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Observing weight stigma in the editing of UK factual welfare programming

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ABSTRACT

Media representations of fat and weight play a central role in the circulation of weight stigma. However, the production practices involved have received little attention. This paper focuses on the editing techniques deployed in a UK reality television documentary series, *On Benefits*. Our analysis of cutaway shots suggests a quantitative and qualitative difference between an episode featuring "obese" people claiming welfare, compared to the rest in our sample. We examine the cutaways to show how weight stigma intersects with welfare stigma on the grounds of self-control. We conclude that images of bodies, food, and medical aides mobilize weight stigma to overdetermine welfare claimants as underserving while casting suspicion about the purpose of state welfare in the UK.

KEYWORDS

Editing; cutaway; production techniques; weight stigma; welfare stigma

Introduction

Media representations of weight and fat are key mechanisms through which fatphobia and weightism are reproduced, sustained, and internalized with dire socio-cultural, material, and psychological consequences (Meadows and Bombak 2019: Puhl 2022). Scholars have used a range of analytic tools, (for example content, discourse, and thematic analysis) to explore how mass media construct stigmatizing and reductive knowledge about weight, fat, and the "obesity epidemic" (e.g., Cook and Wilson 2019). To date, the functions that production practices play in these representations remains under researched and consequently, their role in producing stigma is not well understood. This article takes editing as its focus, with specific attention given to the cutaway shot (camera shots that shift the audience's attention away from the main action). We draw from a wider research project that explored how cutaways operate within five randomly selected episodes of a UK reality documentary series, *On Benefits*. The series documents how people in receipt of welfare payments manage to live on limited resources. Our original project examined how cutaways shots of littered roads, unmade beds and toilets played a part in framing people as lazy, negligent, and as unworthy of state assistance: we

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argued that the documentary series was producing and circulating welfare stigma (Harrison, Raisborough, and Taylor 2021; Raisborough et al. 2022). As such, our project contributes to wider research charting the role of reality television in representing and shaping broader cultural currents of welfare stigma in the UK (see Day 2020: De Benedictis, Allen, and Jensen 2017; Jensen 2014; Jensen and Tyler 2015). However, in our sample, one of the randomly selected episodes, *On Benefits: 100 Stone and On the Dole*, was quantifiably and qualitatively distinctive from the other episodes. In this discussion of the data, we explore (i) what we may understand about weight stigma from a comparison between this and the other episodes within our sample, and (ii) what this may suggest about how weight stigma is deployed in UK welfare documentaries.

Editing: The cutaway

Our contention is that editing is under researched. There is, however, critical awareness of how fatness, and particularly, fat bodies are presented in very specific ways: production practices include deliberate camera angles, panning from foot to head, and close-ups on parts of the body that are culturally coded as problematic in fatphobic cultures (Baker et al, 2020; Cameron 2019). For example, the analysis by Puhl et al. (2013) of online news videos around "obesity"-related stories, found that 65% of higher weight/"obese" adults and 77% of higher weight/"obese" youth were portrayed in unflattering, stigmatizing ways. The researchers highlighted how images of people deemed "overweight" were more likely than those regarded as not "overweight" to have a close-up of isolated body parts and engaged in activities that are culturally coded as sedentary, unhealthy, and culturally tasteless. Research conducted some seven years later reached a similar conclusion: Lisser and de Smaele (2020, 5) analysis of online newspaper photos in the Netherlands and Flanders reported that larger weight people's heads "were more likely to be cut out of the image, they were more often dressed sloppily and more frequently portrayed with only their lower body in comparison with non-overweight people." The removal of the head is a recurring trope in visual imagery (Cooper 2007). Thomson (2009, 8) described it as a 'spectacular decapitation' to argue that it is an act of symbolic violence that forces the viewers" attention to the body, often the stomach, while removing personhood, subjectivity, and individuality that is usually read from the face. This is important because there are evidenced links between stigmatizing imagery and dehumanization, a key stage in the construction of Others and their denigration (Yongwoog et al. 2019). Understanding how weight stigmatizing representations are constructed can help produce better representations in mainstream and fat activist visual imagery (see, for Cameron 2019, 2022).

We wish to contribute to this work in two ways. The first is to concentrate on Reality Television (RTV). Cameron (2022) has recently argued that RTV allows for a closer focus on production techniques and their role in the reproduction of weightism. She cites Heller's (2014:126) critical observation that "editing techniques" and "direct-camera style shooting" in RTV create, for the viewer, a sense of authenticity and of "reality" even when viewers are aware of the heavily edited nature of what they are watching: editing is then, crucial to this genre and may play a part in producing common sense, tacit knowledge about weight and health. That RTV *is* heavily edited has been supported by RTV documentary makers themselves. Becker (2021) explains how digitalization has meant that careful pre-planning of multiple camera positions is no longer required. Contemporary production involves a single operator of a lightweight camera who captures a wealth of footage. This is then re-ordered into a narrative through desk-based digital editing software: this means that most content is produced in the editing room (Becker 2021).

Secondly, we wish to focus on a specific editing technique: the cutaway shot. Cutaway shots can be broadly defined as shots that "interrupt the general flow of action" (Katz 1991, 358). They "take the spectator away from the main action or scene" (Haywood 2006, 96). As quick interruptions, the cutaway takes the audience to objects, other people, or views that aren't necessarily from the filmed character's or speaker's point of view. This gives the cutaway an extradiegetic purpose (Rijsdijk 2011); a point confirmed by Paul Watson, a leading innovator of reality documentaries, who regards the cutaway as providing their own "commentary" (cited in Baker 2013, 59). Bricca, a filmmaker, argues that this commentary speaks to an audience "in a more visceral way" because cutaways provide stronger "evidence" than any spoken narrative (2017: 59). A cutaway to an overfilled ashtray may be included to present the "truth" of someone's desire to cease smoking. As we will describe later, cutaways to specific food types may serve to offer "evidence" of someone's commitment to socially-defined understandings of health. The cutaway is then not a neutral or aesthetic insert, although it can be used to flesh out content. Rather, it can provide a commentary that does not rely on the character or speaker's own narrative: they can provide extra information or help to produce specific audience reactions (Rijsdijk 2011). Cutaways remain under-researched as a whole (Rijsdijk 2011) and their role in helping produce "visceral" information about weight and fat is our focus in this article.

The research

This article forms part of a wider research project examining the role of cutaways in the reproduction of welfare stigma (the stigmatization of people in receipt of state welfare payments in the UK). Our wider project used Google search engine's random number generator to randomly select five episodes of

Table 1. Sample episodes and number of cutaways.

Episode	Acronym	Series	Episode	Year first aired	Cutaways
On Benefits: Costa Del Dole	*CDD*	1	23	2015	115
On Benefits: And a Baby on the Way	*BoTW*	1	30	2015	26
On Benefits: Depressed, Stressed and Repossessed	*DSR*	4	4	2017	54
On Benefits: 100 Stone and On the Dole	*100St*	4	7	2017	128
On Benefits: Britain's Benefits Blackspots	*BBB*	4	10	2017	72
					395

the RTV documentary series, *On Benefits*, that are repeatedly aired on the UK's newest terrestrial channel, C5. The series was the most recent form of welfare documentaries in the UK. Our analysis showed that it shared similarities with others in the genre (Harrison, Raisborough, and Taylor 2021: Raisborough et al. 2022) but we make no claims to this being representative of the genre. Further we are not aiming to make generalizations from this small sample. Our attention to only five episodes is justified by the detailed and data-rich nature of analyzing production techniques (see Harrison, Raisborough, and Taylor 2021)

Each episode focuses on a specific aspect or demographic (see Table 1) in fly-on-the wall footage charting the lives of people who are poor and in receipt of state assistance (welfare). We applied a content analysis to generate a list of cutaways in each episode and used screen shots to capture these. We recorded the character of these screen-shot cutaways by devising a short, qualitative description of the main visual element in each. We then generated larger collective categories to group the shots: for example, a cutaway described briefly as "busted sofa turned on its side on the street" was included in the category of "Fly-tipping." This process produced quantitative (number of cutaways) and qualitative (description of their content) data, from which we generated commonalities and comparisons between the episodes for this article. We worked together as a team on all aspects of the of the work but the majority of the coding was conducted by the fourth author.

To reiterate, one of the randomly-selected episodes related to weight and "obesity"; *On Benefits: 100 Stone and On the Dole* (hereafter *100St*). In common with other RTV documentaries, *100St* follows the lives of three people in different geographical settings, each of whom offers a different perspective of life on welfare. A synopsis of the episode from the television magazine *The Radio Times* is below:

Welfare claimants for whom weight could pose a serious health issue, including 31-stone James, who rarely leaves home due to his agoraphobia, and 30-stone Kathleen, who fears her weight-related diabetes could kill her. In Brighton, housebound MS sufferer Bryan has found an unlikely way to pass the time – indoor archery – while in Lincolnshire, 27-stone Sarah dreams of making it as a plus-size model – but at what risk to her health?

https://www.radiotimes.com/programme/b-jgud8s/on-benefits-season-4/

Below we discuss how *100St* compares to the rest of the sample.

Findings

Using the definition of a cutaway as inserted shots that move the viewer from the main action, our content analysis produced 395 cutaways across the five episodes in our wider sample ranging from 26 to 128 (Table 1). The mean number of cutaways across the sample was 79 (see Table 1)

Our analysis suggests that *100st* has significantly more cutaway shots: 128 compared to an average of 66.72 across the remaining episodes. This makes it worthy of closer examination.

In common with the other episodes in the sample, *100st* contained shots of cities, roads and the homes of the people featured in the documentary (see Table 2). Establishing shots of cities (8 n, 6%), of nearby roads, close-up shots of high-rise apartment blocks (19 n, 15%), and internal shots of hallways and bedrooms (10 n, 8%) testify to the spatially rich imagery that characterizes the RTV series. We had two related interests in this spatial imagery. The first relates to how neoliberal re-structuring has eroded communities, housing provision, and meaningful employment, producing areas of deprivation characterized by high unemployment and state neglect (Shildrick 2018). The second is influenced by the relationship between neoliberal measures in the UK since 2010 and anti-welfare propaganda, which seeks to blame the poor for their own impoverishment (Shildrick 2018; Tyler 2020). Unsurprisingly then, areas of deprivation are represented across mass media and in right-wing political discourse as "problem areas" that house the "undeserving poor" (Shildrick 2018; Stahl and Habib 2017). In terms of our sample of RTV documentaries, we found that the establishing shots of cities helped to identify and place the episode's participants in areas of deprivation. However, images of littered streets, dirty and cluttered homes, broken furniture, and shots of the toilet bowl suggested that the state of the area is a result of its inhabitants' chosen lifestyle (lazy and neglectful) not of structural neglect. We have concluded that spatial cutaways invite moralized judgments about the "types" of people who are in receipt of welfare (Raisborough et al. 2022).

Table 2. Breakdown of cutaway content in *100St*.

Categories	Number	Example of a description of a main visual element of a cutaway in the category
External shots of cities	8	"Lead-in shot of Leicester"
Localities	19	"View from the participant's balcony"
Shots of within the home	10	"View of bedroom from the hallway"
Groceries, fast-food, crisps and confectionary	32	"Multipack of cola"
Food preparation, serving and eating	11	"Participant eating a burger"
Images of kitchen	11	"Pile of grocery bags in the kitchen"
Damage or decay	1	"Ripped carpet"
Medication	12	"Daily medication"
Smoking	4	"Participant rolling a cigarette"
Body shots	12	"Participant's stomach"
Entertainment and hobbies	8	"Model car"

However, *100St*, despite having many more cutaways than the rest, had *fewer* cutaway shots to littered streets, or internal objects or walls that are damaged, ripped, or dented (20 n in the remaining episodes, an average 5 each, contrasts to 1 cutaway to a ripped carpet in *100St). 100St* shared with the other episodes cutaways to intimate living spaces like bedrooms but had fewer cutaways to general clutter, dust and piles of bags and clothing, which were found across the wider sample. Instead, *100St* contained more images of the kitchen than the other episodes in the sample (*100St* had 11 images of the kitchen, compared to only 4 across the remaining 4 episodes) and of food. There were 32 cutaways to food, 25% of the total cutaway imagery in *100St*, compared to only 6 food cutaways in total across the other episodes. Additionally, there were 4 cutaways of food being prepared or served, and 7 of food being eaten in *100St*.

We suggest that this marks a shift to a different register of anti-welfare messaging because the participants in *100St* are not aligned with dirt, decay, neglect or disgust, each of which are coded as lifestyle explanations for the unemployment of these "social types." Instead, the participants in *100St* are, through these cutaways, repeatedly associated with prevailing misinformation about weight, and, specifically, a reductionist causality between food/eating and higher weight that is constructed through hegemonic notions of the "obesity epidemic" (Monaghan, Rich, and Bombak 2019). There is then a different *lifestyle* presented to the viewer for their moralized judgment that draws on poverty *and* upon "obesity" stereotypes. This point is underscored by our observation that the kitchens were not dirty or poorly maintained, as we might expect from a genre that can construct higher weight bodies as disgusting (Raisborough 2016); rather, images were characterized by a volume of food that was neatly stacked on surfaces and in food-filled cupboards and freezers.

There are two points we wish to discuss here: the volume of food and the types of food captured by the cutaways. Both relate to a general concern with how people spend their money: it has been argued that excessive attention is given to how poor people spend their money compared to that directed to the spending habits of those with middle and higher incomes (Shildrick and Rucell 2015). This is particularly so when poor people are in receipt of welfare: Besley and Coate (1992, 165) label this "Tax Payer resentment," which is caused in part by a (constructed) perception that tax payers work to support the purportedly luxury lifestyles of unemployed people. These discourses circulate freely within right-wing and centrist politics, and the mass media to form a common poverty myth (Shildrick 2018). It follows then, that signs of inappropriate or excessive consumption in RTV is a regular trope aimed to elicit anti-welfare sentiment and scaffold individualized explanations for poverty.

Food volume

Excess or inappropriate consumption is communicated through cutaways to iPads, model cars (8 n) and expensive habits, like smoking (4 n). This was in common with the rest of the sample. However, *100St* also used repeated images of stacked food. The food was often of the same type: identical cans, a brand of frozen pie, and multipacks of soft drinks. Cutaways showed more food entering the home (images of full grocery bags and a shopping delivery was captured on camera too). The volume and stacked nature of identical foods resonates with another regular RTV staple: programs and documentaries on hoarding. A resonance between hoarding RTV programs and those on "obesity" has already been observed by Lepselter (2011, 921) who claims that both linger on the body and what she describes as "irrational habits of consumption." The morbid curiosity with excess arises because it goes against the normal circulation of consumer goods: buy, use (in this case, eat) and dispose (Cross, Leizerovici, and Pirouz 2018). Shugart (2010) further adds that a general widespread awareness about the material inequalities within consumer society combined with the constant pressure to keep consuming, generates cultural taboos around greed and *restrained* consumption. Images of "too much stuff in the home" (Brembeck (2019, 44) can, then, prompt interpretations of greed and excess That greed is persistently attached to larger weight bodies (Monaghan, Rich, and Bombak 2019) overdetermines the participants in *100St* in terms of "faulty" lifestyles.

Types of food

The cutaways of food included images of multipacks of soft drinks, processed food, and shots of plated food (see Table 2). The importance of food imagery in *100St* was also suggested by the number of close-up and extreme close-up shots used. Of the 32 cutaways of food, 59% were in close-up. Specifically, 10 close-up shots zoomed in on crisps, chocolate, biscuits, bags of groceries, and a packaged Turkey while an additional 9 extreme close-ups showed images of chocolate, soft drinks, waffles in the freezer, and crisps to each fill the screen. Burningham and Venn (2022) argue that this food is "accessible, inexpensive and attractive" (p.80) and play a role in people's comfort and well-being. Yet, these food types are not celebrated for their cheapness in *100St* – surprising when frugality would presumably be lauded – instead, cultural knowledge about link of these foods to "obesity," to deskilling (can't cook), laziness (won't cook), ill health, and addiction to sugar (Soubry et al. 2021; Throsby 2020) are encouraged through close-ups and extreme close-ups of food culturally coded as "bad."

That excessive and inappropriate consumption is signaled here in terms of volume of "unhealthy" food supports our contention that discourses of weightism are utilized in RTV welfare documentaries. In the context of the "obesity epidemic," weight is readily assumed to be a health risk, suggesting that the "lifestyles" on view have consequence not just for welfare services but also to health care services. This offers some explanation as to why *100St* differed from the other episodes by the number of cutaways to medication and medical aides: 12 shots (9%) of breathing equipment, daily medication, and boxes of tablets compared to 1 image of prescription drugs found in the rest of the sample. An abundance of close-up shots emphasizes the "health burden" of "obesity," making up 66% of medicine cutaways, including one of a claim form to access medical benefits. We suggest here that viewers are encouraged to see health as a consequence of weight and not of illness, health conditions, or structural determinants of health (Schrecker and Bambra (2015). This is evidenced by cutaways to parts of the body culturally coded as problematic. Across the whole sample there were cutaways to people's legs and feet, and of hands rolling cigarettes and, in one episode, close- ups on a neck tattoo. Yet, *100St* differed because shots of bodies (12 n) included two panning shots from feet to head, shots of stomachs, and extreme close-ups of a participant's back, arm and stomach. There is strong repetition here of stigmatizing fat imagery found across other media forms (i.e., Puhl et al. 2013).

Discussion

We began by asking what we might understand about weight stigma from a comparison between *100St* and the other episodes within our sample, and what this may suggest about the mobilization of weight stigma in a UK welfare documentary series. Our starting point is our observation of the ease at which weight stigma and welfare stigma intersect to produce further grounds on which to stigmatize or denigrate welfare claimants. Instead of the decay and litter we observed in the other episodes in the sample, a different representational repertoire characterized *100St*, which was based on reductive cultural knowledge about weight. What interests us is how this intersection is made possible.

We draw on Joffe and Staerklé's (2007) observation that as individualization becomes a core value in neoliberal western societies, one of its key components, self-control, becomes a defining feature of personhood, and, as such, functions as a mechanism for social exclusion. In short, Joffe and Staerklé (2007) argue that in-groups and out-groups are cast by their purportedly respective abilities to exert self-control over their bodies (its shape and function), mind (attitude and will power) and destiny (ambition and aspiration). What Joffe and Staerklé (2007)provide is a way of understanding that most low-status groups are denigrated on similar grounds: as a lack of self-control

becomes the content of stereotypes and the substance of denigration, then repeated motifs of indulgence, excess, and mismanaged or "wasted" lives make up a stock knowledge of a wide range of out-groups. We suggest that this common ground of stereotype content enables the apparently seamless intersection of weight- and welfare stigma in our sample.

More specifically, in terms of weight, following Joffe and Staerklé (2007), what we see in *100St* is a reproduction of the fat body as out-of-control: they argue that as the thin person "symbolizes the mastery of mind over body," fat people are represented as embodying a "loss of control and moral failing in terms of sloth and gluttony" (p.405). In our data, we see the self-control deficit actively produced through cutaways to culturally problematized areas of the body and cutaway shots to a volume of "bad food." Yet, it is on the grounds of productivity that we argue that intersections are at their most powerful: to return to Joffe and Staerklé (2007), they stress that "productivity and paid labour are deemed the primary means to achieve self-control" (p.408) specifically over an individual's future (destiny). As others have argued, in neoliberal contexts, the effort to work hard, plan, and strategize for the future are recast as lifestyle *choices*: in this context, any *failure* to be productive (as defined by paid labor) is also read as a deliberate, faulty choice (Throsby 2007). This has grave significance for representations of weight, specifically in the genre of welfare documentaries, because repeated stereotypical imagery of larger weight people constructs them as *unproductive*, leading zombie-lives, with a motif of being trapped in their homes/bodies/stagnant lives or, in wider culture, as "stupid, unprofessional and lazy" even if employed (Brembeck 2019, 46; Spratt 2022).

Following from Throsby (2007) in relation to weight and Shildrick (2018) in relation to poverty, the dominant messaging is that unproductivity is a consequence of an individual's lifestyle: it is a *choice*. There are two points to draw from this. The first is the brutal depoliticization at play: individuals are framed as producers of their own fate and rendered culpable for matters that are outside the remit of personal agency such as poverty, lack of quality employment, substandard housing, and poor health (see Harrison, Raisborough, and Taylor 2021; Schrecker and Bambra 2015). The second point refers to how individualized explanations, mediated through reductive stereotypes, help cast doubt on the efficacy and necessity for a welfare system in the UK (Raisborough et al. 2022), thus aiding the ideological work producing an "anti-welfare commonsense" (Jensen and Tyler 2015, 470) in support of neoliberal policies.

We could conclude that "obesity" and fat are deployed by *On Benefits* to provide yet another sensationalized example of a lack of self-control. Yet, in the genre of RTV welfare documentaries, we argue that weight serves to overdetermine the unproductive welfare claimant in a further way. To understand this, we are reminded that weight is repeatedly conflated with health

(Spratt 2022 just as fat bodies are represented as the ideal substance for transformation -through diets, weight-loss surgery, exercise regimes, and cosmetic surgery, among others (Kyrölä and Harjunen 2017). That health itself is imagined as a site for a responsible citizen's labors, promotes lifestyle solutions to purportedly lifestyle problems (Carbone-Moane and Guise 2021): weight becomes not just something to be managed -it *ought* to be managed by neoliberal citizens (Throsby 2007)

Cutaways to medicine and medical aides serve to bolster the connection between health and weight, and, further, to visualize the consequences of not taking control over health/weight. These images may have extra significant in the context of the UK (Williams and Annandale 2020). The National Health Service (NHS) is often the site of party-political wrangling as to its future as a state-funded service. Historically, UK media coverage of the NHS contains stories of national pride on one hand, and damaging accounts of negligence, financial waste, greedy managers, and unprofessional staff, on the other (Walker, Hanna, and Raisborough 2021). Walker, Hanna, and Raisborough (2021) argue that across these accounts, there emerges a general "sensibility" or direction of the public mood toward the neoliberal privatization of the NHS, while masking the historic underfunding by the state We suggest that what we see in our analysis is further ideological work that pushes the blame for the failure of the NHS away from the state onto individuals who are imagined as abusing limited healthcare resources by self- induced illness. Carbone-Moane and Guise (2021) provide a more recent example of this logic by analyzing how weight- loss was (and is) heavily promoted as a way of looking after one's self, one's community, *and* saving the NHS over the Pandemic (see also Williams and Annandale 2020) Taking control over one's weight, then, is celebrated as a cure for a seemingly inexhaustible list of social ills (see Sundin et al. 2021 who see weight loss as a means to reduce greenhouse gases). We are alerted too to the powerful intersections here operating between class, weight, and disability. We have explored this elsewhere in relation of reality television programs (Raisborough, Ogden, and De Guzman 2019) but more work is now needed to explore how editing knits different forms of oppression together

We conclude by returning to Bricca's claim that cutaways provide an additional commentary to a documentary, one that provides "more visceral" evidence than viewers might get through spoken narrative (2017: 59). Evidence of a lack of control and responsibility can be found in "visceral" shots of dirt and litter in the wider sample. However, we contend that cultural fatphobic discourses are so prevalent that *100St* did not need to relay on this imagery; instead it could provide "evidence" for unemployment by a lifestyle of bad choices, written on the fat body. The "obese" welfare claimant is firmly and repeatedly constructed as "underserving." We contend that anti-welfare

and pro-privatization ideologies are circulated through editing choices and that weight stigma is mobilized specifically to generate "tax-payer resentment" (Besley and Coate 1992) toward a visibilized, identifiable social group to look with askance at the welfare state itself.

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