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

Fat Talk

BY MIMI NICHTER

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.

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.”
Fat is Still a Feminist Issue: Susie Orbach in Israel

BY BARBARA GINGOLD

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.

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.

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."

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-

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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
original sold out.

California sent her in 1979 when the copy of the book that a friend in CCW's founders, still cherishes a pist Janet Baumgold-Land, one of than the Hershey bar. Jerusalem therapeutists began to delve into women's internal oppression. A economic analyses failed to account for their bodies. The usual political and cooperating in the manipulation of their own issues, she confesses, originated in being an American. "My ideas are simply too radical for the British," she laughs. "It's easier to blame them on America."

In truth, her compatriots are not far off. Though her father was a British Jewish politician, Orbach attributes her own proclivity for political activism to her mother, an American Jew who was very involved in the socialist Zionist movement. And many of Susie Orbach's ideas were actually conceived in the fertile ground of American feminism and radical politics of the 70s, when she was studying for advanced degrees in New York. "Everything was up for examination in those days," she recalls. "Housework, careers, parenting. I thought we should look at our bodies, too.''

As a political activist, she became interested in the way women were cooperating in the manipulation of their bodies. The usual political and economic analyses failed to account for women's internal oppression. A psychoanalytic approach, she felt, would be more revealing, and she began to delve into women's inner worlds.

The result was Fat Is a Feminist Issue ("FIFI," she calls it, affectionately) — the benchmark book which made its way around the world more handily than the Hershey bar. Jerusalem therapist Janet Baumgold-Land, one of CCW's founders, still cherishes a photocopy of the book that a friend in California sent her in 1979 when the original sold out.

"The book revolutionized thinking about body issues, hunger, fat, and eating," Baumgold-Land states unequivocally. "As a social critic, Susie made it clear that women had internalized so many contradictory messages about food — from family, from the environment — that we were totally alienated from our bodies. We didn't know the meaning of hunger. We never even knew what we really wanted to eat, if we were actually craving sweets or celery."

Orbach herself saw hand-copied versions of the book being passed from woman to woman in Soviet Russia. Almost 25 years since the first edition appeared in English, she confirms its impact: "I am staggered that FIFI is still in print, still relevant today. And that — on the basis of all the pain in it — I've been given a voice."

That voice reaches out, in well-modulated, authoritative clarity, across the packed hall in Bat Yam. "The collapse of civil society and its replacement with the global market and consumerism...has had a curious effect on how we as individuals view ourselves and our place in the world." Orbach says. "Branding — the latest ingenious idea of the advertising industry — has become the way to belong, to feel recognized and to acknowledge others." Wherever in the world she is, in other words, the woman who identifies with the name brand blasted across her soft drink, her sneakers, the seat of her jeans, has become a member of the brand. The name of her land is irrelevant; so too is her native culture, her natural shape.

Orbach continues. "Girls and women who don't have a secure body image try to belong by acquiring a recognizable body, a thin body, an admired body, in essence a branded body which...secures them a position in our body, we need to risk the assertion of our own appetites. To recognize that they are great, that they relate to more than food and size, that we have an appetite to take up our space in the world and to celebrate and redefine the strict confines in which we have been seen and so have seen ourselves."

Lunchtime. Susie throws off her black jacket and, over a plate filled with colorful salads, discusses food with the women of the Counseling Center. A few hours later, as the sun begins to sink into the Mediterranean, she has a revelation to make. "All these years," she reflects, "I thought that I'm my father's daughter. Today was the first time I thought that I'm my mother's daughter." Her face lights up for a moment, and it's not just from the reflection of her bright pink top.

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To liberate ourselves, we need to risk asserting our own appetites.