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Life as a Work of Health: Women's Healthy Food Blogs as Self-Help

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Philosophy  
in Sociology

by

Gabrielle G. Gonzales

Committee in charge:

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September 2021

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Life as a Work of Health: Women's Healthy Food Blogs as Self-Help

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by

Gabrielle G. Gonzales

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Sociology of Race, Class, Gender, Studies in Sociology of Inequality, Studies in Sociology of the Body, Studies in Sociology of Medicine and Health

## ABSTRACT

Life as a Work of Health: Women's Healthy Food Blogs as Self-Help

by

Gabrielle G. Gonzales

Today, more than three-quarters of internet users in the United States read blogs. One type of blog is healthy food blogs which provide readers with recipes and diet, lifestyle, and health advice, generating profit through advertising and page visits. Additionally, eight in ten Americans look to the internet for health advice. Given the massive reach of blogs and ubiquitous use of the internet for advice on health, healthy food blogs must be considered a significant source of health, diet, and lifestyle advice. Scholars have paid scant attention to the messages on these blogs and their implications. In examining over 200 popular healthy food blogs, I find that these blogs disseminate messages about food, health, and diet to their audiences using a self-help framework, which treats “life as a work of health.” Viewing healthy food blogs through a self-help paradigm helps illuminate how healthy food blogs individualize and moralize messages about health.

Overall, I argue that the messages on healthy food blogs collectively support an individual-centered self-help narrative which I call “life as a work of health”. The underlying messages and assumptions in this narrative holds that 1) thinness and healthy eating are individual choices, 2) chronic disease and poor health are individual problems addressed by healthy eating, and 3) happiness is a result of a thin, fit body.

The first key contribution of this dissertation is a reconceptualization of healthy food blogs as digital extensions of the self-help literature that contribute to the framing of health



in popular American discourse. This framing process is evident in my analysis of weight loss food blogs. I trace the presence and adoption of the “hero’s journey” in the healthy journey narratives of weight loss food bloggers as a form of self-help discourse that perpetuates an individualized and moralized approach to understanding food and health. In short, I argue that healthy food blog messaging places responsibility for weight and body size on individual people instead of on structural health inequalities, and it promises happiness as the ultimate reward for thin, healthy bodies.

Individualizing issues related to health and body size may encourage dangerous or unsustainable eating habits while perpetuating fat phobia. Chronic illness healthy food blogs also present a concerning narrative, which begins with the failure of Western medicine, and requires chronically ill persons take control of their own health through diet and lifestyle change. While well-meaning and empowering for individual bloggers, messages on chronic illness food blogs play into the idea that one can overcome illness outside of traditional medical paradigms and may be risky for people suffering from treatable medical conditions. This poses a significant challenge to public health policy and personal understandings of health and illness. Although different in content, weight loss and chronic illness blogs share an individualistic approach, while ignoring structural health inequalities related to race, gender, and class.

Popular healthy food bloggers not only disseminate healthy eating and lifestyle advice, but also comment on public social events. I examine how they frame two mass events - the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020 and George Floyd’s murder and Black Lives Matter protesting in May and June of 2020. Though these events do not concern food, the messages these bloggers post about these events are significant given the trust shown by

their followers. I find that these highly politicized collective events are also approached from a self-help perspective, by centering the experiences of food bloggers who are overwhelmingly white, middle-class, and financially secure. By implicitly undermining more complex structural understandings of social problems, healthy food bloggers divert focus from collective structural approaches to public health and safety.

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## Chapter 1 Introduction

“The price of survival is endless toil.”  
Barbara Ehrenreich in *Natural Causes*

In 2014, Vani Hari used her blog *Food Babe* to launch a reader-driven campaign demanding that Subway remove the ingredient azodicarbonamide,<sup>1</sup> commonly used to create yoga mats and other plastic products, from its bread recipe. Three days later, over 50,000 people had signed her petition and Subway declared that it would stop using the ingredient. How did one woman force the hand of the largest fast-food chain in the world?<sup>2</sup>

The successful advocacy of Vani Hari is an example of the influence food bloggers have on their audiences and their potential power to wield social change. It is also an example of bloggers’ ability to influence what their audiences believe about health and what they do about it. But, Hari’s story is also exceptional in another aspect: it differs from most content posted by healthy food bloggers that focuses on self-help strategies and individual behavior change, and not collective action, as the way for readers to improve their health, bodies, and society.

Social science researchers have paid scant attention to the ways online content creators guide and persuade their followers. Food blogs, conceptualized in this dissertation as an outgrowth of the self-help movement, have the potential for tremendous collective power. However, by directing readers’ attention to individual views of health and their

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<sup>1</sup> Azodicarbonamide is a commonly used, FDA approved chemical compound in a variety of foods and products (PubChem)

<sup>2</sup> In 2020 Business Insider estimated Subway as the largest fast-food chain in the world with over 42,000 locations in 100 countries.

bodies, promote a decontextualized understanding of human health and limit the organizing potential of these media.

The accessibility of the internet and social media has increased the types and sources of public commentary, allowing a large swath of the population to comment on current events. Anyone with internet access and a computer or smartphone can start a food blog or Instagram account, but not everyone becomes popular or earns a living doing so. The most successful healthy food blogs are largely written by white middle-class women, and their popularity is demonstrated and measured by the number of Instagram followers and blog readers, which range from a few thousand to over one million. The size of the audience underscores the potential for influence from the blogger to a community of readers. At the same time, no matter the size of the audience, bloggers may influence individual perceptions of health, food, and the body.

Following other scholars researching blogs (Petersen 2015; Jarrett 2016; Rodney, Cappeliez, Oleschuk, and Johnston 2017), I conceptualize these social media outlets as online journals written by anyone with access to the internet. This is largely because the everyday person has the capacity to form and share an opinion on these outlets. Moreover, these online journals are critical in understanding broader societal significance surrounding health, or as Tasha Dubriwny (2012) argues:

As an important source of lay people's knowledge about health and illness, popular mainstream texts such as blogs, memoirs, advertisements, and the news, are pivotal in making meanings about health issues (2).

Food blogs are one type of blog that feature recipes and food writing. Health blogs are another blog form on which authors share experiences with illness and efforts to become healthy. Healthy food blogs, a subset of both food blogs and health blogs, focus on posting

and writing about healthy recipes and lifestyle practices. In this dissertation, I focus on health discourses found on healthy food blogs and their corresponding Instagram accounts. Based on data from my sample of food blogs, I make the case that these forms of social media are crucial sources of self-help discourse regarding what it means to be healthy in today's society. The healthy food bloggers I write about in this dissertation position themselves in a larger context related to women's health issues, primarily from a white, middle-class perspective. Messages on popular healthy food blogs are a piece of the puzzle to understand societal and cultural ideologies and processes related to self-help, health, and food. In these blogs, health is widely represented as the purpose of one's life. To describe this concept I develop and describe, in this dissertation, the term, "life as a work of health."

Situated in today's uncertain economic, political, and social landscape, the self-help genre<sup>3</sup> is particularly alluring to audiences because it encourages individuals to take control over their own lives. Similarly, from the dinner table to food stamps, food consumption is often framed in terms of control. Unlike health behaviors such as exercising, eating food every day is necessary for survival. Food is also a complex cultural and social signifier connected to historical and familial meanings. For these reasons, food consumption, or lack thereof, is central to a variety of social phenomena, from hunger strikes to eating disorders. The subject of food functions well to succeed as a self-help genre for these precise reasons. Both self-help and food are centered around control through individual behavioral change.

In this dissertation I explore the expansion of the individualistic self-help genre to the internet in the form of messages about health and food, disseminated through influential

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<sup>3</sup> The "self-help genre" I refer to here consists of popular literature and manuals directing people to make individual life changes.

healthy food blogs. The genre of self-help has existed since the mid 1800s (Whelan 2004; Starker 1989) and has undergone shifts in themes related to creating happiness, achieving positive change, and self-actualization in a person's life (Whelan 2004). The title of my dissertation -- "Life as a Work of Health" -- is inspired by an observation made by Micki McGee (2005) in her book, *Self-Help Inc.*, that in the last 40 years, the "aesthetics" turn in self-help literature encouraged people to view their lives as works of art in progress.

I find that healthy food blogs are built around a specific set of frames. These frames tell a story from an individual's perspective about health, healthy eating, and lifestyle. Frames are tools we use to make sense of the world around us. Sociologist Erving Goffman observed that people and interest groups use conceptual frames or definitions of situations to organize their experiences and guide their actions. Different frames imply different origins, solutions and strategies (Goffman 1974; Saguy 2013). In my concept, "life as a work of health" is the pursuit and achievement of health is framed as the ultimate purpose in a person's life, and the route to a fulfilling and happy life. I argue that self-help (on healthy food blogs) adapts the idea of "life as a work of art" into "life as a work of health." I specifically look at how leading food bloggers encourage Americans to better themselves in terms of their bodies and health, broadening this concept to engage with the idea that art and aesthetics include the shape of the human body and that the ultimate exhibition of the human body project is a thin, fit, white body. Although the relationship between whiteness and Blackness and thinness and fatness are not explicit in the food blogs, the centering of white middle-class women's experiences maintains racial and moral distinction between groups of people and bodies deemed acceptable. The messages in the food blogs show how American

individualism unites with the concept of healthism, or a moral orientation towards health, to produce health narratives with the ultimate message of life as a work of health.

Health is the ultimate purpose in life, these bloggers suggest, because it leads to happiness. Happiness and positive thinking, according to American cultural ideology, are the ultimate states of being or the goal of a life well-lived (Ehrenreich 2009). The linking of good health to happiness occurs through a process of association made by the bloggers in framing their journeys to good health. Furthermore, American culture highlights the importance of positivity in constructing selfhood, identity, and individuality. The physical body has come to represent a person's identity. Social beliefs regarding the physical body, grounded in historical constructions related to beauty, risk, and illness, define a "good" body and a good person, as healthy, thin, and white (Strings 2019). How can fat people, sick people, and people with dark skin obtain a "good" body? People who fall into these social categories attempt a variety of techniques to alter their physicality to achieve a "good" body and thus a "good" identity. People struggle so much to accomplish these achievements because their bodies tell others whether they are worthy, moral people, deserving of happiness.

My data allow me to examine the interplay between the macro and micro, or structural and individual perspectives found in healthy food blogs. The healthy food blogs address perceived social problems of illness and body size. However, they do so in a way that emphasizes individual agency apart from the larger social structural context. For example, bloggers direct readers to combat COVID-19 by improving their immunity through exercise and eating certain foods, but the consumption of immune boosting foods is not placed in a larger social context which limits access to these foods for certain groups of



people. When individuals focus too closely on what actions they can take to solve their problems, they overlook what can be done as a society to address widespread social problems.

The main research questions driving the inquiry in my dissertation are: How do healthy food bloggers utilize a self-help framework to construct messages related to health and food? And more broadly, what social and cultural frames related to health and food are utilized on popular healthy food blogs? In order to study these questions, I analyzed a sample of 200 popular healthy food blogs using qualitative content analysis and grounded theory methods (Charmaz 2006; Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990). The following section provides an initial background of blogging and self-help. I then discuss my data collection and methods and an outline of the chapters.

## **Blogging**

The late 1990s marked the beginning of the internet blogging phenomenon. In 1997, the term “weblog” was coined by Jorn Barger, author of the blog *Robot Wisdom* (Chapman 2011). A blog is a personal homepage authored by an individual featuring posts usually listed in reverse chronological order with a reader comment section at the end of each post. Authors of blogs write about anything from technology to surviving cancer. The popularity and influence of blogs is far reaching, there are over 600 million blogs on the internet today and in the United States alone, there are 31.7 million blogs (Todorov 2021). Although information regarding the readers of blogs is hard to quantify, one study estimates that 77% of internet users read blogs (TechJury 2021), or as estimated by others, 57.0 to 94.1 million people are blog readers (Technorati 2009; Lenhart and Fox 2006). The popularity of blogs

can be partially attributed to the ease at which one can now author a blog with the emergence of free software and hosting sites.

Today, in the United States, women are more likely to blog than men (Garber 2012) and are more likely to be social media users in general. But, the most trafficked and influential blogs are still run by white American men. Additionally, male bloggers are viewed to be more authoritative and credible compared with women (Armstrong and McAdams 2009). At the onset of blogging, men were more likely to blog because of the historically male dominated tech world. An article from *The Guardian* in 2004 delved into this topic, stating that a blog, at the time, “is a masculine noun.” However, with ease of access to creating web content and initiatives to involve women in the tech and blogging world (examples are BlogHer), women joined the blogging world in large numbers.

Some previous research on food blogs in the social sciences looks at their gendered content (McGaughey 2010; Noren 2011; Rodney, Cappeliz, Oleschuk and Johnston 2017). Scholars have written about “digital women’s work” (Duffy and Schwartz 2018), the “digital housewife” (Jarrett 2016), and the role of emotion in digital labor (Arcy 2016). Specifically, feminist scholars look at food blogs as sites of idealized femininity that encompass tensions about what it means to be a “domestic goddess” in today’s society. They also argue that food blogs have been under-studied and yet because of their influence and popularity are rich sites to examine attitudes about food. Dejmancee (2016), a communications scholar situates her research in relation to feminist corporeal theory and postfeminist subjectivities. She researched food photography or “food porn” in food blogs, contextualizing food blogs as online feminine spaces and showing the connections between the hypersexualized public portrayal of food and the female body. Dejmancee argues that

food blogs have become a new and indirect space for the sexualization of women. Academics have also researched how blogs are representative of disordered eating behaviors. Boepple and Thompson (2014) examine attitudes about eating and exercise in healthy living blogs and find evidence of extreme and disordered views on diet and exercise. Lynch (2010) also found through a content analysis of food blogs evidence of restrictive attitudes and behaviors relating to diet and exercise.

Many successful and popular food bloggers go on to publish their own cookbooks and continue making a name for themselves in the food world. Food blogs, and blogs in general, are a way for individuals to express ideas and opinions in a space relatively free of gatekeeping (Rodney et al. 2017). A lack of gatekeeping allows individuals to be cited as experts on the issues they discuss on their blogs. As popular “lay experts,” women who blog have the opportunity to earn an income while working from home and raising a family. Bloggers make money through corporate sponsored posts, affiliate market linking, and selling of their own products. Corporate sponsored posts happen when blogger and corporation form a partnership in which the blogger uses the product in a post (including photos). For example, as per an agreement with the company, a blogger will be paid to use a certain brand of protein powder in a recipe, post photos and recipe on their blog and promote via Instagram.

In the last 15 years, with the rise of “mommy blogs” (blogs dedicated to sharing the personal experiences and challenges of motherhood), blogging has become a solution for some women, allowing them to stay home with their children, while also making a living (Deuze 2009; Lopez 2009; Petersen 2015). Lepkowska-White and Kortright (2018) used content analysis to understand how women food bloggers approached running their blogs as

businesses. They found that food bloggers construct personas and utilize a variety of business tactics to appear credible, professional, trustworthy, and part of the community of their readers. Van Reijmersdal, Fransen, van Noort, Opre, Vandenberg, Reusch, van Lieshout, Boerman (2016) looked into the effect of sponsored material on blog readership, finding that disclosing sponsorship often leads to negative perceptions of bloggers and the content while at the same time communicating transparency, which readers appreciate. Popular food bloggers in my sample, and in general, earn money from their blogs and therefore represent one way in which the internet, self-help, productivity and consumerism intersect.

Healthy food blogs, specifically, are also more likely to be written by women than men. Historically and contemporarily, women have been associated with food work, however, not the high profile, highly paid chef work in expensive restaurants. Women typically bear the responsibility for daily feeding of their families and for the health of their families. There is a societal expectation for women to put food on the table for their families, but for that food to be healthy (Barnett 2016; Cairns and Johnston 2015). Feeding a family healthy food is not only a gendered obligation but a moral responsibility (Crawford 1980, 2006).

Social media has expanded the world of self-help literature to the internet. Anyone with access to the internet can share their opinion, advice, or story. The blogs in my sample are influential in that they are followed and read by thousands to millions of people. Information published on the internet can “provide a sensitive barometer of social process and change” (Saguy and Gruys 2010) while reflecting societal ideologies and belief systems.

My sample of 200 healthy food blogs, authored by a majority white middle-class women can be understood as one manifestation of the self-help movement and self-help literature. I examine how gendered, raced, and classed perspectives play out in the messages disseminated on these blogs and what consequences these perspectives have on ideas about bodies and health.

### **Self-Help**

Throughout the 20th and 21st century, in the United States, the purchasing and reading of self-help literature has grown to tremendous popularity among the masses. The American self-help industry is worth \$9.9 billion (Sinclair 2019). Self-help literature is typically written by self-proclaimed experts and aimed at solving people's problems on an individual level (McGee 2007; Starker 1989). Self-help books, more specifically, "offer advice for behavior modification, make explicit promises for positive change and provide a framework for self-conception and understanding of personal goals and self-worth" (Whelan 2004). The genre is written for the lay public and is therefore accessible, inexpensive, and portable. People read self-help books for many different reasons, including seeking comfort and control over their lives (Simmonds 1992). Although self-help focuses on individual change, it is worth noting that self-help is not passive (Whelan 2004), but rather strongly encourages individuals to actively change their lives. On the whole, the self-help genre also makes no claims to promote political and social change.

Self-help as a literary genre did not originate in the United States. Historical scholar of self-help, Beth Blum (2020), traces the origin of self-help to political movements of 19th century Britain. Although Blum documents how self-help literature grew out of a desire for

community action in socialist and anarchist groups, self-help quickly became anachronistic to collective action (Blum 2020), especially when brought to the Americas. The contemporary iteration of self-help is distinctly American, rooted in religious doctrine. Self-help scholar Christine Whelan breaks up the eras of self-help in the United States into four distinct phases: religious (before 1930s), pragmatic (1930s-1950s), inner-directed (1960s-1980s), and personal action (1990s to now). Self-help literature in the late twentieth century underwent shifts to viewing life as an aesthetic project. This is seen in the widely-read book, “The Artist’s Way” by Julia Cameron and in dozens of self-help books from the 1980s and 1990s (McGee 2004). As private and public spheres blurred as women entered the paid labor force, ideas governing the private and public sphere also blurred. A turn to aesthetic values as a way of viewing one’s life became a ready solution. As McGee argues, “aesthetic values— for example the pursuit of the ‘creative life’ -- have served as a ready, ethically neutral buffer for these tensions, helping to balance the asymmetries that emerge as the distinction between the commercial and intimate spheres blurs” (21). I apply my concept of life as a work of art directly to literal aesthetic features of the physical body, extending McGee’s original concept of “life as a work of art.” I analyze how the messages on healthy food blogs emphasize the importance of working on their physical bodies to become healthy. In this context, health is viewed by the bloggers as the ultimate goal and idea state of being. For example, my discussion of weight loss food bloggers and their attempts at weight loss highlight how bloggers manipulate their bodies for the purpose of achieving happiness – represented as the highest purpose in life.

Each era of self-help literature has reflected changes in cultural and social norms of the time. Self-help literature throughout history reflects larger societal and cultural

understandings related to the concepts of self and self-identity (McGee 2005; Mur Effing 2009). However, one constant in the United States has been the focus on the power of the individual, encompassed in beliefs of determination, hard work, and perseverance which parallel American bootstraps ideology, meritocracy, and individual achievement. For example, the works of Horatio Alger, written during his lifetime from 1832 to 1899 greatly influenced the secular American way of thinking, particularly in terms of the “rags to riches” story, featuring a person who only needed determination and work hard in order to succeed. Alger’s bootstraps mythology is reminiscent of the Protestant work ethic and is directly tied to American religious doctrine. The blogs in my sample provide examples of how bootstraps mythology is continually embedded within American culture, especially through the messages bloggers disseminate to their readers regarding how good health is possible for anyone, as long as they devote themselves to the cause. This ideology about hard work is still present in today’s society and in self-help literature and ignores the influence of race, gender, and social class inequalities in favor of an individualistic frame that represents all people on an equal playing field.

Alongside cultural ideological trends towards individualism, Marxist historians Reinerman (1995) discusses how America’s obsession with self-help culture is related to feelings of alienation endemic to advanced capitalism and mass consumption (Whelan 2004). The illusion of individual control is powerful given this “disjunction between cultural goals and the availability of institutional means to achieve those goals” (Whelan 2004, 302). Individuals are encouraged to achieve the American Dream, or the idea that all Americans have equal access to opportunity if they try hard enough, yet, the political and economic landscape are barriers to achieving this dream for a large portion of Americans.

The bloggers in my sample utilize narratives which parallel the hero's journey narrative, to write about how they became healthy. The hero's journey is an archetype that represents what it means to succeed despite all odds in today's society. The concept of a hero's journey is common across literature, media, and more recently, self-help books. As McGee writes, "The metaphor of the path or journey -- in which life is understood in terms of geography, itinerary, crossroads and cul-de-sacs, mapping a course, and getting somewhere -- is among the most common figures in the literature of self-improvement" (McGee 44). The hero's journey features an individual walking a path with challenges along the way, ultimately leading the individual to realize their purpose or calling. Although not originally an American invention, the hero's journey is reflected in the stories and messages of countless American works such as those by Horatio Alger. The message is that the individual must rely upon themselves to become successful through hard work and determination.

Historically, men are the subjects of the hero's journey. However, in the past 40 years, women have been included, especially in self-help literature. In today's neoliberal-oriented market society, women are positioned as particularly in need of transformation (Ehrenreich and English 1978). Not only are women viewed as flawed, but also the ideal of optimum selfhood is ever elusive and out of reach (Riley, Evans, Anderson, Robson 2019). My research expands upon how the hero's journey and self-help are distinctly gendered phenomena in healthy food blogs. It is commonly believed that mostly women buy and read self-help media. This has to do with marketing and the social norms which state that women are more emotional than men (Simmonds 1992; Zimmerman et al 2001). However, there is no conclusive data that suggests that men buy and read less self-help than women, although



there is evidence to suggest that men and women purchase different types of self-help (Whelan 2004). Men tend to buy more motivational and self-improvement books, while women tend to buy self-help regarding weight loss and dieting, stress, spirituality, and relationship help (Starker 1989; Wood 1988).

There have been a variety of feminist critiques of the self-help genre. For example, Hochschild (2004) and Ehrenreich and English (1978) discuss how self-help contributes to making women feel inadequate, with women's purported need for transformation often grounded in cultural understandings of femininity as pathological (Riley, Evans, Rice, Elliott, Marecek 2017; Ehrenreich and English 1979). H.G. Lerner (1990) says, "the advice giving industry . . . teaches us to privatize, individualize and pathologize women's problems, rather than to understand these difficulties as a natural and shared outgrowth of inequality and the socially constructed fabric of work and family roles" (15). Postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007; 2017) is a term that describes how ideal femininity in today's society collides with neoliberal rationality. or the self-imposed desire to improve the self without taking into consideration outside social structures. The expectation is created that an ideal woman works on herself without questioning the social structures that encourage her to buy products that would improve herself, for example. Other critics frame this as another form of female social control which serves to enforce power differentials between men and women (McKay 1995).

I place the healthy food blogs I analyze in this postfeminist, neoliberal context, unpacking the relationship between gender, privilege, health, and self-help. In my analysis of healthy food blogs, I show how the hero's journey, previously reserved for men and viewed as a masculine enterprise, is now an integral component of women's health

narratives on healthy food blogs. Through the convergence of aesthetics, the body, health, and food, women have become central subjects of self-help.

## **Data and Methods**

Data for this project were collected from two main sources – personal healthy food blogs and personal Instagram accounts linked to these blogs. I assembled a list of 200 healthy food blogs from across the world. In order to assemble this list, I conducted a Google search of “healthy food blogs” as a way of purposive homogeneous sampling for those who identify as healthy food bloggers, clicking on every link that appeared (Kemper, Stringfield, Teddlie 2003). This approach was used by Lynch (2010), a public health scholar who researched perceptions of food and exercise in a community of food bloggers. Usually, the results of the search yielded links to sites of lists of healthy food blogs that had been created by an outside source. I recorded the name of each of the blogs on each of the links until I reached a sample of 200+ blogs. I chose this number of blogs to analyze because it seemed a sufficient number to analyze and collect data on both qualitatively and quantitatively. The data in my sample reflect the number of followers and blog statistics from 2018.

With few exceptions, all blogs have “About” or “FAQ” pages. In order to be included in this research, the blog author was required to mention any of these keywords: “healthy, wholesome, whole foods, wellness, clean eating, food as medicine” and/or make a connection between food and health on their “about” and/or “FAQ” page. These words

denote, from the blogger's perspective, a particular perspective and explicitly state the importance of the connection between food and health.

The next step in creating a comprehensive sample of 200 popular healthy blogs was to record the number of Instagram followers for each blog. I operationalized the "popularity" of the food blogs based on the number of Instagram followers. If the Instagram account connected to each blog had more than 10,000 followers, the blog remained in my sample. If the account had less than 10,000 followers, they were omitted from the list. I limited the blogs in my sample based on the number of followers in order to focus on those blogs and corresponding Instagram accounts with large audiences. Overall, my sample is stratified based on number of followers with more or less equal numbers of blogs with followers ranging from 10,000 to 2 million.

Once I reached 200 blogs, I went through each blog to collect data on these variables: gender of blogger, age range of blogger, nationality, race/ethnicity, geographic location, start date of blog, level of expertise in food and health (if any), type of diet or food preference, description of health journey (if any). For about 25% of the blogs, this information was relatively easy to find. Gender was identified through traditional gender markers such as dress, makeup, and identification as a mother. I determined the relative age range of the blogger through their reference to their age as a "20-something" or "30-something." If they did not explicitly mention age, I used pictures that they provided of themselves and the ages of their children (if mentioned) to estimate many of the women bloggers to be in their 30s. Most food and lifestyle bloggers are women between the ages of 20 and 50, which is consistent with my findings (Presswood 2020). I determined geographic location usually by the explicit mention of where the blogger lived in their about page. If

they did not provide this information, I went to their Instagram page. Some bloggers' Instagram profile pages provide location information. If this information was absent I scrolled through the profile's Instagram feed to look for any location tags.

I used geographic location to estimate their nationality. I assumed the blogger was American if they lived in the United States, appeared white (the presence of light skin color), and did not mention being of another nationality, race, or ethnicity. For those bloggers who were not American, most of them discussed this in their "about" pages. They might say "I'm a Melbourne based food blogger, born and raised here" or "I'm one of the UK's top food bloggers", for example. In order to estimate the race/ethnicity of the food bloggers, I first reviewed the blog to see if the blogger self-disclosed their identification with a specific race and ethnicity. If this was not present, I then assumed the blogger was white if they had light/pale white skin (as seen in photos on their blog) unless they mentioned being mixed race or had a last name that I associated with being Latino or Asian. One white-appearing woman mentioned that she kept her maiden name "Garcia" when she married because she was proud of her Latino heritage on her father's side. I then categorized her as white/mixed ethnicity. If the blogger appeared in photos presenting a phenotypically Black appearance<sup>4</sup>, was American, living in the United States, and did not mention their race/ethnicity, I categorized them as Black (Dixon and Telles 2017). Bloggers with Indian, Middle East, or Asian background usually identified themselves as such. I acknowledge that this method is not foolproof and may have engaged in essentializing and misrepresenting race and gender. This is one limitation of my research. However, based upon my

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<sup>4</sup> Skin color has long been used to differentiate races of people based on status. I fully acknowledge that race is not "real" biologically but is experienced in the lives of those who identify with a particular racial category.

positionality as a mixed racial and ethnic woman, I have a sensitive barometer to how racial and ethnic identification is read in the United States and believe that my racial and ethnic estimations of the bloggers are well informed.

### ***Data Coding and Data Analysis***

To code and analyze blog and Instagram posts (including image and caption), I used content analysis and grounded theory. In grounded theory, the starting place for developing codes comes from the initial research questions - informed by previous research and literature on this topic (Strauss and Corbin 1990). The data are analyzed in relation to the research questions, but theory is constructed from the data itself. Blogs and Instagram accounts as social media platforms serve as interactive public diaries. The most appropriate approach to this type of data is qualitative content analysis through grounded theory. Blogs and Instagram accounts provide data that cannot be gathered using other methods.

I imported the blog posts and Instagram posts into a data analysis software called MAXQDA. Through close reading of these posts, I performed initial coding, a process that allows for the description and categorization of portions of the blogs and Instagram posts based on their content. This entails identifying common words and themes and attaching a code to them and then writing initial memos about the data. I then completed another round of selective or “focused” coding, continuing to identify important themes while eliminating others that no longer seemed relevant. I created a codebook of relevant codes, listing the codes and specific descriptions of the codes including examples and criteria for inclusion. I followed with focused coding to refine the conceptual categories by writing advanced memos, turning codes into themes and concepts (Charmaz 2006). When I reached data

saturation, or no new data emerged the themes solidified, I wrote further memos about the data leading to potential answers to the research questions and further hypotheses (Bengtson, Endacott, Kang, Gonzales, and Silverstein 2017).

A variety of ethical issues arose in conducting this research. Although all data collected is public data, the personal lives and biographies of the bloggers are the source of research and analysis. Bloggers may discuss very personal and sensitive topics and while they are meant for a public audience, they may have not been intended for research purposes. However, I ultimately chose to use and record this data because it has been made public and has been read by thousands to millions of people and is direct evidence of how bloggers present themselves to readers (Presswood 2020). All research materials are stored on a password protected personal computer.

In our daily lives, each of us takes on multiple, co-existing identities. One of my identities is a graduate student researcher and another is a food blogger. I author my own food blog on which I post photos and recipes. I also follow many food blogs on Instagram and therefore also situate myself as a member of the food blogging community. I am an insider/outsider (Collins 1986), meaning that I am an academic studying food bloggers and also as a food blogger. On my blog, with around 1000 followers, I often write about the connection between social issues and food. As a member of the food blogging community, I have a sensitivity and understanding of what it means to share with a public audience and a sensitivity to lived experiences related to food and body related issues. Although I critique the approaches taken by food bloggers in my sample, I aim to be generous in my understanding of their lived experiences, taking a nuanced approach to how individuals exercise agency within a system structured by inequality.

## **Outline of the Dissertation**

Following this introductory chapter are three substantive chapters which discuss the main findings of my dissertation. The final chapter is a conclusion and discussion.

Chapter 2 focuses on weight loss healthy food blogs. I ask: how do weight loss food bloggers document their weight loss journey? Based on a subset of weight-oriented Instagram and blog posts, I found that weight loss food blogs focus on a four-step health narrative consisting of first the “aha moment,” second the acknowledgment of struggle that accompanies weight loss attempts, third embracing living a healthy life as a set of daily steps, and fourth, the realization that the key to weight loss is moderation and balance, resulting in happiness. In this chapter I draw parallels between the hero’s journey and the health journeys of the weight loss food bloggers, unpacking societal beliefs about bodies, health, and happiness.

Chapter 3 focuses on healthy food blogs for people suffering from chronic illness. In this chapter my research questions are: how do chronic illness food bloggers document their journeys towards “good” health? What does good health imply and what are the consequences of viewing health in this way? My findings demonstrate how chronic illness food bloggers claim to rely on personal agency to cure themselves of illnesses not resolved through traditional Western medicine. In the process of curing themselves through altering their diet and lifestyle, they realize what it means to be happy, create a community of others suffering from illness, and empower themselves. Along with these more positive narratives of becoming healthy are embedded raced, classed, and gendered notions of health.

In chapter 4 I pivot to an examination of how healthy food bloggers frame major societal events. I analyze Instagram and blog posts from healthy food bloggers during COVID-19 lockdown and Black Lives Matter protesting. I ask: how do popular healthy food bloggers approach social issues and the role of race and class? Once again, my findings show a narrow focus on individual agency with little attention to social context, framed in a white middle class female perspective. I argue that this narrow focus and perspective impedes structural change to racialized health inequalities.

The organization of the middle three chapters is meant to reflect a larger theoretical question embedded in my dissertation regarding the micro and the macro dimensions of health in the United States. Chapters two and three revolve around the meanings of the personal health journey narratives on weight loss healthy food blogs and chronic illness healthy food blogs, respectively. Chapter four pivots to look at the meanings of bloggers' messages related to major social and political events. An examination of messaging on healthy food blogs associated with both personal problems and public issues allows for a more thorough understanding of food blogs messaging, rather than studying only one perspective.

I end the dissertation with a final chapter discussing the major findings and their academic and practical significance. I propose potential solutions and ways forward in making meaningful social change related to health, food, race, class, and gender and ways that contemporary healthy food blogs can engage in promoting a more just society.





## Chapter 2

### *The Weight Loss Journey: Health Narratives on Weight Loss Food Blogs*

The Instagram account run by Dr. Sarah Ballantyne, also known by audiences as The Paleo Mom, has over 172,000 followers. Figured prominently on the landing page of her blog is a tab titled “Healthy Weight Loss.” The tab is connected to a web page with paragraphs of information about the state of overweight and obesity in the United States and how the Paleo<sup>5</sup> diet can aid people in losing weight. Halfway down the page is an equation to help readers calculate their body fat percentage using their Body Mass Index (BMI), to determine if they are in a healthy range. Dr. Sarah Ballantyne utilizes a combination of her personal weight loss story and scientific research to advise thousands of readers on how to lose weight by consuming a Paleo diet.

In this chapter, utilizing what I term “health narratives”, the weight loss food bloggers in my sample engage in identity projects related to the health of their bodies, in turn disseminating information about how to become healthy to their readers. Every blog has an “about” page where the blogger presents who they are to their audience. On weight loss food blogs, the author often recounts the story of their health journey or how they transitioned from poor health to peak health. The health journeys recorded on weight loss are indicative of a social process of working on one’s body as an aesthetic project. Food bloggers in my sample tend to view their own bodies as unhealthy and therefore in need of change. They take actions to embrace a healthy lifestyle which they attribute to their resulting happiness. This process is what I call “life as a work of health.”

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<sup>5</sup> The paleo diet is rooted in the ancestral hunter-gatherer type of eating and is a diet meant be healthy and to counteract the Standard American Diet (SAD). See Agoulnik et al. 2021

I consider the relationship of happiness to thinness by demonstrating that historical constructions related to fatness are also those signifying morality. A circular pattern connects fatness to immorality and unhappiness. These beliefs are representative of societal perspectives on bodies, particularly those resulting from healthism and individualism. The significance of my analysis lies in the individualized, self-help focused approaches taken by weight loss food bloggers at the neglect of the social. Weight loss food bloggers tend to focus on changing themselves as opposed to placing their stories within a social or political context. I position the bodies of the food bloggers as sites on which improvement toward optimum selfhood is attempted through a narrative of life as a work of health.

### **The Sociology of the “Self,” Healthism, and Individualism**

In the United States, health is often associated with appearance and the “presentation of self” (Shilling 2007; Cregan 2006; Turner 2008; Nettleton 2006; Kwan 2009; Goffman 1959, 1969). Individuals are encouraged to view their “selves” and their paths towards selfhood as the ultimate project. Anthony Giddens calls these “identity projects” (1991). The body, as an identity project, is a social symbol of accomplishment and a battleground to achieve mastery (Shilling 1993; Chrysanthou 2002). Dominant societal messaging instructs individuals to construct their “selves” in relation to both the health status and aesthetics of their bodies (Shilling 2007, 2012; Cregan 2006; Turner 2008; Nettleton 1998; Kwan 2009; LeBesco 2004). As Chris Shilling (2012) argues, “there is a particular tendency for the body to become central to the modern person’s sense of self identity” (1). In other words, people are taught that the status of a person’s health can be read through their physical appearance.

Additionally, ideas about selfhood, identity, and health status are racialized, classed, and gendered in that the appearance of certain groups is held as the ideal (white and thin).

Historically, there is a causality or assumption of sameness between health and appearance (Jutel 2005) and the supposed ability to “see” physical health in terms of the physical body (Lupton 1996). Or as the popular adage goes, “You are what you eat.” Recent research however demonstrates that thinness does not determine or constitute health and that fat people often live longer lives than thinner people and are less prone to certain diseases (Flegal, Graubard, Williamson, and Gail 2005). The concept of “health” in a Western context is grounded in a belief system that prescribes moral meaning to body size and health status. Crawford defines this association as “healthism” (1980) -- the way in which a person’s physical body is representative of their morality and how a healthy body and good health in general are products of a self-disciplined diet and lifestyle. Body size and diet choices are both strongly connected to ideas about morality. For example, thinness is associated with both health and moral virtue while fatness signals poor health and gluttony. In addition, healthism constructs and reinforces inequality and maintains the divide between the white middle class and the “other”, (Johnston, Szabo, & Rodney 2011; Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008; Smith Maguire 2008) while justifying privilege (Crawford 2006; Guthman 2009).

Furthermore, these moral associations intersect with other axes of inequality such as racism, classism, and sexism. Women are more likely to be criticized for being fat than men, for example (Stinson 2001). And poor people of color are blamed for their eating habits and lack of control over their bodies (Strings 2019). The criticism and blame come from dominant social groups in society and social institutions like the media and medical

establishment. Characteristics such as will power, self-restraint, and individualism — characteristics strongly valued in a protestant -capitalist society, lead to the moral dichotomous construction of fatness and thinness.

Additionally, individuals are also encouraged to manage risk in terms of their health and are determined to be a good “biological citizen” if they manage this risk well (Rose and Novas 2005; Davis 2014; Foucault 1991). To achieve good biological citizenship, people must monitor their health and food choices and have a thin disciplined body as a result (Petryna 2002; Davis; Rose and Nova 2005; Rose 2007; Foucault 1977, 1980, 1991; Strings 2019). A good biological citizen manages health risk as a moral enterprise in terms of self-control, self-knowledge, and self-improvement (Lupton 1999, 91). Using the health narratives of popular weight loss food blogs, I demonstrate the connection between these stories and contemporary western ideology, dictating that peak health is equal to a person’s ultimate goal in life.

Capitalizing on cultural ideology surrounding weight and health and individuals’ desire to change their bodies, the fitness, diet, and weight loss industry is worth over \$71 billion (Van Amsterdam 2012; Business Wire 2021). This industry encompasses the government, economy, corporations, nonprofits, small businesses, even schools and the internet and social media. Particularly in the wake of health crises like the “obesity epidemic”<sup>6</sup> and rising rates of diabetes and heart disease, the fitness, diet and weight loss industry appear on social media, the news, in politics, and in the university. On social media, ordinary people post about their weight loss, diets, and fitness routines. Successful

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<sup>6</sup> I take a critical approach to the “obesity epidemic”, in the footsteps of scholars Jeffrey Sobal and Abigail Saguy, viewing obesity as not an objective fact, but a contested crisis.

influencers earn a living on social media through advertising, sponsorships, and blogging. This research focuses on the messages on popular weight loss food blogs. Weight loss blogs chronicle a blogger's journey through weight loss while advising readers on how to achieve similar results. The genre of self-help is useful for understanding the power of weight loss food blogs because it reveals how weight loss food blogs are instruction manuals dispensing advice on how to lose weight and be healthy.

### **Self Help Literature: Life as a work of art and health**

The concept of self-help lies in the transformation of the individual. Much of the discourse in self-help literature and on food blogs is psychological in nature, aiming at improving the mental health and wellbeing of an individual. However, the concept of self-help remains elusive; what does it mean to improve oneself? The answer to this question can range from embarking on a spiritual journey to practicing yoga, to improving your diet, to altering your performance in the workplace. While at times acknowledging the social, self-help tends to focus on individual level problems of self-actualization (Anderson 2017; Riley, Evans, Anderson, Robson 2019; Bauman, 2000; Beck, 2000; Illouz, 2008; Whelan 2004). Although the majority of the self-help genre makes no claim to advising readers on social change, I underscore the importance of examining self-help as focused on individual change, but placed within a social context. One significance of examining individualized self-help discourse is the ability to examine how power is created and reenacted. For example, as Nikolas Rose (1996, 1999) argues, psychological discourse (such as self-help) is a site of the reproduction of power and evidence of the current social structure as opposed to a self-actualized freedom of individuals.

Since the inception of self-help in the 1800s, the genre has changed in relation to the current social context. For example, self-help literature in the late twentieth century underwent shifts to viewing life as a work of art. This is seen in the well-read book, “The Artist’s Way” by Julia Cameron and in dozens of self-help books from the time (McGee 2004). As private and public spheres blurred as women entered the paid labor force, ideas governing the private and public sphere also merged. A turn to aesthetic values as a way of viewing one’s life became a ready solution. As McGee says, “aesthetic values- for example the pursuit of the ‘creative life’ -- have served as a ready, ethically neutral buffer for these tensions, helping to balance the asymmetries that emerge as the distinction between the commercial and intimate spheres blurs” (21). The concept of life as a work of art can also be applied directly to literal aesthetic features of the physical body. In terms of my research, the narratives on weight loss blogs demonstrate a version of self-help that is geared towards viewing life as a work of art but moreover, life as a work of health through the body as an identity project. I demonstrate how the messages on blogs transmit the overall idea that a person’s highest purpose in life is to be healthy and in order to achieve a state of optimum health, a fit, thin, healthy body is required.

The concept of a hero’s journey is common across literature, media, and more recently, self-help books. As McGee writes, “The metaphor of the path or journey -- in which life is understood in terms of geography, itinerary, crossroads and cul-de-sacs, mapping a course, and getting somewhere -- is among the most common figures in the literature of self-improvement” (McGee 44). The hero’s journey features an individual walking a path with challenges along the way, ultimately leading the individual to realize their purpose or calling. Historically, the hero’s journey has been reserved for men.

However, in the past 40 years, women have been included, especially in self-help literature. In this chapter I examine how the hero's journey figures prominently in the food blogs that discuss their journeys towards health and weight loss.

Gender is a consequential social category in the self-help genre. In today's society, women are particularly positioned as in need of transformation as femininity and womanhood have been deemed pathological for decades (Riley, Evans, Rice, Elliott, Marecek 2017). Postfeminist sensibility (Gill 2007, 2017) is a term that describes how ideal femininity in today's society collides with neoliberal rationality, or the self-imposed desire to work on the self apart from social context. The expectation is created that an ideal woman works on herself without questioning the social structures that encourage her to buy products that would improve herself, for example. Not only are women viewed as flawed but additionally, the idea of optimum selfhood regardless of gender, is ever elusive and out of reach (Riley, Evans, Anderson, Robson 2019). Feminist critiques of self-help focus on how changing individual women's behavior obfuscates structural inequalities (Whelan 2004; Simonds 1992). I expand upon the obfuscation of social context and structural health inequalities by investigating stories of weight loss by popular weight loss food bloggers.

This chapters examine the answers to these research questions - how do weight loss and healthy food bloggers describe their journeys toward health and weight loss? What is the significance of these journeys? I find that bloggers describe a four-part process towards health and weight loss stressing the importance of balance and moderation in finding a healthy lifestyle. This four-step process is significant because it represents broader societal ideologies related to food, bodies, and health. More specifically, that weight loss and health are coded as thin and white and reinforce racialized, classed, and gendered inequalities.



## **Data and Methods**

As discussed in the methods section in Chapter 1, I collected data on 200 healthy food blogs. I found that one recurrent type of healthy food blog is what I call “weight loss food blogs”, or healthy food blogs which focus on food and lifestyle changes related to weight loss. I categorized blogs in my sample as weight loss food blogs if they specifically discussed weight loss on their “about” page. Out of the 200 blogs, 24 are weight loss food blogs. The analysis that follows is based on the coding of image and text data presented on the “about” pages of the 24 weight loss food blogs.

## **Findings and Analysis**

### *The Journey to Optimum Health*

Across my sample of healthy food blogs, the single most common theme on the about pages was the ability to find happiness in life by eating healthfully, living a healthy lifestyle, and losing weight. This theme is elaborated upon in the “weight loss journey narrative,” a concept I have created to understand how weight loss bloggers discuss how they frame their health journeys for their audiences. The weight loss journey narrative consists of four steps: the “aha moment,” the struggle, taking small steps, and lastly, health as the key to happiness through balance and moderation.

The last step - health as the key to happiness forges the connection between living a healthy life and being happy. It represents the underlying belief that happiness is only possible in the context of optimal health. In relation to the weight loss food blogs, it is evident that living an optimally healthy life means living in a body that is not fat. Therefore,

the implicit message to readers is, if you are fat you cannot be happy because fatness is unhealthy. In this chapter I draw upon research related to positivity and happiness in order to place the final step of the health journey narrative into context. For example, Barbara Ehrenreich's historical account of the American orientation towards positivity in her book *Bright Sided* (2009).

Happiness is an elusive concept that is used to define wellbeing or quality of life. The World Health Organization, for example, collects data on economic indicators and how they correlate with subjective well-being (Cieslik 2014). The positive psychology movement claims that positive thinking improves health. Or as Ehrenreich says in analyzing the positive psychology movement, "the central claim of positive psychology, as of positive thinking generally, is that happiness - or optimism, positive emotions, positive affect, or positive something -- is not only desirable in and of itself but actually useful, leading to better health and greater success" (159). The belief in the benefit of happiness and positivity are deeply entrenched in both self-help culture and American cultural and religious ideology (Ehrenreich 2009; McGee 2004). Popularly, and in self-help literature, happiness is often the end goal of improving oneself and a valued state of being in American society. Happiness may also be performative as theorized by Hochschild (2003), who examined how people manage their feelings to create an illusion of happiness. My research builds and adds to sociological research on happiness, taking a critical look at the connection between health, bodies, food, and happiness.

Healthy food blogs and weight loss food blogs not only publish recipes, but also document the journey to good health. For the weight loss food blogs, this often results in a specific page on their website discussing how they lost weight and became healthy.

Although my sample of blogs is not representative of all blogs or all weight loss blogs, the majority of weight loss blogs analyzed for this project discuss the weight loss journey along these planes: First is the “aha moment,” second is the struggle to lose weight, and third is once the blogger comes to terms with the fact that losing weight is a lifelong process of small daily steps. Finally, each and every blog makes it clear that the key to weight loss and happiness is balance and moderation. The journey to optimum health mirrors the classic hero’s journey, from a white, gendered perspective. In this way, I argue that the journey reflected in these food blogs is evidence of a societal turn towards viewing one’s life as a work of health.

This four-step health narrative followed by each of the weight loss blogs mirrors broader societal ideas and expectations for those whose bodies are viewed as fat or unacceptable. The “aha moment” is significant because it points to a self-realization of needing to change. The struggle mirrors the classic journey to selfhood seen in self-help literature. Following the struggle is the victory, but accompanied by the victory is a realistic assessment of weight loss as a lifelong battle. Most significantly, the ultimate takeaway from the blog narratives is moderation and balance, the key to weight loss and happiness. Weight loss food blogs emphasize how happy a person can be if they are healthy. In other words, individuals view the ultimate goal of life as happiness which is found through good health and weight loss.

### *The “Aha moment”*

Many of the bloggers experience an “aha moment,” waking them to the predicament of living in a large, “overweight” body, and sick body. This moment is significant because it

marks the beginning of the weight loss journey. The “aha moment” is often triggered by an acute awareness of physical body size, illness, and the feeling of being in their body. The drive to become healthy is initiated by these “aha moments” largely because the blogger sees their body as unacceptable and in need of weight loss and/or improved health. There are a variety of ways in which the “aha moment” occurs, including a doctor’s visit, stepping on the scale, seeing pictures of themselves, and experiencing a health scare. *Running to the Kitchen* remembers seeing pictures of herself from a family vacation:

A family beach trip that year ended up being my aha moment. I felt completely uncomfortable in my bathing suit and clothes, and hated every picture of myself that entire trip. By the last day of vacation I had made up my mind to do something about it.

Being uncomfortable in her clothes and seeing pictures of herself triggered her “aha moment” and a call to action to lose weight. Another blogger discusses seeing their weight increase on the scale:

I think every person who struggles with their weight has a number they swear they are never going to get to...well, one day (THAT day that was a major turning point in my life in so many ways), I stepped on the scale and saw that I had not only hit that number...but surpassed it. I was stunned, horrified, and ashamed of how I had let myself go at such a young age. I was not just unhealthy, I was terribly unhappy with who I was and was sick of feeling that way. I knew that day, that it was either time to sink or swim. So I opted to swim in the direction of a healthier, happier life.

The above blogger’s reaction to stepping on the scale are horror and shame. She says she was both unhappy AND unhealthy. Similarly, Andie Mitchell, food blogger and author of her own memoir about weight writes:

Twelve years ago, I weighed nearly 300 pounds. After 20 years of being big, knowing I needed to change—and trying to, but failing—hitting 268 on the scale was my turning point. I started eating better, learning about nutrition for the first time in my life. I started exercising regularly. In short, I overhauled my life.

Although this blogger says she was “unhealthy,” the reader is not given evidence of what this lack of health might be other than a number on a scale. Similarly, Kevin Currie, the one Black, male weight loss blogger in the sample wrote:

My “ah-ha” moment happened when I saw a photo of myself on my friend’s Facebook page. My initial reaction was a mixture of denial, surprise and quite truthfully, a little shame for letting myself go as much as I had. I was overweight and felt sluggish, and to compound the issue, my physician told me my blood pressure was steadily rising.

Similar to the blogger discussed above who felt shame at “letting herself go,” Kevin Currie also mentions feeling shame at “letting himself go”. The phrase “let myself go” is a common phrase associated with being fat and embedded within it is the belief that being fat is shameful and undisciplined.

Both Andie Mitchell and Kevin Currie touch upon another component of the “aha moment” - the desire for health due to the experience of living with pain and illness. The “aha moment” is not only significant because it marks the beginning of a weight loss journey but because it documents the physical experience of living in a body that is deemed (whether by outside perspectives or internally) unhealthy or ill. For example, Maria on *Maria Mind Body Health* writes in her “about me” section,

As an overweight 16-year-old, I lacked energy, I was depressed and didn’t know why. After a visit to my doctor, I was told I had PCOS (polycystic ovarian syndrome) and walked away with a prescription to an acid blocker and an antidepressant — not the answer I was looking for. That same week, my dog was losing patches of her hair. “The veterinarian asked, ‘What are you feeding her?’ It was like a light-bulb went off for me. I went home and immediately changed my own diet too.

Maria documents feeling depressed and lacking energy, attributing her ill health to these symptoms. Her decision to change her diet was a result of reflecting on her dog’s health.

These quotes show how the “aha moment” is not only a desire for thinness but a desire for better health.

The management of illness and fatness is a major component of accessing biological citizenship in today’s society (Rose and Nova 2005; Davis 2015). Similar to sociologist Georgiann Davis’s scholarship on intersex, my analysis focuses on biological citizenship at the level of the self in addition to the institutional and societal level. On the institution level, one example of being a biological citizen is seen through health insurance. As American author Barbara Ehrenreich (2018) says, “Insurance involves risk sharing, with those in need of care being indirectly subsidized by those who are healthier, so that if you are sick, or overweight, or just guilty of insufficient attention to personal wellness, you are a drag on your company, if not your nation” (172). On the level of the self, a person is a bad biological citizen if they do not properly manage risk, successfully avoid, and prevent illness because they are costing others and society valuable resources. This is a common argument used by those criticizing rates of obesity in the United States, for example.

The following quote from Dr. Sarah Ballantyne of *The Paleo Mom* is an example of the desire for good health, attempt to avoid health risk of being fat, and access biological citizenship:

There was nothing special about the day my approach to health changed. My youngest daughter was 1.5 years old and I was sitting in her bedroom watching her play. It was summer, 90F outside, and I was wearing pants and long sleeves because eczema and lichen planus lesions were so bad on my arms and legs. Having skin conditions felt similar to being obese for me, like I was wearing a visible badge for everyone to see that screamed “I’m not healthy”. I had a headache, my joints were sore, and I had been battling depression. And in one thought, everything changed: “Being thin isn’t the same thing as being healthy. I want to be healthy and I need to figure out how to do that.

*The Paleo Mom* felt unhealthy due to skin conditions, sore joints, depression, and headaches. Although she acknowledges that thinness does not equate to health, she does make an equal comparison between being obese and being unhealthy, leading the reader to assume that a fat body is unhealthy. However, it is not only a thin body that is desired, but also a certain health status which would allow for access to biological citizenship. In today's society, thinness, longevity, and lack of disease are all signifiers of good biological citizenship. Similar to *The Paleo Mom*, blogger Vani Hari of *Food Babe*, shares her health scare on her blog, writing:

For most of my life, I ate anything I wanted. I was a candy addict, drank soda, never ate green vegetables, frequented fast-food restaurants and ate an abundance of processed food. My typical American diet landed me where that diet typically does, in a hospital. It was then, in the hospital bed more than ten years ago, that I decided to make health my number one priority.

After ending up in the hospital, Vani Hari vowed to put her health first. Some of the bloggers link their “aha moments” to poor health while others simply link the moment to their body size viewed through a picture or a number on a scale. These outside cues cause them to want to change their bodies and health status and provide the impetus to take action in order to access biological citizenship.

The “aha moment” apparent in the lives of these bloggers is the realization that their body is not acceptable or desirable and needs to change. At the same time, the “aha moment” also represents the desire to feel better in their bodies or to recover from felt symptoms related to illness. Bodies that are viewed as fat, overweight, obese or unhealthy are deemed undesirable and dangerous. At the core of the “aha moment” is the message that fat bodies need to change AND that fat bodies are unhealthy, and therefore in need of change. Linking fatness to poor health perpetuates the idea that fatness is unhealthy while

much medical research proves this to be untrue (Sobel 1999;1999; Boero 2012). The belief that fat bodies are unhealthy and need to lose weight is ubiquitous in the United States and Western world. From social media, to television, to books, to what parents say to their kids, it is a taken for granted assumption that it is unacceptable to live in a fat or unhealthy body.

Additionally, my data demonstrate how assumptions about fatness and illness are linked to happiness. The bloggers discuss how unhappy they felt in their bodies, how sluggish, depressed, unworthy. The assumption follows that if everyone is unhappy when they are fat then you only deserve to be happy if you are skinny and healthy (or not ill). The experiences recorded on the blogs reveal the nuanced experience and the very real biological unpleasant quality of living in a “sick” body. These realizations occur alongside social processes of viewing unhealthy and fat bodies as unworthy of happiness.

### *The Struggle*

The second theme in the weight loss journey narrative, following the “aha moment,” is the emotional, mental, raw, and physically taxing struggle that accompanies being fat and losing weight. The pain of living in a fat and sick body and trying all tools available to lose weight is revealed in these parts of the bloggers’ stories. The struggle to lose weight is mirrored in the broader struggle of being fat in the United States today and in many scientific papers and articles that discuss the biological difficulties of losing and maintaining weight loss (Evert and Franz 2017; Ochner et al. 2013; Hall and Kahan 2018).

The theme of the struggle reveals disordered eating behaviors many of the bloggers engage in to lose weight, while never achieving the desired results. Some of the disordered



eating behaviors involved restricting and bingeing, also called yo-yo dieting. *The Paleo*

*Mom* says:

I was cycling between low-carb and out-of-control binges, occasionally going on ketogenic whey protein + flax oil fasts. Nothing worked, nothing was sustainable, and I was miserable. I was defeated and gave up trying.

She goes on to say:

It was my attempts to lose weight by following the conventional diet wisdom of the late-eighties (low-fat, high-carb, calorie-restricted) that really did me in. I constantly felt deprived while my weight yo-yo'ed more up than down. Overall, I gained 10-30 pounds per year throughout my entire teen years, until I reached morbid obesity status in my early twenties at 265lbs (I'm a little shy of 5'6").

From the Ketogenic diet, which encourages dieters to eat extremely low carb (less than 50 grams per day) to the exact opposite (low-fat, high-carb), *The Paleo Mom* tried it all. *Hello*

*Healthy Eating* discusses a similar course of events in her life:

When I was in high school I was lured into low calorie, unsustainable diets. The media portrayed 'fad diets' as glamorous and fashionable and the only way to lose those unwanted pounds. My goal was to be thin and fit. But I was so uninformed that I actually believed the key to getting there was to eat hardly anything. Well, little did I know that eating TOO little leads to eating TOO much... and then TOO little again... Pretty soon I found myself out-of-balance and heavier than ever!

These bloggers try everything - different types of diets and approaches, only to find themselves spiraling out of control and feeling worse. *Detoxinista* also writes about her experience with "yo-yo dieting":

Desperate to fit into my clothes again, I embarked on a series of diets to help me lose weight. I tried going low-carb, eating a vegan diet, and even did a 30-day raw food fast, but I was always in an "all-or-nothing" mindset. I was either on a diet or I wasn't, and when I wasn't dieting I would secretly binge-eat and gain all of my weight back— sometimes winding up heavier than I had even started.

The dangers of attempting to lose weight are evidenced in these stories. Repeated and constant dieting, yo-yo dieting, restricting, and bingeing are proven to be detrimental to one's physical and mental health and result in eating disorders (Lee and Pausse 2016;

Anderson et al 2001). In today's climate, "if fat bodies were accepted and not hated in our culture, fat people would not embark on restrictive eating or disordered eating in order to lose weight, and the majority would not develop eating disorders" (Lee and Pausse 2016; Anderson et al 2001). Medically, restrictive dieting alters one's metabolism, making it more difficult in the future to lose weight and keep that weight off (Anderson et al 2001).

Many of the weight loss bloggers mention feeling "defeated." Simple statements like those above demonstrate their struggles and the ups and downs they experience. However, bloggers also acknowledge that weight loss is still worth the struggle. For example, *Hello Healthy Eating* says,

Learning to eat well is a challenging process, especially if you've struggled and dieted before, but the rewards are SO worth it!

The above blogger acknowledges the difficulties in changing lifestyle practices. But she makes it clear that the results are worthy of the struggle. This second step of the weight loss journey mirrors a critical step in the hero's journey. Part of the hero's journey is never giving up or giving in but persevering despite all challenges. This is also reflected in the following quote from *Organize Yourself Skinny*:

Ummmm, YES! Like I said, I'm human. We all go through different seasons of life – some days we got it and others not so much. The biggest difference between the Tammy then and now is I keep going. I never give up.

The hero's journey is not linear, it features many ups and downs, turns, and dips. This is part of what makes the end result of the hero's journey so desirable - because of the sweat, tears, and blood that went into the achievement. The following two bloggers discuss these ups and downs and recognize that this is only human. This is reminiscent of Hercules' journey, as he is part God, part human and must undergo 12 tests to prove his worthiness. Because he is

human he fails but always gets back up again to fight another day. Another example comes from *Organize Yourself Skinny*,

Since starting my weight loss journey in 2010 I've lost a total of 40lbs. However, in the last 2 years I've put back on 15lbs – I have ups and downs just like everyone else – I'm human.

The weight loss ups, downs, and plateaus parallel the journey of the hero and the common experience of attempting weight loss as said by *The Pound Dropper*:

During each pregnancy, I gained an average of 65-75 pounds, and I would re-start my weight loss journey after each pregnancy. I was able to get down to my pre-pregnancy weight but I never did reach my goal weight. After my last baby was born, which was in April 2015, I promised myself that I was going to go all the way. I was going to hit the goal. I lost 50 pounds in 5 months, and after that I ended up taking a few months off from tracking. I was content with the weight I was at.

Evident in the quotes is the sheer effort put into losing weight and the grit and motivation to not give up, also a key component in the “hero’s journey,” American ideology such as the bootstraps myth, and key to accessing biological citizenship. Another component introduced by *The Pound Dropper* is the gendered pressure as a mother to return one’s body to pre-pregnancy weight.

Research demonstrates that over 90% of those who lose weight on a diet will regain that weight (Mann 2015; Gaesser 2009). Despite the number of attempts, insidious cultural messages about bodies (for both men and women) encourage dieters to continue to try to lose weight. Attempts at dieting are wrapped up in the pursuit of thinness and are ways individuals regulate themselves or engage in self-governance in line with acceptable body standards (Foucault 1977, 1980, 1991). The physical struggle of weight loss can be viewed through the lens of material feminism. While sociologically, it is critical to analyze the social construction of ideas related to the physical body, it is equally important to acknowledge the lived experiences of those with the bodies (Warin 2014).

The struggle endured by these weight loss food bloggers parallels the struggle of the hero on the journey of self-realization. Discussions by the bloggers regarding the struggle are followed by statements about how worthwhile and essential the struggle is in ultimately reaching optimum health. Optimum health is viewed as the implicit goal in the blogs because it is how individuals access both biological citizenship and happiness. In the classic hero's journey, the journey is only realized after extreme struggle. In the following section I expand upon self-governance and dieting in the third step of the weight loss journey - the acceptance and realization that keeping the weight off and living healthfully requires small daily steps.

*It's not a Diet, It's a lifelong process*

The third part of the weight loss journey is the idea that becoming healthy is not a diet, but a lifelong process, a summation of small daily steps towards health. Some bloggers conceptualize this theme as “a lifestyle change” or “a journey not a destination.” For example, one blogger says,

Healthy living is absolutely a journey and not a destination ... and sometimes we all (myself included) fall off course. But embracing balance and finding your way back to the path is, in my opinion, much more important than expecting perfection out of yourself.

In analyzing this quote, the blogger uses a classic diet metaphor - that of falling off the wagon. She uses the phrase “fall off course”. But the message is the same, that there is a correct course to follow. This idea of “course” is reinforced through her language of “finding your way back to the path.” This phrase is also strongly reminiscent of both the hero's journey and religious doctrine. However, the whole quote is tempered at the end

when the blogger makes it clear that she is not expecting perfection from herself (or her readers).

Following in line with the concept of healthy living as a lifestyle change, Kelly from *Eat yourself Skinny* instructs her readers,

Keep in mind that eating healthy doesn't have to be hard. It's a complete lifestyle change that can actually be fun if you allow yourself to try new things.

Her quote implies that not only can eating healthy be fun, it can be easy if you allow yourself. The choice of language reflects common notions related to personal responsibility and choice. Individuals are expected to take responsibility, make healthy choices, and reduce risk for disease (Crawford 1980, 2006). Rather than acknowledging that eating healthfully can indeed be difficult, or altogether impossible for some groups of people, the blogger reinforces ideas related to individualism, healthism, and personal responsibility.

The following blogger, *The Lemon Bowl*, cites feeling comfortable in her own skin and preventing disease as her reason for trying to lose weight and improve her health:

When I began my [weight loss journey](#) at the age of 25, my goal was never to fit into a size 2 or weigh 149 pounds like the BMI chart says I should. Rather, I just wanted to feel comfortable in my own skin while preventing diseases like diabetes, cancer and heart disease.

*The Lemon Bowl's* above reasons for weight loss are reflected in the concept of healthism (Crawford 1980) and self-governance (Foucault 1991). *The Lemon Bowl* says how her desire to lose weight was actually a desire to prevent disease. Healthism is the concept that a healthy body and good health in general are products of a self-disciplined diet and lifestyle. More specifically, healthism attributes morality to good health. Biological citizenship is granted to those who engage in self-governance and put in the effort of maintaining good

health to prevent disease and illness. The Lemon Bowl mentions taking the course of action required of a good biological citizen.

The concept of “governmentality” (Foucault 1991) clarifies how individuals engage in self-surveillance and self-governance despite explicit or overt coercion. In relation to modern technological devices that monitor health behavior, Meleo-Erwin (2011) writes, “rather than through techniques of overt coercion, people are disciplined and regulated through their active engagement with recommended practices and techniques designed to normalize behavior” (Petersen 2003). Examples of self-governance of the physical body comes in the form of monitoring food intake and exercise. Individuals engage in dieting behaviors to achieve a desired state of thinness, which ultimately reflects a status of worthiness. Dieting requires specific daily bodily practices like eating less and exercising more. Dieting is also part of engaging in practices to attain a socially desired self; in this instance thinness. This is evident in the weight loss blogs in my sample who stress how they must take small daily steps towards their goal, never giving up. This requires daily monitoring of health behaviors such as exercising and eating healthfully. For example, as *The Pound Dropper* reflected on her weight loss journey in the above quote, she dieted in order to lose 50 pounds in 5 months after the birth of her last child.

Dieting behaviors mirror the process of self-improvement in self-help. Barbara Ehrenreich (2018) discusses this laborious process as expected of today’s modern citizen, particularly of the aging citizen, “All of the books in the successful-aging literature insist that a long and healthy life is within the reach of anyone who will submit to the required discipline” (165). The pursuit of health is essential to the construction of the self and requires constant labor to achieve. In my analysis, I conceptualize this third step of the

process as a reasonable reaction to the struggle to lose weight and reduce illness, experienced in the second step. The bloggers come to terms with the sacrifices that need to be made in order to lose weight and maintain weight loss. At the same time, this third step represents the bloggers embracing and accepting the effort that is required of the hero's journey. Most of the weight loss bloggers characterized this as "taking small steps every day." For example, one blogger writes,

Make the first step and make a small change today and then do the same tomorrow. Those small changes will in time become big changes that will begin to shape the new you!

Similarly, Kelly from *Eat yourself Skinny* says,

Start slow and make tiny changes week by week, swapping soda for sparkling water, taking the stairs instead of the elevator or cooking with coconut oil instead of butter. I can almost guarantee that by the end of a few months you won't even see them as changes, but simply as a new way of life!

These small steps or changes are characterized as a lifestyle shift as opposed to a diet. One example is from *Organize Yourself Skinny* instructing readers,

If there's one thing I've learned it's this – losing weight is a life-long process – or journey. It's filled with roads, hills, valleys, and everything in between. There's never an end destination. It's a lifestyle that's with you forever.

Again, it is clear that weight loss bloggers in my sample embrace the cultural

mandate of self-improvement as a constant process across the life course. Another point of significance in relation to constant improvement is self-regulation and self-governance which can lead individual bodies to become docile bodies. Docile bodies, a concept developed by Foucault (1975) to discuss how bodily processes (such as dieting) are the object of the applications of power. Academics like Sandra Bartky (1990) study the rendering of docile bodies through dieting. As Heyes (2006) writes, "Dieting itself is an activity that constructs the docile body" (127). This is because governmentality is

maintained through the compliance and resultant docility of bodies. Rose and Novas (2005) built upon Foucault's theories to develop the concept of biological citizenship, referring to the ability of individuals to be perceived as "good" biological citizens. For example, Davis (2015) uses this concept to discuss how intersex people who identify with medical terminology gain more access to biological citizenship than those who embrace intersex as a political and social identity which is often in conflict with the medical community. In the case of bodies deemed non-normative such as those classified as fat or ill, in order to gain access to biological citizenship they must engage in attempts at weight loss through eating "right" and exercising. As Morgan (2011), a women's and gender studies scholar puts it, "Good Americans literally watch their own weight, count their calories, and calculate their own BMI (Body Mass Index) thereby constituting themselves through those very practices of normalizing governmentality" (200).

The process of self-governance is reflected in the weight loss blogs through the hero's journey. The hero's journey stressed the importance of engaging in a journey in order to reach a desired goal, in this case, weight loss. The journey to weight loss requires one to monitor themselves closely through self-governance. Repeatedly, weight loss blogs utilize the word "journey." For example,

In case you were wondering, no . . . I didn't always live like this. It was a journey that I have been walking my whole life and continue to grow in.

The specific use of the word "journey" is tied to self-help literature and underlines the importance of struggle and daily steps towards an ultimate goal. Instead of rejecting the diet mentality and seeing their experiences as evidence that diets do not work, the bloggers take on the daily struggle they see as required to maintain weight loss. Taking on the challenge of weight loss parallels challenges within the hero's journey.



The hero's journey has historically been a narrative reserved for men, stressing bravery, courage, and determination, in spite of life's difficulties. However, the increase of self-help literature in the 1990s and 2000s, and expansion of the market to increase profits, made way for women to become the target of the modern hero's journey. This is both due to an increasing need to expand an economic market and plays upon common gendered tropes that view women as in need of improvement (Riley, Evans, Anderson, Robson 2019), particularly as it relates to the body. Women are viewed as the subjects currently at the center of self-help culture for these reasons (Riley, Evans, Anderson, Robson 2019). One example of how the hero's journey plays out in relation to age comes from the following food blogger, *My Bizzy Kitchen*:

Now that I am in my 40's, I am realizing this weight loss thing is a slow and steady progress, but I will not give up!

Societal ideals view women in middle age as past their sexual and reproductive prime, in need of maintaining and pursuing healthy bodies that exist at a low risk to society. Another blogger writes,

I learned that lasting weight loss really requires baby steps, realistic goals and lifestyle changes. As someone who has lost almost 40 pounds (and has maintained that weight loss for 4 years) I know what works (and what doesn't!) when it comes to healthy weight loss.

Weight loss bloggers and healthy food bloggers also make a point to distinguish their lifestyle change from a diet. Separating a lifestyle change from a diet is a method of underscoring the importance of changing daily habits instead of engaging in a "fad diet," for example, further explained below in Cairns and Johnston's concept of the "do-diet." A blogger following the Keto diet says,

Eating keto isn't a diet for me. It is a lifestyle. I love food and I will always love food, but more so, I love the way I feel eating like this!

She says that she loves food but more than loving food, loves the way she feels while on the Keto diet. The blogger, *Baked Greens*, discusses how, as a byproduct of eating whole ingredients, she lost 100 pounds,

Over the past decade I started using more wholesome, high-quality ingredients in my kitchen and ended up losing around 100 pounds in the process.

The content of the quotes presented above parallel what Cairns and Johnston (2015) call the “do-diet.” The “do-diet” is the modern equivalent of the attempt to achieve thinness without explicitly dieting. Instead, eating habits are presented under the guise of pursuing health. In other words, eating healthfully is a euphemism for weight loss. Cairns and Johnston explain that there has been a cultural shift away from the term “dieting” and claim that in today’s “postfeminist” context, dieting is not viewed as a feminist act and is therefore looked down upon. However, claiming that these lifestyle changes result in being healthier and happier is a way of sidestepping physical looks or body weight as a reason for altering diet and lifestyle. Cairns and Johnston not only look at the do-diet from a structural perspective but through the individual level of emotion that is attached to food choices, “While governmentality studies tend to emphasize embodied surveillance and discipline, neoliberalism also operates at the level of emotion, as structural problems are individualized as private burdens that are felt in everyday life” (Cairns and Johnston 2015). The concept of healthism has taken the place of more overt attempts at dieting and weight loss and are often stand-ins for the desire to achieve thinness.

Although the bloggers discuss the importance of balance and moderation, much of the subtext of the quotes is that of continued restriction. For example, a Keto diet in and of itself is restrictive. It requires a person to eat around 20 grams of carbohydrates a day. The

recommended amount of carbohydrates for an adult on a 2,000-calorie diet is around 200 to 300 grams (Medline Plus). Similarly, the Paleo diet restricts eaters to only meats, fruits, and vegetables. Recent research in dieting demonstrates that restricting any groups of foods results in the dieter feeling restricted and eating the restricted foods regardless. Following specific diet plans is not only detrimental psychologically but is also time-consuming and expensive.

The small daily steps that add up to a lifestyle change are worth the struggle because of their result: happiness. But happiness is only achieved through moderation and balance. The next section discusses what balance and moderation mean in the context of happiness and weight loss.

*Health is the key to happiness, the key to health is balance*

In addition to enduring the struggle of weight loss and learning to take small steps towards a health goal every day, the bloggers stress that the key to embracing a healthy life is to embrace balance and moderation. The logic follows that if the goal of life is to be happy (as per modern self-help culture), then that happiness can be found in living a balanced life. Balance and moderation come in a variety of forms. One form is through not having to restrict foods but rather eating a diet that includes things like cake as well as foods such as spinach. For example, *The Healthy Little Peach* says,

My goal with my website is to show you that you can live a balanced and healthy life without having to restrict and binge in order to find yourself.

The above blogger directly connects identity, or “finding oneself” to living a balanced and healthy life. This is one example of how individuals in my sample link the concept of self and identity construction to health status. Different bloggers have distinctive ideas about

what it means to live a healthy life. For example, the following blogger makes it clear to their audience that they believe it is possible to live a healthy lifestyle and still eat things like cake:

I work hard to achieve balance in my life, and that includes the recipes I create. You can expect to find plenty of hearty meatless meals, nutrient-dense snacks, and ample baked goods on Baked Greens. And cake, because we all need cake. *Have I mentioned I like cake?*

Not only is moderation and balance the key to living a healthy life but it is also supposedly possible for anyone, as is written by the following blogger:

I hope through my recipes, ideas, insight, and writings that I inspire you to see that a healthy, balanced, natural lifestyle is within anyone's grasp!

Imbedded within the belief that anyone can live a healthy, balanced, natural lifestyle are notions of personal responsibility and healthism. This belief implicitly projects blame on those who do not have the ability to achieve this lifestyle.

While some bloggers claim to eat a balanced, unrestricted diet, they also discuss not being able to eat specific foods:

Just because I can't eat certain things doesn't mean I don't eat well. I'm all about BALANCE and my food intolerances have actually caused me to eat incredibly healthy, completely natural things.

*Hello Healthy Eating's* food intolerances (not being able to eat certain foods) have led her to eat healthfully. The word "balance" is used often to describe the types of diets the bloggers follow:

If you know me, you know that while I believe the best diet is a BALANCED one, you also know that I eat gluten-free, dairy-free and soy-free. Balance can also lead you to losing weight, but it is made clear to the audience that weight loss is not a main goal, but occurs as a side result of a healthy lifestyle:

I finally found BALANCE and I actually began to lose weight in a completely maintainable sustainable way! I ended up losing 35 pounds over the course of a year and a half.

Cairns and Johnston's concept of the "do-diet" once again comes into play here -- bloggers use terms like balance and moderation to describe dieting, instead of using the actual term itself.

Balance and moderation, as adopted by bloggers in their daily lives, is the key to living a healthy life. This is significant because living a healthy life leads them to living a fulfilled, happy life. For example, Andie Mitchell writes on her about page:

When I lost weight, I started cooking, remaking the foods I had always loved in lighter, more wholesome ways, and slowly, **I started to feel like I was transitioning from a diet to a life.** I started to work through my relationship with food and emotional eating, learning how to weave in some indulgences here and there to keep me happy. And over time, the more I practiced, the more I was able to achieve that mystical "balance" I'd always heard about.

Andie Mitchell weaves together step 3 in the weight loss narrative (it's not a diet, it's a lifelong process) with the final step of living a balanced life.

Furthermore, some bloggers like *Hello Healthy Eating* explicitly state that eating healthy makes you happy:

Cue Hello Healthy Eating! One of my favorite sayings (and the tagline of this blog) is, "...because eating healthy makes you happy!"

One blogger named her blog *Hungry Happy Healthy* and writes on her about page:

Hungry Healthy Happy was created by Dannii in 2011 as a place to share **healthy recipes** that weren't boring or restrictive (this blog focusing on how to nourish your body without giving up the foods you love), document Dannii's **100lbs weight loss** and show that healthy is all about balance, which is why you will find so much more than healthy recipes here.

Happiness is a socially constructed concept, and in the United States, happiness is often viewed as an outgrowth of positive thinking. I make the claim, through analyzing these

bloggers' quotes, that embracing moderation and balance, leading to happiness also works in the reverse – being happy leads to better health. Ehrenreich (2009) writes in *Bright-Sided*, “happiness . . . is not only desirable in and of itself but actually useful, leading to better health and greater success” (158-159). Happiness, as a state of being, is desirable because American society encourages positivity and also because happiness is beneficial, both to the individual and society.

In describing the purpose of her blog on her about page, Dannii from *Hungry Healthy Happy* associates eating healthy with both weight loss and balance. Finding moderation, balance, and ultimately happiness is the final step of the weight loss narrative which is the culmination of the previous three steps (the “aha” moment, the struggle, and the daily steps towards lifestyle change). These previous three steps towards weight loss are worth doing because they lead to happiness (through balance and moderation). The end of the hero's journey is the achievement of a long sought-after goal. In this case, the ultimate goal of the weight loss struggle is happiness. I conclude this chapter with an analysis of how happiness is related to self-identity, morality, and health status.

## **Discussion**

In weight loss food blogs, previously fat people blog about how they lost weight and became healthy. They also document how they became happy along with gaining health. The audience is led to believe that losing weight makes you healthier, happier, and more virtuous. Self-help literature and popular American discourse lead people to believe that the goal of life is positivity and happiness through self-actualization. It is evident through the weight loss food blogs in my sample that the solution to happiness is to become a healthy

person through a four-step health narrative ending with moderation and balance. One consequence of this set up is the implied flip side of the equation – the resulting belief that being unhealthy and fat is a matter of choice. Therefore, it follows that it is a matter of choice to be happy.

Contemporarily, individuals are taught to believe that their bodies are tangible representations of their selves. People are also instructed that central to one's selfhood and identity is one's health. If our bodies represent our true selves, then it is of the utmost importance that we show the world we are healthy. However, one problem with this logic is that a healthy lifestyle is subjective. In the context of the weight loss food blogs, this logic is white, middle class, heterosexual and feminine. From this selective, but dominant perspective, fatness is unhealthy and morally reprehensible. One example of this is the "war on obesity" launched by medical professionals, educators, fitness professionals, and a host of other interest groups (Sobal 1999; Campos 2004; Saguy 2014, Guthman 2014; Boero 2012). According to Dr. Robert Aronoqitz (2008), the "war on obesity" is really about upper-middle-class Americans' unconscious "desire to put symbolic distance between themselves and people from lower socioeconomic classes" (Saguy 19) and from different races and ethnicities. The underlying currents of the "obesity epidemic" stem from fear and hatred of fatness. Hatred of the fat body has negative consequences for people with fat bodies and positive for those who are thin and benefit from fat discrimination (Guthman 2011). Fat hatred is also racialized and classed. For example, Sabrina Strings analyzes historical material demonstrating the intimate connection between morality, anti-fatness, and anti-blackness (Strings 2020).

The concepts of biological citizenship and healthism aid in understanding the role of morality in happiness and health. Healthism intersects with biological citizenship to produce a moral orientation towards health. Access to biological citizenship is dependent upon one's lack of illness. For example, in their research on anti-ageing superfoods and media marketing, MacGregor et al. point out that, "Demonstrating the achievement of optimum health is the ultimate symbol of success in neoliberal times" (13). Today, a good biological citizen manages health risk as a moral enterprise in terms of self-control, self-knowledge, and self-improvement (Lupton 1999, 91). On an individual level, individuals are responsible for their health status not only because it affects them directly, but because it supposedly has consequences for society at large. Therefore, an immoral person is one who does not watch their health and costs society valuable resources.

A focus on losing weight is simultaneously a focus on individual behavior related to health and a focus on gendered self-surveillance (Bartky 1990; Foucault 1991). Both are potentially harmful. Attempts at dieting including "clean" eating and healthy eating are wrapped up in the pursuit of thinness and are mechanisms for individuals to regulate themselves and engage in self-governance (Foucault 1977, 1980, 1991).

In addition, weight loss bloggers demonstrate the commercialized and commodified understanding of happiness. Weight loss bloggers in my sample earn money from publishing posts on their Instagram accounts and blogs. Similar to the publishing and selling of self-help literature, they profit off of enticing audiences to read their posts. The pursuit of happiness that the blogs promote is not simply an inside project of self-discovery but intimately connected to larger economic social processes of consumption. Furthermore, the supposed routes of health and happiness, as advocated by the bloggers, are not open to



everyone. Access to happiness in this case, is dependent upon access to commodities or specific resources that aid the process of weight loss and becoming healthy. This is another example of the commercialization of happiness. More specifically, in order to live a healthy life, as prescribed by healthy food bloggers, a person would need access to resources like gyms or certain foods or time to prepare and research what foods to eat, access to doctors, whether practicing Western medicine doctors or holistic medicine, health insurance, and mental health resources. Many of these resources are simply out of reach to a large portion of the American population.

## **Conclusion**

Popular healthy food blogs are contemporary forms of self-help literature. One subset of healthy food blogs are weight loss food blogs which instruct individuals struggling with their health to embrace moderation and balance through healthy diet and lifestyle. The bloggers' journeys towards weight loss and health are represented as a four-part process consisting of the "aha moment," the struggle, small daily steps, and moderation and balance. Happiness in the food blogs is linked to living a healthy life. Living a healthy life is deemed a moral enterprise in the eyes of societal mandates such as healthism and individualism. Therefore, the association is made between happiness and morality. In order to be a moral, happy person, you must live a healthy life. But if a healthy life is reserved for those with thin bodies, white skin, and the resources to achieve this goal, where are those left who do not fall into these categories? My analysis reveals deeply embedded American beliefs regarding who is worthy of good health, coded through skin color and body size. For example, because 90% of the bloggers in my sample are middle and upper-class white

women, this is evidence of how white women's voices are viewed as legitimate in the project of constructing life as a work of health. In doing so, I contribute to the literature related to the sociology of the body and the sociology of health, more specifically expanding upon knowledge of healthism and governance related to weight loss.

## Chapter 3

### *Change your Diet, Cure yourself: The Content and Consequences of Chronic Illness Food Blogs*

*Deliciously Ella* was started as a UK healthy food blog in 2012 by Ella Mills in order to document her journey to wellness through eating a plant-based diet. Mills is a white British woman in her 30s who suffered with a variety of ills including digestive issues, chronic fatigue, postural tachycardia syndrome, ehlers-danlos, and mast cell activation disorder.<sup>7</sup> Today, her Instagram account has over 2 million followers, and she conceptualizes her empire as a “plant-based food and wellness platform sharing delicious ways to feel better.” Ella and her husband Matt have now published six cookbooks, opened a restaurant in the UK, launched an app, a podcast, and a plant-based snack line. *Deliciously Ella* underscores the market and the influence of social media focused on healing from chronic illness. Across my sample of 200 popular healthy food blogs, more than a quarter of them fall into the category of chronic illness healthy food blogs.

In this chapter I analyze the messaging on these 65 popular chronic illness healthy food blogs. Healthy food blogs of women suffering from chronic illness are both popular and unique sites to examine the dissemination of health information because they illustrate the cultural framing of the struggle to become well, as a woman, in today’s society. Placed in the context of self-help through social media, these bloggers write en masse on how to cure, heal, and/or manage illness and health through food and diet.

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<sup>7</sup> These disorders and syndromes can be viewed as “contested illnesses,” meaning that conflicting views exist between and among physicians and patients about their nature, causes, and treatment. Contested illnesses are chronic conditions with distressing symptoms and limited or controversial physical signs. There are opposing ideas of how to diagnose these illnesses which rely on objective markers, laboratory tests, or professionally mainstreamed consensus. See Murphy et al. 2016.

In 2021, the World Health Organization expects chronic disease<sup>8</sup> to account for 75 percent of all deaths worldwide. The internet is an increasingly central source of health information for those suffering from chronic illness. Online blogs numbered at 600 million have become one of the most popular forms of web content. Chronic illness is on the rise worldwide, and experts and non-experts alike have stepped in to solve the health issues of millions. Besides medical doctors, the internet is now one of the most prevalent ways that people find information regarding health issues. In fact, 8 in 10 Americans turn to the internet for health information (PEW 2011). With the rise in users of social media outlets like Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, and Twitter, health blogs have gained prominence as sources of information on health, wellness, and diet. Additionally, communication technologies made possible through the Internet have increased opportunities for individuals living and coping with illness to share their experiences with others, form community, and heal (Rains and Keating 2012). Illness and health blogs are some of the most popular forms of blogs because of their community building potential and broaching of intimate topics (Miller and Pole 2010).

This chapter explores the cultural and moral frames about health and food that emerge in chronic illness healthy food blogs. Findings show that two narratives persist on chronic illness healthy food blogs – the failure of Western medicine to heal illness, and the benefits of altering diet and lifestyle. The purported result of this approach is empowerment through individual agency, community building, and becoming an expert on one’s own body and health. The messages on the blogs individualize health, side-stepping structural

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<sup>8</sup> I use chronic disease and chronic illness interchangeably in this chapter, following Bernell and Howard (2016).

explanations and centering the experiences of privileged white women. This research demonstrates chronic illness food blogs as sites for examining the dual effect of self-empowerment through health knowledge and the impact of surveillance and policing of their own and others' bodies, especially bodies that are viewed as unacceptable in today's society. It is important to understand the ideological content of discourse about health and diet because taken for granted understandings (eg about individual or collective responsibility) may perpetuate and legitimize health and other inequalities and depoliticize women's health.

### ***Chronic Illness and Western Medicine***

Chronic illness is a major leading cause of death. Chronic illness or disease includes diabetes, obesity, cancer, high blood pressure or any other condition that “lasts a year or more and requires ongoing medical attention and/or limits activities of daily living” (Warshaw 2006). The World Health Organization estimates that three quarters of all deaths were the result of chronic disease in 2020 (WHO). The health industry, fitness industry, health and food corporations, pharmaceutical companies, Western medicine, and the government are attempting to address these perceived problems, and all make up the “domain” (Figert 1995) of chronic illness. Western medical doctors are often those who patients suffering from chronic illness come face to face with as a first line of defense in combating their illness. However, many chronic conditions cannot be solved by traditional Western medical approaches and/or little research has yet been performed on the many chronic illnesses that exist.

An alternative and often complementary approach to Western medical solutions is how food can serve as medicine. This is not a new concept and for centuries before the existence of modern westernized medicine, healers utilized food and herbs to cure people. Today, another iteration of the food as medicine movement exists, reflected in the lives of food bloggers, when conventional western medicine failed to address and cure their illnesses. However, approaches to alter lifestyle through food and diet in order to address chronic illness and manage risk are part and parcel to Foucault's concept of "governmentality." Citizens are promised health through continual self-surveillance (Foucault 1991), for example through body vigilance of diet and exercise.

These food bloggers exist as lay experts (Epstein 1995) whose personal, individual knowledge related to their own health journeys intersects with and often supersedes Western medical advice. Cairns and Johnston (2015), in their research on gendered messages about food and body, claim that expert knowledge is bound up in healthy eating discourses in the United States. My analysis in this chapter incorporates this perspective to examine how bloggers as informal experts on their own health both utilize and reject expert medical advice.

### ***Risk and Medicalization***

The potential of becoming ill is a pervasive risk that has bodily and social consequences. The concept of risk is a critical line of sociological inquiry demonstrating, among other things, the "emphasis on anticipating and preventing the emergence of undesirable events such as illness, abnormality, and deviant behavior" (Petersen 1996). Constant monitoring and vigilance is required to achieve the ideal state of being – that of

peak health and absence of illness. Many people engage in a variety of preventative behaviors to avoid risk of illness (Petersen 1996; Beck 1992; Giddens 1991; Castel 1991; Lash and Urry 1994). Placed in a neoliberal context and part of the concept of healthism, the management of risk is not only essential to the production of the individual self but fundamental to avoiding financial costs to society. However, aging and illness are facts of life and most individuals cannot always successfully avoid health risks, or in other words, everyone is at risk.

The theory of medicalization is relevant to health risk. Medicalization is the complex interaction between medical authorities, social regulation, and control. It is the legitimization of medical control over the lives of individuals and the expansion of medical control into everyday life replacing other institutions like the church and the law. As sociologist Correia (2017) writes, “explanations for human conditions gradually changed from sin, to crime, to eventually sickness” (2). In other words, human problems entered the jurisdiction of medical professionals (Conrad 1992). Medicalization forms the backdrop for understanding the role of medical experts in the lives of people today. Built into the western medical system is the disempowerment of the patient and the dominance of the medical authority. Women specifically have a unique relationship to the western medical system which has sought to resolve the “woman question” for centuries (Ehrenreich and English 1978).

Women in my sample suffer from a variety of chronic illnesses including: autoimmune disorders like Hashimoto’s, Epstein Barr, lupus, Graves disease, Lyme disease, Crohn’s disease, ulcerative colitis, irritable bowel syndrome as well as polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), endometriosis, fibromyalgia, hyperhidrosis, interstitial cystitis, lichen

sclerosis, lichen planus, asthma, eczema, migraines, fatigue, and food intolerances. In many cases, including for some women in my sample, a diagnosis may provide relief in that it is evidence of the visibility of suffering. In this chapter I critically analyze the role of medicalization in the lives of women experiencing chronic illness. My research also helps answer the broader sociological question of how messages about chronic illness and disease are disseminated through popular, influential outlets to audiences who also may be suffering from chronic illness.

### ***Illness, Blogging, and Community***

The experience of living with a chronic illness can be isolating and lonely. Blogging has become a popular tool used to share the intimate experience of illness with a broad population (Kim and Chung 2007; Miller and Pole 2010). This is important because individuals today are likely to seek out information on the internet regarding health (Pew 2008). Therefore, chronic illness bloggers fulfill a societal need regarding the access and sharing of health information on the internet. Blogs focusing on illness and healthcare can serve to create networks, generate discussion, and expand political movements. The ability to form community and combat feelings of isolation is one critical result of chronic illness blogging. This form of social support is also shown to aid in healing from chronic illness (Kengan et al 2012; Ressler et al. 2012).

The purpose of chronic illness recovery healthy food blogs, as stated by the bloggers, is to inspire and help people facing similar health issues to not feel so alone. Another commonly stated goal is to provide information to people that the bloggers had to discover through trial and error, sparing the readers the burden of having to engage in trial and error



themselves. My research supplements research on blogging with chronic illness while providing a gendered and racialized approach.

### ***Data and Methods***

This chapter examines the messages of 65 popular chronic illness healthy food blogs, with chronic illness defined by the presence of an illness, disease, or health condition negatively affecting the life of the blogger. As mentioned in the introductory chapter, after forming a comprehensive list of 200 healthy food blogs, I categorized each blog based upon “type.” This chapter reflects one “type” which I term chronic illness healthy food blogs. I categorize a blog as a chronic illness healthy food blog if the blogger focused their “about” section on discussing the connection between creating healthy recipes and recovering from a chronic illness.

### **Findings and Analysis**

Similar to the weight loss bloggers in the previous chapter, almost every chronic illness healthy food blogger engages with a specific set of narratives to describe their health journey. The two prominent narratives on the chronic illness food blogs are: the benefits of altering diet and lifestyle and the failure of traditional medicine to address their health concerns. In the following section I document how these women food bloggers discuss these narratives. I highlight the idea put forth by the bloggers that eating “real food” rather than engaging in modern medicine, is the path to a happier and healthier life. I also examine the critical role of individual agency in the choices made by the bloggers. In fact, it is the failure of western medicine that is the catalyst for the women to take their health into their own

hands, utilizing their agency as individuals while also managing impending illness. My research positions these (mostly) white women food bloggers as subjects who both reinforce ideology related to individual responsibility for managing health risk while at the same time, resisting imperatives of healthism and medicalization to manage illness. The bloggers exist at the intersection of race and class privilege while experiencing conflict with medical experts and the medical industry at large. My findings reflect the nuances of the messages on their blogs. Below, I analyze first how western medicine falls short in aiding the women in my sample in healing from chronic illness. I then look at the solutions they found to solve their health problems.

### *The Failure of Western Medicine*

Chronic illness bloggers document the failure of traditional western medicine to address their health issues. From diagnosis to treatment, western medicine falls short at every step. Bloggers point to this failure as the reason why they made the decision to take their health into their own hands. Common experiences are misdiagnosis, a lack of resolution for their health problems, and feeling like they are overprescribed pharmaceuticals, none of which target the root problem. In terms of misdiagnosis and lack of resolution for their illness, bloggers say things such as:

Doctors were useless at figuring out what was wrong. Spending almost 7 years going from specialist to specialist with no resolution. Not once was the diet or food allergies discussed.

American cultural ideology surrounding medical professionals produces the idea that medical doctors are the ultimate authority (Ehrenreich and English 1978) with the answers to all health problems. The statement made by the above blogger is clear in saying that the doctors she saw had no solution for her and never once suggested she change her diet. The

lack of resolution and diagnosis is key because it leads the bloggers to disregard expert opinion in favor of finding their own solutions. For example, *Clean Eating Goddess* experienced something very similar:

After multiple tests and visits to doctors I was still left with no concrete solutions or remedies for my restless nights of agonizing pain.

The similarities in the experiences of the bloggers are striking. *Healthy Little Vittles* also writes on her blog,

I went to numerous doctors, who just didn't have a clue what was going on with me. I became agitated and stopped seeking medical help because quite frankly I was frustrated!

These bloggers demonstrate the time spent, the multiple doctors consulted, with no real results or relief from chronic ailments. They mention that changing diet was never mentioned and that as a result of the lack of resolution, they became frustrated, remained in pain, and stopped seeking medical advice. *Earthy Andy* paints a vivid picture of her ailments and what it was like to live and suffer on a daily basis,

Thousands of dollars have been spent on specialists and doctors, medications, and yet never have I achieved much of anything other than a short fix. The cycle of my problems always came back or did not leave at all. This included a long list of chronic stomach pains and digestive issues, celiac disease, fatigue, asthma, allergies, brain fog, leaky gut syndrome, IBS, mood swings, irregular menstrual cycles, candida overgrowth, hypothyroidism, and skin problems.

As *Earthy Andy* discusses, bloggers spend thousands of dollars seeking out treatment. This is both a consequence of the American medical system and health insurance, as well as a reflection of the resources that the bloggers have to spend on trying to find a cure. Bloggers mention their doctors prescribing them medications and the bloggers' refusal to treat their illnesses with these pharmaceuticals. The physical experience of living in an ill body reflects similar themes to the weight loss food blogs. As a parallel to the "aha moment" of the

weight loss food bloggers, chronic illness bloggers experience a lack of resolution which spurs them to make changes. An example of this parallel is found in the following quote:

After two years of struggle my neurologist suggested adding yet another daily medication to my prescription regimen—a treatment plan that wasn't working anyway. I kindly rejected her suggestion and drove home thinking, "There must be another way.

The "aha moment" for this blogger is coming to the conclusion that doctors' advice was not working for her and that she believed another way must be possible. Another blogger experiences something similar,

After diagnosis, I saw conventional and unconventional doctors for years, each of them throwing prescription medications and bio-identical hormones at me, but I knew that wasn't the path I wanted to follow.

Pharmaceuticals often failed to get to the root cause of the health problems or address the health problems in a useful way. The failure of pharmaceutical drugs to aid in healing is another catalyst, or "aha moment" for the bloggers. *Deliciously Ella*, the most popular blogger in my data says,

I was prescribed a cocktail of medication, but unfortunately they had limited success in managing the condition and after about a year I hit rock bottom, both physically and mentally. At this point, I started looking into other ways of managing the condition and began researching diet and lifestyle.

As is evident in *Deliciously Ella's* quote, the role of individual agency is critical in healing and finding solutions outside of Western medicine. She points out that she began to educate herself on diet and lifestyle, taking her health into her own hands. Many bloggers have the same realization. There is a procession of events that occurs in most of the bloggers' health journeys, similar to the "aha moments" of weight loss food bloggers which causes bloggers to find their own solutions, exert individual agency, and become experts on their own bodies and health.

The process of solving their health problems begins with the failure of Western medicine and pharmaceuticals. Then the blogger comes to the conclusion that something outside of the advice of western medicine must be done in order to heal. One method for this is the women educating themselves and becoming agents of their own health:

In this discovery and quest for natural healing, I realized that if I wanted to heal, I would need to be the key player in my wellness. Even doctors with the best intentions could not care for me on a molecular level, only I could do that.

The method of taking health into their own hands, or this “other way”/alternate solution is changing their diet and realizing the power of whole foods and a healthier diet. The alternative health movement that arose in the 1970s set the stage for contemporary discussions about food as medicine, although the concept of food as medicine is centuries old. As an arm of the self-help movement, the alternative health and medical movement was related to cultural changes in psychology and New Age philosophy in the 1970s (Whelan 2004). The alternative medicine movement legitimated illnesses often dismissed by mainstream Western medicine. The journey to health sought by chronic illness food bloggers can be viewed as a modern-day iteration of self-help and the alternative health movement. The ready solution available for the bloggers is food; which is never mentioned by their doctors as a fix. For example,

At the age of 12, I was taking 96 pills a week. Not so much your ideal childhood. Unfortunately, back then I had no idea that the food I was consuming was literally killing me. My doctors never mentioned diet to me, so it wasn't important, right? I was passed around from doctor to doctor, and unfortunately the most they could offer me were antibiotics, which basically worked like a short-term band-aid.

Once again, the solution the blogger turns to is eating differently. As *Recipes to Nourish* writes,

After traditional medicine failed to get to the root cause and help me with migraines, autoimmune disease and more health challenges, I turned to whole foods,

mindfulness, gratitude practice, natural remedies, self-care, acupuncture and Chinese medicine for healing and overall wellness.

*Earthy Andy* also drives this point home in one of the last sentences on her about page as does Danielle Walker of *Against all Grain*,

The best thing I ever did for myself was to take the advice that I should take my health into my own hands and ‘become an expert on you.

And,

After a few years of suffering, multiple hospitalizations, and doctors telling me that what I ate wasn't a factor in my disease, I decided to take matters into my own hands and drastically change my diet.

The failure of western medicine to diagnose and heal these women, led the women to find alternate solutions to their health problems. The solution they turned to was in food. As discussed in the introduction, food is a critical element of social life because of its complex connection to cultural meaning. It is also a commonly used tool of control.

Overall, in efforts to manage chronic illness, food bloggers take their health into their own hands, outside of traditional medical authority. Taking control of their health through altering their diets and lifestyles is empowering as it allows food bloggers to exercise their individual agency. The following section continues with the themes of individual agency and benefits of changing diet and lifestyle as solutions to the failure of western medicine.

### *The Benefits of Healthy Eating*

After modern westernized medicine fails to address the women's health problems, the women take their health into their own hands. The ability to exert control over their illness and find solutions to their health problems allows the women to experience their lives as agents of change. They tend to frame these narratives in a binary - either life is to be

enjoyed through healthy eating or the suffering will continue. Women and Gender Studies scholar Tasha Dubriwny (2013) also finds how women today engage in an “act of choice” through individual actions of empowerment towards achieving health. This is in contrast with the women’s health movement of the 1970s which approached women’s health from a perspective of collective empowerment as opposed to individual action.

Chronic illness healthy food bloggers assert individual agency through two methods: educating themselves on alternate forms of healthcare and altering their diet and lifestyle. It is evident from the blogs that these changes result in empowerment, health, and happiness for the bloggers, freeing them from lives previously spent ill. These women take an active part in risk management through education and lifestyle change.

Bloggers note a critical point in their journey where they realize that changing their diet will change their lives. For example, Mickey Trescott of *Autoimmune Wellness* writes in her “About” section:

Instead of feeling better after my diagnosis, I continued to suffer many months of deteriorating health until I made the transition to the Autoimmune Protocol, slowly reversing vitamin and mineral deficiencies and greatly improving my health.

Although this blogger mentions that she was diagnosed with Celiac and Hashimoto’s, she makes it clear that it wasn’t until she changed her diet and lifestyle through the “Autoimmune protocol” that she started to feel better. The “Autoimmune protocol” is an elimination diet focused on eating along the lines of the Paleo Diet which focuses on removing grains, beans, legumes, dairy, eggs, nuts, seeds, and nightshades.

Not all chronic illness bloggers in this chapter follow the Autoimmune protocol or the Paleo diet. However, all of them find that changing their diet in some way provides them

relief. For example, another woman points to “real” food as a way that her and her family began to heal,

Through good, natural, real food my family has overcome Hashimoto’s Disease, chronic migraines, IBS, severe asthma and eczema.

“Real” food can mean different things to different bloggers but overall refers to whole, organic fresh fruits and vegetables. Another blogger says,

In the midst of dealing with a ton of health conditions, I realized I could help heal myself by eating REAL food, instead of the processed junk that makes people sick.

However, it is important to mention that sometimes bloggers do find medical professionals who are able to diagnose them. This only happens after seeing doctor after doctor and landing upon an alternative medical doctor or holistic nutritionist who tells them that changing their diet would benefit them. For example, *Grass Fed Salsa* tells readers on her “about” page that she wants to help others who suffer from similar illnesses to her. She says that after many visits to different types of doctors she was diagnosed with polycystic ovary syndrome (PCOS), Celiac disease, endometriosis insulin resistance, and postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome (POTS). Diagnoses, as extensions of medicalization, provide relief for bloggers who feel that they can finally get to the root cause of their illness. The solution she found was in detoxing her life:

Basically, **I detoxed my life, one simple step at a time, and the change was profound. It literally changed my entire life.** Yes, you read that right. Toxins were the trigger to it all, and living a life less toxic is what I needed to do to truly heal. (emphasis original)

Pervasive throughout my body of data is the role of the individual blogger as an agent with the power to change their diet and ultimately their health status. The use of “I” statements throughout the blogs is striking. This agency to eat “real food” or less toxic food is the key in healing, connecting the ability of the individual person to change their diet.



Bloggers point out that not only are they healed but they are happier and overall healthier as a result of changing their diet. This sentiment directly reflects the final step in the weight loss journey - the discovery of happiness through moderation and balance. An example of this from a blogger announces,

I can happily report that since I changed my diet I have been free of all stomach pain. My knees & shoulders feel great, and are no longer inflamed. I now can be in the water surfing for hours without any pain. I was able to free my body from all the inflammation and today I am healthier and happier than ever before.

In the above quote, changing diet is centered as the key to curing this woman from her stomach pains and inflammation, allowing her to do what she loves - surfing. Another writes,

I began by cutting out the foods that I believed were causing me discomfort→ gluten, meat, dairy products, processed sugar and processed foods. I started incorporating more fibre from fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and gluten free whole grains. By making these changes to my diet and adjusting my lifestyle I noticed myself feeling more energised, happy and healthy.

Feeling happier, healthier and full of energy is framed as the direct result of diet and lifestyle change. The following quote drives home the connection between health and happiness:

I KNOW, I know in my bones that real food is the key to health, and a healthy, thriving life is the key to happiness.

Paralleling the evidence in the previous chapter on weight loss food blogs, bloggers frame eating healthfully as the key to making them a happier, healthier person. This link between health and happiness is made repeatedly throughout the blogs in this chapter and in the previous chapter. The connection between health and happiness is striking and is reminiscent of religion and the promise of salvation and is central to one of the key claims of my dissertation - that bloggers frame life as a work of health. The relationship between health and happiness is also well documented in research on advertising, demonstrating that

in order to sell products to consumers, corporations inspire buying through appeals to happiness. One possible perspective on why this link is presented so frequently on blogs may be the marketing or “selling” of their approaches because these bloggers make an income from gathering readers and selling products via their Instagram and blog posts.

The two narratives presented above: the failure of western medicine and the benefits of changing diet and lifestyle illustrate a focus on individual behavior change as a source of empowerment and the oversimplification of health and empowerment through lifestyle change. The bloggers find freedom in making their own decisions and choices about their health while successfully managing illness. Empowerment is also found in creating community and helping others in similar situations.

### *Empowerment and Individualism*

The women bloggers frame individual agency through diet and lifestyle change in terms of empowerment. Empowerment is defined as “the process of becoming stronger and more confident, especially in controlling one’s life and claiming one’s rights” (Oxford Dictionary of English 2015). Sociologists have examined how people become empowered in their lives and as part social movements (McCadam, McCarthy, and Zald 1996). The version of empowerment in the lives of the food bloggers occurs on an individual level as opposed to a societal one.

In becoming experts on their own bodies and how to heal themselves, they experience empowerment. They both utilize medical diagnoses, wielding the western medical system to their advantage, and at the same time push back on modern medicine asserting alternative routes to health. They take on the task of fixing their health problems

themselves in order to help others in a similar situation, fostering community around their illnesses, providing accessible information, and empowering others in similar situations.

This is often made clear in the mission statements of the blogs. For example,

Here at The Castaway Kitchen, our mission is to spread the word that food does heal. That you can embrace the dietary and lifestyle changes that will change your life.

There is an effort made to relate to those out there in the world suffering from similar symptoms and illnesses. In this way, not only are the bloggers empowering themselves, they are attempting to help others create community among those with similar issues and provide helpful information that can relieve suffering for others in similar situations. *Deliciously*

*Organic* writes,

Chronic disease and health issues can leave you feeling helpless. With all of the conflicting advice about food and health, you need solid advice. You need someone who understands. My goal here at Deliciously Organic is to give you sound advice, vibrant recipes that your whole family will love and help you walk down the path towards better health.

Another woman blogger, Michelle writes on her “about” page on her blog *Unbound*

*Wellness*,

I am now living my best life through food freedom and I am so excited to encourage and support others who may be fighting the same battles. A few years ago, if you were to tell me that I’d one day be free from my mystery food allergies, energy deficits, and thyroid problems, I would have thought you were crazy. But I’m here to tell you that **there is hope!** There is hope that you can turn your health struggles into a health success story.

Michelle underscores the potential for hope and the ability to become a health success story through providing information for her readers on recipes that follow the Autoimmune protocol. The message and goal to help others who are suffering is also clear in *Deliciously Ella*’s about page. She says,

We knew we wanted to bring what we were doing to a wider audience though, as we wanted to make delicious plant-based food even more accessible. So shortly after

opening the deli, we set about starting the larger, and most effective way of reaching the most people possible, which was to launch our food products business. We're only getting started on our journey, but our core purpose has remained the same from when I wrote my first recipe, which is to share the joys and benefits of plant-based living. It gave me my life and health back, and between us we can help millions of others too.

*Nutrition Stripped* also discusses accessibility,

We believe people should have access to the education they need to support their health in order to make small changes at a time — an ambitious goal, but one that's a priority for us. While we're a health and nutrition company and yes, a business, one that sells products, we're also a company that shares our educational work and content largely for free.

Both *Deliciously Ella* and *Nutrition Stripped* use the word “accessible” in discussing how they want to help others with similar health issues. The women chronic illness healthy food bloggers in my sample are mostly white and financially secure. Their ability to access different kinds of resources - whether monetarily or through cultural and social capital, aids them in finding relief. They are able to assert individual agency through choice in rejecting medical advice and finding their own solutions. Dubriwny focuses on how women work within the medical system to assert individual choice, and the chronic illness healthy food bloggers in my research also engage in self-discipline and choice instead of collective empowerment or political action. As Dubriwny (2013) writes, “The promise of collection action is contradicted by an overall focus on the individual woman's responsibility to take care of her own health” (2).

The empowerment felt by these women is both similar to and different from what is described by Alondra Nelson (2011) in her discussion of the People's Free Health Clinics of the Black Panther Party in the 1970s during the women's health movement. She looks at the concept of “self-health” in the clinics and writes, “Self-health was an important and transformative practice among feminist health radicals. ‘Know your body, know thyself’

Armour remembered. ‘Had I not been doing [self-examination], I might not even be here today’” (89). The PFHC were a structural and collective challenge to medicalization while the food bloggers push back on western medical cures and pharmaceuticals through enacting individual choice. However, both foster communities and in this way can be viewed as collective. As part of a larger collective, white women food bloggers are part of a community struggle to alter and change western medical knowledge structures, provide accessible information, and help others in similar situations.

Although the context of white women chronic illness healthy food bloggers and women of color in the People’s Free Health Clinics is vastly different, there is a parallel between the resulting empowerment felt for both groups of women by taking their health into their own hands. However, the white women food bloggers focus on individualized approaches to self-health as opposed to the institutional and structural perspective adopted by the Black Panther Party.

Empowerment is also found by these women through resisting medicalization. Women activists and organizers in Figert’s (1995) research resisted medicalization by a variety of interest groups involved in the domain of LLPDD and PMS<sup>9</sup> as psychiatric disorders. When offered medications, the women in my sample refuse medication in favor of taking control into their own hands and out of the hands of modern medicine and doctors.

The two main narratives of the blogs – the failure of western medicine and the impact of altering diet and lifestyle result in individual empowerment for the food bloggers and potential audiences. They are empowered as agents in control of their own health,

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<sup>9</sup> LLPDD stands for Late Luteal Phase Dysphoric Disorder. PMS stands for premenstrual syndrome. Both are contested diagnoses in women’s health.

finding solutions where western medicine could not. They also foster community and aim to provide accessible education and information for their audiences.

## **Discussion**

While the women food bloggers use their individual agency to feel empowered and foster community, the messages about food and lifestyle disseminated by the food bloggers remove a structural context. One result is that the focus is moved away from complex social factors related to gender, race, class and chronic illness or disease. For example, the messaging on the blogs leads audiences to believe that individual action alone will result in improving health. An individualized approach as opposed to collective empowerment reinforces ideas that are potentially harmful to disadvantaged populations without the ability to take control of their health in the same way (for example: access to certain foods and grocery stores). Bloggers tend to overstate the control one can have over their body which undermines structural constraints related to health. This message further instills ideas related to healthism and individual responsibility, sidestepping institutional and structural forces such as poverty and racism, encompassed in food deserts and segregated neighborhoods, for example, that shape health outcomes. Numerous quotes from “About” pages reveal messages such as this from *Well Nourished*,

Change begins with you as an individual but ultimately shapes your family, shapes your world. I believe that without good health there’s not much else.

The messages on these food blogs are somewhat dogmatic and result in potential policing of others’ lifestyles. There is a general lack of acknowledgment in the blogs that different populations have different and unequal access to healthy foods and services. The assumption that lifestyles are solely dependent upon individual choices as opposed to

lifestyles as a result of institutional structures can lead to blaming populations that do not fall in line with acceptable white and middle-class ideas of health. This is especially apparent in populations whose bodies do not fit into the mold of what an acceptable woman's body looks like in today's society – white and thin. Within the context of the current “obesity epidemic,” bodies (especially fat bodies) face continued surveillance in the name of public health.

As I've shown, healthism as the dominating American perspective on health risk, illness, and well-being centers the role of the individual. Medical sociologist Becker writes, “The focus on proximate risk factors, potentially controllable at the individual level, resonates with the values and belief systems of western culture that emphasize both the ability of the individual to control his or her personal fate and the importance of doing so (Becker 1993). This approach is particularly seductive for a variety of interest groups, including white women food bloggers because it targets certain core values of American society and allows people to believe that they alone are ultimately in control of their own lives.

Additionally, the visibility of some women's experience with chronic illness comes at the cost of potential political implications as focus is moved away from complicated social factors of disease and illness. An individual approach to health leads to the depoliticization of health issues. Depoliticization refers to the ways in which a social issue or social movement becomes severed from its political roots. Depoliticization is a concept used directly related to the government and the ways that governments and politicians, “attempt to move to an indirect governing relationship” (Finders and Buller 2006). I draw on Tasha Dubriwny's usage of depoliticization and expand this concept to look at the ways

social groups depoliticize social issues or in other words, make social issues matters of the individual. Dubrwin (2013) found this to be the case in a majority of contemporary public discourse related to women's health. The chronic illness food bloggers engage in depoliticization of health issues related to chronic illness and disease.

The individualizing of social problems ignores structural and institutional mechanisms for health issues and inequalities and potentially misinforms audiences on health issues. As an example of this, when bloggers instruct readers to eat a paleo diet as the pathway to becoming healthy, bloggers ignore how this advice might only be attainable for a small percentage of the population because it requires time to prepare and eat the foods on the diet, and monetary resources to buy the foods. The bloggers also guide audiences to question the medical establishment, which can be potentially dangerous. For example, in the case of diabetes, if an audience member with diabetes refuses to see a doctor based upon the advice of a food blogger, their medical condition may worsen. As most of these food bloggers are not medical experts with years of training, it is possible that their personal experiences with diet and lifestyle may not be right for everyone and in fact can be harmful, especially if the information provided by the blogger is incorrect. In all, misinformation about health that is transmitted through the blogs to large audiences is dangerous to those suffering from ailments treatable via pharmaceuticals and medical intervention.

## **Conclusion**

The reach and influence of social media outlets like blogs and Instagram have greatly expanded in recent years. At the same time, so have the rates of chronic disease. Chronic illness food bloggers bridge these two worlds. This chapter demonstrates the role of women



chronic illness food bloggers in providing audiences with information about health, diet, and lifestyle.

Almost every chronic illness healthy food blogger engages with two narratives related to their healthy journey: the impact of altering diet and lifestyle and the failure of traditional medicine to address their health concerns.

The blogs in this chapter demonstrate how the interplay between the individual and institutional related to health is both nuanced and complex. In some ways, the bloggers strategically utilize western medicine to enact individual agency. They are often able to work the system in their favor because of their privileged positions in terms of race and class status.

The two narratives on the blogs are both empowering and problematic. Empowerment is created through questioning the medical establishment, pushing back on western medicine, and creating community among other bloggers and audiences who face similar challenges. The individualization of health issues is dangerous because it leads to the belief that each and every person is entirely in control of their own health and well-being. This perspective fails to acknowledge structural explanations for health differentials. The narratives of the blogs are also problematic because they result in the policing and surveillance of health behaviors and because of the possible misinformation on these blogs and the advice directing away from western medical practitioners with the potential to resolve certain health ailments.

## Chapter 4

### *COVID-19, Black Lives Matter, and Healthy Food Blogs: Individualized Approaches to Racial Health Inequalities*

This chapter explores the narratives that emerge when healthy food bloggers switch focus from improving individual bodies to addressing mass societal problems. It focuses on two critical events that took place in 2020 - the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (March) and the murder of George Floyd (May) resulting in widespread Black Lives Matter protests. I compare and contrast how these two events are manifested in the social media feeds of healthy food bloggers set against the backdrop of self-help culture in the United States.

As the COVID-19 pandemic spread across the world and institutions and organizations began to shut down mid-March, healthy food bloggers began to administer health advice on how to manage the stress and uncertainty. Around the same time, George Floyd, a Black man, was murdered when detained on a busy street during the day by four Minneapolis police, resulting in global Black Lives Matter protests and a resurgence of demands for radical, systemic anti-racist changes in American politics and society. In early June, amid protests, riots, and political upheaval, white influencers on social media encouraged each other to “mute” their feeds for a week as a way of #amplifyingmelanatedvoices. Posts accompanied by inspirational quotes and declarations of white privilege were seen on almost every Instagram account included in my sample. After a week of muted feeds, healthy food bloggers' feeds mostly returned to normal with posting of healthy recipes and health and lifestyle advice, including how to improve immunity, how to deal with stress and anxiety, and how returning to the kitchen will solve our problems. For

example, white blogger Meghan Telpner wrote on her Instagram, “We are in a crisis of resilience and our best defense begins in the kitchen...”.

The whirlwind of worldwide events that took place from March 2020 through June 2020 are classic sociological phenomena of the global affecting the local and vice versa, or as C. Wright Mills would say, “Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both” (1959). As social media influencers with thousands to millions of followers, the healthy food bloggers in my sample not only discuss their journeys to good health but also stay relevant to readers by responding to current events. This is in their interest as entrepreneurs who make money from website visits and Instagram advertisements. As white, middle-class women between the ages of 20 and 50, healthy food bloggers reflect and influence perceptions about health and race in the United States today, particularly as they relate to BLM and COVID-19. My research shows the dominance of whiteness across food blogs, particularly healthy food blogs, connecting previous research (Barnett 2006) demonstrating the association of health and gender and health and whiteness.

The convergence of COVID-19 and BLM protests demonstrates a common tension in politics, culture, and social life today - between individual level-approaches to solving social problems and structural reform that aims to target the root of the problem. Overall, my findings in examining food blog Instagram feeds in relation to COVID-19 and BLM demonstrate this tension. When discussing COVID-19, the food bloggers rely on individual solutions and approaches that sidestep discussions about how health relates to institutional racism. The BLM movement is a more explicitly structural movement in that protestors demand altering or abolishing traditional societal institutions such as the police force. This

allows food bloggers to mention taking action, for example, urging followers to call and email elected representatives or donate to specific organizations. However, both responses to COVID-19 and BLM target individual behavioral change as opposed to larger structural reform that would combat the roots of institutional racism.

Amid a global pandemic, the privilege of white women healthy food bloggers insulates them from many of the health and financial challenges faced by marginalized and impoverished communities. For example, they have the privilege to work from home, to focus on improving immunity, and to deal with stress through a gratitude practice, to cite several Instagram themes. The flip side of the food bloggers' privilege reveals gender oppression as women continue to work "the second shift" through supporting their families financially, providing childcare, and being responsible for cooking and housework. These circumstances reveal the landscape of inequality in the United States during the pandemic. Access to resources and privileges allow bloggers to depoliticize the pandemic and in turn reinforce traditional gender roles. At the same time, bloggers experience a loss of control in their world, resulting in stress which they choose to deal with via individual actions. For example, food bloggers advise creating gratitude lists to combat the stress of COVID-19. Gratitude lists help combat stress because they remind one of all they have to be grateful for in life. These lists are meant as a method of focusing on the positive instead of the negative. Their attempts to deal with stress through a gratitude practice are individualized self-help approaches. My research compares and contrasts responses to COVID-19 and BLM as socio-political health crises that are both rooted in institutional racism. This research extends scholarship on self-help by examining the blogosphere and social media as critical locations for individualized advice related to COVID-19 and BLM.

I approach the study of gender, blogging, and domesticity in a way that allows me to retain the complexities of the bloggers' positionalities, or as Presswood (2020) writes in her study of blogs, "I rely on an understanding of domesticity as an area of study that simultaneously holds liberatory and oppressive potential for gender equality. Digital media acts, like it so often does as an amplifier for both of these capacities" (3). In this chapter, I begin with background information on racism and COVID-19, the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, self-help, and food blogging. I then introduce my research questions, methods and empirical analysis. I end with a section suggesting ways for food bloggers and online influencers to "look forward" and address structural inequalities.

### ***Racism and COVID-19***

The 2020 global pandemic, altering the lives of billions of people, has necessitated a political and economic response by the United States and other nations. The unemployment rate in the United States rose to almost 15% in April 2020, the highest in over 50 years (Falk 2020), revealing the precariousness of class status in the United States. How is COVID-19 a racial issue? Although coronavirus affects those of all socioeconomic classes, ages and genders, its impact on different social groups is influenced by the healthcare system and larger patterns of racism, residential segregation, and poverty in the United States specifically (Ray and Rojas 2020). As sociologist Kimberly Higuera (2020) points out, the ability to social distance is a privilege, "There is another group of people who are not socially distancing, the precariously employed, that is to say workers who are living paycheck to paycheck and/or lack the flexibility to stay home. To the precariously employed, staying home from work for health reasons is a decadent luxury, one that they

don't usually employ even outside of the context of a pandemic." Additionally, people may not even live in a home that allows the luxury of distancing, i.e. multiple rooms and sufficient square footage.

COVID-19 has also exposed and exacerbated food insecurity in households across the country, most common in Black and Latino households. Already vulnerable populations, losing employment will make them even more vulnerable to food insecurity. Young et al. (2020) write in *Contexts Magazine's* online blog,

While privileged Americans close themselves inside their homes and order their food to be delivered, low-income communities and communities of color are staying at work or losing their jobs. These frontline food workers are being asked to unequally shoulder the risk of COVID-19 now and will undoubtedly shoulder a larger burden of economic and food insecurity in its aftermath.

An example of the connection between race and COVID19 is the presence of the virus in U.S. prisons. In California's Santa Barbara County, on the Central Coast, for example, the vast majority of COVID19 cases occurred in the local prison where conditions are unsanitary and crowded. Black men bear the brunt of incarceration at a much higher rate than white men and thus are more likely to contract COVID19 (PEW 2019). Overall, vast inequalities in poverty and racism lead to living in racially segregated neighborhoods with unsafe living conditions, lack of access to healthcare or health insurance, and food insecurity, all constructing a situation that leaves racial minorities more vulnerable to the virus.

### ***BLM, George Floyd, and Police Violence***

Police violence and the killing of Black people is a centuries-old phenomenon in the United States that is also a public health issue (Alexander 2010; Fanon 1967). Throughout

the past hundred years there have been efforts by activists and reformers to combat structural racism and grant rights to Black people (Robnett 2000). However, Black people still face the dangers of being killed by state authorities on a daily basis. The Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement began in 2013 by three Black Women in response to the killing of Trayvon Martin, a Black teen walking home from a convenience store, and the subsequent investigation of his death. Since Martin's death and following the acquittal of his white murderer, countless other deaths of Black people have occurred due to police violence. The Black Lives Matter Movement gained momentum over the years but the murder of George Floyd on May 25, 2020 by police and video circulated of it resulted in an explosion of protests and outcry across the world, demanding tangible structural change to both the police and criminal justice system in this country. On the internet, specifically social media, white influencers (and users in general) wrote posts saying that they were going to educate themselves on racial issues in the United States, no longer remaining ignorant. It was common to see both advice on how to address the issues structurally and how to deal with it, specifically as a white individual. This article examines the advice of popular food blog influencers on Instagram from a self-help perspective.

In this chapter I address these research questions: What are the responses of popular healthy food bloggers to COVID-19, George Floyd's murder, and the BLM social movement? How are these responses to two separate social crises connected and what do the bloggers' responses reveal about individualized self-help narratives in today's society?

## **Data and Methods**

For this chapter I examine a sample of 52 popular healthy food blogs and their corresponding Instagram accounts. Almost all blogs in my sample are run by white, middle-class women between the ages of 20 and 50. I used qualitative content analysis to analyze blog posts and Instagram posts written since the onset of COVID-19. I use March 13 (the day President Trump declared a national emergency of COVID-19) as the starting date. Any post since March 13 that mentioned coronavirus, George Floyd, or BLM was flagged. These posts - including photo and caption were coded and analyzed in MAXQDA qualitative data analysis software.

### **Findings and Analysis**

I find that bloggers tend to depoliticize COVID-19 and BLM as structural public health issues by focusing on individual behavioral change. I also find that the responses reflect current societal pressures towards traditional gender roles. These responses reveal the complex relationship of the bloggers to privilege and oppression as white women during COVID-19. Simultaneously, the messages on the blogs and Instagram accounts demonstrate how the rise of self-help models and literature reflects a general U.S. ideology orient toward individualism and a failure to see structural roots of racism and racial inequality.

#### *Privilege and Oppression in the 2020 Pandemic*

Three themes emerged from the Instagram posts on how to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. First is the advice to deal with the stress of the pandemic through practicing gratitude. Although gratitude lists by themselves are not a classed or raced phenomena, in the context of the food blogs, I show how the gratitude lists of the bloggers presume the privileges of having enough (healthy) food to eat, living in a space that allows social



distancing, access to outdoor spaces, and ability to be with family. The second theme is the ability to work from home during this time. And the third is the capacity to focus on improving immunity. Each of the three themes expose both the evident privilege of the bloggers as well as how women today continue to bear the burden of responsibility for the health of their families while being expected to contribute financially to the household. As modern models of self-help, messages on blogs advocate for individual level solutions to the problems posed by COVID-19 and thus expose the ways in which these solutions reinforce traditional gender roles. These themes demonstrate how bloggers approach COVID19 from a narrative of individualized or family-based self-help solutions, depoliticizing social and political issues.

### *Stress and Gratitude*

Instagram posts by healthy food bloggers reveal attempts at controlling their lives during an unprecedented and uncontrollable environment. When a global pandemic has taken hold and still so much is unknown about the virus, individuals are looking for ways to manage stress and anxiety through their individual actions. The food bloggers in this sample reveal how a political and social issue is transformed into an individual and private problem through administered self-help advice.

One way of accomplishing individual control is through the kitchen and consumption. As the next section demonstrates, the practice of gratitude is another way of dealing during these stressful times. A modern trend seen in dozens of self-help books from the last 15 years is gratitude. In these books, gratitude is thought to be so important because research shows that it can lead to living a happier and healthier life (Emmons and

Mccullough 2004). This self-help trend has made its way into the posts of popular healthy food bloggers, influencing how they discuss the current global pandemic:

Covid and quarantine brought more anxiety than I could have ever imagined to my life (and being one to already suffer from anxiety it only made it so much worse). However, it is in moments like this that I pause and give thanks for relationships and bonds that have been strengthened because of it. My friend told me when it comes to Covid she has resorted to playing the “glad game” from Pollyanna. She said it helps to reduce her stress and anxiety. Well, color me “glad” for these tiny moments. They do this momma heart good!

Another blogger, *Coconuts and Kettlebells* says,

There is no right or wrong way to feel right now—your emotions are valid! We all cope with stress differently. Unfortunately, stress can negatively impact our health. So while it's easy to feel fear and anxiety, I want to encourage you to choose gratitude and hope.

*Coconuts and Kettlebells*, a popular healthy food blogger acknowledges that our current times are stressful. She also explicitly connects stress to health, saying that stress negatively affects health. As a solution to this stress and anxiety, so as to not negatively impact health, the blogger recommends that her audience embrace gratitude and hope. Her solution to feeling stress and anxiety due to the pandemic targets individual behavior change. The following quote from *Clean Food Dirty City* provides a specific list of things she is grateful for:

We're all processing in different ways and at different times - the last 24 hours have felt particularly heavy so I'm taking a few minutes to breathe and think about what I'm thankful for: like today's avocado toast, a streaming workout with [@theclass](#) (with a 13 lb weight attached to my ankle the entire time 🤖 😊), some solo beach time to breath in some fresh air, a little solo picnic, and a clean room 🙏❤️ what is helping you feel grateful today? Xo ❤️🙏

This Instagram post highlights the internal movement from feelings of fear, stress, and loss of control to embracing gratitude. *Clean Food Dirty City* also lists what she is grateful for: working out, avocado toast, being outdoors at the beach, a clean house. Her ability to get

outside, live near the beach, have enough food to eat, live alone, are all markers of privilege. Once again, readers are asked to make a list of what they are grateful for as a route to managing coronavirus. Healthy food bloggers reassure their followers that the stress can be solved through gratitude.

One blogger, Meghan Telpner goes beyond stating that gratitude is important, she details the almost magical quality of embracing gratitude:

It's tough to keep on the bright side of life right now as we're inundated with just the opposite in our news and social feeds. That's why today's post on my blog focuses on GRATITUDE. When life feels like a bit of an uphill trudge, that is when the gratitude practice becomes essential.

Practicing gratitude doesn't directly make good things happen in our lives. The practice invites us to witness, pay attention to, and put energy toward the good things that enhance our health, happiness, love, connectedness, and sense of joy. Here's the magical bit- when we direct our focus on the good, we start to notice more good. And then it's like a flood gate opens and we find ourselves seeing more and more goodness and this, ultimately impacts the vibration in which we operate, and also how we see the world.

As per Megahn Telpner's claim, gratitude transforms not only how we see the world but how we go about living our lives on a daily basis. Gratitude is transformational. Self-help literature points readers to solve their problems through individual efforts. A political movement encourages members to unite and demand systematic and institutional change. Healthy food bloggers stand in contrast to the women's alternative health movement of the 1970s or AIDS activists studied by Steven Epstein (1996). For example, AIDS activists in the 1980s and 1990s challenged the scientific and medical establishments of the time, politicizing their movement.

Millions of people have lost their jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic, and this is not necessarily the case for food bloggers who have jobs that can operate from anywhere. However, food bloggers have experienced a decline in income and business like most

industries across the world, revealing the precarity of middle-class status in the United States. In addition to encouraging readers to embrace gratitude to deal with stress, bloggers might have urged followers to call their representatives, demanding a rent strike? Or encourage followers to think critically about how the government is reacting to the pandemic? Tressie McMillan Cottom (2020), a sociologist, wrote an article in July discussing whiteness, class, and COVID19, arguing, “When you are white, there are very few triggers for feeling your whiteness . . . unless you feel your class.” Whiteness is an invisible marker in that it operates as the default in a society that values white skin and systemically oppresses those with darker skin. What McMillan Cottom means in this context is that whiteness intersects with socioeconomic status to create a certain experience for white middle- and upper-class people. However, in the context of massive economic downturn and job loss, a white person may feel more what it is like to not be advantaged by those skin color and class status.

*Eating Bird Food*'s Instagram post also details her gratitude and privilege. She and her husband have jobs that allow them both to work from home and remain at home with their baby. She has a home to enjoy time with her family and is able to pay for grocery delivery service to avoid virus exposure at a store. However, *Eating Bird Food*'s post hints at an underlying tension common among the posts - the interplay between privilege and oppression.

Most days I think we both feel behind and a little stressed, but we're grateful that we have jobs allowing us to work from home during this time (I know many people don't), appreciative of everyone out there on the front lines and thankful to those helping us directly -- from our work teams, to grocery delivery services and friends who've dropped off toilet paper. (We're taking extra precautions given [baby] Olivia's immune system and avoiding all in-store shopping.) Through everything I'm over here trying to stay positive, share content that is helpful or things that will make you smile... like photos of Olivia or Isaac being funny. Also

realizing that this is a season of life to slow down with work a bit and take advantage of the fact that being quarantined is giving us lots of family time.

Individual level solutions aimed at managing stress through gratitude expose the ways in which these solutions reinforce traditional gender roles. The solutions also reveal how these white women food bloggers are simultaneously experiencing privilege and traditional gender pressure. Brittany from Eating Bird Food mentions trying to “stay positive,” “slow down with work,” and enjoy family time.

Women are expected to take care of their families mentally, physically, and nutritionally. A modern woman is defined by her ability to marry and raise a healthy family while pursuing a fulfilling career. She is expected to be thin and middle class and college educated. She is also supposed to discipline herself and her body, while leading a balanced lifestyle that includes indulgence and consumption. As Cairns and Johnston (2015) so aptly write, “In contemporary North American food culture, the ‘ideal woman’ must balance a complex constellation of factors. She should know what foods make her fat, but also avoid the appearance of ‘dieting’” (153-154). And she must feed her family healthy foods, as women typically bear the responsibility for feeding their families. It is not only important for women to put food on the table for their families, but for that food to be healthy (Cairns and Johnston 2015). Feeding a family healthy food is not only a gendered obligation but a moral responsibility. Food choices have come to be moral choices through the dictates of ideology surrounding health since the 1980s (Crawford 1980, 2006). To be a “good” citizen and a “good” individual, it is important for people to choose health through healthy eating and corporeal discipline (Crawford 2006).

Healthy food is also coded as “white.” Cairns and Johnston (2015) explain how food preferences enforce boundaries between racial groups, “The logic of health as personal

responsibility reaffirms the boundary work of white middle-class able to adopt “healthy lifestyle” practices, working to distance themselves from unhealthy Others, and often serving to justify their own privilege” (Cairns and Johnston 2015).

The following quotes demonstrate a return to traditional gender roles as a result of COVID-19, particularly as a way of dealing with stress during this time. While bloggers are grateful for the ability to enjoy family time, the following quotes expose how they also face gendered oppression involving traditional gender roles.

*Nourished Kitchen* discusses returning to the kitchen as a practice that helps her when she is stressed,

In times of stress, I return to the kitchen. It's my therapy. It's pleasure and purpose all wrapped up together. Cooking clears my mind and brings me a sense of deep peace. I also believe that how you feel when you cook weaves itself into the energetic fabric of your meals. That is, a meal made with love brings love. Nourishing my family is simply another way of loving them.

The quotes from the blogs about the privilege to stay home and feed their families reflect the above themes and also touch upon how the kitchen can be viewed as a liberatory space for women (Presswood 2020). As an example, Alane Presswood finds, “As unified communities of support, food blogs provide clear benefits in times of struggle . . . Food and domestic pursuits can also serve as valuable forms of escapism, especially in times of economic and political distress” (134).

*Cotter Crunch* reflects on something similar to *Nourished Kitchen*,

I keep wondering. What if this “new normal” is really about bringing back the old normal, aka tradition, like Sunday Supper around the table. 😊 If you’re like me (us), we used to be too busy to sit and eat together. And now, it’s nice to have something to look forward to. We are home, together! 🍷 Let’s bring back Sunday Supper around the dinner table! Here’s a recipe for a healthy & comforting Sunday dinner that doesn’t have you cooking all day. [#instantpot](#) to the rescue! 🙏

*Cotter Crunch* provides an easy recipe for followers to make, encouraging them to eat family meals together at home. She also mentions using an “instant pot,” a cooking appliance similar to a pressure cooker that cooks a variety of foods and meals quicker than traditional stove and pot cooking. Readers are given the message of the importance of eating together as a family, along with a practical tool to buy to make this a reality. The mention of the instant pot is significant not only as a way of advertising through an Instagram post (a common practice for food bloggers), but also because it is a way to spend less time in the kitchen. Pressures faced by women today include being a dual or single income earner while cooking and feeding their families healthy foods. Any device or method of reducing time spent in the kitchen, is less overall time a woman spends attending to the needs of others. In this way, modern cooking devices, like the dishwasher or washing machine, can cut back on time women spend working.


Across the Instagram posts, food bloggers made statements about the power of making and preparing nourishing foods, especially as ways of feeding their families. For example, Madeline Shaw writes,

We are living through a really unsettling time but if there is one thing we could all do to look after our health it's to nourish ourselves with nutritious and delicious food.

And *101 Cookbooks* says,

I believe in the healing power of home cooking, and my hope is that this will bring some fresh insight, inspiration and balance into your homes at an increasingly tumultuous time.

*Clean Food, Dirty City* draws connections between self-care, comfort, cooking, and nourishment,

COMFORT IN COOKING  As we temporarily shut down all operations of [@clean.market](#) and [@nutridrip](#) this week, there has been pain, heartbreak and hope and I'm even more grateful for my connection with my kitchen and the self-care I

find in cooking. ♡ I hope you are able to find some comfort and nourishment in home cooked meals right now, while life is anything but business as usual. I'll continue to post some favorites over the next weeks. Please stay inside and stay safe!

Cooking and the space of kitchen serve dual purposes for these food bloggers: they are a way of dealing with stress and a way of embracing traditional femininity. Along with embracing traditional femininity is the strain of working what Hochschild (1989) termed “the second shift.” Not only are women expected to go to work and contribute financially to their household, but they also are responsible for the production of food and their family’s health as well as the overall maintenance of the home. Finding pleasure in a return to the domestic sphere is evident from these quotes, and in this way, food bloggers reclaim traditional femininity. Another way the duality of privilege and oppression emerge is through the food bloggers’ Instagram posts about working from home.

### *Working From Home*

Working from home is a privilege afforded to employees who are not considered essential workers and not employed by the service industry, which are those with stable middle to upper wage incomes. In a recent collection of articles in the sociology journal, *Contexts* magazine, Pangobrn and Rea (2020) acknowledge this differential: “Telework and social distancing are privileges that evade low-wage workers, many of whom are Black Americans and Latinos. Both groups are overrepresented among grocery workers, restaurant workers, cleaners, and transit drivers.” Those who cannot easily work from home while remaining employed are low wage workers now deemed “essential” or as Nicole Pangborn (2020) writes, “store clerks, sanitation workers, bus drivers, and healthcare workers have found themselves among those on the front lines of a pandemic.” Not only are essential



workers low wage workers, they are also overwhelmingly women, women of color, and men of color.”

Blogging is a flexible job that can be done from any location with access to the internet, thus blurring the lines between the public and private spheres. It is also a solution to many of the problems faced by the women today - that of contributing financially and meeting the supermom expectation. It is a job that is flexible in location and schedule. Women wield their personal experiences as moms and family caretakers as essential parts of their blogs, allowing women to be simultaneously part of the public and private spheres (McGee 2005)

Working from home . . . sounds great in theory, but it certainly comes with its own challenges. I know many of you have recently transitioned to working from home in the past week or so and I’m sure a lot of you are craving your normal work routine. 🗍 As someone who’s been working from home for quite awhile now, I wanted to share 10 of my best tips for working from home and staying healthy and productive.

Some of these tips for working from home include creating a designated workspace or office, sticking to a schedule, getting dressed in the morning, taking a break to get outside, eating lunch away from the computer. Madeline Shaw shares similar tips on her Instagram,

As someone who has spent most of my career working from home I like to think I’m a seasoned pro. For years people always told me how lucky I was to work from home and for many of us this is a new (temporary) reality so I thought I’d share my top tips for making working from home work:

1. Tidy Space, Tidy Mind: If you are going to be spending a lot more time at home it's important to make your home environment as comfortable and pleasant to be in as possible
2. Break up your day with exercise – You’ve saved 45 minutes on your commute so why not invest that 45 minutes back into yourself. Exercise is proven to help productivity and the flexibility of wfh means you can take an exercise break at any point in the day. I usually love doing a half an hour yoga flow followed by a 15-minute meditation before lunch. I have loads of yoga and meditations for free over on my YouTube
3. Set goals for the day - One of the best things about working from home is that you don’t have to work to anyone else’s time. I like to create a to do list at the beginning

of the day and finish my day once I've finished my tasks. I work most effectively in the morning so early starts and early finishes are best for me.

4. Prepare Your Meals in Advance - I work in my kitchen which means procrastibaking is always tempting, prepping my meals and snacks in advance using dinner leftovers means I stay focused and nourished.

In these posts, the bloggers often state that they have years of experience working from home and although it is an idealized work environment, working from home presents its own set of unique challenges, especially if children are around.

I've been working from home on and off for 10 years now, and while I certainly don't have this whole working from home thing all figured out (especially with a toddler in the mix), I do know that going from working in an office full time to suddenly strolling over to the computer in your pajamas every day is a BIG change. And that big change can throw a lot of our eating routines out the window. If you are struggling with finding a food routine that works for you right now, I hope today's blog post (link below or in profile) on intuitive eating while working from home – or while chasing kids around at home – will be helpful.

*Fannetastic Food* mentions that the large shift to working from home because of COVID-19 can disrupt our established routines, especially when it comes to food and eating. Madeline Shaw also discusses this above, telling followers to prep their food and meals in advance. A prominent concern in these Instagram posts is how to manage eating while working from home. It goes unacknowledged that working from home places additional pressures on women, particularly as children are increasingly also remaining at home during the school day.

Blogging has provided women opportunities to make money in an acceptably gendered way. Women are an essential part of the paid workforce. Although some women have made their way into fortune 500 companies and worked their way up to positions as vice presidents or CEOs, most jobs are still segregated by gender. Women are still not afforded the same opportunities as men in today's world. The cultural ideology surrounding

women and work continues to limit women's opportunities, binding them to expectations of modern femininity.

### *Improving Immunity*

The contemporary wellness industry requires capital to purchase organic food, fair trade yoga pants, pilates classes, collagen protein powder, or immune boosting supplements. Moreover, those who can afford and are interested in these luxuries are white middle- and upper-class people, mainly women. This privilege is reflected in the Instagram feeds of popular healthy food bloggers with educational and professional degrees in nutrition and holistic wellness. The directives these "experts" give to the public for how to stay healthy during a pandemic largely include the consumption of foods and practices that cost both money and time.

For example, *Deliciously Organic*, a Nutritional Therapy Practitioner, gives tips on her Instagram for how to maintain health and immunity during these times, "drink bone broth, hydration, sunshine and fresh air, eat fermented foods, cook with butter and coconut oil, sleep 8 to 9 hours, Epsom bath salts." Embedded within these instructions are assumptions about privilege. Bone broth can be homemade or purchased, the former takes time to prepare and the latter money to buy. Getting outside to enjoy sunshine and fresh air is also a privilege often taken for granted. Many people do not live in places with accessible green space or communities with healthy air quality or the time to even go outside away from their jobs. Eating fermented foods requires knowledge of what foods can and are fermented. The last two instructions - sleeping 8 to 9 hours and taking Epsom salt baths arguably require the most time, access to a bath, and a comfortable, relaxing safe place to

sleep. A simple instruction to sleep 8 to 9 hours, when pulled apart, reveals the pieces that factor into the privilege of a good night's rest.

Other directives given by bloggers include what kind of nutrients, vitamins, and minerals one should be consuming. Health coach, *Eating Bird Food*, discusses the benefits of apple cider vinegar elixirs,

Say hello to your new best friend... apple cider vinegar! 🙋 If you didn't already know, ACV has a ton of proven health benefits and helps boost the immune system (which I know we're all trying to do right now). 🙋 I'll be the first one to say that apple cider vinegar tastes pretty awful on its own, but these #acv elixirs are a game-changer because they actually taste delicious! They're also loaded with other immune-boosting ingredients like lime, honey, cayenne, ginger and cinnamon. 🙋 I've got four flavors that are sooo easy to make at home and taste just like the store-bought @bragglivefoodproducts drinks.

On her blog, *Eating Bird Food* goes deeper into the benefits of drinking apple cider vinegar which she learned about from reading a book by a woman named Tosca Reno, a weight loss book author. *Eating Bird Food* also claims that recent scientific studies have shown that apple cider vinegar can remove toxins from the body, increase fat loss, and reduce cancer cells. However, she provides no references or links to studies, a common practice for food bloggers. She also says that it helps her stay full and less hungry if she drinks her apple cider vinegar elixir every morning. The use of apple cider vinegar is a co-optation of Black people's home remedies. Black people have used common household items like apple cider vinegar for decades to address a variety of health and beauty issues particularly due to lack of historical access to quality health and medical care (Quandt et al. 2015) and this goes unacknowledged in *Eating Bird Food*'s posts.

Another set of bloggers, two women, Micki and Angie, who run *Autoimmune Wellness* discuss how to use food and cooking as a way to boost immunity. Mick is a

certified Nutritional Therapy Practitioner and Angie is a holistic health coach who advise people with autoimmune diseases.

Now's the perfect time to be looking to food as a source of immune-boosting nutrients. This dish is packed with virus fighting nutrients and is a tasty option to have on hand. The smokey parsley, tartness of the lemon, spicy bite of the onion, and fresh hint of mint all combined together makes for an explosion of fresh flavors in your mouth.

*Ascension Kitchen*, a naturopath, medical herbalist, and nutritionist and wellness coach advises her followers to consume green tea and probiotics:

**Probiotics** - Loving this simple immune tip - consume a small amount of probiotic-rich foods daily. Regular consumption has been found to reduce the risk of developing an upper respiratory tract infection. So easy to do - a spoon of kraut, a cup of miso soup, a shot-glass sized serving of kefir... plenty of ideas on my blog - search for a post called 'top fermented foods for gut health'.

**Green tea** - drink and gargle with green tea daily ☺ Epidemiological studies have long-found an association between regular consumption and gargling of green tea with decreased risk of influenza and common cold infection rates

*Healthy with Nedi*, health coach certified through the Institute for Integrative Nutrition,

This recipe is now up on my website and ideal during this time as it has incredible immune boosting properties. Thyme is packed with vitamin C and is a good source of vitamin A. If you feel a cold coming on, thyme can help get you back in good health. Thyme has been used to treat respiratory illnesses such as bronchitis and coughs. I added shiitake mushrooms into the mix as they contain beta-glucans that boost the #immunesystem. Using the combination of garlic, onion and mushrooms will boost the immune system and fight #inflammation

Meghan Telpner, a nutritionist, also discusses the connection between inflammation, immunity, and COVID-19, urging followers to reduce inflammation in their bodies, a popular idea in current health and wellness popularized by Dr. Andrew Weil<sup>10</sup>. An anti-

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<sup>10</sup> Dr. Andrew Weil is an integrative medical doctor in the United States. He founded the Program of Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona.

inflammatory diet is supposed to decrease risk of Alzheimer's, heart disease, and cancer by reducing inflammation in the body.

Reducing inflammation is critical for optimal health. Everyone is joking/not joking about bingeing on the carbs and sugary snacks and boozing it up to cope with the stress of it all. That coping option can work for a day -- maybe a week, right? If only that was as long as this is going to last. We know it's going on much longer so what are we going to do? At a time when we need our resilience up, we're kicking it to the curb. Now, I definitely don't want to increase anyone's stress but it's important to look at the big picture of what's happening. Very simply put, the virus causes a massive immune response which can trigger the inflammation in the lungs- the most dangerous potential result of the virus. If we are actively promoting inflammation through our diet and lifestyle habits, we are reducing our resilience, or ability to actively prevent and/or overcome the virus.

Meghan Telpner directly links the consumption of sugar, carbs, and alcohol to inflammation to “the dangerous potential of the virus.” The embedded assumption within her statement is that those who eat or drink these kinds of foods and beverages are most at risk for contracting COVID-19. *My New Roots*, a Certified Nutritional Practitioner tries to look on the bright side in her Instagram post:

There is so much to do to feel better though - it often starts in the kitchen. Today I'm making my Adaptogenic Date Shake to keep my stress levels in check, and emotions as stable as possible. It's a creamy, not-to-sweet blend of dates and coconut with vanilla, warming spices, and herbs to support you right now: ashwaganda, maca, he shou wu and licorice root. If you haven't tried it before, NOW is the perfect time. Remember: food is medicine and we have many plant allies on our side.

The above quotes highlight specific foods and products that supposedly improve immunity that also require time and money to buy and prepare. Only one blogger in the sample, *Eleat Nutrition* mentions that there is no scientific evidence to suggest that foods have the power to halt COVID-19,

Because I'm going to go ahead and assume at least 75% of you have seen an infographic (or several) this past week on 'boosting' your immune system. I've been sent quite a few cringe-worthy posts already. As powerful and amazing as whole foods are, we have zero evidence that any single food or supplement will cure or

prevent COVID-19. Also . . . you really should be eating these foods daily, not just when we're experiencing a pandemic.

Yet, during this unprecedented time, healthy food bloggers continue to post about the immune boosting properties of apple cider vinegar, ashwagandha, lemon, mint, and honey, and the immune crushing properties of refined sugar and alcohol. What is the significance of this nutritional advice? First, as *Eleat Nutrition* pointed out, there is no scientific evidence showing that certain foods can improve immunity to COVID-19. Second, this nutrition advice given by healthy food bloggers reveals both the privilege of access to time and money to engage in these health practices and the implicit belief that those who do not follow these health practices are unhealthy and at risk for COVID-19 as well as the co-opting of traditional people of color remedies for profit.

I continue this discussion in the following sections to connect the Black Lives Matter movement to the pandemic, showing the ways institutional racism is embedded in both. Through my analysis of the Instagram feeds of popular healthy food bloggers, the privilege claimed by these women is evident, but so is their disadvantage as women working multiple shifts (Hochschild 1989). Their ability to work from home, to focus on eating in a way to improve their immunity, and to deal with stress through a gratitude practice reveal inequality in the United States during the pandemic. Furthermore, these privileges and access to valuable resources lead to a depoliticization of the pandemic and a reinforcement of traditional gender roles.

### *Bloggers' responses to Black Lives Matter*

George Floyd, a Black man from Minneapolis, Minnesota was murdered by a police officer kneeling on his neck on May 25, 2020. A video of this event sparked worldwide

Black Lives Matter protests. Although Black Lives Matter protests have taken place since the birth of the movement in 2013, Floyd's murder exploded the movement, spreading like wildfire across social media. White social media influencers were called upon by activists to mute their feeds beginning the week of June 1, 2020 to create space for Black voices to take center stage. Implicit within this action was the request for influencers to acknowledge their own white privilege. Food bloggers put a pause on posting about COVID-19 to acknowledge a structural problem that has existed for hundreds of years in the United States. The responses of bloggers to George Floyd's death and BLM protests mirror many of the individualized self-help approaches taken in response to COVID-19. However, in contrast to their posts on COVID-19, they are more likely to acknowledge their privilege as white influencers.

*Muting the Instagram Feed, Silence, and Acknowledging Privilege*

June 1, across social media, white people posted black boxes on their Instagram accounts, stating that they would not post on their accounts for a week in solidarity with Black Lives Matter and placing Black voices center stage. As influencers with thousands to millions of followers, healthy food bloggers followed suit. Across the food blogs in my sample, almost every account posted something similar to the following quotes:

From June 1-7 I will not be posting any of my own content and will instead be sharing the voices, experiences, and work of Black activists, creators, educators, body liberation and food justice therapists, dietitians coaches, and more for the #AmplifyMelanatedVoices Challenge from @blackandembodied and @jessicawilson.msrd

It was very common to see posts addressing feelings of uncertainty with how to go about responding to the situation as a white female influencer:



It's taken me a few days to put my feelings about everything that's happening into words.

But my silence is part of the problem. Not standing up is the problem. Not supporting each other is the problem. Not speaking out against injustice is the problem. Our system is the problem. Our society is the problem. Our lack of education is the problem. Our lack of respect for people's lives is the problem. Violence is the problem. And the list goes on... It's our jobs, as human beings, to help find the solution. And I want to use this platform as a way to inspire others to stand up.

Will this be fixed overnight? No. Will be it hard to fix? Yes. But I believe it CAN BE BETTER. It CAN be solved. It's going to take more than me acknowledging my privilege. Or sharing a quote about injustice on my feed. Or saying Black Lives Matter. Sure that helps show my support, but that's not changing anything. ACTION is what will start to change things.

Here are a few things you can do: - CONTACT your local, state and federally elected officials. - TALK to your children about what's happening. - DONATE to organizations who are helping if you have the means. - EDUCATE yourself. - SPEAK UP when you see injustice happening in your community.

Above, *Simply Quinoa* gives actual advice on what to do about the ongoing police killings of Black people in the United States. She tells readers that they can contact government officials, donate to organizations, read and educate themselves, and speak up. *Simply Quinoa's* advice to readers is both structural and individual advice, placing her role as an individual in a larger structural context. Her requests to contact officials and donate are arguably structural changes readers can make, a departure from individualized advice given regarding COVID-19. However, no specific social policy changes are suggested. Multiple bloggers also address "silence,"

I haven't talked about race or the horrific injustices caused by it, because it has intimidated me to the point of silence. I don't want to say the wrong thing, accidentally offend anyone, or "mess up". But I realize now that my being silent is a huge part of this systemic problem, and I recognize that I need to do better.

*Eating Bird Food* acknowledges her silence and says that she wants to be a better ally to the Black community and put in the work,

Over the last few days I've shared several posts on IG stories to express how heartbroken I am over George Floyd's death and the fact that this sort of inequality is still present today. I hadn't posted anything to my feed because to be honest I didn't know what I could say that would help and I was scared my words wouldn't be eloquent enough. Stories go away in 24 hours, but racism and the work that needs to be done will not. As a white woman I know I've benefited from #whiteprivilege (probably more times than I realize). I also know that I can be a better ally to the black community. I'm disappointed in myself that it's taken me this long to realize it. I have been educating myself on what I can do that will actually make a difference and I encourage you to do the same. Sharing posts on social media is one thing, but actually putting in the work to do better is another.

Although *Eating Bird Food's* words appear to be sincere, she does not give meaningful directives on how to go about being a better ally or put the work in. This is similar across Instagram feeds of healthy food bloggers. Few bloggers answer the question of how to actually go about creating structural change in relation to racism. Bloggers do not make claims to be activists or attempt structural change, however, I argue that because of their influence on thousands of readers, their messages reinforce and reflect broader understandings of racial relations in the United States. The following quote from *Cotter Crunch* addresses silence, injustice, and God:

When we remain silent in the face of injustice, we loudly slap the face of God, because the person being abused is the face of God.”  
I don't have a personal account, but sometimes business needs to get personal. I don't have the words to express my heart, but sometimes hearing someone else's words is exactly what's in your heart. ♡

She points out a division between the personal and professional, stating that she is introducing the personal into her business account. This personal/professional divide points to how influencers are encouraged to keep their political and social beliefs away from business. George Floyd's death and the desire to pull the personal into the professional

reflect the classic adage, “The personal is political.” This statement is often associated with the women’s liberation movement of the 1970s and Carol Hanisch’s essay titled “The Personal is Political” (1969). Understanding how personal lives are informed by the political and vice versa is one way of approaching issues of structural inequality.

Bloggers like *Nutrition Stripped* encourage readers to “do the work”, especially as healthcare providers,

Showing up to injustice starts with our own work. It’s about taking action in unlearning, learning, reading, journaling, donating, having these conversations with family and friends, supporting teachers and black voices, and doing the work internally. I will listen, learn, and do my part as a human being and a healthcare provider to stand with and support the black community.

Bloggers, *Cotter Crunch* and *Coconuts and Kettlebells* appealed to their religion, using quotes about God and from the bible as proof that our society in general and Christians specifically need to fight against racial injustice:

I grew up in a multilingual, multicultural non-denominational church. As a child, I didn’t see racism. I saw inclusion and community. I assumed racism was in the past. It is not. And right now, being “non racist” is not good enough. In other words, the passive rejection of racism isn’t acceptable. As white people, and especially for 104hristians, we need to stand up and be anti-racist. We need to stand in unity, and stand for righteousness. And so, I ask myself: What have I done to prevent injustice that Black men and women are facing? What have we done to educate families—our children—about racism and how to stand against it? How do we, as Jesus has called us, “love each other in the same way I have loved you.” (John 15:12). Love isn’t simply a compelling emotion or warm feeling; it is an attitude that reveals itself in action. Let’s not just stand up. Let’s step in by helping when it’s not convenient, by giving when it hurts, by devoting energy to others’ welfare rather than our own, and by leading with compassion rather than judgement and shaming.

*Coconuts and Kettlebells* writes that it is necessary to be anti-racist. She points to education and love through action as the answers to being an anti-racist.

After the week of muting their social feeds, most healthy food bloggers returned to business as usual instead of continuing a discussion about race in the United States,

particularly as race relates to health. A few of the bloggers posted profiles of Black influencers or wrote one or two more posts about racial injustice in the United States, but most continued to post photos of tofu bowls and green smoothies. Because health is central to race, it would be highly beneficial for influencers to use their platform as a way of discussing how these issues are interconnected.

In the following section I summarize my findings and consider what it would look like to “put in the work” or “do the work” of addressing racism as it relates to food, health, and COVID-19.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

COVID-19 and BLM are interconnected social issues, in which race and class figure prominently. However, healthy food bloggers do not present these issues as related and rarely acknowledge their structural dimensions. Access to good health in the United States and Western world is highly stratified by race and class. Healthy food bloggers dedicate their lives and careers to the discussion of living a healthy lifestyle with no acknowledgement of the influence of race or socioeconomic class on access to healthy lifestyles. But, with BLM infiltrating the minds and feeds of healthy food bloggers, a dialogue about health and race is essential, including both COVID-19 and the killing of Black people as racialized public health crises.

Sociological and medical research demonstrate the connection between racism, stress and decreased health (Thoits 2010; Williams 2012). Dating back to the research of sociologist W.E.B. Dubois (1899), there is evidence demonstrating racial health disparities, and these continue. For example, 2007 mortality data show the death rate for Black people

was 30% higher than for white people. Poverty and socioeconomic class account for some of these health disparities but as Williams (2012) says, “Race and SES combine in complex ways to affect health. Race is a social status category that was created by larger societal processes and institutions, including institutional and individual dimensions of racism. SES is not thus just a confounder of the relationship between race and health but part of the causal pathway that links race to health” (283). Williams and others demonstrate that race is an added burden to health in addition to socioeconomic status.

COVID-19 is stressful for everyone, but the pandemic has revealed specific vulnerabilities now felt by white people that are not new for many populations of color. As Tressie McMillan Cottom wrote in a recent *Medium* article, “If you are a minoritized minority – Black, Latino, Asian – you have a million opportunities to learn who you think you are is not what the world thinks you are. Right now, millions of white people are feeling their class position. Without consumption to perform their class aspiration, those white people are spinning out.” In other words, the loss of control over class and consumption is not a novel phenomenon for minorities, but it is for white people. Some white people are feeling extreme stress with this loss of control. White healthy food bloggers encourage their followers to embrace gratitude and do not discuss lobbying their government for social welfare assistance or other more substantial institutional and structural change. An individual solution targets an individual’s behavior in their immediate day to day lives and interactions. Movements related to self-help bypass social and political issues, opting for individual solutions that center the self and obscure structural forces.

Healthy food bloggers’ posts related to COVID-19 and BLM center the domestic experiences of white, middle-class women. A consequence of this is the prioritizing of

privileged identities, or as Presswood (2020) writes, “Discourses of domesticity act to enable and prioritize privileged identities, particularly those of white, heterosexual, financially secure women, at the expense of the voices of women of color, immigrant women, and/or queer women” (137). Domesticity, comprised in the ability for healthy food bloggers to work from home, improve their immunity, and practice gratitude are part and parcel to being an exemplary modern woman. This is because domesticity reifies ideas about what a woman should act, look, and be like.

Responses to COVID-19 and BLM are interconnected issues, united through health inequalities and institutional racism. The bloggers’ responses to the two crises reveal how structural racism remains masked through the targeting of individual level solutions such as love and acknowledging privilege. While the posts from bloggers seem sincere in wanting to create change, their messages reflect the larger landscape of understanding related to racism in the United States. Societal messages related to the killing of black people and racism overwhelmingly focus on individual responsibility and action – whether that be of individual police officers, individual black people, or individual influencers, and fail to place these individuals within a larger structural and historical context related to race in the United States. Additionally, when discussing COVID-19 on their Instagram feeds, there is no discussion about the racialized nature of the pandemic nor about how health is stratified by race, class, and gender, and no partisan political connections are drawn. Instead, health advice related to improving immunity is doled out, along with advice to embrace gratitude. The approach to COVID-19 is explicitly individualized. What would it look like for health and wellness food bloggers to view COVID-19 and BLM as issues that intersect, both require structural solutions, and reflect that in their content?

Overall, a public discussion is needed that considers the connection among health, food, racial disparities, and COVID-19. Viewing these issues as separate and presenting them as such on social media will not lead to a critical engagement with racial inequity in the United States. If food bloggers are up for the challenge of dealing with racial inequality head on, as they claim to be, their actions moving forward need to connect the dots. In the final following chapter, I expand upon actions that I believe can be taken to address structural racism and health inequalities in the food blogging world.

## **Chapter 5**

### *Discussion, Implications, and Conclusion*

Throughout this dissertation, I have shown how popular healthy food blogs are potentially powerful digital outlets for discussions about diet, food, and lifestyle. The primary findings from my analysis of these blogs reveal how messages on the food blogs combine American ideologies of individualism and healthism to produce narratives with the ultimate message of life as a work of health. Specifically, the bloggers and messages I analyzed focus on individual solutions to food and health related problems through three major narratives: 1) thinness and healthy eating are individual choices, 2) chronic disease and poor health are individual problems addressed by healthy eating, and 3) happiness is a result of a thin, fit body. Along with other scholars and critics of self-help, I argue that the sole focus on individual choices, agency, and health distracts from structural inequalities and does not consider differential capacities for individual action in a larger social context. Healthy food bloggers in my sample implicitly link morality, happiness, and healthfulness to thin bodies, perpetuating the notion that one's highest purpose in life is to be healthy and that health is the product of virtuous individual choices, in other words, that life is a work of health. Whether targeting people with chronic illness or weight loss goals, the underlying message is the same: happiness is only achievable through healthfulness, and individual behavioral change. The indirect discourse is that you are personally responsible if you cannot change your behavior and become healthy. The result is stigma and blame on individuals for health inequalities.

Below, I summarize the key findings of the dissertation and discuss how they can inform future sociological research on self-help and the sociology of health, the body, and



illness. I also consider what they tell us practically about what it means to be healthy in today's American society.

### **Summary of Findings**

Chapter 2 examines how weight loss food bloggers describe their journeys towards good health and thinner bodies. What cultural frames about weight emerge in these personal weight loss narratives? An important finding concerns how bloggers detail their journeys towards good health. I call these "health journey narratives". My analysis demonstrates a four-step health journey narrative that details a process of weight loss ending in happiness. The process begins with the "aha moment" of realizing how unhappy the blogger is living in their body, second, the acknowledgement of the struggle required to lose weight, third, coming to terms with how weight loss and living healthfully require small daily steps, and finally the finding of happiness through balance and moderation (resulting in thinness). These health narratives reflect how the concept of the "hero's journey" persists and is relevant to health status. The hero's journey fuses with the journey towards good health to demonstrate that improving one's health, lifestyle, and weight are among the most worthwhile pursuits an individual can engage in contemporarily.

Chapter 3 examines how chronic illness food bloggers attempt to cure their illness through diet and lifestyle. I find that two broad narratives proliferate on these blogs. The first is how Western medicine failed to cure the bloggers of their chronic illnesses. The second reflects how the bloggers then turned to altering their diet and lifestyle to cure themselves. These narratives have two important implications. On one hand, the bloggers are empowered through individual agency, control, and community building while on the

other hand, they are disseminating ideas about altering diet and lifestyle that have the potential to reproduce health inequalities by centering the experiences of the white, middle-class food bloggers, bypassing structural approaches to addressing chronic illness, and passing along untested medical advice.

Chapter 5 asks: What are the responses of popular healthy food bloggers to major national and world crises, COVID-19, George Floyd's murder and the BLM social movement? How are these responses connected and what do they reveal about self-help narratives in today's digital world? Results show that the individualized approaches taken by food bloggers, such as focusing on gratitude practices and improving immunity to disease, both reflect their privilege as white, middle-class women and demonstrate continued gendered pressures to work, maintain the household, and raise a healthy family. In this chapter, I argue for a new approach to political and social events which focuses on both individual action and social structural change.

Uniting the three substantive chapters of my dissertation is what I identify as an overwhelming emphasis on individual approaches to health. This is evident in three main narratives that emerged from the blogs I analyzed: thinness and healthy eating are individual choices, chronic disease and poor health are individual problems addressed through healthy eating, and ultimately, happiness is a result of living in a thin, fit body. The following sections delve into these three themes answering the questions of: Why are they empirically problematic? Why are they socially problematic? What do they presume theoretically?

### **Healthy Eating and Thinness as Individual Choices**

Within a broader neoliberal context in the United States, healthy food blogs both reflect and shape the narrative of individual choice related to health (Cairns and Johnston 2015; Cook 2012; Crawford 1980; Lupton 2013; Ayo 2012). Major narratives on healthy food blogs frame healthy eating and thinness as individual choices. Blogs send the message to their audience that it is a matter of choice whether or not you eat and live a healthy lifestyle. If healthy eating is a personal choice that results in living in a smaller body, as detailed by the weight loss food blogs, then thinness is also a matter of individual choice. The assumption is made by healthy food advocates that healthy eating and a healthy lifestyle result in a thin body. This is evident across popular culture, for example, in the TV show “The Biggest Loser”. Contestants volunteer to be put on extreme diets and exercise for hours a day in order to lose as much weight as possible in a few months. Data collected from contestants after the show ends demonstrate that a majority of contestants regain much of the weight they initially lost (Kolata 2016). Similarly, there is a large body of evidence (Hall and Kahan 2018; Franz et al 2007) that dieting is not an effective weight loss strategy and that genetics play a much bigger role in a person’s weight than previously thought. Despite this research, food bloggers reflect common American ideologies related to both individual choice, consumer choice, and dieting.

Although the connection between health and choice is not explicitly drawn out in food blogs, it is implicit. For example, both chronic illness and weight loss blogs instruct readers to change their diet in order to improve health and lose weight or cure chronic illness with statements such as: “Keep in mind that eating healthy doesn’t have to be hard. It’s a complete lifestyle change that can actually be fun if you allow yourself to try new things” (Eat Yourself Skinny). Bloggers tell their readers how easy it is to transform their eating

habits through will power and responsibility and how enjoyable it can be. In relation to COVID-19, the healthy food bloggers in my sample underscore the importance of personal choice in practicing gratitude, which they believe will help with mental health, and in eating a healthful, immune-boosting diet to address physical health during the pandemic. As Meghan Telpner wrote on her Instagram account in a discussion of inflammation and COVID-19, “If we are actively promoting inflammation through our diet and lifestyle habits, we are reducing our resilience, or ability to actively prevent and/or overcome the virus.” She directly links a person’s ability to fight coronavirus to dietary and lifestyle choices that may increase inflammation in the body. The connection between the two healthy eating and choice is ubiquitous across popular healthy food blogs.

The association between eating healthy and thinness is also implicit. Bloggers do not outright declare that eating healthy will make you thin, but the link is evident, particularly in the weight loss food blogs. An example is a blogger who states on their “about page”:

Over the past decade I started using more wholesome, high-quality ingredients in my kitchen and ended up losing around 100 pounds in the process.

The conclusion drawn from this blogger’s story is that it is possible to lose a large amount of weight just by eating wholesome, high-quality ingredients. Another example linking thinness to healthy eating comes from Andie Mitchell:

When I lost weight, I started cooking, remaking the foods I had always loved in lighter, more wholesome ways, and slowly, **I started to feel like I was transitioning from a diet to a *life*. (original emphasis)**

Mitchell states how her weight loss and smaller body size was a result of her cooking in a “lighter” or healthier way. Through losing weight, she declares, she gained a “life”. Losing weight not only made her thinner but it also gave her her life back. This is an example of the significance bloggers attribute to weight loss.

The fusion of the concepts of healthy eating and thinness as individual choices is sociologically problematic from a variety of angles. The notion of individual choice is directly related to the concepts of selfhood and the American bootstraps mythology (Hochschild 1996). From a young age, Americans are taught that hard work from individual action will lead to success. Research on the sociology of the self demonstrates how selfhood is constructed along individualistic lines (Callero 2003). In other words, individuals are instructed by bloggers to create themselves, to see their lives as a project, to work towards a goal of success and ultimately happiness. The ultimate message is - the only thing between success and failure is your determination and hard work. Pairing this idea with healthism - the idea that individuals are responsible for their own health and that bodies are tangible representations of the self (Turner 2008; Shilling 1993), it is clear that individual selves are created in line with appropriate ideas of health.

Foucault's concept of "governmentality" (1991) helps make sense of the frequent messaging about individual choice, dieting, and healthy eating on the food blogs. Governmentality demonstrates how individuals engage in self-surveillance despite explicit or overt coercion. By regulating themselves through diet and lifestyle changes, these bloggers engage in self surveillance while at the same time, surveil the lifestyle practices of outsiders. The assumption that lifestyles are solely dependent upon individual choices leads to blaming certain groups for poor health. This is especially apparent in populations whose bodies do not fit into the mold of what an acceptable body looks like in today's society – white and thin.

Individualized ideologies related to health are socially precarious because many individuals do not have the choice, opportunity, and/or resources to eat in a healthful way. It

is dangerous to spread ideas about how health is solely an individual choice because blame is then placed upon those without access to resources. For example, 39.5 million people, or 12.8% of the U.S. population live in food deserts defined by a lack of access to grocery stores with fresh produce (Casey Foundation 2021). Black and low-income communities are more likely to be located in so-called food deserts, which are defined as neighborhoods where it is difficult for residents to buy or access quality fresh foods (Bower et al. 2014).

Another way that assumptions about healthy eating are dangerous is through the beliefs about what healthy food looks like. Unhealthy food is commonly thought of by the white, middle- class population, as foods associated with or eaten by certain racial and ethnic groups such as fried foods, Southern food, and Mexican food. Determining ethnic food as unhealthy serves a larger purpose. As sociologist and fat studies scholar Abigail Saguy writes, “blaming ‘unhealthy’ culinary practices and beauty ideals among African Americans or Mexican Americans for higher obesity rates among these populations serves to stigmatize these groups” (Saguy 2013, 149). The blame for eating unhealthy foods and living in large bodies by low-income and people of color is placed in contrast to the healthy lifestyle practices of white, middle-class, and thin people. The contributions of people of color also go unacknowledged in healthy food narratives. As Presswood (2020) wrote in her study of food blogs, “to compound the lack of respect for chefs and food writers of color, the cuisines of postcolonial cultures are often used by white authors to increase their own credibility. This is a structural issue as much as an individual one” (138). For example, *Eating Bird Food* encourages readers to drink apple cider vinegar to help with their immunity. What goes unsaid is that apple cider vinegar remedies have been used for decades among African American communities.

The following section sifts through assumptions related to the theory that chronic disease and poor health are individual problems.

### **Chronic Disease and Poor Health as Individual Problems**

Food bloggers take self-help approaches to chronic illness, body size, shape, and social issues, constructing the notions that hard work, determination, and behavior change are the solutions. Another central message is that chronic disease and poor health are individual, not social, problems. Chronic illness food bloggers post and write about how they became healthy and recovered from chronic illness through health narratives similar to those of weight loss food bloggers. For example, chronic illness food bloggers espouse things such as, “Change begins with you as an individual but ultimately shapes your family, shapes your world. I believe that without good health there’s not much else.” This quote tells the reader that change is an individual choice that will lead to good health and not that health is shaped by outside influences.

Chronic illness food bloggers tell readers how they saw Western doctor after doctor, each of whom failed to solve their health problems. This lack of resolution leads chronic illness food bloggers to exercise their agency in becoming their own experts in matters of their health. These bloggers underscore the critical role that eating and living in a healthful way had on curing their chronic illnesses. The blogs are grounded in the lived experience of existing in what is perceived by them as a sick body and underscore the importance in social science research examining how individual agency and social structures and institutions interact to produce a unique experience for people suffering with chronic illness.

Overall, healthy food blogs do not acknowledge health disparities and differing rates of chronic illness stratified by race, class and gender, and do not place health in a structural context. Even wide-scale political and social crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic are framed on popular healthy food blogs as an individually experienced event. Neither COVID-19 nor Black Lives Matter is placed in a broad social context by the food bloggers, which would take into account how each, at the core, are structural health problems, requiring structural and institutional solutions.

At the root of health inequalities and chronic disease are institutional barriers to health. These consist of high poverty rates, racial residential segregation, concentrated food deserts, environmentally polluted neighborhoods, and poor social investment in health infrastructure. By centering their experiences as white middle-class women, the food bloggers ignore the multiplicity of experiences of people with differing levels of inequality.

In the words of Alane Presswood (2020):

Food blogging trends and influencers reveal how domestic discourses in the digital realm selectively lift up privileged voices at the expense of entire subordinated classes of people . . . Without lifting up the voices of women with marginalized identities, domesticity creates a homogenized portrayal of women's experiences, flattening our understanding of women's needs, wants, and contributions to life in and beyond the home (7).

A major social consequence of viewing chronic illness, fatness, and poor health as individual problems is that blame is placed firmly on the shoulders of those with the least access to the resources required for living the prescribed type of healthy lifestyle. Michele Lamont's concept of boundaries is useful for understanding this process of distinction. Boundary work refers to the creation of a symbolic distance between groups of people. Dating back to "sumptuary laws" in the Middle Ages, food has been used as a marker of social distance (Moyer 2011). For example, Robert Aronowitz (2008) discusses how



American's widespread fear of obesity and fatness is a mechanism for maintaining social distance between higher and lower socioeconomic classes. Similarly, Abigail Saguy (2014) applies Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic violence to reveal how blaming certain races and ethnicities for unhealthy cooking and eating practices stigmatizes these groups with the "dominant social group imposing their beliefs and practices as superior to those of dominated classes, it constitutes what French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1984) calls symbolic violence" (149). Although the food bloggers in my sample are not consciously inflicting symbolic violence, the messages they promote do.

For chronic illness food bloggers, living in a "fit" or "healthy" body is crucial to living a happy life. The connection between healthfulness and happiness is the strongest in the chronic illness food blogs. With statements like, "I began by cutting out the foods that I believed were causing me discomfort—> gluten, meat, dairy products, processed sugar and processed foods. I started incorporating more fiber from fruits, vegetables, nuts, seeds and gluten free whole grains. By making these changes to my diet and adjusting my lifestyle I noticed myself feeling more energized, happy and healthy" and "I KNOW, I know in my bones that real food is the key to health, and a healthy, thriving life is the key to happiness" (The Castaway Kitchen). Once again, individual behavioral change related to healthy eating and lifestyle is held up as the path to achieving happiness and healthfulness. This is an attractive route to health and happiness because it puts the individual in control of their own lives instead of reminding them of how little control they may actually have. Additionally, those who are naturally thin or privileged benefit from viewing body size as a choice because, as Samantha Kwan (2009) writes, "When fatness is conflated with bad nutrition,

bad health, and sedentary lifestyles, those who are not fat gain status through the association. Healthism allows bodies to be signs of individual character, and hence, deservingness” (61).

### **Happiness and Morality**

The food blogs I analyzed, represent good health as living in a healthy, thin body. Dozens of researchers have shown the connection thinness, body mass index (BMI), and good health to be weak at best (Gutin 2018; Sobel 1999; Lupton 1999; Saguy 2013; Jutel 2005; Campos 2004). So why do Americans, driven by the medical, weight loss, and dieting institutions, hold so tightly to thinness as an ideal body type and a measure of good health? One answer to this question lies in another theme running throughout my findings: the role of morality in determining who is worthy or even capable of living a healthy and happy life.

Bound up and embedded within the messages on healthy food blogs is a moral orientation towards health and happiness. Morality is defined by the distinction between good and bad behavior and right and wrong, long used to distinguish groups of people through boundary work (Lamont et al. 2015). The groups deemed moral and worthy of happiness are usually those in power with the influence and control to define immorality and morality. For example, popular conceptions of the “obesity epidemic” and food access in the United States contribute to the continuing belief that individuals are to blame for eating unhealthy foods and their weight (Saguy 2014). Fat people are perceived as a danger to American society and its morals and ideals, health care and economic systems. Fat and “obese” people are condemned not only for being fat but also for placing a burden on the medical and economic system (Strings 2019; Usiekiewicz 2016; Gailey 2014; Farrell 2011).

The underlying belief of healthism, as defined earlier in this dissertation, is that you will be happy, healthy, and beautiful if you follow the rules (Contois 2015; Bacon 2015). Healthism in many ways resembles missions to bring Christianity to the “new world” and civilize the native people. It reflects a civilizing mission to educate people about the good and correct way to eat. In the United States today, both food and the body are described in terms of moral imperatives derived from Christianity (Althaus-Reid and Isherwood 2008; Lelwica 2009; Bacon 2015; Hoverd and Sibley 2007). Food is often referred to as “sinful” and packaged foods are labeled “guilt free” (Contois 2015). Fat bodies are described as gluttonous, the thin body as moral and worthy. As Contois writes, “an overweight or obese person is seen to physically manifest corruption through a lack of personal discipline characterized by the deadly sins of unregulated appetite (gluttony) and laziness (sloth)” (392). Fat bodies come to be framed not just as diseased or sickly but as a “societal sin” (393). There is the assumption that certain types of foods are both desirable and healthy for everyone. Along with the food bloggers in my sample, food justice advocates tend to be white, socio-economically well-off people (Guthman 2011) which frames how they discuss access and consumption of food.

Sabrina Strings’ (2019) research on the historical connections between Blackness and fatness shows how morality is intimately bound up with ideas about fat and Black bodies. Although the meaning of fatness has changed throughout history, its contemporary linkage to immorality comes from the belief that fatness in men was indicative of dullness, weak character, and lack of intelligence (Strings 2019). Historically, the slave trade influenced the cultivation of taste and the development of a racial classification system that justified its existence. With the work of Francois Bernier in the 18th century, women’s

bodies were used to prove fundamental difference and white superiority. This confluence of events and ideas has culminated in the historical representations of fat, Black bodies as immoral.

Contemporary fat, Black bodies continue to be viewed as immoral through popular representations (Usiekniewicz 2016; Gailey 2014; Farell 2011). Although the relationship between whiteness and Blackness and thinness and fatness are not explicit in the food blogs, the centering of white middle-class women's experiences has the effect of maintaining racial and moral distinction. The health narratives on the food blogs, especially on the weight loss blogs, support the belief that fatness is incompatible with happiness and morality. Messages about health on healthy food blogs continue the work of representations that position whiteness and thinness against blackness and fatness.

Biological citizenship, mentioned throughout this dissertation, is another concept helpful in understanding how morality is relevant to bodies and health. Non-normative bodies such as those classified as obese must engage in attempts at weight loss through eating "right" and exercising in order to gain access to biological citizenship. As Morgan (2011), argues, "Good Americans literally watch their own weight, count their calories, and calculate their own BMI (Body Mass Index) thereby constituting themselves through those very practices of normalizing governmentality" (201). A good biological citizen manages health risk as a moral enterprise through self-control, self-knowledge, and self-improvement (Lupton 1999, 91). The concepts of biological citizenship and healthism both describe an individualized understanding of health that is about prevention, personal responsibility, and ultimately morality. In addition, healthism constructs and reinforces inequality and maintains the divide between the white, middle-class and the other (Johnston, Szabo, &

Rodney 2011; Ringrose & Walkerdine 2008; Smith Maguire 2008) all the while justifying privilege (Crawford 2006; Guthman 2009).

Throughout this dissertation I have drawn upon the scholarship on happiness to understand how the promise of happiness is related to health, gender, and power (Clisby 2017; Ahmed 2010) and how notions of happiness are inflected with tones of morality and privilege (Robinson 2017). The implicit messages on the food blogs is that happiness is only achievable through determination, hard work, good health, and morality. These underlying messages are bound up with the concepts of healthism and American individualism which place responsibility on individuals turning food choices into a moral imperative (Connolly and Prothero 2008; Cairns and Johnston 2015; MacKendrick 2010). Based on the implicit messages on the blogs, a healthy life is the result of being a moral and happy person. But if a healthy life is reserved for those with thin bodies, white skin, and the resources to achieve this goal, where are those left who do not fall into these categories? My analysis reveals deeply embedded American beliefs regarding who is worthy of good health, coded through skin color and body size.

Messages about health, bodies, and food on food blogs revolve around the experiences of white middle-class women who reproduce the standard of beauty in the United States that depends upon both whiteness and thinness. Food bloggers reflect broader societal ideologies related to beauty and health such as how happiness is found through individual behavioral change.

### **Implications for Sociological Theory and Practice**

This dissertation contributes to the studies of self-help, health, and blogging within the broader field of sociology, by documenting how issues of the body are narrated through an individualized self-help frame on popular healthy food blogs. I take an approach that examines the sociology of self-help in the online world, framing popular healthy food blogs as self-help “texts” and as public discourse, and adding a contemporary understanding of self-help. These self-help frames de-emphasize structural issues in favor of individual actions. If widespread, these frames can perpetuate inequality by obscuring the structural roots of illness, health, and the body. A self-help approach to food blogs and the concept of “life as a work of health” are relevant to the subfields of sociology of self-help, the body, and social inequality because this approach provides an understanding of how inequality is reproduced in the pervasive self-help public discourse focused on messages about the ideal body. In studying questions related to public understanding of health issues, it is critical to pay attention to what popular healthy food blogs are telling their audiences.

Food blogs and their parallel Instagram accounts have recently pivoted to discuss current events regarding COVID-19 and BLM. My research extends sociological research on self-help to understand how bloggers are reflecting and producing messages, advice, and knowledge regarding the health pressures of COVID-19 and institutional racism. My research extends the analysis of self-help into the internet and more specifically, the blogosphere, demonstrating how self-help alters and adapts to changes in technology and current political events.

I build on the work of scholars of gender and blogging such as Cairns and Johnston (2015) and Alane Presswood (2020). Most importantly, my research analyzes the interplay between micro and macro, individual and structural in messages about health on the internet,

similar to Tash Dubriwny in *The Vulnerable Empowered Woman* (2013). I also bring the sociology of self-help into conversation with scholarship on postfeminism through a discussion of how healthy eating discourses on the internet fit within a neoliberal framework of personal responsibility. On a theoretical level, I contribute to the study of the sociology of inequality by illuminating how inequality is reproduced on social media through individualistic approaches to health and food, originating from a white, middle-class, and female perspective.

The popular food bloggers in my sample have thousands to millions of followers who read their blogs and Instagram posts. The analysis of this data is critical for both theory and practice because it shows the potential that social media influencers have to influence and promote social change and why it is important to study social media. Food bloggers are influential and what they say matters for product sales and how people view social issues. A structural approach to promoting health and wellness would target institutions such as the government, the economy, the criminal justice system, rather than exclusively focusing on changing individual behaviors. For example, racism produced unequal health outcomes through differential exposure to poverty, housing segregation, and food insecurity. Suggestions for how food bloggers might engage more meaningfully with topics of health and food, follow below.

Despite an overwhelming focus on individual level approaches, some food bloggers do show movement towards community making, potential collective action, and feminist politics. This is evident in chronic illness healthy food blogs, which demonstrate how food blog narratives arise out of a feminist politics that takes seriously women's stories about their own bodies. Dubriwny (2013) points out that the women's health movement of the

1970s resulted in self-determination for women observing that, “activists offered a significant challenge to standard accounts of objective knowledge by insisting on the validity and importance of their own experiences” (17). Another legacy of the women’s health movement evident on chronic illness healthy food blogs is “self-determination,” or the right for women to control medical access to their bodies. Chronic illness food bloggers describe their engagement in self-determination through exercising personal agency over their recovery from illness.

I have attempted throughout this dissertation to avoid the theoretical pitfall of establishing individual agency as dichotomous to structural approaches, instead trying to paint a complex portrait of how individuals act within structures. That being said, individual action and behavioral change do have a place in making meaningful social change along with targeted institutional initiatives. Alane Presswood (2020) addresses this when she writes, “Dedicated attention and effort can turn these platforms into a tool for visibility and intersectional progress, but that effort must be continuously enacted and reenacted at the individual level” (136). Although part of the puzzle in attending to interracial relations in the United States, it is clear that structural racism will not be solved through individual white food bloggers acknowledging their white privilege. In examining how healthy food bloggers approached the social issues of COVID-19 and BLM protests, I find a mixture of individual and structural directives. The following quote is an example of the mixed bag of solutions for racism,

It’s about taking action in unlearning, learning, reading, journaling, donating, having these conversations with family and friends, supporting teachers and black voices, doing the work internally.



Another quote from a blogger also illustrates the combination of structural and individual solutions,

Here are a few things you can do: - CONTACT your local, state and federally elected officials. - TALK to your children about what's happening. - DONATE to organizations who are helping if you have the means. - EDUCATE yourself. - SPEAK UP when you see injustice happening in your community.

Contacting elected officials and donating are potential structural solutions to racism. But although the blogger tells readers to do this, she does not specify a policy goal or command to convey to elected officials. These more general directives related to racism are counterpoint to the extremely specific food guidance given by the food bloggers.

Chapter four on COVID19 and BLM hints at ways for food bloggers to promote meaningful structural change and individual empowerment in the struggle for health and social justice. Below, I consider how a self-help approach might be connected to structural solutions and understandings of health.

Food bloggers could use their social media platforms to create awareness about the complex nature of food, health, and body size. There is a society-wide need for a growing understanding that chips away at blaming fat people for poor health and immorality. One way bloggers could do this is in advocating for a Health at Every Size (HAES) approach to weight and health. Health at Every Size (HAES) is an alternative approach to the traditional world of food, diets, and exercise, involving a weight-neutral approach to health (Burgard 2009). In opposition to traditionally restrictive forms of dieting HAES embraces the idea that individuals can be healthy at any physical size or weight. HAES is about living intuitively and in rhythm with one's physical needs and desires (Burgard 2009, 42-43). In other words, "HAES asserts that the medical pathologizing of the majority of the U.S. population harms people's health by stigmatizing them and causing discrimination in

insurance, jobs, social relationships, and medical care” (Brownell, Puhl, Schwartz, and Rudd 2005).

Other topics that could be discussed by bloggers to educate their audiences include environmental racism and quality of life conditions including poor air quality in minority neighborhoods, structural roots of health issues and history of racism such as: food deserts, residential and racial segregation, poverty, and environmental racism. Related to the COVID-19 pandemic, bloggers could acknowledge that those who are most impacted by the pandemic are not only health workers but those in the service industry without the privilege of isolating themselves who are disproportionately Black, Latino, Asian, and women. Broaching the topic of food insecurity would also be a valuable step. Bloggers could encourage followers to donate food, time, and money to local food banks.

Policy level initiatives such as demanding universal health care and paid time off for all workers -- including those in the service industry and lobbying the government for increased social welfare assistance for things like food and housing vouchers are also causes food bloggers could engage in and enlist the help of their followers.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Like all research, this dissertation has limits. Among other things, I only examine a subset of 200 healthy food blogs. I chose to focus on healthy food blogs with large followings on Instagram to assess how popular influencers were discussing health and food and what messages they were disseminating to their large audiences. In order to do this, I had to construct my own definition of a healthy food blog and create criteria for selection.

This process was not foolproof and some healthy food blogs most likely slipped through the cracks.

Future research in this area might focus on food blogs written by men and food blogs written by women and men of color. I focus overwhelmingly on the healthy food blogs of white women, who have up to recently comprised the vast majority of popular food bloggers. Due to the centering of Black voices last May on Instagram, many more food blogs authored by Black people and other people of color have gained traction, especially in discussions surrounding the role of Black people in food in the history of the United States. For example, as a result of the upheaval on social media and society more broadly, Juneteenth<sup>11</sup> (June 19) is now being celebrated across the country, especially as a food holiday by eating and drinking things such as red drink, peach cobbler, macaroni and cheese, sweet potatoes, and collard greens. Investigating the intersection of food with social media specifically related to the presence of information regarding Juneteenth would be a fruitful and interesting line of inquiry.

Other facets of the self-help genre, such as books written for white people to learn about white privilege and racism, might be examined as well. It would be interesting to ask whether self-help books or media exist that successfully discuss individual and structural approaches to social problems. Methodologically, it may be of interest to engage with the concepts of health and food on the internet through more quantitative approaches, such as web scraping, in order to gather a more representative sample.

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<sup>11</sup> Juneteenth celebrates the freedom of enslaved Black people in the United States on June 19, 1865. It is now a national holiday celebrating emancipation from slavery.

I specifically center healthy food blogs because the goal of the project was to understand messages about health. However, messages about health related to food no doubt appear on food blogs in general. Another potential route for studying food blogs would be to look at when and how messages about health appear on popular food blogs as opposed to healthy food blogs. Other avenues might examine food blogs written by those who are outside of the United States for a deeper understanding of the ways nationality and geography inform writing on food.

### **Conclusion**

Treating life as a work of health, as the bloggers in my sample do, requires constant and continual progress towards the end goal of health. This approach to health leaves little room for seeing structural causes that led bloggers to their current social locations and the possible solutions to health inequalities that lie beyond individual hard work. While I believe that it is possible for self-help to be both individual and collective in effort, focus, and goals, this will require that bloggers attend more to ways of collectively promoting social justice and structural and community-based change. Just as Black Lives Matter is about individual Black lives, the movement is also a collective effort to identify and address the structural roots of institutional racism. Following this model, food blogs, as modern self-help outlets can embrace healthy living alongside allyship and social justice.

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## Appendix

Table 1: Descriptive variables of 202 Healthy Food Blogs

Blog Type	Blog title	Number of Instagram followers	Nationality	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Geographic Location
Chronic Illness	Eat Beautiful	10.5k	American	Woman	White	Oregon
Lifestyle change	The Gracious Pantry	11.1k	American	Woman	White	Northern California
Weight loss	Bariatric Foodie	11.3k	American	Woman	Black	Texas
Lifestyle change	Creative Green Living	11.3k	American	Woman	White	Oregon
Lifestyle change	Tinned Tomatoes	11.7k	Scottish	Woman	White	Scotland
Healthy	Dietitian Debbie	12.1k	American	Woman	White	Chicago/Mid west
Chronic Illness, Weight Loss	The Curious Coconut	12.4k	American	Woman	White	Tennessee
Chronic Illness	Real Food with Dana	12.5k	American	Woman	White	Maryland
Chronic Illness	Raising Generation Nourished	12.6k	American	Woman	White	Michigan
Chronic Illness	Yum Universe	12.7k	American	Woman	White	West Virginia
Healthy	Natalie Tamara	12.8k	British	Woman	White	UK
Chronic Illness	Low FODMAP Inspiration	13k	British	Woman	White	Southampton, Hampshire
Healthy	Healthy Liv	13k	American	Woman	White	North Carolina
Weight Loss	Real Mom Nutrition	13.5k	American	Woman	White	Ohio
Healthy	The Sassy Dietitian	14k	American	Woman	White	New York
Healthy	Running on Real Food	14.1k	Canadian	Woman	White	Vancouver BC
Chronic Illness	Vegetarian Mamma	14.2k	American	Woman	White	Ohio
Healthy	Vegan Miam	14.2k	American	Man/Woman	Asian and white	Oregon

Weight Loss	Honey, What's Cooking?	14.7k	American	Woman	Indian	Los Angeles, CA
Chronic Illness	Salted Plains	15k	American	Woman	White	Missouri
Chronic Illness	Grassfed Salsa	15.5k	American	Woman	White	Austin, TX
Healthy	VeguKate	15.7k	American	Woman	White	Portland, OR
Healthy	The Iron You	16.1k	American	Man	White	New York
Chronic Illness	The Healthy Hunter	16.2k	Australian	Woman	White	Melbourne, AU
Lifestyle change	Amazing Paleo	16.6k	Ecuadorian	Woman	Latina	Idaho
Healthy	Eat, Pray, Workout	16.8k	Australian	Woman	white	Sydney
Healthy	Healthy, Seasonal Recipes	17k	American	Woman	White	Vermont
Healthy	Tastes Lovely	18.1k	American	Woman	White	California
Lifestyle change	Olives for Dinner	18.4k	American	Woman	White	Boston, MA
Healthy	Flourishing Foodie	18.7k	Canadian	Woman	White	Seattle, WA
Healthy	Vegan in the Freezer	18.9k	American	Woman	White	Southern California
Chronic illness	Clean Eating Kitchen	19.4k	American	Woman	White	California
Chronic illness	She likes Food	19.4k	American	Woman	White	Arizona
Healthy	Wholesomeli cious	20k	American	Woman	White	Virginia
Healthy	Fannetastic Food	20k	American	Woman	White	WA DC
Weight loss	Two Sleeveers	20.1k	American	Woman	Indian	Texas
Healthy	Eleat Nutrition	22.3k	American	Woman	White	Midwest
Chronic illness	Rubies and Radishes	22.8k	American	Woman	White	California
Weight loss	Baked Greens	22.9k	American	Woman	White	Boston
Healthy	Julie Morris	23.2k	American	Woman	White	California
Chronic illness	Living Healthy with Chocolate	23.4k	Brazilian	Woman	White	Hawaii
Chronic illness	Meghan Telpner	23.6k	Canadian	Woman	White	Toronto
Healthy	Perry's Plate	23.7k	Unknown	Woman		
Chronic illness	Feed me Phoebe	23.9k	American	Woman	White	NYC

Weight loss	Organize Yourself Skinny	25.1k	American	Woman	White	New York
Weight loss	Running with Frosting	25.1k	American	Woman	White	Los Angeles, CA
Healthy	Savory Spin	26.2k	Sri Lankan	Woman	Sri Lankan	Atlanta, GA
Chronic illness	Ascension Kitchen	26.4k	New Zealand	Woman	White	New Zealand
ED Recovery	Coconuts and Kettlebells	26.4k	American	Woman	White	East Coast
Healthy	Maria Marlowe	26.4k	American	Woman	White	NYC
Chronic illness	The Roasted Root	26.7k	American	Woman	White	Nevada/CA
Healthy	Vegetarian Ventures	27.2k	American	Woman	White	Indiana
Healthy	Domesticate Me	27.3k	American	Woman	White	New York
Chronic illness	Well Nourished	27.6k	Australian	Woman	White	Australia
Chronic illness	Healthy little Vittles	27.6k	American	Woman	White	Southwest
Healthy	Whitney E. RD	27.7k	American	Woman	White	Los Angeles, CA
Chronic illness	Thanks Heavens	27.8k	Norwegian	Woman	White	Australia
Healthy	Holley Grainger	28k	American	Woman	White	Alabama
Healthy	The Endless Meal	30.7k	Canadian	Woman	White	Vancouver
Chronic illness	Jessica in the Kitchen	30.8k	Black/Jamaican	Woman	Black	Atlanta, GA
Healthy	Eat Drink Paleo	30.9k	Ukrainian	Woman	White	London or Sydney
Healthy	Nosh an Nourish	31k	American	Woman	White	Colorado
Healthy	The Almond Eater	31.1k	American	Woman	White	Pittsburg, PA
Chronic illness	Deliciously Organic	31.5k	American	Woman	White	Florida
Healthy	Joyful, Healthy Eats	31.5k	American	Woman	White	Texas
Healthy	Eat, Live, Run	32.1k	American	Woman	White	Berkeley, CA
Chronic illness	Veggie Balance	32.9k	American	Woman	White	Michigan
Weight loss	The Lemon Bowl	33.2k	American	Woman	White	Michigan

Healthy	Dishing out Health	33.3k	American	Woman	White	Colorado
Chronic illness	Clean Eating Goddess	33.4k	Canadian	Woman	White	Montreal
Lifestyle change	Blissful Basil	33.7k	American	Woman	White	Midwest
Healthy	Everyday Maven	34.2k	American	Woman	White	Pennsylvania
Healthy	Prepare and Nourish	36k	Russian	Woman	White	California
Healthy	Fork and Beans	36.7k	American	Woman	White	Chicago, IL
Lifestyle change	Brewing Happiness	37k	American	Woman	White	Los Angeles, CA
Healthy	Tales of a Kitchen	37.1k	Australian or British	Woman	White	Australia
Chronic illness	With Food and Love	39k	American	Woman	White	Texas
Healthy	Nourished Kitchen	39.4k	American	Woman	White	PNW
Weight loss	Running to the Kitchen	39.5k	American	Woman	Unknown	Hudson Valley, NY
Weight loss	Andie Mitchell	40.4k	American	Woman	White	Massachusetts
Chronic illness	The Garden Grazer	40.6k	American	Woman	White	Montana
Chronic illness	Life of Goodness	41.4k	Australian	Woman	White	Australia
Chronic illness	Unbound Wellness	41.8k	American	Woman	White	Texas
Weight loss	Hungry Healthy happy	41.9k	British	Man/Woman	White	UK
Healthy	What's Cooking Good Looking?	42.2k	American	Woman	White	NYC
Weight loss	Paleo Parents	43.2k	American	Man/Woman	White	Virginia
Weight loss	Desserts with Benefits	44.3k	Canadian	Woman	Unknown	Austin, TX
Chronic illness	Sprinkle of Green	45.4k	British	Woman	White	London
Weight loss	Carrots n' Cake	45.7k	American	Woman	White	Massachusetts
Chronic illness	Recipes to Nourish	46k	American	Woman	White	Northern California
Weight loss and Chronic illness	Hello Healthy Eating	46.3k	American	Woman	White	Rhode Island

Lifestyle change	40 Aprons	48k	American	Woman	White	Memphis, TN
Healthy	PB Fingers	48.2k	American	Woman	White	North Carolina
Chronic illness	Root and Revel	49.2k	American	Woman	White	Atlanta, Georgia
Weight loss	My Bizzy Kitchen	50.2k	American	Woman	White	Chicago
Lifestyle change	Real Food with Jessica	50.5k	American	Woman	White	Michigan
Chronic illness	Real Simple Good	51k	American	Man/Woman	White	Oregon
Healthy	Healthy with Nedi	52.2k	Bulgarian	Woman	White	New York
Healthy	Saffron Trail	52.5k	Indian	Woman	Indian	Bangalore
Lifestyle change	Golubka Kitchen	52.6k	Russian	Two women	White	NYC and Florida
Healthy	In Pursuit of More	52.8k	Canadian	Woman	White	Vancouver
Chronic illness	Zen Belly	53.8k	American	Woman	White	San Francisco
Healthy	Yummy, Healthy, Easy	54.9k	American	Woman	White	Southern California
Healthy	Veggie Desserts	56.5k	Canadian	Woman	White	UK
Healthy	Wholehearted Eats	57.4k	Canadian	Woman	White	Vancouver
Chronic illness	Supercharged Food	60.2k	Australian	Woman	White	Sydney
Healthy	Kale and Caramel	60.9k	American	Woman	White	Southern California
Chronic illness, ED Recovery	Gluten Free Cuppatea	61.8k	British	Woman	White	London/Essex
Weight loss	The Natural Nurturer	63.7k	American	Woman	White	San Diego, CA
Weight loss	Eat Yourself Skinny	66.5k	American	Woman	White	Virginia
Chronic illness	My Darling Lemon Thyme	68.4k	New Zealand	Woman	White	Raglan, NZ
ED Recovery	The Full Helping	69.1k	American	Woman	White	NYC
Healthy	Athletic Avocado	69.7k	American	Two women	White	Unknown
Healthy	Amy's Healthy Baking	70.2k	American	Woman	White	San Diego, CA

Chronic illness	Downshiftology	71.9k	American	Woman	White	Southern California
Lifestyle change	A Couple Cooks	74.4k	American	Man/Woman	White	Indianapolis, Indiana
Chronic illness	Cotter Crunch	74.4k	American	Woman	White	Utah
Healthy	Physical Kitchness	81.2k	American	Woman	White	San Diego, CA
Chronic illness	Predominantly Paleo	82.8k	American	Woman	White	Virginia
Chronic illness	Every Last Bite	83.2k	Canadian	Woman	White	London
Weight loss	Detoxinista	84.2k	American	Woman	White	Kansas
ED Recovery	Food, Faith, Fitness	85.1k	Canadian	Woman	White	Seattle, WA
Chronic illness	The Blender Girl	88.2k	Australian	Woman	Unknown	Los Angeles, CA
Healthy	Well-Plated	88.7k	American	Woman	White	Milwaukee
ED Recovery	The Fit-Foodie	89k	British	Woman	White	Sydney, Australia
Healthy	Mark's Daily Apple	89.2k	American	Man	White	Southern California
Healthy	Civilized Caveman	89.5k	American	Man	White	California
Healthy	Two Purple Figs	89.7k	Unknown	Woman	Unknown	Unknown
Healthy	My Fussy Eater	92k	British	Woman	White	Europe
Healthy	Bojon Gourmet	92.7k	American	Woman	White	San Francisco
Weight loss	Rachel's Healthy Plate	94k	American	Woman	White	Kentucky
Chronic illness	Castaway Kitchen	95k	Cuban American	Woman	Latina	Virginia
Healthy	101 Cookbooks	97.1k	American	Woman	White	San Francisco, CA
Chronic illness, weight loss	Healthy Little Peach	97.2k	American	Woman	White	Missouri
Weight loss	Naturally Ella	102k	American	Woman	White	Sacramento, CA
Chronic illness	Dolly and Oatmeal	104k	American	Woman	White	Los Angeles, CA
Lifestyle Change	Beaming Baker	106k	American	Woman	Vietnamese	Boston
Chronic illness	Fed and Fit	107k	American	Woman	White/Latino	Texas
Chronic illness	Living Loving Paleo	108k	American	Woman	White	Unknown



Chronic illness	Simply Quinoa	108k	American	Woman	White	NYC
Chronic illness	Clean Food Dirty City	117k	American	Woman	White	NYC
Chronic illness	Autoimmune Wellness	121k	American	Women	White	Willamette Valley, OR and WA DC
Healthy	This Rawsome Vegan Life	122k	Canadian	Gender queer	White	Vancouver, BC
Healthy	Eating Bird Food	123k	American	Woman	White	Richmond, VA
Lifestyle change	Sweet Potato Soul	124k	African American	Woman	Black	LA
Lifestyle change	100 Days of Real Food	126k	American	Woman	White	Charlotte, NC
Chronic illness	Lexi's Clean Kitchen	132k	American	Woman	White	Boston, MA
Healthy	The Real Food RDs	132k	American	Two women	White	Colorado and Minnesota
Chronic illness. Weight loss	Mariam Mind Body Health	133k	American	Woman	White	Wisconsin
Healthy	Wholesome Yum	137k	Russian	Woman	White	Minnesota
Chronic illness	The Vegan 8	140l	American	Woman	White	Texas
Weight loss, Chronic illness	The Paleo Mom	148k	Unknown	Woman	Unknown	Atlanta, GA
Healthy	Eat Good 4 Life	151k	Spanish	Woman	Spanish	New Jersey
Chronic illness	The Plant Riot	156k	Australian	Woman	White	Boston
Lifestyle change	Cook Republic	159k	Australian	Woman	Indian	Sydney, AU
Lifestyle change	Fit Mitten Kitchen	161k	American	Woman	White	Michigan
Weight loss	Emily Bites	162k	American	Woman	White	New York
Chronic illness	Keto Diet App	171k	British/Russian	Woman	White	UK
Healthy	Cookie and Kate	172k	American	Woman	White	Kansas City
ED Recovery	Fit Foodie Finds	183k	American	Woman	White	Minneapolis, MN
Healthy	Hungry Girl	187k	American	Woman	White	Los Angeles, CA
Chronic illness	Inspiralized	201k	American	Woman	White	New Jersey

Healthy	Green Kitchen Stories	201k	European	Man and Woman	European	Stockholm
Healthy	Secret Squirrel Food	206k	Australian	Woman	Asian	Dubai
ED Recovery	Ambitious Kitchen	212k	American	Woman	Mixed race (white)	Chicago, IL
Healthy	The Skinnyish Dish	215k	American	Woman	White	Midwest
Weight loss	The Pound Dropper	219k	American	Woman	White	West Coast
chronic illness	Kris Karr	225k	American	Woman	White	New York
Healthy	Rebel Recipes	226k	British	Woman	White	UK
Healthy	Sprouted Kitchen	228k	American	Man/woman	White	Dana Point, CA
Healthy	The First Mess	235k	American	White	Canadian	Ontario
Weight loss	The Food Babe	240k	American	Woman	Indian	North Carolina
Lifestyle change	The Defined Dish	254k	American		White	Southwest
Healthy	The Big Man's World	273k	Australian	Man	Mixed race (Persian, Malaysian, European)	Melbourne
Chronic illness	Madeline Shaw	278k	British	Woman	White	London
Healthy	Love and Lemons	279k	Couple	Man and Woman	American	Chicago
Healthy	Adventures in Cooking	284k	American	Woman	White	Portland
Healthy	Choosing Chia	284k	Canadian	Woman	White	Canada
Healthy	No Crumbs Left	288k	American	Woman	White	West Coast
Chronic illness	Low Carb Yum	292k	American	Woman	White	Midwest
Healthy	Rainbow Plant Life	297k	American	Woman	Indian	NYC
ED Recovery	Meal Prep on Fleek	305k	American	Man/Woman	White	LA and Boston

Healthy	Hemsley and Hemsley	312k	British and Filipino	Two sisters	Mixed race Filipino	London
Chronic illness	Lil Sipper	320k	American	Woman	White	Los Angeles, CA
Healthy	From my Bowl	326k	American	Woman	White	Miami, FL
Chronic illness	Nutrition Stripped	332k	American	Woman	White	Nashville, Tennessee
Healthy	Thug Kitchen	340K	American	Ma/Woman	White	Los Angeles, CA
Lifestyle change	Paleo OMG	340k	American	Woman	White	Denver, CO
Healthy	My New Roots	372k	Canadian	Woman	White	Toronto
Healthy	Chocolate Covered Katie	381k	American	Woman	White	Texas
Chronic illness	Against All Grain	392k	American	Woman	White	San Francisco, California
Healthy	Rachael's Good Eats	421k	American	Woman	White	Seattle, WA
Lifestyle change	Nom Nom Paleo	460k	Asian American	Woman	Cantonese, Chinese	San Francisco, CA
ED Recovery	Oh She Glows	620k	Canadian	Woman	White	Oakville, Ontario
Other/Lifestyle Change	Clean Food Crush	711k	American	Woman	White	Salt Lake City, Utah
Healthy	Skinny Taste	913k	American	Woman	White	Oceanside, NY
Chronic illness	Earthy Andy	1.1m	American	Woman	White	Hawaii
Weight loss	Fit Men Cook	1.3m	American	Man	Black	Dallas, Texas
Chronic illness	Deliciously Ella	1.4m	British	Woman	White	London
Healthy	Minimalist Baker	1.4m	American	Woman	White	Portland, OR
Healthy	Feel Good Foodie	1.9m	American	Woman	Lebanese	Midwest