What is wrong with obesity. Misconceptions and ethical issues in obesity discourse

Franziska Kasch

As I will demonstrate in this presentation, there are several misconceptions and ethical issues in obesity discourse. In this discourse, obesity is often perceived in a negative way. It is thought to be responsible for several diseases and does not fit into the modern ideal of slim beauty. Therefore, obese people are stigmatized and sometimes even discriminated, but since the negative images about obesity are so widely spread, fat discrimination is rarely addressed or even recognised as something bad. On the contrary, obese people are commonly shamed for their appearance and blamed for the illnesses they presumably have or will get due to their weight. References to sins like gluttony and sloth are heard all too often in the context of obesity.

However, research does not support this negative image of obesity. Statistics show that death rates of overweight people are sometimes lower than that of 'normal' weight people, which raises questions about the validity of these weight categories. Nevertheless, the idea of a 'normal' or 'ideal' weight lets many people believe that they should try to reduce their weight even if they are healthy. In fact, this idea has become such an imperative that it does not seem to matter by which means it is achieved. The detrimental effects most diets have on health are overlooked as well as the fact that weight loss might not even have any positive effects. So it is tolerated that someone starves her- or himself or gets injured due to exercising because this is believed to be a praiseworthy effort to escape the apparent dangers of too much weight.

This believe persists although research shows that most efforts to reduce weight are futile. Only 5% of weight loss interventions are successful in the long term while most people regain the weight they lost or even more after the end of an intervention. With such a low success rate it is questionable whether it is ethical to even advise weight loss, as is common practice among health care professionals.

One should also ask why research that does not fit into the common sense perception of obesity as the result of too much food intake and too little exercise is deliberately ignored or even ridiculed. Despite the fact that the theory of calorie balance does not explain why people would eat more than they need it is accepted as the explanation for overweight. If someone eats more calories than he or she burns the result is weight gain. Consequently, if someone burns more calories than he or she eats the result is weight loss.

Due to this simple equation, responsibility for 'excess' weight is assumed in the individual who fails to control its energy balance. Therefore it is also the individual's fault if it gets sick. It is because of the individual's wrong choices that it became too heavy and a burden to society. Thus, programmes to change individual behaviour are seen as a way to educate people about healthy or 'right' lifestyle choices and induce weight loss.

However, as mentioned above, this kind of intervention is hardly successful, which has led to another theory about what causes weight gain. Now it is talked of an 'obesogenic' environment, which obstructs 'right' choices. Modernisation and industrialisation are said to have created a highly convenient but 'toxic' environment in which people do not need to be physically active anymore and can access calorie-dense food 24 hours a day. This theory tries to shift responsibility from obese people to the environment to stop blaming and rather help them to lose weight. But what seems laudable at first sight, turns out to neither help obese people lose weight nor take responsibility from them. Instead it tends to conflate obesity stigma with that of other population groups often living in unhealthy environments like the poor or minorities.

Given all these misconceptions about obesity I think it is time to ask what is really wrong with obesity. If it is not as dangerous as we believe, then why do we fear fat so much? And why do we reject scientific research, which is not in line with our beliefs and prefer to believe what is proven to be wrong instead? Is it possible that not obesity is the problem but our beliefs? And if so what can we do about it? These are some of the questions I want to raise with this presentation.