

# Identity Transformation and Weight-Loss: Altering Fundamental Sentiments in an Online Community.

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Last year over two-thirds of American adults were classified as either over weight or obese. And every year, millions of dollars are spent on weight loss programs, gym memberships, supplements or coaches. Despite the effort and resources that many Americans are putting into their attempts to lose weight, most of these efforts are doomed to fail. Indeed, one pessimistic statistic suggests that only one percent of Americans who attempt to lose all of their excess weight will be successful and of that one percent, the majority will have gained their weight back within a relatively short period. Even the National Registry of Successful Weight Loss has had to scale back their criteria - people now only have to have lost 30 pounds or more and kept it off to be considered - in order to have a large enough cohort to study.

Although the scholarship on why people gain weight is clear, our understanding of how people lose weight - and keep it off - is not. Given that weight is such a salient characteristic - acting, in some ways, as a master status that carries significant economic, interpersonal, and social costs, it is surprising how little social psychological attention has been paid to this issue within sociology.

To date, there have been only two studies that have addressed weight loss using insights generated from formal social psychological theory. The first is Ellen Granberg's seminal work on weight loss, which she framed in terms of Burke and Stets' identity control theory and Markus concept of "possible selves." The second is Christine Groar's unpublished dissertation, *Weight Loss, Subculture Socialization, and Affective Meanings*, which used insights from Heise's affect control theory. This proposed research is a multistage project within sits at the nexus at both Granberg's and Groar's work, by examining shifts in affective meaning among members of an on-line weight loss community, Bright Line Eating, LLC (BLE).

BLE is a for-profit weight loss program that is based entirely online. Started in 2013, by Susan Peirce-Thompson, a Ph.D. in Cognitive Psychology, BLE offers high touch virtual support and boasts successes that far surpass other weight loss programs, including Over Eaters Anonymous and Weight Watchers.

A research faculty at the University of Rochester, Thompson is currently collecting data on the relationship between daily habits and weight loss. At this time, she has several virtual communities (each of then containing between 300-350 people) that house individuals at various stages of the weight loss process. Although many people join BLE because they need to lose weight, others join in order to maintain prior weight loss, and some come to recover from eating disorders, including anorexia and bulimia. As new members join BLE, they are asked if they would like to participate in her data collection efforts and the majority say yes. They are surveyed once a week.

## **Stage One**

I propose to collect two sentiment dictionaries of identities, behaviors, and settings that are related to weight loss and obesity, in general, as well as identities, behaviors, and settings that are specific to the BLE community. I will also ask respondents to provide identity hierarchies and to score those identities and attributes along the three dimensions of affective meaning.

One set of data will be drawn from individuals who are just signing up to join the BLE community, either through the 14-day challenge (the low price point way into the community) or the 8 week bootcamp (the mid range price point of entry). The second set of data will come from a sub set of individuals who Thompson refers to as her “Bright Lifers.” Although anyone who has successfully completed the 8 week bootcamp can join the Bright Lifer community, I will focus exclusively on those individuals who have reached their goal weight using BLE and have kept the weight off for more than two years.

The purpose would simply be to determine whether there are significant differences in the affective sentiments and identity hierarchies between those new to the program and those who had been successful in reaching their goals.

## **Stage Two**

If the cross sectional analysis reveals that individuals who were successful at reaching their goal and who have maintained that loss over time have different fundamental sentiments than those entering into the program and/or identity hierarchies populated by more positive, potent, and active identities, then the next phase of the data collection would be to collect affective sentiments and identity markers from individual participants over time. I would then link the affective sentiments to the data that Thompson is already collecting, including the participant's weight, their participation in the online community, and their adoption of other program sanctioned behaviors - including meditation, journaling, weighing and measuring food, etc.

The purpose here would be to understand how and under what conditions affective sentiments and subsequent identity hierarchies begin to shift. I would also be able to compare the experiences of those people who are successful in the program with those who are not.

## **Stage Three**

While the longitudinal data is being collected, I would also interview a number of Thompson's most successful Bright Lifer's regarding their past experience with weight loss as well as their ongoing experience of weight maintenance. These narratives would be analyzed for common themes, but with particular attention paid to shifts in identity and affective meaning.