

## 7 The imagined psychology of being overweight in a weight loss program

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The contemporary concern with being overweight<sup>1</sup> is an important new area in which personal and private matters are transformed into serviceable problems. Current understandings of being overweight often are imagined as linked to negative personality characteristics such as being lazy, being unable to set limits, lacking self control, having difficult childhoods and dysfunctional relationships, or simply being a problematic personality (LeBesco 2004, Jutel 2005, Throsby 2009, Mik-Meyer 2009a, 2010, Lupton 2012). For many, being overweight represents more than an inconvenient or troubled body; it has become a troubled mind. Not everyone explains overweight in psychological terms, of course, but those who do are not a minority, as related images and reasoning convince those concerned, both those affected and those responsible for helping them, to turn to the personal past, present, and future for insight and recovery.

This chapter explores the imagined psychology of being overweight articulated by staff members and overweight individuals in a Danish weight loss program. Imagined psychologies exist virtually everywhere in contemporary society, as everyday constructions of inner life increasingly serve common understanding (Rose 1998). In this context, the institutional account of being overweight is primarily a story of problems in childhood, adolescence, and adulthood that make the goal of weight loss obvious and body weight alterable by way of the mind. The constructions produced and ramified in ordinary talk of both the staff and overweight individuals can be seen as related to the growth of what Nikolas Rose (1990) calls the "psy-industry." In the chapter, we also will meet individuals who talk about overweight in alternative terms, mostly in the language of combustion, exercise, and eating habits. This more traditional way of viewing overweight is based on a simple model that focuses on the physiological workings of the body. Simply put, the overweight person consumes more calories than are burned away. The solution in this framework is for the overweight person to stop excessive eating and exercise more. The solution to the problem is to provide information on diet and combustion and prescribe exercise regimens.

These frameworks are not independent of each other, so that respective accounts and understandings of being overweight cross-fertilize, but the