# fat talk

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## Mimi Nichter

*For Mark, Simeon, and Brandon*

# Preface

Tʜɪꜱ ʙᴏᴏᴋ has been personally as well as professionally motivated. This became evident to me soon after the project began. I was having dinner with my mother, who was celebrating her seventieth birthday. To my surprise, she refused to indulge in a piece of chocolate cake for dessert. After some persuasion from my sister and me she relented, agreeing to eat a sliver. Her rationale was clear—she was dieting to lose the weight she had gained over the holiday season. When I jokingly told her that she could be a participant in my research project, she smiled broadly and said, "Yes, me and the rest of the women in my community! We're still concerned with our weight . . . you know, it doesn't stop when you get older. We're always watching what we eat!" After a moment she added, "You can never be too rich or too thin!"

As I reflected on her comments later that evening, I considered how age-centric my thinking was about the issue of weight. Had I naïvely assumed that as women got older they became less concerned with their weight? Had my own awareness of body weight diminished as I matured? I realized—with much surprise—that I was a lot like my mother. This encouraged me to look more closely in my research at the relationship of mothers and daughters and how knowledge about appropriate body shape and dieting is transmitted from one generation to the next.

I could certainly rationalize my concern with my weight as motivated by my heightened health consciousness. But I had to admit to myself that although my weight has always been slightly less than average for my height, I have often thought that I would be more attractive if I were five to ten pounds thinner. This troubled me. Despite all I had read on the tyranny of slenderness, the extensive interviews I had conducted with girls and women about body image, as well as my awareness of the pain caused by body dissatisfaction, why was I unable to shirk the idea that being thin would somehow render me more attractive and more in control of my life? If *I* couldn't let go of this embodied sense of beauty after so much reflection, who could? I pondered the extent to which these concerns affected my everyday life. Although I did not diet with any frequency or regularity, I often watched what I ate. Looking back on my life, it was clear that my sense of appropriate body weight was internalized at an early age. What was more, this sense was tenaciously clinging to me even as I grew older.

As I listened to fat talk among teen-aged girls, I could identify with their concerns about their developing bodies. Although I am no longer as bothered by these concerns as were the teens I interviewed, I acknowledge with a degree of humility that such thinking has not faded completely from my consciousness.

Although many articles and books have been written on women, the body, and dieting as a cultural institution, this book is different. In these pages I strive to look beyond the oft-cited pathology of teen-aged girls in relation to their bodies, identifying not only their dissatisfaction with themselves, but also many of their positive attitudes and behaviors. If we as researchers look for what is pathological in girls, that is what we will find.

I also pay particular attention to the interactive nature of the female socialization process. From the outset of the project it was clear to me that girls do not single-handedly adopt the thin beauty ideal; indeed, they internalize an ideal that is

reinforced by their peers at school and by their families at home. Nor is this ideal uniform across all age groups or ethnic groups. Thus in documenting girls' struggles to meet a cultural ideal of beauty, I explore how developmental age and ethnic identity influence this process.

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## Introduction: Barbie and Beyond

"What's a mother to do?" my friend Sally bemoaned while discussing her fourteen-year-old daughter's dissatisfaction with her body. "She's always complaining that she hates her thighs. She looks in the mirror, grabs hold of them as if they're a piece of meat, and asks me how she can get rid of them. I try to help her accept herself. I tell her that everyone has a part of their body that they dislike and that people don't just look at her thighs . . . they see her as a whole person. But she doesn't seem to hear what I say." After a momentary pause she asks, "Do you think her feelings of dissatisfaction with her body are just a stage that she'll outgrow, or will they persist for some years? What can I do to help her through this difficult time when her body seems so out of control?"

Sally's frustration with her daughter's concerns about her body is common among parents of teen-aged girls. Like her own mother, Sally has been a devout dieter for many years, though she hopes that the cycle of dieting and dissatisfaction will not be reproduced into the next generation. As a friend and a researcher in the area of body image and dieting among teens, I silently wonder whether Sally can teach her daughter to accept her body when she has not come to terms with her own shape. What message does Sally send to her daughter when she eats small portions of food and abstains from dessert for weeks at a time?

At first glance, Sally's daughter may appear to fit the general

profile of a teen-aged girl growing up in the United States to-day. Study after study reports that dissatisfaction with weight and inappropriate dieting behaviors are pervasive—at least among white middle-class girls. This situation is considered to be so serious that it is sometimes referred to as an epidemic; indeed, some estimates claim that as many as 60 percent of white girls are dieting at any given time.[1] Researchers warn that the use of extreme weight-loss methods such as fasting, binging, and purging are escalating and that we may soon see a higher incidence of eating disorders.

The concern that many teen-aged girls are "at risk" for eating disorders reflects the increasing tendency to view the behavior of adolescents as pathological.[2] One need only glance at the morning newspaper to confirm that adolescents are portrayed as major players in the multiple "epidemics" that beset the country. Much of what is written about girls is derived from a youth-at-risk perspective that details the losses in self-esteem and self-confidence that girls experience across adolescence and that often lead to a host of other problems, including negative body image, eating disorders, teen pregnancy, sexually transmitted diseases, and drug abuse. This propensity to pathologize youth has led some social scientists to refer to adolescence as a culture-bound syndrome.[3] As a result, many parents live in fear of the dreaded teen-age years. The mere mention that one's child is about to enter adolescence can evoke deep sighs and sympathetic looks from others. Parents swap stories about the inherent dangers of having teenagers and discuss strategies for controlling them. As a result, parents have come to expect the worst.

Concern with eating disorders in particular is so widespread that when I mention to people that I conduct research on body image and dieting among teens, I am inevitably asked, "Is it really that bad? Are so many girls suffering from eating disorders?" In response, I explain that though 1–3 percent of females do suffer from eating disorders, the other 97 percent demonstrate a wide range of attitudes and behaviors toward their bodies. People are often surprised at this response because they have been led by the media to believe

that eating disorders are far more common than they actually are. Some of the women I have spoken to assumed that eating disorders affect as many as one in four girls—and not just aspiring ballerinas!

These misperceptions are not surprising, given that in the past decade slimness as a beauty ideal has been the subject of countless magazine articles and books, constituting a cultural phenomenon in its own right. Much of this literature focuses on anorexia nervosa and bulimia, which are typically presented as culturally induced illnesses; cultural forms of rebellion or withdrawal; or addictions. Feminist writers describe the political and societal environments that contribute to women's struggle to discipline themselves, control their appetites, and achieve social status and a moral identity in the form of the "right look."[4] Some popular accounts of women and the body draw on therapeutic encounters with eating-disordered and obese women, giving voice to those at the extremes of weight-related behavior.[5] Although there are many in-depth studies of why adult women have attempted to discipline their bodies, we have mostly survey statistics about teen-aged girls and their eating habits.

Most of these statistics are derived from a series of standard survey questions presented to high school and college-aged females. The young women are asked to gauge their level of satisfaction with their weight and body shape, as well as to reveal their current dieting and exercising practices. While such statistics provide important baseline information on females, they fail to capture adequately the complexity of their behaviors.

Despite the claims that there is an epidemic of dieting among teen-aged girls, a number of questions remain unanswered, and indeed, unasked. What do survey statistics claiming that 60 percent of teen-aged girls are dieting actually mean? What do girls really do when they're on a diet? How long does a typical teen-ager's diet last, and when does she consider it successful? Do girls actually lose weight from their diets? Given the cultural imperative to be thin, are girls *overreporting* their dieting on surveys because they feel they *should be* dieting? As a culture, why do we focus so much at-

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tention on the 1–3 percent of girls who suffer from eating disorders to the exclusion of an in-depth understanding of what the other 97 percent of girls are doing? And finally, if "everyone" is dieting, why do studies continually report that American youth are becoming increasingly overweight?[6]

What is missing from the literature on body image and dieting are the voices of teens and the reality of what "being on a diet" actually means to them. Looking beyond those who suffer from eating disorders, I focus on what constitutes "normal" behavior among teen-aged girls and examine the extent to which body image and dieting play a role in female gender socialization. Is there an image of the "perfect girl" in mainstream American society? If so, what impact does comparing herself with this ideal have on a girl as she grows up? How consistent are beauty ideals across different ethnic or social groups? Do some girls resist popular images of beauty and body shape, and, if so, how is their resistance expressed? How central a role do dieting and diet talk play in girls' lives? Do some girls reject dieting and adopt healthier eating practices as a means of watching their weight?

As an anthropologist, I have focused upon the difference between what girls *say* they do and what they *actually* do. Beyond survey statistics, I examine how peers, parents, and the media contribute to girls' body image, dieting practices, and sense of self. I explore cultural meanings of the "I'm so fat" discourse—what I call "fat talk"—examining how this pervasive speech performance facilitates social relations among girls. Before describing the study upon which this book is based, it is important to provide a brief background and context for girls' concerns about their bodies.

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### *The Allure of Advertising*

For many Americans, the "mirror, mirror on the wall" telling them who is the fairest of them all—or at least how they stack

up—is television. Television programs present slender women as the dominant image of popularity, success, and happiness. Particularly in programs favored by teen-aged girls, female characters are almost always well below average weight.[7] This skew toward slenderness distorts the actual diversity of female shapes and erases overweight women from our vision.[8]

Advertisements, including the 400–600 we scan in the morning newspaper and observe on billboards and television on a daily basis, reinforce the slender image.[9] Indeed, one in every eleven television commercials includes a direct message about beauty, and these messages are almost exclusively-directed toward women.[10] Similar messages about beauty and perfection are disseminated to girls in the guise of self-improvement features in teen magazines. Both articles and advertisements in these publications convey the message that "the road to happiness is attracting males . . . by way of physical beautification."[11] At least 50 percent of teen-aged girls are regular readers of fashion magazines such as *Seventeen* and *Glamour;* more disturbing still, they form their ideas of what constitutes ideal beauty for women from the images they view in these magazines.[12]

Even before girls reach adolescence, many have embodied the thin beauty ideal through play. Barbie, the most popular fashion doll in America, accounting for 1.9 billion dollars in annual sales, has a body that can rarely be achieved in real life. Ninety percent of all American girls ages three to eleven own one or more Barbies, and more than one billion have been sold since manufacturing began in 1959. It has been calculated that if all the Barbies in the world were laid out head to foot around the earth, they would circle it three and a half times.[13] As they dress their Barbies during their formative years, many girls engage in fantasy play of their grown-up life as thin, blond females. Barbie's one hundred new seasonal outfits are created by a team of nine full-time fashion designers and a roomful of hairstylists who gain inspiration by observing teen-aged girls at California malls. Barbie's designers do not attempt to create new fashions; they search for what signifies popularity among teens and then copy the look for Barbie. Teen fashion is capital-

ized upon and coopted. Whereas Barbie's outfits change continually, her body shape has been altered only minimally.

Television advertisements portray young girls happily playing with Barbie, declaring her attributes: "She's cool-time Barbie, she's rad, she's blond, she's beautiful." Irrespective of the outfit she dons, Barbie is the popular girl who conveys a subtle yet powerful message: If you get the body you can get the guy.[14] This same message is transmitted in advertisements in teen magazines. In a *Seventeen* ad for Weight Watchers, a handsome lifeguard is seated on a tower at the beach. The copy below reads: "We can help you get the body you've always dreamed of." Although the product is directed at adolescent girls, the message is that "getting a thin body" is the key to getting *his* body.

A growing number of American females cannot measure up to the image of beauty that pervades television and advertisements. More than half of teen-aged girls are size thirteen or larger. Paradoxically, injunctions to look thin and be "in control" of one's appetite are juxtaposed with directives to indulge, release, and enjoy a well-deserved break, be it in the form of a Big Mac, a Snickers bar, or a shopping spree. Such paradoxes promote the new American dream of having one's cake and eating it too![15] An advertisement for a low-fat chocolate pudding, for example, features an ultraslim model who holds a spoon to her pouting lips while exclaiming, "Dessert is always on the tip of my tongue!" Such ads suggest that we can indulge while still maintaining our sense of "being good." The miracle of olestra is that we can eat what we want and forget about the calories.

In addition to messages about what we should eat, we are bombarded with advertisements that tell us how we should look. "Making up and making over" have become prominent components of everyday life. Girls are led to believe that they should adopt beauty practices at younger and younger ages as "preventive care" and that makeup is an essential ingredient in achieving the "natural" look. Through the wonders of science, females have an ever-growing arsenal of products available to them that promise to maintain their youth and transform,

camouflage, or mask their imperfect bodies. Frustration with one's body, from hair and skin to weight and its distribution, sells products because we are taught that our bodies are transformable objects, part by part.

In order to sell products, advertised messages offer hope after undermining self-confidence. This pattern of advertising reflects the American ideal of individual success through self-improvement, free will, and personal destiny. Beauty has, at once, become a symbol of moral self-worth, as well as a commodity purchased at a cost. But then we are told we are worth it! One of the hidden costs of buying into beauty work is that females have come to feel increasingly responsible for transforming their appearance to meet an elusive cultural ideal.

Teen-aged girls undergoing rapid physical changes are especially susceptible to advertising. The average girl gains twenty-five pounds in body fat during puberty. Weight gain and fat accumulation, though necessary components of puberty, may be particularly distressing for girls who believe that a slender body is a prerequisite for popularity and success. As psychologist Rita Freedman has described, adolescents' search for a personal identity has become distorted into a search for a packaged image.[16] A growing girl is directed to her mirror to discover who she is.

Exposure to advertisements with highly attractive models contributes to a tendency among teen-aged girls to be increasingly critical of their own physical attractiveness as well as that of others. As girls move from childhood to adolescence, they compare themselves more and more with models in advertisements—a tendency that is greater for those with lower self-perceptions of physical attractiveness and lower self-esteem.[17] Marketing messages directed toward adolescents promote the latest style built around images of bodily perfection embedded in a broader directive promoting consumption as a primary value of life.[18] Advertisers create the illusion of a community of consumption whose membership requirement is possession of popular brands and styles.

I do not mean to imply that advertising is the root of body dissatisfaction among teen-aged girls; indeed, to do so would

be to oversimplify a complex cultural problem. In fact, fashion magazines *do* commonly address the issue of weight obsession among females. Unfortunately, rather than alleviating the problem, they perpetuate it by producing a steady stream of hype about weight. Articles in the popular media that address teen-aged girls' obsession with their weight often perpetuate stereotypes. The very articles which contend that women and girls must move beyond concerns about their bodies are sandwiched between ads of near-anorexic models clad in the latest body-revealing fashions.

Anthropologist and psychohistorian Howard Stein has argued that the trend toward dieting and physical fitness in middle-class America demonstrates a return of the "survival of the fittest" mentality. The wellness syndrome, which includes dieting, has emerged as an unconscious ritualistic solution to a sense of loss of control over the societal body. Forces of good (slimness) and evil (fatness) are pitted against each other in a morality play that takes the form of getting in shape.[19] Evidence for this is found in dieting discourse that is *replete with references to dieting as "being good" and "doing right,"* and pigging out as "being so bad," leading one to "feel so guilty." Stein identifies the body as a battleground of magical control where fitness provides a personal path to salvation at a time when the specter of a nuclear, if not a viral, holocaust hovers close at hand, yet is denied.

Acts of control that center on the body, such as dieting and exercise, can also be interpreted as a social response to risk and uncertainty. As individuals have less control over their outer environments (be they social, socioeconomic, or natural), they tend to focus more intently on an immediate environment where they can reaffirm boundaries and exercise control.[20] This type of reasoning might help explain why going on a diet, redoing one's hair, or "getting in shape" often follows the breakup of a relationship as a form of coping. Extending the logic, the appeal of getting in shape or going on a diet may index feelings of insecurity and risk at the societal level. In a high-performance world in which the metaphor of trimming off "excess fat" and "streamlining" operations is incorporated

into the discourse of business layoffs, a means of reducing feelings of powerlessness may involve working within the same metaphor at the site of the body.

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### The Teen Lifestyle Project

But do ideas such as these, which link attempted control of the body to more generalized feelings of powerlessness, apply to teen populations? As a result of a growing theoretical interest in the "body" among social scientists and a sustained popular interest in dieting and body work, I became interested in exploring how issues concerning body image and control in the form of dieting played out in the everyday lives of girls. Were teen-aged girls, as media accounts and other researchers have suggested, really obsessed with their bodies, or was this true of only a small but highly visible group? In order to move beyond a snapshot account of girls' lives, my colleagues Mark Nichter and Cheryl Ritenbaugh and I reasoned that we would need to follow girls over several years to see how they changed as they got older and were exposed to different social influences. Rather than study body image and dieting as isolated behaviors, we felt it was important to view these as embedded within the lifeworld of teens. The name of the study, the Teen Lifestyle Project, was specifically chosen to reflect this broader perspective.

In order to interest girls in participating in the Teen Lifestyle Project, we spoke before physical education classes for eighth- and ninth-grade girls in four urban schools in Tucson, Arizona. I introduced myself as an anthropologist from the University of Arizona and told the girls about the purpose of the study. Many expressed surprise that an anthropologist, a title that conjured up images of old bones and past civilizations, would want to talk to them. I explained that my interest was in teen culture and that I considered them to be experts in this field. By talking with each of them alone and in groups