

**I was brought up to think being thin...  
like I'd say, "Mom, have a piece of cake,"  
and she'd be like, "No, I'm on a diet."  
So I mean, I've known diets since I  
was in kindergarten.** Tina, Age 14

BY MIMI NICHTER

# FatTalk

THE QUOTE ABOVE, WHICH IS from one of the interviews I conducted for my book *Fat Talk: What Girls and their Parents Say about Dieting* reminds me of my own childhood, growing up in a Jewish home in Brooklyn with a mother who was always either actively dieting or searching for dieting tips in the pages of *Ladies Home Journal* or *Good Housekeeping*.

For my mother, who was first generation and had grown up on the Lower East Side, having the right body was an important part of fitting in.

Although attentive to her own weight, she was not overly concerned when I gained about twenty pounds during puberty. She didn't impose her diets on me. When

I complained about my weight, she told me I was going through a stage and that I would outgrow it. By age 15,

I was still waiting impatiently for "it" to melt away. I knew that my older sister had gotten diet pills from our family doctor, and when I asked my mother if I could get them too, her approval was clear. She immediately called and made an appointment for me. After taking amphetamines for a month, I experienced a newfound pride in my thinner body. Like my mother and sister, I wanted a body that would mark us as somehow different from the rounded bodies that characterized my grandmother's generation. I had received a message about Jewish women, weight and our relationship to food that was to stay with me for many years to come.

African-American girls were notably **less** concerned than their white counterparts with the standards **for an "ideal girl"** depicted in the media.

Here are excerpts from what I say in a chapter called "Looking Good among African-American Girls":

● My readings on the subject showed that African American girls were more satisfied with their body weight and were less likely to diet than white or Latino girls. But there were few explanations given for why these ethnic differences existed, although the reports all made vague references to "cultural factors." As anthropologists interested in the culture of teenage girls, we wanted to explore what led African-American girls to accept their body shape while so many of their white peers were dissatisfied with theirs.

● Nationwide survey results indicate that, in contrast to African-American girls, white and Latino girls perceive themselves to be overweight even when their weight falls within "normal" parameters for their height as established by the National Center for Health Statistics. As they get older, white girls express increasing dissatisfaction with themselves, whereas African-American girls report a relatively stable and positive sense of self-worth.

● [However] drawing on in-depth interviews with African-American and Latino women, sociologist Becky Thompson highlights the risk of generalizing about class and thinness among women of color. The diversity of experiences among the women she interviewed makes it clear that African-American and Latino women may be equally vulnerable to the emphasis on thinness. "Media presentation in even the most remote areas of the country," writes Thompson, "makes it unlikely that any ethnic or racial group is unaware of the premium placed on dieting and thinness."

In **contrast**, white girls received support for **altering** their looks to fit established beauty ideals.

- In order to assess differences between white and African-American girls with regard to weight related issues, we compared responses to the survey question, "How satisfied are you with your weight?" Responses show distinct differences between the two groups. Seventy percent of the African-American girls responded that they were satisfied or very satisfied with their current weight. While 82 percent of these girls were at or below the normal weight-for-height range of African-American girls their age, 18 percent were significantly overweight (defined as above the eighty fifth percentile). Only 15 percent of the girls who were of normal weight expressed dissatisfaction with their present weight. By contrast, a similar survey question about body shape directed at white girls revealed that almost 90 percent were dissatisfied with their bodies.

- Girls wrote comments such as: "White girls have to look like Barbie dolls and Cindy Crawford to be beautiful," and "White girls want to be perfect." African-American girls noted that "their attitudes and the way they wear their clothes is different," and that white girls "want to be tall, thin, and have long hair."

- When we asked the African-American girls for their description of an ideal black girl, their response often began with a list of personality traits rather than physical attributes.

.... What was particularly striking in African-American girls' descriptions, when compared with those of white adolescents, was the deemphasis on external beauty as a prerequisite for popularity.

- African-American girls were notably less concerned than their white counterparts with the standards for an "ideal girl" depicted in the media. Having a positive attitude and "not worrying about your looks too much" were important components of a beautiful woman. Attitude eclipsed body parts as a measure of value...Community reinforcement is an important component that sustains this self esteem at high levels.

- African-American girls receive far more positive than negative feedback about how they look from their family and friends... receiving positive feedback for creating their own style around their given attributes. In contrast, white girls received support for altering their looks to fit established beauty ideals.

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# Fat is Still a Feminist Issue: Susie Orbach in Israel

BY BARBARA GINGOLD

THE WOMAN STEPPING UP to the lectern is Dr. Susie Orbach, world-renowned author of *Fat Is a Feminist Issue* (1978), *The Impossibility of Sex* (1999), and scores of other publications in between. Orbach needs neither makeup nor high heels to assert her authority. She takes the mike to tell some 400 Israeli women about women, body image, and eating problems.

"We have on our hands a major public-health problem," she announces to her audience, largely social workers, psychologists, and other

The **body itself** is a woman's form of **language**.

mental health professionals. "An epidemic which infects more people every single day, whose routes are neither mysterious nor genetic nor incomprehensible. An epidemic which we could stop for future girls and women and lessen for girls and women currently, if we had the will to do so. And yet we do not."

Orbach is on her first professional visit to Israel as a guest of the non-profit Counseling Center for Women (CCW), a mental health organization established in

1987 in order to empower women in Israel through psychotherapy. As co-founder and chief executive of The Women's Therapy Centre in London, "Susie" has long inspired CCW's founders—eleven feminist therapists originally from North America and Europe—and its present, much enlarged staff. They have brought her to Israel, to a hotel overlooking the Mediterranean in Bat Yam, to raise the consciousness of the workers in the field, those who deal daily with what is overwhelmingly a women's problem. Most of them are already aware of the alarming statistics. Ninety percent of Israelis with eating disorders are women. The number one cause of depression among young girls is a negative body image. One out of every 20 female teenagers will develop bulimia. One percent of *all* Israeli women will become anorexic. And some of them will die each year from the complications of their eating disorders.

One of many discussions now reverberating throughout the nation on the subject of eating disorders (two other major conferences will take place within a month of this one), this one called by the Counseling Center for Women addresses, in particular, the psychosocial context and impact of

anorexia, bulimia, and related problems. How the personal is the political. What it means to own a woman's body in a male-dominated world. Where the revolution must begin in order to solve women's eating problems: in the psyche, the media, the global marketplace.

Susie Orbach leaves no doubt as to the roots of the problem. "We name what is in reality a social problem as a medical and genetic issue... If we lose sight of the cultural environment which makes these conditions [anorexia, bulimia, compulsive eating] not simply likely but also within the norm

for girls and women today, if we unduly pathologize the women who are gripped by these symptoms...we

are going to be seriously on the wrong track."

The right track, she says, is to focus on the place of women in contemporary society.

While Western women appear to occupy social roles

and economic positions which categorically reject subordination, the modern constraints and restrictions that they are expected to place on their own bodies are no less debilitating than the traditional Chinese practice of foot-binding.

A psychologist specializing in the treatment of eating disorders, Orbach can and does provide ample psychological explanations for their existence. Women, for a start, are scared of their own needs. "Talking about food and dieting becomes a way to talk about aspects of women's lives that are deeply troubling to them...Instead of telling one another about our desperation and feelings of impotence, we say 'If I were thin things would be so much better.' Instead of telling one another we feel invisible and unrecognized, we become anorexic and force that recognition on others."

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## The Cycle of Female Dissatisfaction

I have been careful not to lay blame on those mothers who feel they are "helping" their daughters at a time of vulnerability by teaching them how to diet. But I am concerned about the impact of both their dieting advice and practices that serve to normalize the daughter's dissatisfaction with her body, regardless of whether she actually begins to diet. Without education, this cycle of dissatisfaction with body shape and weight will more than likely be repeated once again as these daughters become mothers. Mothers need to instill pride in their daughters for who they are, not for who they may become [and] shifting the focus of the discussion from the individual to the cultural level might provide girls with a much needed perspective on their own attitudes and behaviors.

—from *Fat Talk: What Girls and their Parents Say About Dieting*  
by Mimi Nichter

The body itself, Orbach maintains, is a woman's form of language. Her investigations of the unconscious reveal a host of symbolic meanings in body shape and size, in the way people eat or refrain. Despite rank social prejudice against obesity, the female unconscious may equate fat "with power, with presence, with a demand to be seen...A way to keep private vulnerabilities hidden while requesting acceptance for who one is. It is about an attempt to give to self."

Thin, on the other hand, may represent "fear, frailty, disappearing, conformity...the end of conflict, loneliness, or confusion." This, Orbach says, is by no means a positive thing, but rather the negation of an essential element of human existence. "Denying inner conflict, appearing to be alright because one *looks* as one should, actually renders the person too one-dimensional."

Orbach quickly shifts back to the socio-cultural plane, outlining a theory of multi-generational behavioral patterns. For at least two or three generations now, with more or less subtlety, women of the West have been encouraged to curb their appetites. Large appetites bring up the specter of large bodies and large needs; society would rather not confront either. Unwitting females learn, even before they can speak, that their bodies are unsafe; their corporeal beings,

complete with smells, desires, flesh, and most of all appetites, are undesirable and unacceptable. "What girls' and women's lips, stomachs, hearts, minds and hungers desire are 'dangerous,'" Orbach notes. "They must be managed, they must be curtailed."

Hapless mothers brought up in this tainted atmosphere, hating their imperfect bodies, insecure and unhappy about the food they consume, can hardly be expected to imbue their daughters with the sense that eating is a wonderful experience. Far more likely, according to Orbach, are the odds that the girls will grow up believing that their own bodies are worthy only of manipulation, correction, and attack from within and without. Far more likely that, anywhere from the age of three onward, they will expend more effort emulating the looks of female pop stars than cultivating mental or physical prowess.

"Ironically and most cruelly," declares Orbach, "it is mothers today, who have suffered the bombardment of a mono-imagery of femininity... who transmit body insecurity to their daughters. [The latter are] then susceptible to the false offers of the fash-

My mother  
**dieted**, so  
I did too.

