

# **Obesity and poverty in the media: a case study from a Brazilian newspaper**

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*Poor people's disease does not make headline news.*

Ricardo Bonalume Neto

## **Abstract**

In the last decades obesity has become one of the main concerns in public health. According to WHO by 2015 there will be 700 million obese adults. This scenario reflects on news-making, particularly the way the media continuously stresses the problem of obesity, considered a serious illness, even a world epidemic. Furthermore, this issue leads to the socioeconomic apparatuses or *dispositifs* of risk control. These dispositifs are expressed by individual practices of self control towards a larger emphasis on minimum intervention of State. In Brazil, the statistics show that overweight and obesity have also grown significantly. Moreover, poverty, a social problem earlier linked to hunger and underweight, is now one of the faces of obesity in that country, a scenario not so different of rich countries. The relationship between obesity and poverty is related to a kind of scarcity of some nutritional components, access and knowledge of what is healthy or unhealthy. Also, there is a scarcity of options in the circumstances that making choices is considered an essential condition for controlling obesity. The purpose of this paper is to present some conclusions of my doctoral thesis aimed at researching the role of power dynamics in constructing the relationship between obesity and poverty as legitimate discourse by the media, even as a legitimate problem more important than fighting hunger in Brazil. The study was made through the

analysis of 65 news items concerning the relationship about obesity and poverty and published in the biggest Brazilian newspaper, Folha de São Paulo, from 1996 to 2005. It was significant that among these 65 news items, 48 – i.e. more than one third – were published between 2003 and 2005.

**Keywords:** health communication; obesity and poverty; risk

## **Introduction**

In 2000, in an article published in the newspaper “Folha de São Paulo”, the Brazilian journalist Ricardo Bonalume Neto (2000) stated that when he was editor of a small scientific magazine he needed an image to illustrate a feature story on Malaria but did not find one. He commented about this with a colleague who explained there were neither texts nor images of Malaria, because it was a disease of poor people and the magazine was read by middle class people who don't catch Malaria. As editor he realized that in the magazine almost all medical news was about obesity, erectile dysfunction, cancer, longevity and so on. According to the journalist, in general, the news media are the mirror of what happens in the society, which means that scientific journalism, as well as biomedical research, seems to be more focused on health demands of people who are potential consumers of biomedical products.

In 2003, three years after Bonalume Neto's article, the scenario seemed quite different. No, Malaria did not become regular in the news. But news about the increase in obesity among poor people in Brazil was more and more regular in the media, even as news headlines. Since the 1980's, the prevalence of underweight in Brazilian population decreased from 8,3% to 5,0% and then to 3,5% while the overweight increased from 2,1% to 4,1% and then to 6,4%. However, according to region of the country, income and gender the scenario is more significant. In the Southeast, among lower-income women overweight increased from 11,2% to 14,1%, while among higher-income women overweight decreased from 14,8% to

8,9% (Monteiro, Conde & Popkin, 2002). This inversion of the nutritional condition of the population, moving from undernutrition to obesity, is called *nutrition transition*. Moreover, due to the characteristics of the female population in the Southeast of Brazil, it is presumed that obesity is becoming a disease of poor people.

Although the nutrition transition, earlier noticed in rich countries, was occurring in the last decades in Brazil, this fact was more limited to the specialist sphere. Nevertheless, since 2003 this issue has become public due to the media. This occurred at the same time in which the President Luís Inácio Lula da Silva took office for the first time in 2003 and started “Fome Zero” (Zero Hunger Program), the main social program of his government. In fact the emergence of the relationship obesity/poverty at this time did not seem a coincidence and, one can say, definitely was not. Beyond evidences and statistics about the demographic inversion in Brazil there was another issue: the relationship obesity/poverty was being constructed as a political subject. This means that health was the background for political disputes about the role of the State and, particularly, the relationship obesity/poverty as a fact in Brazil was calling into question the social policies of the government at that time.

Moreover, despite poverty can be associated to the increase of obesity in Brazil, stressing the relationship of social issues with health conditions of the population, the discourse of risk control is predominant. According to this discourse, individual practices of self control are encouraged among population which, in turn are exhorted to change habits and make healthier life choices. These individual practices characterises what can be defined as apparatuses or *dispositifs* (Rabinow and Rose, 2003) of risk control.

The purpose of this paper is to present some conclusions of my doctoral thesis (Carvalho, 2007) aimed at researching the role of power dynamics in constructing the relationship obesity/poverty as legitimate discourse by the media, even as a legitimate problem more important than fighting hunger in Brazil. The study was made through the

analysis of 65 news items concerning the relationship about obesity and poverty and published in the biggest Brazilian newspaper, Folha de São Paulo, from 1996 to 2005. It was significant that among these 65 news items, 48 – i.e. more than one third – were published between 2003 and 2005.

The methodology of analysis of these news items was built upon three sections: (1) content analysis; (2) analysis of historical contexts of production of news and (3) analysis of main metaphors found. For this paper, a brief presentation of the methodology will be made and some results based on the historical contexts of production of news will be shown. In the conclusion it will be discussed how the relationship obesity/poverty can be conceived as a political subject.

### **Methodological framework**

The biggest Brazilian newspaper Folha de São Paulo (FSP) was the source of all the news items concerning the relationship between obesity and poverty. The newspaper was founded in 1921 and is printed in broadsheet format. The period of time analysed was from 1996 to 2005, ten years before the year the doctoral thesis would be written<sup>1</sup>. Although the relationship obesity/poverty has become more and more public since 2003, it was interesting to know how the issue was addressed before this period, indentifying potential trends and differences before and after this time.

The sample of 65 news items was collected from the newspaper's database available through the internet<sup>2</sup>. Many types of news elements were found: ears, headline news, opinion texts, columns, editorials, news stories, feature stories and so on. The relationship obesity/poverty appeared in different forms – it was either directly addressed or implicit. In both cases the relationship was recognized by the presence of subjects like: evolutionist

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<sup>1</sup> The thesis *Obesidade e pobreza na imprensa: epidemiologia de uma questão social* was written in 2006 and approved in March 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved from <http://www1.folha.uol.com.br/folha/arquivos/>

theories in the etiology of obesity; food consumption of the poor; nutrition transition; physiology of nutrition and undernutrition; and overweight, sedentariness and lack of information amongst the poor.

Foucault was the main theoretical reference of the methodology. In *The discourse on language* (Foucault, 1986), one of his lectures at Collège de France, he explained the relationship between discourse and power and proposed a particular kind of discourse analysis. More than a simple method Foucault revealed the complexity of his theory on discourse, arguing about its multiple discontinuities and the relationship between hazard and reasoning in the making and propagation of discourse.

Foucault (*op. cit.*, p. 158) presented four principles to be considered in the discourse:

- a. the principle of reversal: “in those factors which seem to play a positive role, such as the author, discipline, will to truth, we must recognise the negative activity of the cutting-out and rarefaction of discourse”;
- b. the principle of discontinuity: “the discourses must be treated as a discontinuous activity, its different manifestations sometimes coming together, but just as easily unaware of, or excluding each other”;
- c. the principle of specificity: “a particular discourse cannot be resolved by a prior system of signification; that we should not imagine that the world presents us with a legible face, leaving us merely to decipher it”;
- d. the principle of exteriority: “taking the discourse itself, its appearance and its regularity, that we should look for its external conditions of existence, for that which gives rise to the chance series of these events and fixes its limits”.

The methodology was designed according to Foucault’s principles and was constituted in three sections:

1. content analysis;

2. analysis of historical contexts of production of news and
3. analysis of main metaphors found.

Although content analysis is a kind of quantitative methodology, the research is qualitative, in as much as the whole analysis is concerned with not quantifiable aspects.

The content analysis of items was organized by categories like:

- a. classification according to editorial format, editorial content and theme;
- b. credibility of information and who spoke: sources of information; testimonies; contradictions of data;
- c. how obesity and the obese person are addressed;
- d. how poverty and the relationship obesity/poverty are addressed.

The second section was the analysis of historical contexts of production of news and the sources of information – people/specialists consulted by journalists for writing their texts. By this section the discourse was observed as chance events or not, especially as news events. Particular attention was given to what has become news in three periods of time – 1998-1999, 2002 and 2003-2005 – in which the relationship obesity/poverty was more significant.

The third section was the analysis of the main metaphors reinforced by the newspaper:

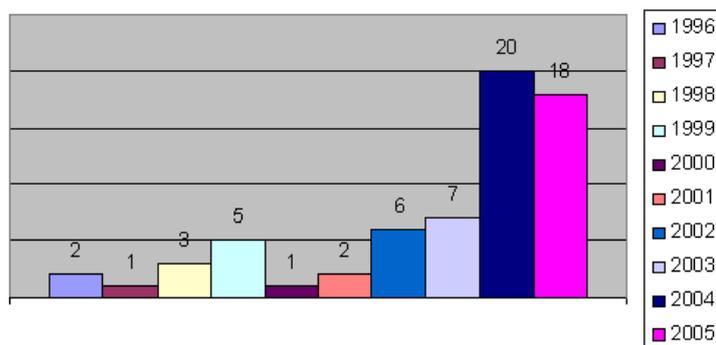
- a. geography of the obesity and the poverty;
- b. excess x absence;
- c. transmutation of what is considered a problem;
- d. nutritional illiteracy;
- e. naturalisation of a social issue;
- f. biological anachronism and
- g. poverty as risk.

By this section it is highlighted the aspect of “novelty” of obesity/poverty in the media discourse which, in the wide sense, refers to a “disguised repetition”.

## Obesity and poverty emerging from politics: excerpts from the analysis

Since 2003, the relationship obesity/poverty has become more regular in the media. More than one third of 65 news items analysed were published between 2003 and 2005. This was very significant, because Lula da Silva took office on January 1<sup>st</sup> 2003 and in his inaugural speech he announced his main social program “Fome Zero” (Zero Hunger Program)<sup>3</sup>.

In 2003 there were seven news articles and five were published in the first four-month period, that is to say the first four months of the new president’s administration. So, after his inaugural speech and the announcement of his focus on fighting hunger there were some reactions in the media.



Distribution of the sample over ten years (1996-2005)

Among the reactions to Lula da Silva’s speech in the media, the first one was published on January 11<sup>th</sup>: an opinion of a famous Brazilian physician. This day, the headline was about Hugo Chávez threatens to use military force to take factories and food warehouses on strike which were causing the shortage of provisions around the country: “I won’t let them kill Venezuelan people by starvation”, Chávez said (Chávez... 2003). In the front page of newspaper there was other significant news: one about the “government’s caravan” by which

<sup>3</sup> President Lula da Silva inaugural speech at National Congress, Brasília, on 1st January 2003. <[www.info.planalto.gov.br/download/discursos/pr0011.doc](http://www.info.planalto.gov.br/download/discursos/pr0011.doc)>

the President was visiting the poor communities in the northeast, “to take a good look at poverty” (Em... 2003); and another one about the Consumer Price Index (CPI) of 2002, in which food and beverage had the biggest increase.

On January 11<sup>th</sup> there was an obvious *thematization* around politics, hunger and nourishment in the front page of Folha de São Paulo, that is to say a relative repetition of these themes and their association to each other. Particularly, the newspaper seems to highlight the populism in the behaviour of the two South American presidents, comparing them to each other. According to the news Chávez and Lula da Silva seem to be engaged with a model of power with paternalistic characteristics that, based on charisma and use of dramatic rhetoric, is aimed at promoting emotional attachment with the population. To “kill people’s hunger” both leaders avoid presidential protocol and make inappropriate or displaced discourses.

The president of Venezuela, Hugo Chávez, on national television has threatened to use military force "in taking factories and food storehouses" on oppositional strike, because they are causing the shortage of provisions. He asked Forces to make a plan to take private companies. "I won't let them kill Venezuelan people by starvation". Through diplomatic means, the US has decided to mediate the negotiations in seeking a pacific solution in Venezuela. According to White House Press Secretary, Ari Fleisher, the US are "deeply concerned" with this crisis and for solving it they have decided to work on a plan alongside their "Venezuela friends" – until then a group headed by Brazil. (Chávez... 2003) (translated by me)

The President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva has been with the government’s caravan and on the first day of his travels he was like in his first day of electoral campaign. His aim is to take a good look at poverty. Followed by 28 ministers, he visited two underserved communities; he walked on dirt roads; shook hands and made promises. In Vila Irmã Dulce, a poor neighbourhood of Teresina [capital of the state of Piauí], he made a speech and presented his ministers. He talked many times as he was still a candidate. Humberto Costa “will be minister

of Health”, he said. Then he corrected himself: “He won’t be, he already is, because we won the elections”. (Em... 2003) (translated by me)

As already mentioned, on January 11<sup>th</sup>, the first news article featuring the relationship poverty/obesity was from a column of the famous physician Dráuzio Varella. It is important to state that Varella is very present in the media – programs on TV, on the radio etc. He is a regular source of information when the subject is health, especially in Folha de São Paulo. In his article “Hunger and the evolution of species” the columnist apparently supports policies for fighting hunger in Brazil, since he starts the text saying that “Chronic pain is easier to support than hunger” (Varella, 2003). However, Varella argues about the condition of precedence by which the precariousness changes the way the body works. By a compensatory physiological mechanism, the body takes all the fat available and saves it for when it is most needed. According to some specialists and Varella himself in other articles, this mechanism can explain obesity among the poor.

When the organism has not the minimum fat for keeping alive all its cells, the brain uses two compensatory mechanisms: the satiety centre becomes more resistant to activation and the energy spent when resting decreases. Consequently, the satiety is retarded (hunger increases disproportionately) and the body reduces fat consumption for ticking over, in order to take properly and wisely the fat available. This is the reason why, weight loss diets work fine by the first weeks, but also why they become inefficient as time passes. (Op. cit.) (translated by me)

It is important to say that the evolutionist perspective concerning obesity – supported by Varella in many texts which are part of the sample – leads one to think that the only way to deal with obesity is in changing food habits. Due to determinism of this perspective, obesity is an inescapable problem in our contemporary universe of temptation. Thus, in fighting this problem the only hope rests on the individual and in resisting temptation.

The second news item was a feature story about all kinds of hunger: hunger of food; hunger of exclusion; hunger of aesthetics; hunger of despair and emotional hunger. Due to its importance this feature first appeared in the front page in which the news headline stated that “‘Unknown’ to science, hunger has many faces”. The lead highlighted that hunger can touch everyone no matter the age or social class, stomachs rumble differently and six “hungry” people can tell and understand this (Constantino, Sampaio & Mori, 2003). The front page revealed an implicit disapproval of Fome Zero, just concerned with one kind of hunger, hunger of food.

With different arguments of Varella, based on another physician, the feature story asserts that real hunger is an extreme condition occurring:

[...] "only in Africa, in countries at war and in Brazil in very isolated areas affected by dry", states the physician Ana Lydia Sawaya, director of the Centre of Recovering and Nutritional Education at Unifesp. This is the reason, she says, why every program for fighting undernutrition needs to go one step further in fighting hunger. "It is no use feeding a child, if that child is full of infections, it doesn't work out. First of all, one has to take basic sanitation to the family", Ana Lydia thinks. (Constantino et al, 2003)

The peak of the theme obesity/poverty was in 2004 at two different political moments: the election for mayor of São Paulo and the announcement of the results of the Consumer Expenditure Survey, by IBGE (Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics). In Brazil an election has two turns when the first candidate has less than 50% of votes. At the second turn, usually one month later, only the two more voted candidates dispute the second turn. In 2004, in the first turn of the election for mayor in São Paulo, José Serra had 40,65% of votes and Marta Suplicy 33,43%. Suplicy was the mayor of the city and wanted to be reelected. She was and is from the Worker's Party (PT), like President Lula da Silva himself. It is remarkable that only in one month, between the first and the second turn, five news items concerning the relationship obesity/poverty were published in Folha de São Paulo (table

below). This newspaper is published in São Paulo and four news items were local, i.e. they were edited in the regional section. Two of them were opinion: an editorial, the newspaper's opinion, and an article written by the São Paulo's physician columnist Dráuzio Varella, already mentioned above.

Title (translated by me)	Front page	Section	
<b>Government adopts national scale of nutrients and table with 50 items<sup>4</sup></b>	Yes	National	News story
<b>Obese city<sup>5</sup></b>	No	Regional	Editorial
<b>Forward, always<sup>6</sup></b>	No	Regional	Feature story
<b>There is ice cream at lunch<sup>7</sup></b>	No	Regional	News story
<b>São Paulo's obesity<sup>8</sup></b>	No	Regional	Column

The local news highlighted the weight gain amongst people in São Paulo and criticised city hall's inclusion of ice cream in the menu of public schools, which could increase obesity amongst poor children. Altogether, the news articles seem to call into question the administration headed by Marta Suplicy in São Paulo. In a broad sense, the newspaper argues that some social actions can be harmful to the health of the population.

After elections, obesity/poverty returned to stage when IBGE announced the results of the Consumer Expenditure Survey. At the moment, the target was the president's program "Fome Zero". The arguments rejected a social program aimed at fighting hunger by questioning either the budget destined for this program or the way the distribution of benefits should be controlled.

<sup>4</sup> "Governo adota tabela nacional sobre nutrientes e tabela com 50 itens" (Suwwan, 2004)

<sup>5</sup> "Cidade Obesa" (2004)

<sup>6</sup> "Para frente, sempre" (Gerhardt, 2004)

<sup>7</sup> "Tem sorvete na merenda" (Bastos, 2004)

<sup>8</sup> "Obesidade paulistana" (Varella, 2004)

During these two moments – the election for mayor in São Paulo and the announcement of the results of the Consumer Expenditure Survey – the relationship obesity/poverty was used by the newspaper to discredit PT's administration, on a local and national level. They argue that: (a) their social policies can increase problems, particularly health problems, and (b) the priorities of government should be more than just fighting hunger because hunger is not the main problem amongst the poorest, it is overweight and obesity.

It is not assumed here that the way obesity/poverty was mentioned in the newspaper was the reason why Marta Suplicy lost and José Serra won the election for mayor of São Paulo. Although most newspapers in Brazil do not announce explicitly their candidates during elections, it was evident that Folha de São Paulo supported Serra's candidature and used the theme obesity/poverty politically among many others with this aim. Thus, being the subject in the newspaper the relationship obesity/poverty is no longer just a social or a health issue, but a political issue. The way obesity/poverty is mentioned between 2003 and 2005 is not just because Lula da Silva and Marta Suplicy were from Worker's Party, a *left-wing* party. In fact, Lula da Silva has kept many policies of the previous administration, headed by Fernando Henrique Cardoso, a centre right social democrat like José Serra. However, Folha de São Paulo, by following its previous discursive bias – as also observed in 1998 and 1999 – was supporting the policy of minimal state concerning social issues.

## **Conclusion**

The particular case of Folha de São Paulo has shown the evidence of the political *rationale* in which is based and biased mostly news concerning the relationship obesity/poverty. By this *rationale* the newspaper validates or not certain governmental actions, priorities and policies accordingly. Thus, obesity/poverty is seen as a political instrument by which certain social policies have been questioned.

According to the 65 news items analysed the newspaper used health to build a scenario in which political disputes about the role of the State are played, at a time when certain political instances are engaged in consolidating neoliberal policies in Brazil. So there was a displacement of health issues through the relationship obesity/poverty that occurred particularly among the most significant periods of time analysed – 1998-1999, 2002 and 2003-2005. Although the contexts were quite different throughout these periods – economical crisis; climatic phenomena; presidential or mayoral elections, so on – the news items stressed the idea that Brazil gained a “new status”. The country was compared to the developed countries, and like such countries and following WHO advices, Brazil should turn obesity into one of its main public health concerns. According to Folha de São Paulo this “new status” would be a strong reason to redesign the political priorities, reducing public investments on social policies, including the program Fome Zero.

Considering nourishment, hunger and undernutrition it is remarkable the way the discourse on risk control is highlighted even when a severe drought threatened the social and political stability in 1998. Paradoxically, at the time, the main social and political challenge seems to be the food behaviour and not the lack of food. Particularly in 1998, in some villages in the Northeast, people pillaged supermarkets which caused clashes with police.

Although social issues are related to the problem of the increase in obesity and overweight among the poor in Brazil – such as inequality, poverty, access to information on healthy or unhealthy foods, and so on – it was seen that in most news items analysed from 1996 to 2005 social issues are neglected or become health issues. As far as a social issue is no longer social, it is no longer political, thus causing it to be removed from the political agenda.

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