

# Cultural Approaches to Obesity, BMI, and Nutrition

Edward F. Fischer

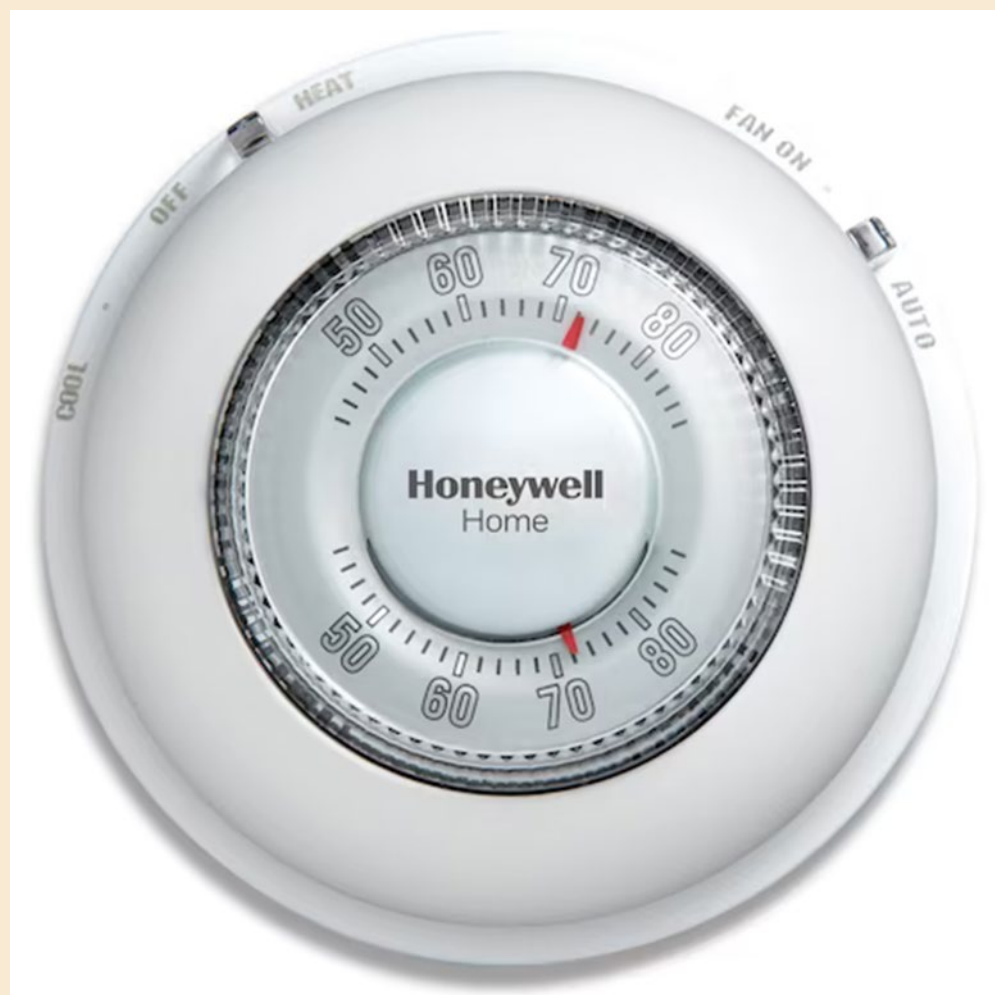
Vanderbilt University



Disclosures: none

Support for this research was provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the World Health Organization/Europe, and Vanderbilt University







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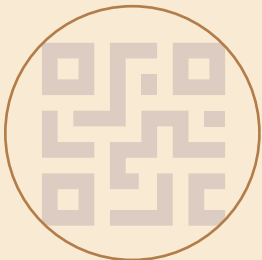
# Cultural Contexts of Health approach



**Uses a cultural lens to work across bounded silos of knowledge,** seeing biology, economics, politics, and the environment as interrelated systems that produce certain health outcomes



**Brings in marginalized voices** and experiences of those living in large bodies to critically examine how categories, clinical care, and health policy are received



**Recognizes the colonial patterns of exclusion** reproduced in commercial systems and obesogenic environments as well as historically racialized and gendered body ideals



# Global Examples

**Crow and Zuni Nations**  
**Indigenous Food Systems and Health**  
Programs based in food sovereignty movements build on traditional agricultural practices and foods to offer integrated approaches to children's diets and body sizes.

**Mexico**  
**Reducing Soda Consumption**  
Public health efforts to combat high levels of soda consumption have included taxes, regulations on marketing in schools, and labeling guidelines.

**Brazil**  
**Anti-Fat Discrimination Efforts**  
Federal and local laws treat large body size as a category of discrimination and provide public funds for accessibility barriers.

**Chile**  
**Ultra-Processed Food Regulations**  
Taxes and labeling regulations have been successfully implemented.

**Brazil**  
**Values-Based Nutritional Guidelines**  
Brazil's guidelines follow 10 broad principles that focus on the cultural and commercial aspects of food and eating, depicting plates with food regularly eaten by all social classes.

**South Africa**  
**Regulating Marketing to Children**  
Government and food companies agreed to limit and restrict marketing of processed foods to children.

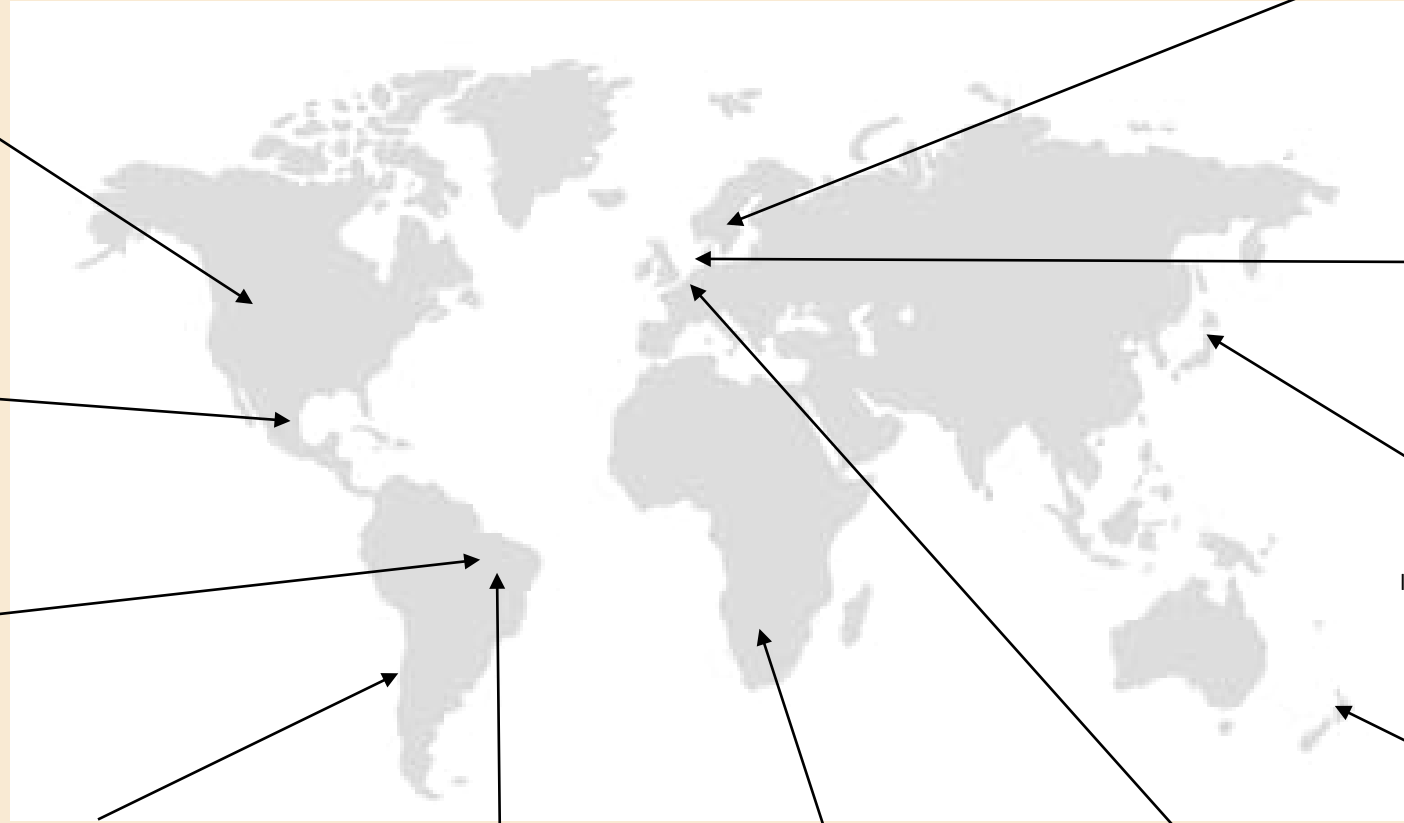
**France**  
**School Lunch Program**  
Nutrition and taste are the two goals that drive their school lunch program. Schools decide how to implement the State's nutritional guidelines while following the traditional French format of several courses per mealtime.

**Denmark**  
**The Cities Changing Diabetes Programme**  
The intervention focused on diabetes prevention coordinates efforts with all stakeholders, including front-line workers, policymakers and administrators from the municipality, schools, and nurseries.

**The Netherlands**  
**Health in All Policies**  
The Amsterdam Healthy Weight Approach works across government units, civil society, and private sectors for an integrated approach to child weight.

**Japan**  
**Alternative Biometrics**  
Japan's controversial Metabo-Law mandates annual checkups that include a battery of laboratory tests in addition to body size measures.

**New Zealand**  
**Māori Systems Thinking**  
Public health efforts have built on Māori systems thinking, introducing a holistic and collective approach to community interventions.





# Cultural insights can help us understand obesity by recognizing that...

## FOOD IS MORE THAN NUTRITION

- Seeing food as embedded in cultural contexts, recognizing the cultural beliefs that drive diet decision, and working with, rather than against, cultural perspectives.

## DIET IS MORE THAN INDIVIDUAL CHOICE

- Recognizing that individual choices are framed by market access and commercial influences, building on systems approaches to food and health

## HEALTH IS MORE THAN WEIGHT

- Recognizing the power of cultural facts on providers as well as patients, and bringing in marginalized voices, including those living with obesity, to understand stigma





## CULTURAL FACTS

- believed to be true
- based on tradition, experience, popular sentiment
- acted upon
- open to revision

## SCIENTIFIC FACTS

- believed to be true
- based on empirical data, measurement, logic
- acted upon
- open to revision



# Western Enlightenment and Colonial Body Ideals

- Linnaeus' *Systema Naturae* (1735-1756) four "varieties" of *H. sapiens*
- Large bodied (Africans) seen as lazy, lacking in self-control
- Scientific/cultural model used to justify colonization
- Adolphe Quetelet's (1832) stat weight/height<sup>2</sup> (normal



## *FEARING THE* **BLACK** **BODY**

The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia

SABRINA STRINGS



## CULTURAL MODELS

Large body size = lack of self-discipline,  
a moral failing

Thinness = rational self-control

## SCIENTIFIC MODELS

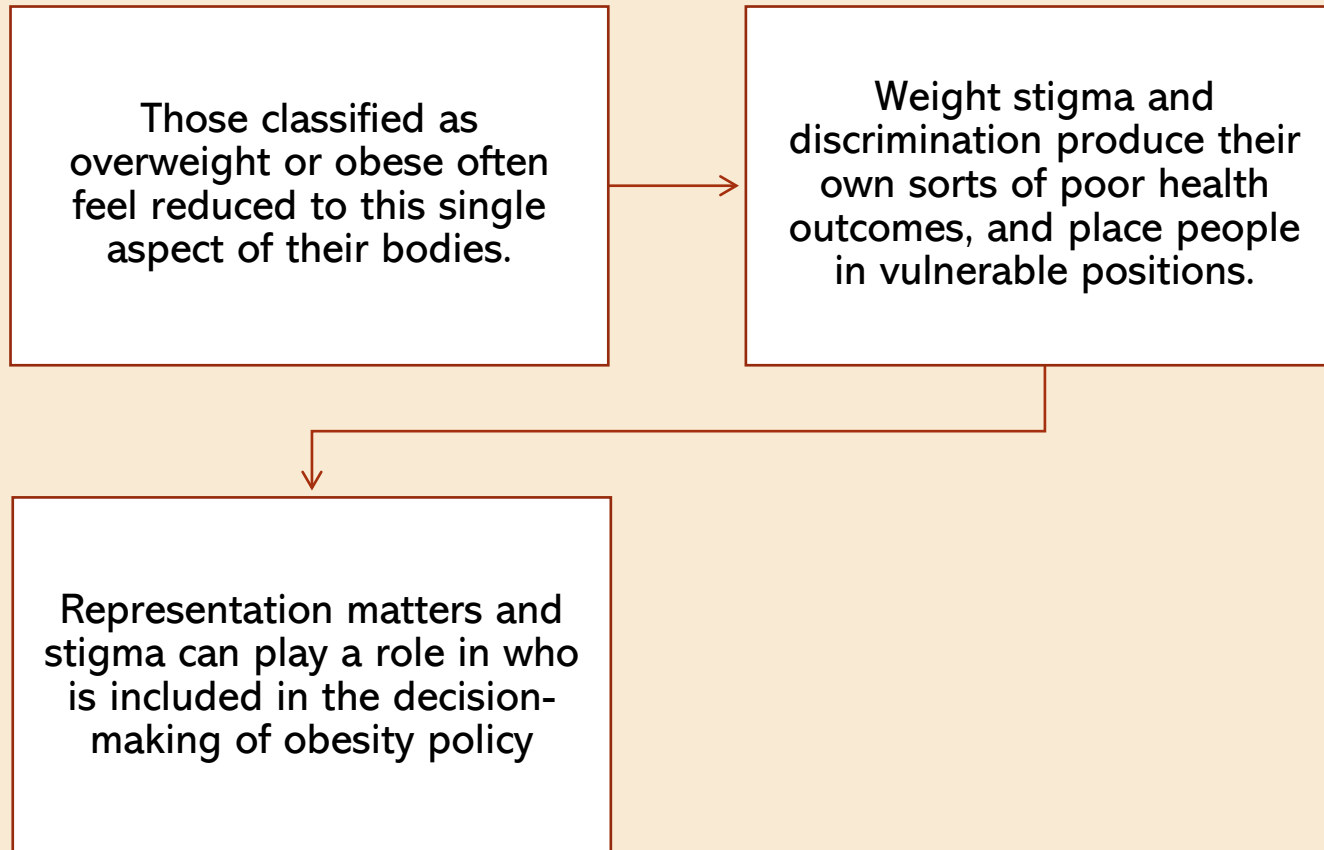
Energy-balance model (calories  
consumed minus calories  
expended)

Body Mass Index (BMI)

**Weight  
is a  
personal  
choice**



# *What can we learn from lived experience?*



Even at a young age, I had been declared an enemy combatant in the US's war on childhood obesity. Bodies like mine had been declared an epidemic, and we were its virus, personified.

-Aubrey Gordon





Reframing Childhood Obesity:  
Cultural Insights on Nutrition,  
Weight, and Food Systems



Food is  
more than  
nutrition

Health is  
more than  
weight

Diet is more  
than  
individual  
choice

The most effective and sustainable efforts to improve metabolic health and nutrition take into account cultural contexts and colonial legacies as well as metabolic science.

[www.vanderbilt.edu/cultural-contexts-health](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/cultural-contexts-health)  
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