the health of the body, or even the symbolic or spiritual meanings of the body. But the discourse was very clearly focussed on the appearance of the body.

When you are a teenager..., (pause) I mean..., when you turn 13, you start to think a lot more about the way you look and the way the others look like (Participant 1, Group 2)

I think image is everything! People can say that that they don't really care about appearance, but the physical image is everything! Well..., at least at the first moment of contact. (Participant 3, Group 2).

In the process of the interview, each category that emerges gives more specific meaning to the previous categories. Therefore the category that we have labelled 'appearance' did not occur without itself being further elaborated. As the interviews progressed, the participants became more precise about their understanding of the theme. And therefore at this stage of the discourse, the adolescent girls started to differentiate between the 'problematic' appearance and the 'ideal' appearance of the body.

## Categories 3 and 4: Problems of the body and the ideal body, and fat and thin

This leads us to the third category that emerges from our analysis of the discourse, namely 'Problems of the Body' and 'The Ideal Body'. These dialectical categories express the

adolescents' expectations of the way, in their own eyes, the body should appear in association with what they do not appreciate in their own bodies. They immediately discuss their notion of the perfect body, and give examples of people that they believe have perfect bodies. The 'Problems of the Body' are related to their own bodies, that is, what they do not appreciate about their bodies, what they dislike in their bodies, the imperfections they see in their bodies, and what they would like to change in their bodies.

I think about the problems of my body. I think I have too much hair on my body, that I'm too hairy ... sometimes I think that my boobs are not big enough, ... sometimes I think that I'm fat ... this kind of stuff (Interview 1)

... Someone could think about a perfect body, or about their own body. But me...I don't know.... (Participant 3). The body changes with time (Participant 1). Keeps changing... (Participant 2); It's a shame that it (the body) starts to look...not that good. Maybe later, if you have problems and you start to dislike (the body) you can always go on a diet, or do another kind of intervention... then it gets better (Participant 1, Group 2)

I have a lot of problems with my body. I hate my body (the group reacts and starts talking at the same time). I'm serious! (the participant tries to continue). This summer I decided that I wanted to look like the "Feiticeira". I'm serious girls! I don't feel comfortable with my body. If I could be like her... I don't want "to be her" (Feiticeira), but I want to have her body. I wish I could have a nice belly, pretty legs, and a nice bum...(Participant 1, Group 4)

The progression of the discourse at this stage of the analysis is visually represented in Figure 1. 4

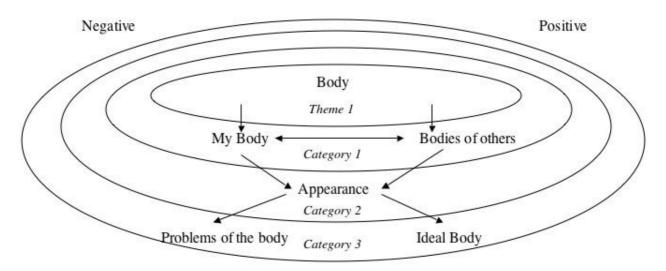


Figure 1. The analysis of the discourse through the first three categories

What we can observe in the course of the analysis thus far, is that, on the one hand, the speech marks that bring together the meaning of the category 'Problems of the Body' are related to the participants' own bodies. On the other hand, the bodies of others are exemplified as the ideal body. The speech marks illustrate the discontent of participants with their own bodies.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Feiticeira is a Brazilian TV icon, who, by 2000, was considered by the media to be the most beautiful woman, and who had the most "perfect body" in Brazil. Many magazines have had her picture on their covers.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> We have included the label "category" in Figure 1 in order to better illustrate the analytical structure of the diagram. In order to simplify subsequent figures, we have omitted this label.

... When I take my clothes off and I look at myself in the mirror, I start to check my body. I turn to one side and the other and I usually dislike things, like my belly for example... (Interview 1)

I hate my nose! (the group starts laughing) That's because it is flat. I don't like my body at all... (Participant 2); That's horrible! (Participant 3); I don't like my hair (Participant 8); Me too! I hate my hair! (Participant 3); Well..., my hair... (Participant 2-reflexive moment); I don't like my face (Participant 3); Sometimes I like my hair..., but only sometimes (Participant 4); I don't like my hair either. I don't have enough hair (Participant 8); Yes you do have a pretty hair! (Participant 1). No (I don't)...(Participant 8, Group 1)

... I wish I could have a perfect body. I weigh 63 kilos now, but I want to go down to 58 kilos. ... I'm doing a lot of exercise because I want to go down to 58 kilos. I'm worried... Sometimes I say: "I don't care!" But of course I do. I look at myself in the mirror and I don't like what I see (Interview 2)

At this point, our analysis helps to clarify what the category 'Problems with the Body' means, and we get closer to the focus of our study. As was previously mentioned, the discourse about the body and its categories, namely appearance, problems with the body, and the ideal body, move spontaneously to the concepts that they called 'fat and thin'.

We use these concepts to label the next theme in the discourse, namely 'fat' and 'thin'.

#### Theme 2: Fat and Thin

When the young girls started to mention the theme 'Fat and Thin', the interviewer began to direct the conversation in order to help them express their understandings about this second theme. The following example is taken from Group 4.

Group 4: ... sometimes I don't even look at myself in the mirror, because if I do I'll think that I'm so ugly (Participant 2) ... And then you don't want to go out of the house (Participant 5).

Interviewer: So that means that you are not happy with your body?.

Group 4: I am! (Participant 2); I am not! (Participant 1). Well... I can't say that I'm not happy with my body, but... I think I need to lose weight (pause). Sometimes I am happy and sometimes I'm not.. Well..., I guess I can say that I'm not really happy with my body (Participant 3). I also have this problem... But since I started to lose weight I started to feel better with my body (Participant 4).

Interviewer: Let's talk a little bit more about this, about losing weight and feeling better about your body. I want to understand better what you mean by this.

Figure 2 represents the process of the discourse and the change of theme as stimulated by the interviewer.

At this point the adolescent girls began to focus on the theme of 'Fat and Thin' by trying to conceptualise what it is to be fat or thin from their perspective. Even though their focus shifts to a different theme, it is important to observe that there is continuity between the previous theme and categories.

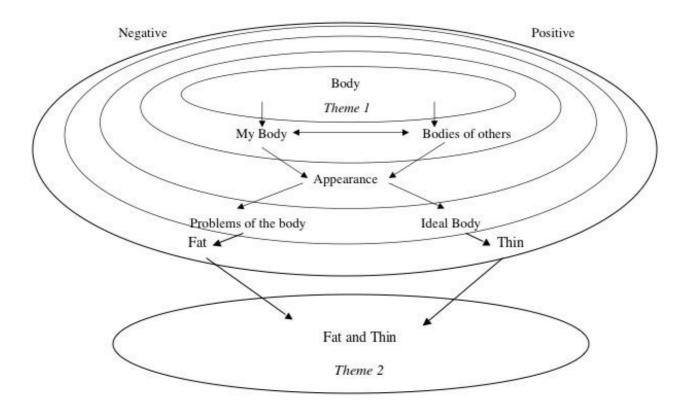


Figure 2. The emergence of the second theme, Fat and Theme

## Categories 1 and 2: Being fat and being thin, and feeling fat and feeling thin

When the theme of being fat or being thin emerges, two different categories appear in the discourse at once. When the adolescents start to define what they call 'fat' and 'thin', the definitions are articulated in two different ways, namely 'being fat' and 'feeling fat', and 'being thin' and 'feeling thin'.

'Being' and 'feeling' are two different realities when the focus is on body weight. Feeling fat or thin does not have to do necessarily with being fat or thin. In other words, their perceived body weight does not correspond to their objective body weight. This distinction is an essential finding of this study, not only because it shows that 'feeling' is different from 'being', but because of the symbolic meanings that underlie this separation. The important question is what makes them feel fat without really being fat?

We argue that these adolescents are reflecting a different logic that guides their understanding and consequently their behaviour regarding body weight. This logic, as well as the distinction between 'being' and 'feeling' is represented in Figure 3. The broken arrows represent the indeterminate logic of the adolescents that will become more clear and important later in this analysis.

The complexity of these distinctions and the interrelations of the categories 'Being Fat or Thin' and 'Feeling Fat or Thin' are exemplified in the selection of speech marks found below.

For me it is like this... Some of them are too thin, others are a little bit fat, others are normal, you know? But all of them keep saying that they are fat. The ones that are thin want to keep losing, and losing, and losing weight! (Interview 1)

... I don't like it when a thin person keeps saying: "I'm fat! I have to go on a diet!". They say this because they want to hear complements about their body..., like: "Oh gosh! You are so skinny!", you know? (Participant 2). Well..., I sometimes do that...

But that is not my intention... My intention is... (she pauses and reflects)... because, sometimes I look in the mirror and I really feel fat...(Participant 1) My mom lost a lot of weight, I think more than 20 kilos or maybe even more. But she keeps saying that she is fat. She does not see herself as a thin person. (Participant 3; Group 2)

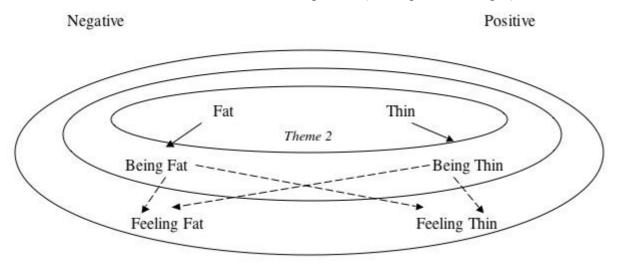


Figure 3. The logic of adolescents about Fat and Thin

## Category 3: Normal

In the above discourse, a new category appears, namely that of 'normal'. However, what is interesting is that this category simply disappears as the discourse flows on. But 'Being and feeling fat' continues to receive meaning as does 'being and feeling thin'. 'Being and feeling normal' takes on a neutral meaning. In the words of one of the participants, it is like "feeling more or less". Clearly the category 'Normal' has lost its significance for these adolescents. If 'normal' means feeling 'more or less', then why would an adolescent want to be only 'normal'? The discourse regarding 'being normal' is given in Figure 4.

In contrast to the concept of 'normal' as having a neutral meaning, the categories 'fat and thin' are understood as being at opposite ends of a continuum. The concepts that are used to give meaning to the category 'being fat', for example, are clearly negative. The adolescents use stereotyped negative expressions when describing overweight persons, and they regard them as totally responsible for their weight condition. These views are reflected in the following speech marks.

You are obese if you do not take care of yourself... It's not healthy. (Participant, Group 4)

The person is fat if she or he wants to be fat! (Participant 1, Group 3)

She does not want to take care of herself... (Referring to an overweight cousin)...I always try to advise her...But my cousin is fat because she wants to be. (Interview 2)

...Once my brother saw this woman in the bus and she could not pass through the turnstile ...She was stuck! (The group starts laughing), (Participant 2). I also watched that happen once!! And you know what? Everyone had to get out of the bus through the back door (The group laughs even louder) (Participant 3). The woman was trapped? (Participant 1). (The group keeps laughing aloud). I think they had to cut part of the turnstile (Participant 3). Oh Gosh! What an embarrassing situation! (Participant 1). What a horror! (Participant 8). Thank God she was not your relative! (Participant 1, Group 1)

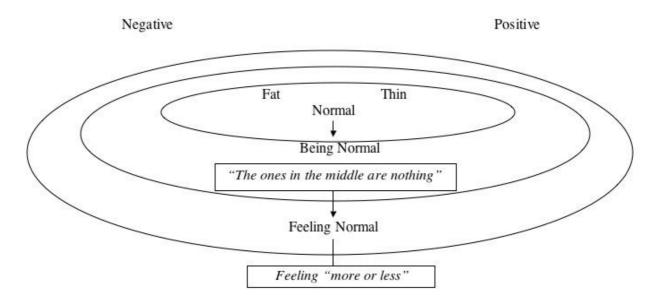


Figure 4. The category, Normal, with the corresponding units of analysis (quotes)

As we see in the speech marks above, these adolescents are inclined to describe situations related to the category 'being fat' in a way that is unconnected with their own body weight experience. In this part of the discourse we observe that the adolescent girls gradually become conscious about the way their own experiences and feelings are a part of the phenomenon (being fat or thin) about which they are speaking.

...I don't know... I put myself in the place of this person who was stuck in the turnstile... Terrible...(Participant 2). They suffer...they are always the objects of jokes ...(Participant 4). Jokes (reflecting)... (Participant 2). Sometimes people even say that they smell bad... (Participant 4). People think they are funny, people think...(Participant 5). Exactly! (interruption) (Participant 4). Because fat people have to have something good, because they are fat... At least they have to be funny to be accepted. (Participant 5, Group 4)

No one likes to be fat...everyone wants to be thin. Ok, ok... Me too... I also think that being thin is better than being fat... Fat people are treated different... They are isolated..., they are left aside... The thin ones are always welcome! (Interview 1)

As we mentioned in our discussion for Figure 3, the feeling of these adolescents about body weight does not correspond to objective body weight. It is a different logic that guides their understanding and consequently their behaviour regarding body weight. The following speech marks illustrate the category 'Feeling Fat and Thin', where the adolescents also talk about their behaviour which is based on this logic.

Something that I can observe is that, people of our age are always changing their weight. I am like that. I gain and lose, gain and lose, gain and lose, all the time. Then I feel really bad, because...you gain..., then you lose and everything is perfect! You feel great and happy...then you stop to take care of yourself and everything goes back... and you feel bad again. It's always like that, this roller coaster: gain and lose, gain and lose, gain and lose, gain and lose... This makes people feel bad...I think... I feel bad... (Participant 3, Group 4)

...I do not think about 'stopping eating' because I do a lot of exercise..., I cannot accept the idea of getting fat and that is the reason why I am always on a diet. I cannot imagine myself 'not dieting'. Weight always worries me... (Participant 1, Group 2)

...When I was about 12 years old I knew the calories of everything. Me and my friend, who was actually fatter than me,... we had this thing (calories) always in our heads. It was terrible! We use to go to the gym...We did not even know what we were doing! (Participant 1, Group 4)

In the words of these girls, feeling fat or thin is not something fixed by any objective standard. It depends on the perceptions and understandings that only make sense in their own environment. Their understanding guides their expectations and frustrations about their body weight. Sometimes the adolescents do not even realise why they are going on a diet—as reflected in the words of one of the girls "we did not even know what we were doing". But the necessity to 'feel good' and accepted—which seems to be related to 'feeling thin'—drives their behaviour.

## Category 4: Fitting in and not fitting in

The need to be socially accepted leads to our identification of a new category, which we call 'Fitting in clothes' and 'Not fitting in clothes', and it is exemplified in the following speech marks.

... You have to be thin to fit into the clothes that are in fashion... You have to look pretty in these clothes and not in the big ones. Well... I don't know... I think it is because of appearance... to have a good looking body and be able to wear a two-piece bikini and not a one-piece swimsuit, you know? (Interview 1)

... The number 4 did not fit! (The participant is talking about a pair of jeans that she was trying on in a store) Can you believe it?! It did not fit! I could not fasten the button! I was so upset...so upset... I felt humiliated... I can't even explain how I felt...I was already feeling a bit sad about myself, and then I had to say to the attendant in the store: "I did not fit in this one"... It was terrible... I knew then that I had to do something about my weight (Participant 1)... In our day we have to be the ones to fit in the clothes that are considered in fashion! It should be the opposite: the clothes should fit on us! And not that we should be trying to fit in the clothes! Why do we have to submit ourselves to that? (Participant 4, Group 4)

In the logic of these adolescents, 'not fitting into the clothes' means 'feeling fat'. What is important is that they are not talking about a large range of sizes; they are talking about specific small sizes. In their understanding, to be and to feel thin, and consequently to feel socially accepted, means to 'fit into small clothes'. There is no flexibility. The requirements to feel accepted and therefore to be comfortable with their bodies are strict and rigid.

In the discourse we can observe that the categories 'fitting into clothes' and 'not fitting into clothes' are not only related to clothes. The adolescents are also talking about feeling socially accepted or included. In the words of the girls, the wish to 'fit into small clothes' represents their wish to 'fit into their peer group'. In other words, the concern about being overweight takes on social implications.

It is at this point that we introduce the final theme in our analysis, namely what we call 'Exclusion and Inclusion'. This transition is given in Figure 5.

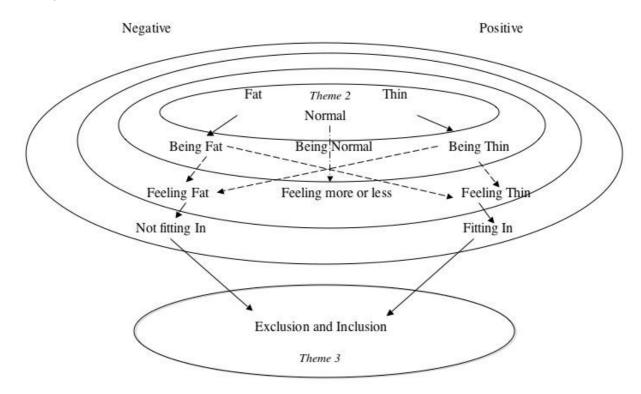


Figure 5. The emergence of the new theme, Exclusion and Inclusion

#### Theme 3: Exclusion and Inclusion

The theme 'Exclusion and Inclusion' emerges in the discourse out of the adolescent's understandings about body weight and its link with their social relationships.

Physical appearance is seen as fundamental for establishing social relationships and to achieve acceptance within their peer groups. In the adolescents' social environment, the groups are determined by rigid criteria related to body standards. In other words, from their perspective the body condition determines 'who' will be excluded and 'who' will be included in a particular group.

...The skinny ones..., they are always surrounded by friends... In my school we have groups divided like this: the popular ones, that everyone likes, that are considered the good-looking ones...Then you have the nerds, those people that are nerds, you know? Then you have the normal ones, the ones in the middle, they are nothing... When a girl is skinny, and she is new at the school, for example, everyone is going to give her attention because she is thin. They will think that she is cool because she is skinny. If she is fat she cannot be cool, because she is fat, you know? These preconceptions... Discrimination against the fat ones... The fat ones are usually nerds and the thin ones have more of a chance to be popular...I don't think this is fair... (Interview 1)

...People judge you by your looks... They are not wondering if you are a nice person or anything like that. No... They are looking at you and thinking: "Is she pretty?" "Is she skinny?" "Is she fat?" (Participant 2). Yes... (Reflecting). This is true...(Participant 1). They don't even talk to you first! (Participant 2, Group 2)

This differentiation, which is determined by 'looks', influences their social relations in many different areas. The adolescent girls give a lot of examples about how their body weight is perceived by others in different situations and how it can determine their future life.

If you are fat the guys will make fun of you. For example, if you are fat and you like a guy he will make fun of you and you are going to feel really bad (Participant 2). If you are thin you are everything...(Participant 6). But there are some guys that like fat girls... (Participant 3). Not in this school (Participant 2). I think it depends on the guy (Participant 4, Group 1).

... If you think of a fat man and a thin woman..., and the other way around also... No one is going to like someone fat, you know? ... There is a lot of discrimination (Participant 1, Group 2).

...I always sang in a band... since I was little... My teacher says that I have a good potential to be a singer, but you know what worries me? To become fat in the future...Do you think that people would like my music even if I'm fat? ... I'll give you an example. If you have two singers, one is fat and the other one is skinny. Which one do you think would be more successful? The skinny one! Of course! Even if both sing well...the one that is going to be successful is the thin one, because everyone is going to think that she is beautiful. So then you end up with these kinds of anxieties about your professional life (Participant 1). Yes... there are some kinds of jobs that are impossible for a fat person, for example, a flight attendant (Participant 3, Group 2).

Looking closely at the above speech marks, we can clearly see that, in the understanding of these adolescents, body weight is a criterion for feeling empowered, acceptable and successful in their social relations. For them, being overweight is not only a problem of health or physical appearance. It is a problem also to the extent that it influences their social relationships, their perception of self, their self-esteem, and their understanding of what it means to be socially accepted and not excluded.

On the one hand, being overweight is linked to the idea of being excluded from different kinds of social relationships and a range of everyday situations. Sometimes it is not even a matter of having excess weight, but 'not fitting into' some patterns that are established in their world, like 'not fitting into small pants' that we pointed out before. On the other hand, being thin is seen as an 'open door' to a wide variety of opportunities. Put simply, to be thin means to be superior.

## Category 1: Superiority and inferiority

The category which emerges from the theme 'Exclusion and Inclusion', in the adolescents' discourse, is that of 'Superiority and Inferiority'. This category represents what the adolescents see as a social consequence of the benefits and costs of the body condition. If being thin is a guarantee of social inclusion, then it follows that these adolescents will behave in a way which is conducive to weight control. If they are not overweight, they are afraid "to become fat in the future", as we saw earlier in the words of one of the participants.

However, what kind of behavioural consequence could we expect from this fear of becoming overweight? What is the consequence of their understanding of being fat as a criterion for exclusion and slenderness as a criterion for inclusion?

One consequence that comes from this fear of becoming fat is trying to lose weight.

Earlier we referred to quotes which illustrated some of the practices that the adolescents engaged in as a response to this fear. However, if the girls are able to maintain a slender weight, or if they succeed in losing weight, in their culture they have the right to feel superior.

...It is kind of normal that after you lose some weight, you feel full of yourself. You think: "Oh! Now I look good! Now I am pretty!" (Participant 2). After my cousin lost some weight she started..., I am not sure but..., she started to brag to the others,

especially to her female friends. I think this is because..., when she was fat no one ever looked at her. She used to dress really bad before losing weight. (Participant 1, Group 2)

... The skinny girls tease the fat girls. They say: "I need to lose some weight", just to put down the fat girls. The fat ones don't argue...They keep quiet... We always compare ourselves to each other and the thin ones can be really bad... I am like that sometimes. (Interview 2)

The discussion of this final category completes our analysis of the interviews and the ways in which these adolescents constructed their social representations of being fat or being thin. What now remains is our summing up of the themes and categories which form a part of the integrated social representations.

#### TOWARD SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BODY

The social representations that emerge from this study extend across the boundary between the body and society. In effect, the social representations about the body which are constructed during the discourse affects the way these Brazilian female adolescents see themselves as fitting into society. A visual portrayal of the integrated social representations constructed by these Brazilian adolescent females is presented in Figure 6.

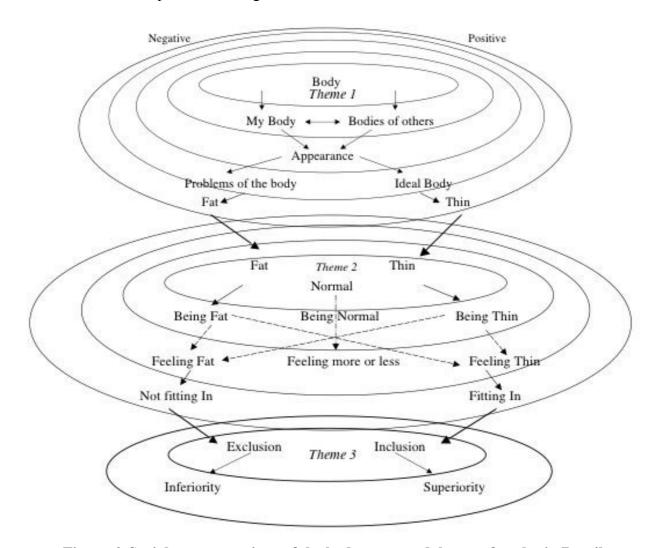


Figure 6. Social representations of the body among adolescent females in Brazil

The social representations of the body for these adolescents can be described in the following manner. First, the representations of being fat or thin emerge from the concept of the body. For these adolescents, the body represents positive and negative values, from which they focus on their own and other people's bodily appearance. They tend to associate problems of the body with their own body, and the ideal body with that of others. The main characteristic of the body which differentiates problems from the ideal is that of being fat or being thin, which we call 'body weight'. The meanings of the body become, in the discourse, 'meanings of body weight', showing that 'body weight', for these girls, starts to turn into a criterion by which the adolescents measure their bodies and later their personal and social worth.

One of the first representations of body weight which emerges was related to the logic of these adolescents, whereby being fat and thin, and feeling fat and thin, are not necessarily related. Thus it is possible to be thin but to feel fat. Furthermore, in this logic there is no 'normal' condition. To be normal is to be 'nothing'. Thus, in the representations of these adolescents, the options are limited, and indeed the only choice is to be thin. And the choice becomes even more restricted when, according to their logic, a person can be thin but still feel fat. The final representation, and perhaps the most significant, is the fact that the adolescents see body weight as affecting their social relationships. Starting with the notion of 'fitting into clothes', their discourse leads to the notion of fitting into society. Thus the social representations of the body include the extent to which these adolescents feel that they 'fit' into their social environment, which includes social relationships, jobs, and other opportunities. Not to be thin means to feel excluded from this social environment. Finally, to the extent that a person feels thin and socially included, that person sees themselves as superior with a positive sense of self and high self-esteem.

From the above, we argue that the social representations of the body are strongly linked to body weight, and are also a powerful pressure on these young Brazilian female adolescents. To understand the complexity of these social representations helps to understand a range of behaviours which characterise youth, and in particular, behaviours related to weight problems and eating disorders.

#### PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS OF SOCIAL REPRESENTATIONS OF THE BODY

The study of the social representations of the body has repercussions in different academic fields, from developments in social representation theory, to the field of overweight, obesity and eating disorders, and finally to studies of youth and education.

## **Social Representation Theory: Content and Process**

The social representations that emerge from this study extend across the boundary between the body and society. The social representations of the body are built around social values that are not necessarily linked to body issues. However, asymmetric social relations such as exclusion, competition between peers, and feelings of superiority are understood by these adolescents as linked to body conditions. This shows that topics concerning weight problems, such as obesity and eating disorders, cannot be approached only as individual and medical conditions. The adolescents in this study show that it is not only the physical body which is important for understanding weight issues, but also the ways they perceive and represent their bodies in a social context that have an important place in their social practices.

Our study makes a further contribution to social representation theory at the methodological level. We have developed and used a systematic and rigorous procedure for the analysis of the *process* of the construction of social representations. We have respected the order of the appearance in the discourse of various stages of building their representations of being fat or being thin. Most of the

previous studies have tended to analyse the content without showing the order and the way the content appeared in the process of construction. By building our analysis around the three operational concepts of themes, categories and units of analysis, as we explained at the outset of this paper, we argue that we have a better understanding of the content of the social representations, and the process by which they were constructed. Furthermore we have portrayed our analysis in a series of diagrams which visually describe both the content and the process. We have incorporated in these diagrams both the contradictions inherent in social representation construction and the dynamism of the process itself.

## Overweight, Obesity and Eating Disorders

With respect to the field of obesity and eating disorders, we are not passing judgement on being fat or thin, nor are we trying to resolve the social problem of obesity. Instead we are investigating the understandings of these conditions by these groups of adolescents, and how these understandings lead to particular types of behaviours. Most of the existing studies on the vulnerability of adolescents to weight problems and eating disorders show that they are a group at risk because they have a high probability to go on diets even when they do not need to do so. For most adolescent girls, the 'fear of becoming fat', an emotion understood as one of the symptoms of anorexia and bulimia, is becoming more common than researchers have expected. Recent studies, such as that conducted by Nunes and her colleagues (Nunes, et al., 2000; Nunes, et al., 2003) suggest that the fear of becoming fat might be a shared anxiety in adolescent culture generally.

Our study makes a further contribution to the above, and shows 'why' adolescents do this. They fear being fat because being fat means social exclusion. What appears to be logical for the adolescents does not appear to be logical from the perspective of outsiders. If you are an adolescent female who fears getting fat, and you know the social consequences of getting fat, then even if you are thin, you go on a diet. The social representation of feeling fat or feeling thin does not have to correspond with the objective condition of being fat or being thin in order to have an impact on the weight-related behaviour of these adolescents. This suggests that what really matters is not reality itself, but the way the reality is represented and understood in the minds of these individuals. For them, the social representation becomes the reality.

Therefore to be on a diet is the only way for these adolescent girls, in their understanding, to guarantee being thin, and to be thin means to be automatically included in social relationships, and to be socially superior. After all, even a person who is thin and still goes on a diet, experiences higher self esteem and perceives their admiration in the eyes of others.

In the logic of these adolescents, to be 'normal' is not relevant or interesting. The focus here is more on being socially included and not excluded. Their perception of 'normal weight' does not seem to guarantee that they will be automatically included in the group, whereas being slender does. Therefore their social representations of body weight do not give any alternative except to concentrate on keeping their weight down, and this means an obsession with dieting. In extreme cases, this obsession might develop into other more serious eating disorders such as anorexia or bulimia.

#### **Studies of Youth**

With respect to the studies of youth, this study contributes to the understanding of the complex process involving puberty physical changes and their social psychological consequences. In addition, it is not simply the physical changes themselves that are of concern, but the impact that the social representations of these changes has for the adolescents in the study.

This study also confirms already existing research findings that show that the perception of the body for female adolescents is strongly linked to appearance and weight issues (Coleman and Hendry, 1999). However, our study takes a further step. We show that the content of their perceptions of their own bodies are not only related to weight issues, but are also related to social issues, both with a strong negative bias. Furthermore, we show that the process of the construction of these perceptions is a part of shared understandings (social representations) and not the product of the aggregation of individual constructions.

The importance of these social representations is inflated by the fact that, at this stage in their physical and social development, young females have little in the way of social accomplishment with which to evaluate themselves, and with which to compare themselves to others. Thus their body form and overall physical appearance take on significance beyond their physical concerns, and extends into their social concerns as well. This is reflected in the social representations of the body constructed by our participants, and it explains why these representations eventually included the theme of social inclusion and exclusion. Future research on the body images of adolescent females, and males as well, might focus more closely on the unique role that the body plays in self evaluation and social comparison, given that at this age they have had few opportunities for other accomplishments or achievements against which to evaluate and compare themselves.

## **Implications for Schools and Educational Programs**

Given that the pressures for these representations of the body come from the media, parents, peer groups and the school, further studies are needed about possible intervention strategies which can modify the construction process to prevent the extreme negative and potentially destructive content of these representations.

Research on the influence of the media has been extensive (Botta, 1999; Herbozo, Tantleff-Dunn, Gokee-Larose, and Thompson, 2004; Posavac and Posavac, 2002), and that of parents and peer groups appears to exist, but to a lesser extent (Phares, Steinberg, and Thompson, 2004). While it may be desirable that intervention strategies be developed regarding the media, parents and peer groups, in reality such strategies are impractical and not likely to occur. However, intervention at the school level is a different matter.

The students in this study represented levels of schooling from high school to university, and yet the representations of the body were consistent. Thus, it has been argued that the best type of intervention for youth is 'psychoeducational', that is, the inculcation of media literacy skills in order to have a more critical approach to the messages from the media and other agents (Phares et al., 2004; Tiggemann, 2004). In addition, it has been suggested that prejudices in attitudes and practice toward certain body forms in school settings need to be removed (Greenleaf and Weiller, 2005). Both of these suggested strategies imply the development of intervention programs in schools which will empower young people to be able to interpret critically, and even resist the negative influence of the media and other similar agents in their day-to-day construction of social representations about the body.

School-based programs might also introduce strategies, which will provide a broader base for adolescents to evaluate and compare their own self worth. Other aspects of the body beside body weight and body form might be emphasised, such as eyes or hair. Positive aspects of personality characteristics and academic and other achievements, such as sport or other manual skills need to be stressed. In this way, body form and body image might be put in a more broad and balanced perspective, alongside other positive features of the total person.

## **Limitations of the Study**

Some might argue that our analysis was based on a relatively small number of focus groups and participants. However, as we noted earlier, the number of our focus groups is consistent with the recommendations of Morgan (1997) and Bloor and his colleagues (2001), and is sufficient to attain 'saturation'. Furthermore, we believe that the methodological procedures that we used, and the depth of the focus interviews themselves, offset any concerns regarding the numbers of groups and participants.

A common criticism of the use of focus groups is that the participants sometimes reveal what they think the researcher wants to hear. In this study, this concern was minimised by the way the focus group interviews were conducted. As pointed out earlier, the interviewer did not intervene in the discussion until the key topic of body weight was mentioned. In this way it was the participants who guided the direction of the discourse and not the interviewer. (See Morgan, 1997.)

A final concern with social representation research is how to account for the social representations of the researchers themselves, and how they might contaminate the analysis of the discourse. In response, we argue that the systematic and rigorous methodology that we used served as a barrier and protector between any prior representations of the researchers and those being constructed by the participants.

In effect, the limitations which we have identified above are not unique to social representation research, and are common to all research of this nature. However, we have indicated our recognition of these limitations and how we think we have overcome them.

#### **FUTURE RESEARCH**

Future research needs to expand the scope of the present study in a number of ways. First, this study needs to be replicated with other groups of Brazilian females, especially in other regions and perhaps with a wider age range. Second, future research needs to replicate this methodology with other groups of females in a cross-cultural context in order to determine whether the same social representations will be constructed. Third, the study should be conducted on males to determine whether their own constructed representations are similar or different from those of females. Finally, it would be possible to approach the study of weight-related social representations from other theoretical perspectives, for example the ideological perspective, which would include an emphasis on the role of external domination agents such as the media and the fashion industry.

By pursuing the study of weight-related social representations using different groups and different theoretical perspectives, not only will our knowledge of the process of the social construction of social representations be advanced, but also our knowledge of the content regarding body issues will be broadened. There are both academic and policy-related benefits for continuing this research agenda.

The functions of the peer group, which emphasises the messages conveyed by the media, particularly through television advertising, also warrant further investigation. The increasing levels of retention at school for 12 or more years, and the growing levels of participation in universities and colleges at a time in the lives of young people when they become sexually aware and active, suggest that social representations of the body, as described in this article, takes place in the classrooms and on the playgrounds of educational institutions where the youth of today are concentrated. Consequently, not only do the various educational institutions have an opportunity to develop among youth a critical approach to these media messages, but also it seems likely that the issues raised in this article could be a hidden factor in explaining differential success at school and continued participation in education.

As educational provision and participation expands in developing countries, the body image issues addressed in this article move beyond Western societies. These emergent critical issues regarding body image affect the growth of health and a sense of well-being among youth. Furthermore, as was clear in our findings in this Brazilian study, they are perceived to affect future democratic involvement in community life and economic participation in the workforce. Clearly, the study of social representations of the body among youth, and their implications for education, is an important subject for continued research in all societies and cultures.

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