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Stories from the gut: an autoethnographic analysis of educating people about weight management in contemporary culture

Kate Llewellyn-Waters¹, Clive Palmer², Marie Percival³ and Michelle Barrow⁴

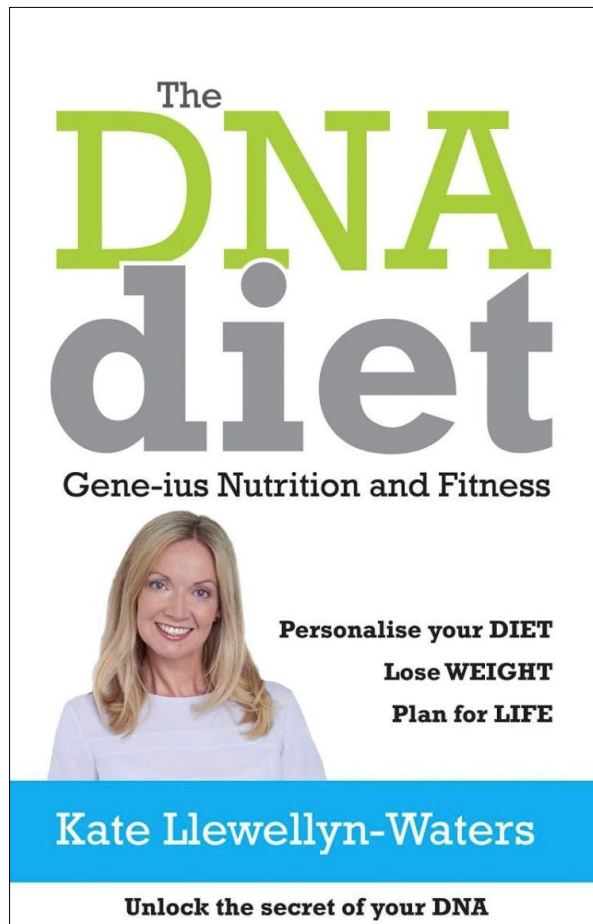
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Keywords: *gut health, weight management, mainstream media, autoethnography*



Introduction

I am the founder of the evidence-based supplement company - K LW Nutrition. My professional experiences as a nutritionist have taken me into mainstream media, including television, newspapers and radio work. In 2021, I was cast as the resident nutritionist in the revamped tv series *You Are What You Eat* on Channel 5, alongside tv presenters, Trisha Goddard, and *GP's Behind Closed Doors*, Dr Amir Khan. I also regularly provide comments for a broad range of national press including *The Daily Mail* / *MailOnline* and *The Telegraph*.

Outside of my nutritionist work, I am raising awareness of the condition otosclerosis and premature hearing loss, having lost 80% of my hearing over ten years ago when pregnant. As a hearing-aid wearer, I am committed to reducing the stigma of hearing loss and wearing hearing aids. In 2023, I filmed a segment for *BBC Morning Live* which looked at hearing loss and accessibility for those with hearing loss and visual impairments. I am also registered with The Nutrition Society and an associate of The Royal Society of Medicine.

PhD by Portfolio: my research context

Nationally, we are in the midst of an obesity epidemic which is costing the NHS £6 billion annually. Additionally, over the last 40 years, obesity levels have increased almost threefold globally (World Health Organisation, 2020) with 26% of adults (1.9 billion) defined as overweight and 13% obese (650 million) (WHO, 2020). The aetiology, or causes of obesity is multifaceted, and the factors involved are numerous and varied. Undeniably, obesity, weight loss, and long-term weight loss maintenance are complex issues, with weight regain occurring in approximately 50% of individuals who lose weight. In the UK, levels of obesity have been shown to be strongly associated with an individual's environment, regardless of gender and age (The Marmot Review, 2010). In addition, the Foresight Programme highlighted the numerous associated and causative factors that contribute to the increased occurrence of obesity, such as: biological, developmental, economic, social, medical, and psychological factors (Foresight, 2007).

Preventing regain after weight loss is one of the most challenging problems in obesity management. The negative energy balance theory for reducing body weight has been well-established (Weinheimer, Sands and Campbell, 2010; Hall *et al.*, 2012; Casanova *et al.*, 2019). However, the issues associated with reduced calorie intake, such as tiredness, hunger, and adherence make this challenging. Additionally, numerous studies indicate a strong relationship between the composition of gut microbiota and specific metabolic disorders associated with obesity, although the key mechanisms are still being studied (Rastelli, Knauf and Cani, 2018). Approaches to prevent weight regain after successful weight loss are urgently needed, hence the need for this research.

Risk factors, such as living alone, poverty, low level of education and unemployment have all been linked to increased rates of obesity, which can lead to further health issues. Food choice is a process through which people think, feel, and eat food. It does not only influence individuals' health and wellbeing, families, and communities, but also impacts at regional, national, and global levels (Haghighian *et al.*, 2017).

Methodological choice

This research will aim to determine the value, meaning and impact of my published and public works through an autoethnographic approach. Autoethnography seeks to describe and systematically analyse (graphy) personal experience (auto) to understand cultural experience (ethno) (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). It reflects past experiences, but also acts as a valuable representation of the culture within which the researcher is situated. Furthermore, it validates the value of our experiences, and allows us to question our lived experience and understand it in relation to our experience as part of society.

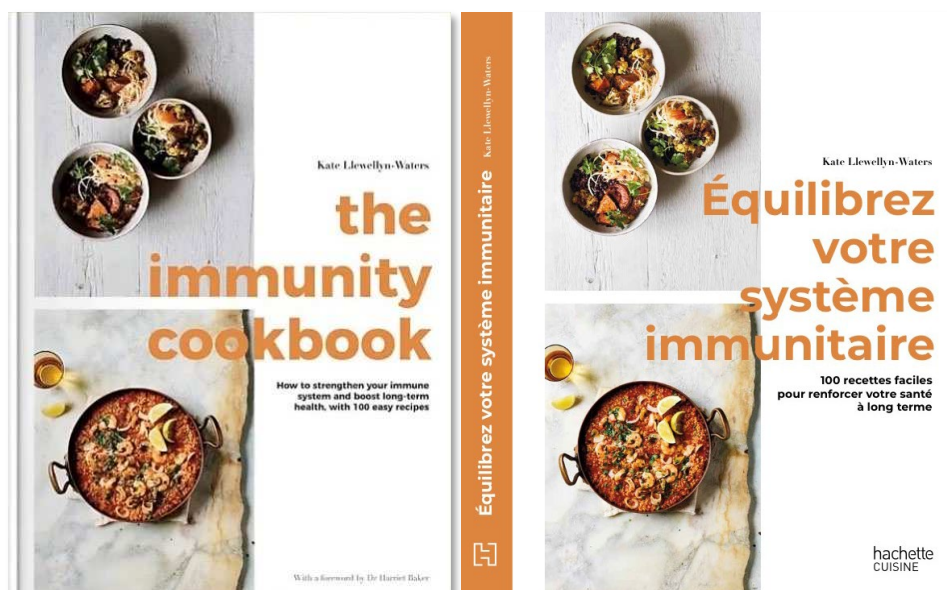
Project 1: The ‘written word’ through publication:

An autoethnographic analysis of published works in weight management and gut health

The DNA Diet, a book I wrote in 2018 (Llewellyn-Waters, 2018), focuses on obesity and weight management from a nutrigenomic and nutrigenetic perspective, and how different nutrients may interact with certain genes to impact the risk of obesity by altering the structure or expression of an individual's genetic profile. This book considers the link of genetic predisposition to obesity and how an individual could manage their risk of obesity with preventative measures.

Further, in 2021, I published a peer review article titled: *Intermittent fasting – a potential approach to modulate the gut microbiota* (Llewellyn-Waters and Abdullah, 2021). The objective of this PRISMA systematic review was to summarise literature of clinical trials related to the impact of intermittent fasting (IF) regimens on gut microbiota in humans. This article investigates the gut microbiota which has been shown to play a role in obesity and weight management.

My second book, *The Immunity Cookbook*, is a 235-page reference guide and recipe book that focuses on the importance of the gut microbiome and gut health. These factors have been shown to play a significant role in weight management, as well as promoting other areas of health, such as immunity (Llewellyn-Waters, 2020). Increasing the international reach of my work, my ideas around gut health in this book led to the rights being acquired by both French and Russian publishers.

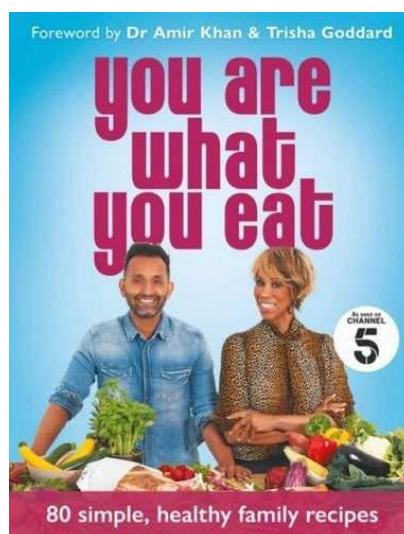


Project 2: The ‘spoken word’ through television and media campaign:

An autoethnographic analysis of improving weight management and gut health through mainstream media contributions

During the six-episodes of *You Are What You Eat* I worked with contributors (people volunteering to feature on the tv programme) who were experiencing obesity, weight management and gut health issues. With all the contributors, I discussed with them individually about the role and importance of their environment, gut microbiome, individual genetic variations, and the role epigenetics can also play in weight management. The guidance I provided across the 6 episodes was focused on improving gut health and personalised approaches to long-term, successful weight management.

Due to my television work on *You Are What You Eat*, I was asked to lead and front a campaign for probiotic drink company, Yakult. I wrote the press release as well as online content and embarked on 15 live radio interviews discussing gut health.



Project 3: The ‘word of experience’ through lived-in stories:

A qualitative study of nutrition practitioners’ perceptions of weight management practice

This live element of research in my PhD by Portfolio will explore nutrition practitioners’ perceptions of weight management (and gut health) practice with reference to the current UK weight management guideline PH53 – 1.7.5 to inform weight management practice (NICE, 2014). The research will also explore attitudes and bias towards obesity.

Prospective research probes:

- What are the experiences of nutrition practitioners for successful weight management (and gut health) in clients?
- What role do nutrition practitioners play in a client’s weight management journey?
- What are the barriers to effective weight loss in clients as perceived by nutrition practitioners?
- What are the views of nutrition practitioners regarding the current UK 2006 weight loss maintenance guideline (PH53 – 1.7.5) for long term weight management?

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Ethics statement: This research was conducted with ethical approval from UCLan.

JQRSS Author Profiles

Kate Llewellyn-Waters¹ has a first degree from Warwick and a Masters in Personalised Nutrition. She is founder of the evidence-based supplement company - K LW Nutrition.

Clive Palmer² is a research supervisor in the School of Health, Social Work and Sport, and Doctoral Education Lead in the Graduate Research School for the University of Central Lancashire. <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9925-2811>  Email: capalmer@uclan.ac.uk

Marie Percival³ is a research supervisor in the School of Health, Social Work and Sport, and programme lead for the Professional Doctorate in Health at UCLan.

Michelle Barrow⁴ is the Academic Team and Clinical Director at the Centre for Nutrition Education and Lifestyle Management (CNELM).

Collegial Review

Kate's background as a nutritionist, owner of evidence-based supplement company K LW Nutrition and author of the *DNA Diet* and the *Immunity Cookbook*, demonstrates a wealth of knowledge and experience in the complex field of health and nutrition. Kate is challenging the traditional norms around calorie counting and incessant dieting. Forming retrospective elements of her PhD by Portfolio, her books discuss obesity and how individual genetics plays a part in weight loss and (re)gain and importantly, that some people are predisposed to obesity. Kate also published an article around intermittent fasting and the impact that this type of eating management has on the gut microbiota. Raising her professional profile further, she also worked on the popular TV show *You Are What You Eat*, providing personalised advice and guidance to people taking part on the show. She was able to help participants understand how their genes played a key role in their health alongside their environment, the food they ate as well as other lifestyle factors such as how active they are. A measure of Kate's tenacity and determination as a doctoral researcher, and in her professional consultancy, is raised significantly when we understand how she has adapted to a catastrophic hearing loss, to conduct high level work and research which involves principally, listening to others, and communicating their stories. I look forward to the reading the results of her prospective 'live' project, and understanding some of the barriers to weight management, the experiences of nutritionists supporting people on their journey to lose weight, but especially the insights of the reflexive researcher to conduct this important socio-cultural study.

