

Comparative Ethnography and Urban Health: A Multisite Study on Obesogenic Cities

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Abstract : Urban health challenges, like the obesity epidemic, need to be studied from a dialogue between different disciplines and geographical conditions. Public health uses quantitative analysis and local samples, but qualitative data and multisite analysis would help to better understand how obesity has become a health problem. In the last decades, obesity rates have increased in most of the countries, especially in the Western World. Concerned about the problem, the American Medical Association has recently voted obesity as a disease. Suddenly, a 'war on obesity' attracted scientists from different disciplines to explore various ways to control and even reverse the trends. Medical sciences have taken the advance with quantitative methodologies focused on individual behaviors. Only a few scientist have extended their studies to the environment where obesity is produced as social risk, and less of them have taken into consideration the political and cultural aspects. This paper presents a multisite ethnography in South Bronx, USA, La Courneuve, France, and Lomas del Sur, Mexico, where obesity rates are as relevant as urban degradation. The comparative ethnography offers a possibility to unveil the mechanisms producing health risks from the urban tissue. The analysis considers three main categories: 1) built environment and access to food and physical activity, 2) biocultural construction of the healthy body, 3) urban inequalities related to health and body size. Major findings from a comparative ethnography on obesogenic environments, refer to the anthropological values related to food and body image, as well as the multidimensional oppression expressed in fat people who live in stigmatized urban zones. At the end, obesity, like many other diseases, is the result of political and cultural constructions structured in urbanization processes.

Keywords : comparative ethnography, urban health, obesogenic cities, biopolitics

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