

UH sociologist has different perspective on obesity 'epidemic'

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Headlines tell us the nation is getting fatter, and that obesity has become an epidemic. But there is more to the story, according to one University of Houston sociologist.

While she acknowledges that there has been a shift in [body](#) weight over the years, assistant sociology professor Samantha Kwan looks at [obesity](#) from a different perspective.

The term obesity was constructed by the medical community, Kwan says. And the use of the [Body Mass Index](#), which measures obesity, as the main factor to define obesity, has resulted in the media greatly overstating the rise of the condition.

"This epidemic has been constructed to the benefit of the medical industry that has in part medicalized the treatment of obesity over the years," Kwan says. "While there may be a rise in 'obesity,' the [BMI](#) is not always accurate. Some scholars describe this epidemic more as a moral panic. While there may be some truths to rising rates, they have been overstated."

Kwan, who has been studying gender and body image since 2001, examines how cultural beauty messages about fat interact with other cultural messages about fat, such as health discourses. This is summarized in her article "Framing the [Fat Body](#): Contested Meanings between Government, Activists and Industry," published in February's [Sociological Inquiry](#).

"I am trying to get students and audiences to understand that there are competing cultural meanings about the fat body," Kwan says. "Fat does not, in itself, signify unhealthy and unattractive. These are cultural constructions. We as a society say what it means to be fat, and right now cultural discourses say it's ugly and unhealthy to be fat. ... It's also assumed that the body is a reflection of the psyche, including one's moral fiber."

Kwan has found that women's self-esteem is more closely tied to weight than men's.

"Women care about their weight and appearance, and I don't want to say that they are being co-opted by cultural messages," Kwan says. "They are not necessarily cultural dupes with false consciousness. They want to lose weight, look good/thin/beautiful, and to conform to body messages because there are rewards to be gained and sanctions to be avoided when one is, or passes, as thin."

Kwan covers this topic more closely in her article "Beauty Work: Individual and Institutional Rewards, the Reproduction of Gender and Questions of Agency," published in February's *Sociology Compass*. Along with co-author Mary Nell Trautner, of the University at Buffalo, SUNY, Kwan addresses how physical attractiveness is associated with a number of positive outcomes, including employment benefits such as hiring, wages and promotion, and is correlated with social and personal rewards such as work satisfaction, positive perceptions of others and higher self-esteem.

"Feeling like they're unattractive is a big problem women struggle with, and a lot of this has to do with beauty ideals," Kwan says. "Yes, there is a culture out there that says women are supposed to look a certain way. Research shows that promotions and wages are based partly on the way women look, including their weight. Women are preoccupied with losing

weight; yet conforming to norms can bring benefits beyond being healthier. You can avoid a lot of the stigma, and we know women are stigmatized for being 'overweight.' "

Again, while Kwan states that she believes the obesity epidemic is overstated and that we need to understand how the fat body and this "epidemic" are socially constructed, she attributes many factors to the rise in weight, including the availability of quick, inexpensive foods and lack of affordable ways to exercise.

"There's a lot of confusion regarding nutrition information, and consumers often get conflicting messages about diet and activity," she says. "There is some evidence that the food industry sometimes uses the same strategies as the tobacco industry to mislead consumers."

Kwan has an article discussing this topic more closely titled "Individual versus Corporate Responsibility: Market Choice, the Food Industry and the Pervasiveness of Moral Models of Fatness," to be published later this year. She also has received a University of Houston Women's Studies Faculty Summer Fellowship to complete a book on contested cultural meanings about body, health and weight.

Source: University of Houston

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