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“Social structures in the socioeconomic-gender obesity gradient in Chile: A qualitative study of lifestyle behaviours’ embodiment in women from different social position”

Background

The obesity epidemic is a growing public health problem in Chile. Nutritional status shifted from extended undernutrition until the 1970s, to rising obesity rates in the 1990s. This transition is explained by rapid modernisation, as well as changes in lifestyles behaviours. Currently, over 70% of the Chilean population aged 15 and over are overweight or obese, affecting more women and low-income groups.

Moreover, lifestyle behaviours are key determinants for health outcomes. Public health initiatives to tackle obesity are based on a ‘downstream’ focus, expressed in individual behavioural interventions (Hunter et al., 2010). However, this approach ignores the importance of social structures to understand individual health behaviours and outcomes. These outcomes are systematic different depending on the social position or gender or ethnicity of an individual.

Additionally, lifestyle behaviours are expressions of each person’s place on the social stratum. Following Bourdieu’s framework (1984), preferences on leisure activities and diet are socially constructed and are expressed in a bodily habitus. These practices are embodied in the everyday life as taken-for-granted routines. Tastes in diet, physical activity and entertainment are markers of social position, evidencing the difference between privileged/underprivileged groups.

Aim and Research Questions

The purpose is to explore the relationships between the embodiment of lifestyles behaviours, body weight and health-related practices in Chilean women from different social positions.

The project will be guided by three main questions:

1. What are the meanings and perceptions of women’s body weight and lifestyle behaviours?
2. How are women’s body weight and lifestyle behaviours embedded in their biographies and daily experiences?
3. What are the similarities or differences in lifestyles behaviours and weight management practices between women from different socioeconomic position?

Methods

This study is part of a mixed-method PhD project seeking to understand the social mechanisms contributing to the social and gender gradient in obesity and its behavioural determinants in Chile. It targets to capture the complexity of how obesity and lifestyle behaviours are embedded in a relational social structure of class and gender.

This qualitative study focuses on the lifestyle behaviours’ habitus of women from a different socioeconomic position. Thirty in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted in Santiago, Chile, in May and June 2019. The interviews seek to capture women’s perceptions and life stories related to their body weight and lifestyle behaviours.

Interviews were recorded and transcribed, to be analysed through a thematic approach using data management software NVivo. The analysis will be guided by a social-structuralist approach, considering Bourdieu's theory on habitus and lifestyle behaviours and the multifaceted social identity the women.

Progress to date

The progress review report was completed and accepted without revisions on March 2019. On the same month, the School for Policy Studies Research Ethics Committee from the University of Bristol granted approval for the qualitative project. The fieldwork was conducted between April and June 2019 in Santiago, Chile. On the first weeks, the potential participants were recruited and invited to be part of this study. A total of 30 interviews with women from different socioeconomic position were conducted around Santiago city. Currently, I am transcribing and analysing the interviews. In parallel, I've completed a systematic review of the socioeconomic differences in the dietary patterns among the Chilean population.

Findings from Preliminary Analysis

Preliminary findings were presented at the BSA Food Group Conference in July 2019, and in the BSA Medical Sociology Conference in September 2019. In the first, a focus on the differences in the dietary and food purchasing patterns between women from different socioeconomic groups was presented. At the BSA MedSoc Conference, the focus was placed on the differences in the physical activity practices and the sedentary behaviour among women from different SEP. Tensions between motherhood, work, household labour and take care of themselves are explored, with special emphasis over the role of gender and class in a patriarchal society like the Chilean.

Activities supported by prize

The Phil Strong Memorial Prize contributed to cover funds related to the qualitative fieldwork conducted in Santiago, Chile, between April and July 2019.

Air travel (UK-Chile-UK)	£800
Transport	£200
Participants thank you presents	£200
Total	£1200

Enhancement of the study

The award gave me the opportunity to conduct a larger, in-depth qualitative study, seeking to understand the role of social structures that intervene in the everyday life behaviours related to diet, physical activity and sedentary behaviour of Chilean women from different social positions. The possibility of including a larger number of women from different areas of Santiago enriched my research and its findings.

Similarly, the award has enabled me to expand my qualitative skills. As a more quantitative researcher, I have had to apply strategies to conduct a qualitative research and reflect on my position as a researcher. The mixed-methods thesis I'm conducting seeks to triangulate the analysis from different perspectives, to offer a full insight into this complex and multifactorial matter.