

Book Review

Fat Talk: What Girls and Their Parents Say about Dieting. Mimi Nichter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA; 2000. 202 pp. +appendices.

Describing body image discourse of predominantly White adolescent girls, Mimi Nichter's *Fat Talk* evokes vivid images of the teenage experience. This small gem of an ethnography plunges readers into flashbacks of adolescence, while simultaneously emphasizing the insight and agency with which American teen girls today cope with eating, body image, and peer and family pressures. Nichter begins with a review of the contradictory societal assaults of the "Barbie phenomenon"—in which the media foster unrealistic notions of body size among American girls and women—with the simultaneous promotion of high-fat, jumbo-sized meals and snacks. In addition, Nichter challenges current assumptions of an "epidemic" of adolescent eating disorders, and critiques the American tendency to label adolescent behaviors as problems in need of solutions.

Fat Talk is based on data emerging from the multidisciplinary Teen Lifestyle Project based in Tucson, Arizona. Nichter and a group of female research assistants used a combination of focus groups and individual interviews to gather longitudinal data on 240 girls attending two middle and two high schools in Tucson. The ethnically diverse sample consisted of "Anglo" (70%), Latina (10%), and African American, Asian American, and Native American girls (5%). (Fifteen percent of girls did not specify an ethnicity.) As a family studies scholar, Nichter also expanded the study to include interviews with mothers of teenage girls, and she incorporates this material on family influences into her analysis.

According to Nichter, "fat talk" serves many purposes in American girls' lives. She describes fat talk as the dialogue between both girls and women in which body image and notions of "fatness" become linked to an overall sense of well being. Fat talk represents an idiom of distress, in which telling friends "I feel fat" means "I feel bad all over." But fat talk can also be a method for obtaining affirmative support from

peers, in an "I'm so fat—no, you're not" exchange. Engaging in fat talk also forestalls scrutiny of behaviors such as eating forbidden foods, and it serves a bonding function between mothers and daughters as both complain about their bodily attributes. According to Nichter, once she identified the existence of fat talk, she began to hear it everywhere.

Through careful in-depth interviews and food recall evaluations, Nichter dispels the myth of teenage dieting. Dieting becomes, like other aspects of adolescence, an experimental process in which actual caloric restriction is usually not maintained over long periods. Instead, Nichter describes the health-promoting concept of girls "watching" what they eat. Watching is described as an awareness of what is being consumed and an attention to nutrition. In this study, "watching" proved to be significantly more frequent than actual dieting, and girls who watched what they ate had better nutritional intake than either "dieters" or non-"watchers."

In an attempt to place adolescent body image in a family context, Nichter also investigates the impact of parents and siblings on girls' self image, both in terms of hereditary predisposition and mothers' dieting and "fat talk" behaviors. Nichter shows that comments made at home regarding body shape had a significant impact on girls' body images. Although girls' body images are often reflections of mothers' perceived desires and attitudes, many girls in the study also described the disparaging remarks made by fathers about their appearances. Unfortunately, fathers, as well as other significant male figures, are only ancillary subjects of this text; yet, their negative contribution to girls' body image perceptions may be profound. Nichter shows how teenage girls' body image is intrinsically linked to the desire to be attractive to boys. This extends beyond adolescence, as one girl in the study describes her father's separation from her mother until she loses weight. Interviewing both fathers and teenage boys about their perceptions of female bodies, body images, and dieting habits might have contributed useful insights about the nature of girls' behavior within a wider intergender context. Although this is a significant lacuna, Nichter does argue

forcefully for the need to foster parental awareness of the potential deleterious effects of critical commentary on daughters' body images.

One of the most important findings of Nichter's study is the ethnic variation in adolescent body image between African American and "Anglo" girls. In general, African American girls in the study had more positive body images and believed in the notion of "making what you have work for you." Given the location of the study in Tucson (with its significant Latina and Native American populations), the study might have also addressed broader considerations of ethnicity and social class and their impacts on girls' body images. Readers are left to wonder if there is actually no variation between "Anglo" girls and girls of other ethnic backgrounds in the sample, or whether differences would have emerged through greater inclusion of south Tucson's minority schools in the study. Furthermore, significant class variation in desired body image may occur among African American girls themselves. Nonetheless, the explicit comparison of Black and White girls in this study yields significant findings, leading Nichter to stress the importance of creating culturally sensitive research tools.

The book concludes in a fairly unique manner by describing a health intervention designed explicitly by the researchers to take advantage of the positive body image attributes of African American girls. In the intervention, which was directed primarily at White girls in Tucson, African American girls shared their positive body image perceptions and their philosophy of "taking advantage of what you have rather than spending wasted effort wishing to be someone else." The intervention also answered questions raised during the earlier interviews and focus groups, includ-

ing discussions of nutritious eating, exercise, and ways to emphasize positive physical attributes. Because of the limited scope of the intervention, the difficulties of fostering widespread cultural change in female body image were not addressed. Nonetheless, this initial attempt to enhance body image among teenage girls was well received by the study participants and could be replicated in a limited fashion in other middle and high schools across the country.

In conclusion, *Fat Talk* provides a unique window into the lives of middle-class, adolescent girls who are struggling to make sense of their bodies in "body-intolerant" American society. *Fat Talk* is sure to be enthusiastically received by both high-school and college-aged students because of its relative brevity, its accessible writing style, and its familiar subject matter. Furthermore, this is a "must read" book for parents of teenage girls, many of whom may need to assess their own contributions to their daughters' unhealthy body images. As a text in psychology, sociology, anthropology, and women's studies courses, *Fat Talk* will make a compelling contribution to discussions of female body image, offering its readers vivid images and the voices of girls "living in" their bodies in contemporary American society.

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