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'Everything I Love is Illegal, Immoral or Against the Advice of the Surgeon General'

By Roberto Hugh Potter

UCF Forum columnist

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The recent situation of TV anchor Jennifer Livingston in La Crosse, Wisc., offers a glimpse into how external indicators of health are becoming stigmatized in the public-health efforts to battle the “epidemic of obesity.”

According to a published e-mail sent to Livingston, who acknowledges that she is overweight, her unidentified critic wrote: “Obesity is one of the worst choices a person can make and one of the most dangerous habits to maintain. I leave you this note hoping that you’ll reconsider your responsibility as a local public personality to present and promote a healthy lifestyle.”

Disclosure statement: I am 5-11 and weigh around 225 pounds, so I am not anywhere near the public health ideal weight for my size. I do weigh less than when I graduated from high school, but not near my lower weight range of 180 that I’ve achieved a couple of times in my adult life.

So, clearly, in public-health terms I am a deviant.

In an upcoming book on the intersection of health and criminal justice, I devote part of a chapter to the increasing role of public health as an agency of formal social control. That is, as colleague Jeff Rosky and I have pointed out, public-health programs are increasingly being used to develop formal rules and laws that control human behavior. There is nothing new in this, as almost every prohibition movement since the late 1800s has framed the need for controlling substances and behaviors in terms of the health risks associated with the issue.

While Livingston chose to respond to her critic’s comments as a form of bullying – an expression of unequal power – I tend to look at his criticism more as an attempt to

impose power by special interests. “Fat” is clearly a devalued state of being in the new normal of the public-health ideal body.

Back in the 1970s and 80s, fat was considered a feminist issue. Academics of the day railed at attempts to use informal social controls such as advertising to impose the “male view of the perfect female body.” Anorexia, bulimia, and techniques used by young girls and women to maintain an “ideal” body size were equated to foot-binding practices of pre-industrial China.

In the 1990s, however, the recognition that boys and young men were using steroids to achieve some “ideal” male physique was treated more as a substance-abuse issue than one of social control over self-image.

In the 2000s, we began to address “obesity” as a public-health issue because of the alleged health costs statistically associated with weight as the “girth of the nation” increased.

A new public-health ideal was created, and acolytes in the academy and the mass media began to spread the word: Obese people are costing you tax money, increasing your insurance costs, requiring that emergency vehicles be retrofitted.

Where I once worked – at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention – sweet tea was banned from the cafeteria. I’m not joking.

Now we have concerned citizens writing to plus-sized TV presenters about the nature of the image they present to the community in terms of ideal body types. Was this an attempt on the part of the critic to shame the TV personality into dieting and modeling the behavior for her audience? Or, was this an attempt by someone who is so convinced his version of an ideal body is the way things should be that he felt justified in what Livingston felt was a personal attack?

During my early days at the CDC, I made a presentation on how creating new norms also creates new categories of deviance – basic Sociology. When I explained that an object or behavior could have different meanings to different people at the same time, one of the psychiatrists in the audience asked me how something could be two things at the same time. It’s not the same as two things occupying the same physical space simultaneously, I replied. It is about two meanings given to the same symbol by different people.

The experience of Livingston is a great example of how we use different approaches to control the behavior of others. In this case, she resisted the efforts of her critics by re-interpreting their criticism as bullying, opening a different line of discussion than I am taking.

On the more formal, social-control level, we have seen efforts by the mayor of New York City to control residents' access to certain types of substances, from tobacco to sugary drinks.

The distance between a letter to a TV personality, and a formal, legal prohibition with fines and/or imprisonment may seem like quite a gap, but it is something to think about as occupational, political and corporate interest groups seek to define behaviors as deviant and provide ways to control them.

Who controls your access to the ice cream?

To see TV anchor Jennifer Livingston's televised response to her critic, go to <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GdJ2jHii6Y0>

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