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## *“I’ll Die for the Revolution but Don’t Ask Me Not to Diet”: Feminism and the Continuing Stigmatization of Obesity*

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*Sometimes I think we’ve all gone crazy. Sometimes I feel like a feminist at a Right-to-Life conference, an atheist in Puritan New England, a socialist in the Reagan White House. Sometimes I fear that fat women have become our culture’s last undefeated heretics, our greatest collective nightmare made all-too-solid flesh. I worry—despite our new ethos of sexual freedom—that female bodies are as terrifying and repulsive as ever, as greatly in need of purification and mortification. Certainly these days, when I hear people talking about temptation and sin, guilt and shame, I know they’re referring to food rather than sex. . . . Everything, for women, boils down to body size.*

—Carol Sternhell (1985, p. 62, emphasis added)

**A** FRIEND OF MINE was teaching an advanced seminar in women’s studies. No matter what topic she covered, her students had a more radical analysis than she did. With one exception: When she discussed women’s weight, the students did not believe that this had anything to do with feminism. These students’ attitudes are reflected by feminists in general. Why haven’t feminists focused on hatred of fat in our society? This chapter examines the social factors that influence women’s feelings about their appearance and body size. Feminists have fought for women’s rights in many arenas, including women’s rights to

control their bodies. Women's body weight has yet to be included in this fight and is still under the influence of the mainstream media and the economy.

In a society that ranks people according to their financial value to society, a woman's appearance may be her most precious asset. To be female in the United States is to be acutely aware of one's appearance. Rubin (cited in Freeman, 1986) asked women to describe themselves, and found that most began by describing their appearance, even when they were highly successful in their professions. "Looksism," prejudice or discrimination based on appearance, has an adverse effect on all women who are not white, middle-class, heterosexual, young, thin, and able-bodied, as well as on many who are. Given the importance of physical appearance norms for women, it is vital that feminists consider all the ways in which women's appearance has been proscribed and controlled by social institutions.

Faludi (1991) and Wolf (1991) have argued that the feminist movement, rather than reducing the emphasis on women's appearance, has created a backlash that has heightened attention to women's bodies. The following sections examine the cult of appearance, with attention to the role played by feminism.

## INTRODUCTION: FACTS ABOUT WEIGHT

"Obesity" is generally defined as a body weight 20% or more above stated ideals (U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare, 1979). Most people in the United States have seen these height and weight tables and know how much they "should" weigh. In fact, the tables were normed on a population of life insurance policy holders; are slanted toward affluent Caucasians of northern European descent residing on the East Coast; and are unrepresentative of people who do not fit this demographic profile. Furthermore, the tables were normed on young adults of both genders, whereas most women gain weight in middle age (see Bennett & Gurin, 1982, for a review of this literature). Regardless of actual weight, most females, especially adolescents, consider themselves "too fat." In contrast, the self-perceptions of men and adolescent boys are more closely related to their actual size (Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1988).

In Western society, it is universally believed that the "causes" of obesity are eating too much and exercising too little. It is, of course, true that with sufficient food restriction everyone loses weight, although women can survive starvation longer than men because of women's greater protective layers of body fat. But researchers have not found

differences in the food intake of fat and thin people—even with methods that control for social desirability effects, such as the observation of fat and thin diners in cafeterias, or random home visits and examination of food available in fat and thin people's kitchens (see Wooley, Wooley, & Dyrenforth, 1979, for a review).

Weight differences appear to reflect differences in physiologically determined "set points" (Nisbett, 1972), which are unique for each individual. One person's set point may be 80 pounds, and that of another may be 350 pounds. Set point mechanisms counteract individual efforts to change weight through dieting; in fact, repeated dieting may result in a *higher* set point, as the body adjusts to this modern form of "famine" by storing more fat (Brownell, Greenwood, Stellar, & Shrager, 1986; Polivy & Herman, 1983). Set point notwithstanding, millions of women and girls in the United States diet. One recent survey found 63% of high school girls to be on diets (Rosen & Gross, 1987), compared with only 16.2% of boys. The longer the follow-up period, the more weight former dieters have regained, suggesting that it is virtually impossible to maintain weight losses for long periods of time (Bennett, 1986; Brownell & Jeffery, 1987; Garner & Wooley, 1991).

In Western society, it is strongly believed that it is unhealthy to be fat. The health care professions spend much time and money convincing the public that obesity is a health problem. In fact, research purporting to show a relationship between weight and various health risks is currently the subject of considerable controversy. For example, studies often fail to control for income and may suffer from a number of confounding variables, since in Western nations fat people are poorer than thin people. These studies compare the rich and poor on health risks, and poor people do not have the same access to health insurance and preventive care. Fat people diet more than thin people, and dieting itself can result in a number of health risks—including the very health risks often associated with obesity, such as hypertension, high cholesterol, and diabetes (Polivy & Herman, 1983). A recent article in the *New England Journal of Medicine* (Lissner et al., 1991) reported that people who dieted and regained weight had higher mortality rates than those who did not diet and stayed at the same (high) weight. In addition, fat people are subjected to stigmatization and discrimination, and the stress of such oppression can result in stress-related health problems.

## THE STIGMA OF WEIGHT FOR WOMEN

Given the facts described above, why do women continue to diet, and why does the culture encourage them to do so? Obesity is highly stigma-

tized in Western society, particularly for women. Beginning in nursery school, children show a dislike of fatness, rating figure drawings of fat children more negatively than drawings of children with physical disabilities (Goodman, Richardson, Dornbusch, & Hastorf, 1963). This stigmatization continues in elementary school, adolescence, and adulthood, and involves the attribution of a number of negative social and academic/occupational qualities. It extends to attitudes held by professionals, including mental health professionals (Agell & Rothblum, 1991; Young & Powell, 1985), nutritionists (Maiman, Wang, Becker, Finlay, & Simonson, 1979), employers (Rothblum, Brand, Miller, & Oetjen, 1990), physicians (Maddox & Liederman, 1969), and even landlords (Karris, 1977).

Antifat prejudice is so acceptable in our society that Crandall (1991) has suggested that it is a better method for studying discrimination and prejudice than is racism or sexism, since the latter are influenced by social desirability factors. Furthermore, unlike skin color or gender, weight is thought to be under voluntary control, so that fat people are held responsible for their condition and for changing it (DeJong, 1980; Maddox, Back, & Liederman, 1968).

One consequence of antifat attitudes in the United States has been the downward economic mobility of fat people, especially women. The Midtown Manhattan Study (Moore, Stunkard, & Srole, 1962) found that 30% of women in the lowest socioeconomic group were obese, compared with only 4% in the highest-income group. The comparable figures for men were 33% and 22%, respectively—still different, but not as much as the figures for women. This study also found fatness in women to be associated with downward social mobility: Fat women tended to have lower incomes than their parents, whereas thin women had higher incomes than their parents.

Why are fat women poor and downwardly socially mobile? First, research has shown that thin women have a greater chance of being accepted by elite colleges, such as Ivy League and Seven Sisters colleges, than do fat women, even when their credentials (e.g., grades, SAT scores, IQ scores, extracurricular activities, parental income, health, and motivation to attend college) are identical (Canning & Mayer, 1966, 1967). Furthermore, when they do attend college, fat women are less likely to receive family financial support for attending college than are thin women; this remains true even when parents' education, income, race, family size, and number of children are factored out (Crandall, 1991). Education is an important prerequisite for success in most careers. Both of these studies found weight differences to have less impact for men.

Studies that have examined weight and employment have also

found discrimination against fat women. My colleagues and I (Rothblum et al., 1990) surveyed over 400 male and female members of a national association for fat persons about their employment; we found that the members had suffered considerable employment discrimination. Many had been turned down for jobs, denied promotions or raises, denied benefits, demoted, fired or pressured to resign, questioned about weight, or urged to lose weight. There was a positive correlation between weight and degree of discrimination. Furthermore, women experienced such employment discrimination at lower weights than did men. Weight was also correlated with more instances of victimization, such as discrimination during junior high, high school, or college, and lower self-confidence in work-related settings. Fat people more often indicated concealing their bodies (e.g., using the telephone rather than meeting in person) as a way of avoiding employment discrimination (Rothblum et al., 1990).

Other studies have focused on employers. Roe and Eickwort (1976) asked employers of women who were either current or former welfare recipients whether they would hire fat women, and about 16% responded that they would not. Furthermore, nearly half of these employers stated that obesity constituted a medical basis for denial of employment. We (Rothblum, Miller, & Garbutt, 1988) showed college students job resumés accompanied by photographs of either fat or thin women (matched for physical attractiveness) or written descriptions (not matched for physical attractiveness) of fat or thin women. No significant difference was found in response to photographs, but students who read resumés accompanied by written descriptions of fat women rated them lower on supervisory potential, self-discipline, professional appearance, personal hygiene, and ability to perform a physically strenuous job than did students who read the *identical* resumés when accompanied by descriptions of thin women. Larkin and Pines (1979) showed videotapes of either fat or thin men and women to college students. Students who saw videotapes of fat people were less likely to recommend that they be hired, and more likely to indicate that they themselves should be hired for a job, than did students who saw videotapes of thin people.

One way for women to achieve upward social mobility is to marry wealth, and it is likely that thin women marry wealthier men than do fat women. Research has indicated that men's status depends to a greater extent on the attractiveness of their female partners than on their own physical attractiveness (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). Since being fat is considered extremely unattractive in Western society (Tiggemann & Rothblum, 1988), fat women are probably less likely to marry "up."

Despite the documentation of educational and employment discrimination against fat women, it is still widely believed that poor people

are fat because they do not know much about nutrition, because they cannot afford to exercise, because they are undereducated, or because they cannot afford healthy foods (see Rothblum, 1992, for a review). In short, most people believe that *poverty causes obesity*, when in fact research suggests that *obesity causes poverty*. The former theory holds fat people responsible for their condition, whereas the latter indicates that fat people are systematically denied economic success.

### WOMEN'S APPEARANCE NORMS THROUGH HISTORY AND ACROSS CULTURES

As old paintings, photographs, and writings attest, female fashions in appearance and dress have changed dramatically across time and place; nevertheless, commonalities in norms can be found. Women have been expected to look and dress in ways that immobilize them. The constricting norms have been thought, by people of each time period, to be the invention of the women themselves. Without conformity to these norms, women have been considered ugly or immoral by men and blocked from marriage or otherwise functioning in society. Often, as noted by Brownmiller (1984), the fashion has been to extend and exaggerate the smallness of a feature that is naturally smaller in women to begin with (e.g., size of feet, body weight). The constricted body parts or articles of clothing have been considered highly erotic by men. And finally, in many instances the medical profession has endorsed a practice as health-promoting, while simultaneously treating large numbers of women for medical complications resulting from it. Three examples—foot binding, corsets, and genital mutilation—reflect the commonalities described above.

For a thousand years, the feet of young upper-class Chinese girls were bound in order to break and deform the bones of the feet and create 3-inch "lotus hooks." As adults, these women could not walk and had to be carried. Daly (1990) has described how Chinese men portrayed women as the inventors and supporters of this practice. Without conforming to this, upper-class women could not marry. Most importantly, the maimed feet were considered the height of erotica by men. Both Brownmiller (1984) and Daly (1990) have written about male sexual attraction to the "hobbled" women.

The corset was an article of clothing designed both to improve the appearance and to strengthen the torso of Western women. The corset applied between 20 and 80 pounds of pressure on the abdomen, caused difficulty breathing, and often led to fainting (Brownmiller, 1984). The medical profession endorsed the corset as improving women's weak

waists and spines, when in fact it caused women's muscles to atrophy. As Brownmiller has pointed out, the corset and its relatives—bras, girdles, and garters—have remained items of erotica for men. It is probably no coincidence that the media focused on feminists in the 1960s and 1970s as "bra burners."

Throughout much of history, some women's genitals were cut off if they were too large (see Hosken, 1982, for a review). Female genital mutilation is still practiced in most central African nations today, affecting 60–90 million women (Lightfoot-Klein, 1989). In some nations of central Africa, the clitoris of a young girl is removed because it is thought to be a small penis, and thus the girl cannot be considered female until the clitoris is removed. In some nations (e.g., the Sudan, Egypt, and Djibouti), an even more drastic procedure is used to remove the clitoris, the labia minora, and the inner parts of the labia majora. The remaining skin is sewn shut, leaving only a hole the size of a matchstick for urination and menstruation. This procedure is done to provide a "chastity belt" for women until marriage (Lightfoot-Klein, 1989).

Most women in these nations are unaware that women in other parts of the world have not been "circumcised" in this way. The procedures are performed on young girls by female midwives, and are considered to be something that women do to one another. Some nations have made these practices illegal, yet their leaders complain that the practices continue because women want them. Women are not considered marriageable unless their genitals are mutilated in this way. Furthermore, women are told that their genitals are dangerous—that the clitoris can poison a man if it touches his penis during intercourse (Lightfoot-Klein, 1989). Women are also told that intact female genitals will cause voracious sexuality, bad odor, and complications during childbirth. In fact, the removal of genitals and the sewing together of the remaining skin cause odor as a result of menstrual and urinary retention, and lead to complications during childbirth. In urban areas, physicians and nurses (including missionaries) perform the operation, and there have been recent cases of European physicians' performing the operation on the daughters of African diplomats in Europe (Lightfoot-Klein, 1989).

These examples reflect important elements of social control of women's appearance. Under the guise of fashion—and fashion that was supposedly dictated by other women—women's behavior and appearance have been radically restricted. Wolf (1991) has also emphasized that what is important about women's beauty norms is that they affect *behavior* as much as appearance. Thus, women with bound feet cannot walk, and women with mutilated genitals cannot express their sexuality. The restrictions were often praised as healthy by the medical profession, even when they harmed women. At the same time, the changes in wom-

en's appearance made them appear less like men by accentuating what was already smaller in women's bodies (smaller feet, smaller waist, the clitoris as smaller than the penis), and this difference was eroticized by men. As Brownmiller (1984) has stated,

Each device of beautification restricted [a woman's] freedom and weakened her strength; each provided a feminine obstacle course through which she endeavored to move with artificial grace. Each instrument of discomfort was believed by her to be a superior emblem of her privileged position and a moral requisite for correct behavior, and each ingenious constriction was sentimentalized by men as erotic in its own right, apart from the woman it was supposed to improve. (p. 33)

Society's strict appearance norms have had disadvantages for women (e.g., constriction of movement, health risks) and advantages for men (e.g., erotic enhancement, forced chastity of women).

## WOMEN'S APPEARANCE NORMS TODAY

*An angry fat woman  
is a dangerous thing.*  
—Karen W. Stimson  
(1991, p. 5)

In prehistoric times, goddess figures were both fat and pregnant, linking obesity with sexuality and fertility. In Victorian times, obesity in women was considered sexual, women's "silken layer" (Wolf, 1991, p. 192). In poor countries where large numbers of people die of malnutrition and infectious disease, thinness is not desired (Rothblum, 1990). Until the 20th century, women in the United States were considered beautiful if they had large breasts and large hips—symbols of reproductive ability (Ewen, 1988).

The positive view of body fat that prevailed for so much of history gave way in the 20th century in the United States to fat aversion. While the suffragists struggled to obtain new rights for women, the beauty ideal shifted to the thin and flat-chested "flappers." Hesse-Biber (1991) contends that the term "flapper" was also used by the media to ridicule the struggles of women by suggesting trivial, busy activity. After a period of return to traditional values, in the 1960s women renewed the struggle for political equality, and the famous fashion model Twiggy became the beauty ideal in the media. Since female models have continued to decrease in weight (Garner, Garfinkel, Schwarz, & Thompson, 1980), even Twiggy appears plump to us now! Wolf (1991) quoted a

description of Twiggy that appeared in *Vogue*: "Twiggy is called Twiggy because she looks as though a strong gale wind would snap her in two and dash her to the ground" (p. 184). Thus, the fight for political and legal equality was accompanied by the media's portrayal of the ideal woman as weak and powerless. As Hesse-Biber (1991) has stated,

Ironically, when women are demanding "more space" in terms of equality of opportunity, there is a cultural demand that they "should shrink." . . . Thinness may be considered a sign of conforming to a constricting feminine image, whereas greater weight may convey a strong, powerful image. (p. 178)

When women convey their power, men may be sexually drawn to female bodies that are childlike and helpless, rather than strong (Chernin, cited in Hesse-Biber, 1991).

Not surprisingly, given the historical precedents, the health care profession has enforced the social control of women's weight with gusto. Life insurance companies state that obesity shortens people's lives; the U.S. Surgeon General encourages weight reduction, ignoring the dangers of dieting and the limits imposed by set point. Being fat is equated with being ill. We take the relationship between obesity and illness so thoroughly for granted that it is difficult to conceive of fat, healthy women. Most females diet to improve their physical appearance and to increase their appeal, not to improve their health (Berman, 1975). This was evidenced in a study (Rodin, Silberstein, & Striegel-Moore, 1984) in which children with juvenile diabetes were asked whether they would prefer to remain diabetic and thin or to become healthy and obese. Most indicated that they would prefer the former. Furthermore, dieting has resulted in an epidemic of eating disorders among adolescent and young adult women. Nevertheless, medical texts and health professionals continue to promote dieting as healthy and obesity as dangerous.

In sum, the current obsession with women's weight is no different from the obsessional concerns in previous centuries and in other cultures. As Wolf (1991) has stated,

A cultural fixation on female thinness is not an obsession about female beauty but an obsession about female obedience. . . . The nations seize with compulsive attention on this melodrama because women and men understand that it is not about cholesterol or heart rate or the disruption of a line of tailoring, but about how much social freedom women are going to get away with or concede. The media's convulsive analysis of the endless saga of female fat and the battle to vanquish it are actually bulletins of the sex war: what women are gaining or losing in it, and how fast. (p. 187)

## INSTITUTIONS OF SOCIAL CONTROL: MAINTAINING STANDARDS OF WOMEN'S APPEARANCE

Why does society mandate oppressive and restrictive practices against women? A number of social institutions stand to gain from women's powerlessness and immobility. Two are examined here: the economy and the media.

### The Economy

*There are no ugly women, only lazy ones.*  
—Store window sign, Burlington, Vt.

The products and practices that maintain women's appearance are costly. The current market reflects a \$33 billion per year diet industry, a \$20 billion cosmetic industry, a \$300 million cosmetic surgery industry, and a \$7 billion pornography industry (Wolf, 1991). The economy would have much to lose if women stopped conforming to society's appearance norms, but the economic necessity of this spending is kept invisible. It is vital to the economy of beauty that women believe that they can enhance their attractiveness by purchasing products designed to change their hair, clothing, body shape, and weight. These methods of enhancing beauty usually involve abrupt departures from natural appearance. Women do not naturally have hairless armpits or red nails, for example. Women who engage in "makeovers" indicate that their motives are to be like others and to be liked by others; that is, they want to conform to social norms (Freeman, 1986).

In recent years, multinational companies have expanded the beauty industries worldwide, so that even poor nations are inundated with cosmetic and fashion products. Simultaneously, these companies have tried to market the products in similar ways, so that now it is possible to see the same products advertised in the same ways in all continents (Chapkis, 1986). Women's appearance itself has been labeled an economic asset. Wolf (1991, p. 20) cites expressions (e.g., "A woman looks like a million dollars," "She's a first-class beauty," "Her face is her fortune") that link feminine beauty with economic advancement. In a society in which men earn more than women in nearly every job category, the selling of bodies is a noteworthy exception. Female prostitutes and fashion models, for example, earn more than do men (Wolf, 1991). In sum, the economy has much to gain from women as consumers, and much to lose if women both understand and become part of the system.

### The Media

*Spend all you have for loveliness.*  
—Sara Teasdale, 1921 (quoted in Partnow, 1982, p. 195)

The mass media barrage us with messages about attractiveness. Dermer and Thiel (1975) examined 150 women appearing in magazine advertisements, and found only one—advertising a mop—to be of average rather than high attractiveness. Downs and Harrison (1985) categorized over 4000 television commercials as related or unrelated to physical attractiveness. The authors found television to be "teeming with attractiveness-based messages" (p. 17). Specifically, viewers could expect to find a message about attractiveness "on every 2.1 personal care ads, 1.1 clothing ads, 0.5 weight reduction ads, 1.2 cosmetics ads, and 0.8 physical fitness ads. Overall, some form of attractiveness message was observed in one out of every 3.8 commercials" (p. 13). This study also found that the greatest proportion of attractiveness messages was delivered by female actors and male voiceovers. Thus, women symbolize the attractiveness of the product, while men give the authoritative message.

Media portrayals establish standards of attractiveness. *Charlie's Angels*, a television program popular in the 1970s that starred three extremely attractive women, was one benchmark. Kenrick and Gutierrez (1980) wondered whether male college students watching *Charlie's Angels* would, in response to the implied standard, rate other women as less attractive. While *Charlie's Angels* aired, two male experimenters entered a dormitory room, and one said: "Listen, could I just interrupt you guys for 30 seconds? We're having a major philosophical dispute here and we need to do an informal survey to resolve the question. You see, we have a friend coming to town this week and we want to fix him up with a date, but we can't decide whether to fix him up with her or not, so we decided to conduct a survey" (p. 133). They then showed the students a photograph of a woman. Those students who had been interrupted while watching *Charlie's Angels* rated the woman's photograph as less attractive than did those students who saw the identical photograph but had been interrupted while watching another television program.

Of course, it could be argued that male college students who choose to watch television programs featuring beautiful women tend to have higher standards of attractiveness at all times. This occurred to the researchers too. Accordingly, they asked another group of male college students to come to an experimental session, and randomly assigned them to rate a photograph of a woman (the same used in the previous study) either with or without a magazine advertisement featuring a

beautiful female model. Once again, the male students who first saw the magazine model rated the photograph of the woman more negatively than did those who did not see the magazine ad. Thus, media portrayals of beautiful women seem to raise male students' standards of attractiveness, so that the average woman no longer looks as good.

Umiker-Sebeok (1981) examined media portrayals of women over the lifespan. Describing the messages received by children, she states:

Clothing, hair styles, nonverbal behavior, and size relationships combine to associate females with smallness, weakness, and subordination, that is, with characteristics of appeal rather than threat, passivity as opposed to aggressivity. . . . Boys, on the other hand, are more likely to be associated with threatening behavior, defense, strength, rationality, and leadership. These differences become more pronounced as the children become older. (pp. 212-213)

Adolescent girls are portrayed as innocent and childlike, still protected by their fathers but on the way to becoming sexual beings (Umiker-Sebeok, 1981). The adolescent girl is often shown as vulnerable, sexually alluring, and frantically outgoing. Portrayals of young adult women often show them doing nothing but displaying themselves. Male adults display ownership of women by towering over women or grasping them. The occasional middle-aged or elderly woman is shown as clumsy, plump, and comical, and nearly always engaged in domestic activity.

We have become so accustomed to images of attractive women in the media that sales pitches are not as persuasive if they lack female beauty. Loken and Howard-Pitney (1988) examined the effectiveness of cigarette advertisements with or without photographs of attractive female models, and found that female college students (whether or not they smoked) rated ads that used female models as more persuasive and attractive, but as less credible, than ads that showed only the product.

The media would have much to lose if women ceased to be influenced by its messages. Wolf (1991) indicated that in the late 1960s, women began spending less for clothing and fashion; sales of women's magazines in Great Britain decreased from 555.3 million in 1965 to 407.5 million copies in 1981. Advertisers, alarmed by this drop in their prime audience, changed their message so that the focus was on the body rather than on clothes. Steinem (1983) has described the power that the advertising media wield even over feminist magazines such as *Ms.*

## PHYSICAL ATTRACTIVENESS: WHAT IS BEAUTIFUL IS GOOD

. . . the beautiful seems right  
By force of beauty, and the feeble wrong  
Because of weakness.  
—Elizabeth Barrett Browning, 1850  
(quoted in Partnow, 1982, p. 19)

It is important to examine exactly what messages institutions of social control want to convey about women's appearance. Feminist scholars and social psychology researchers have examined the importance of physical attractiveness in general, as well as its relationship to social, sexual, and occupational roles for women. Freeman (1986) has described how physical appearance is gender-linked. The word "beauty" refers specifically to physical characteristics and also suggests femininity. In contrast, the word "handsome" refers to behavior, such as strength and accomplishment, as well as to physical attractiveness. As Berger has stated (quoted in Schur, 1984, p. 66, emphasis added): "*Men act, and women appear.* Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at."

One of the most comprehensive analyses of physical attractiveness was conducted by Berscheid and Walster (1974). They coined the phrase "what is beautiful is good" (p. 169) to summarize the phenomenon in which people associate large numbers of positive characteristics with physical attractiveness. Thus, physically attractive women and men were rated as more kind, sensitive, sexually attractive and responsive, interesting, strong, modest, socially skilled, extraverted, nurturant, and exciting than were unattractive women and men. Furthermore, attractive women and men were rated as having more prestigious occupations, leading more fulfilling lives, having happier marriages, and being "masters of their own fate" to a greater degree (pp. 170-171). Although it is not clear whether most of these beliefs are true, there is some evidence that physically attractive women report having more sexual partners and say they have been in love more often than do less attractive women (Berscheid & Walster, 1974). Also, attractive people are less likely to be found guilty in jury trials than are unattractive people, and are given more favorable trial outcomes (Rodin et al., 1984).

Berscheid and Walster (1974) also examined specific attributes associated with attractiveness in the United States, such as height in men. Taller male college students were found to receive higher starting salaries after graduation. Recruiters stated a preference for taller male students. College students judged a man to be taller when he was described as successful than when the same man was described as less successful. And

Berscheid and Walster noted that in every presidential campaign in this century up to the time of their writing, the taller candidate was elected president. Only height was judged to be more important in males; all other body parts or characteristics were of greater concern in women. Women are more conscious of, and more desirous of changing, their weight, legs, hips, thighs, buttocks, waist, and overall appearance, than are men (Jackson, Sullivan, & Hymes, 1987).

Women in previous centuries were often considered to be asexual. Feminists such as Rowbotham (1973) have demonstrated the role of the media in creating the idea of romantic love and sexuality held by women today. Sexual pleasure and sexual relationships are portrayed as being so important that nothing can compensate for their lack. It is also suggested that women who fail to conform to society's norms will not attain these sexual and romantic heights. Men's status depends more on the attractiveness of their female partner than on their own attractiveness (Berscheid & Walster, 1974), suggesting that women will be concerned with their own attractiveness, whereas men will be concerned with the physical attractiveness of women.

In fact, men do spend a great deal of time looking at women. One research team (Rosenwasser, Adams, & Tansil, 1983) asked men and women to look at slides of men and women. The slides showed people clothed, in bathing suits, or nude. Unknown to the viewers, the slide projector was connected to a computer that recorded how much time people spent gazing at each slide. Men spent more time gazing at all slides of women, and women spent the most time gazing at women who were clothed. No one spent much time gazing at slides of men.

One way of studying the effects of physical attractiveness on sexual appeal is to examine the "personals columns" of newspapers and magazines. Harrison and Saced (1977) examined 800 such ads placed by heterosexual women and men to determine (1) what information people offered about themselves (which the researchers termed "revelations"); and (2) what information people required in return (which they termed "stipulations"). They found that women were more likely to seek partners who were older than themselves and to seek financial security, whereas men were more likely to seek partners who were younger than themselves and to seek attractiveness. Women offered attractiveness, and men offered financial security; furthermore, women sought sincerity, and men offered marriage. Thus, women offered what men sought, and vice versa. This study also found that both women and men who claimed they were attractive were more likely to seek good-looking partners. Women who claimed to be beautiful were more likely to seek financially secure partners and to ask for their photographs. The authors state:

Why was it that good-looking advertisers sought good-looking partners but rich advertisers did not seek rich partners? Perhaps it is useful to make a distinction between noncompensatory and compensatory social assets. An asset is noncompensatory if one partner's possession cannot make up for the other partner's lacking. Appearance is an example of a noncompensatory asset—no matter how good-looking one is, it won't make up for an ugly partner. An asset is compensatory if one person's surplus can make up for the other person's deficit. Money is an example: although it's always nice to have more money, a well-to-do person can compensate for a partner's poverty. (p. 263)

Franzoi and Herzog (1987) found that women's body esteem was related to sexual attractiveness, weight, and physical condition, whereas men's body esteem was related to physical attractiveness, upper-body strength, and physical condition. The authors concluded that these body concerns may be related to women's socialization to regard men as material providers, and men's socialization to regard women as sexual providers. Thus, women advertise their physical and sexual attractiveness in personals columns, and men advertise their financial and occupational attractiveness.

## PHYSICAL APPEARANCE NORMS AND FEMINISM

*Wendy is a feminist. When I grow up, I am going to be just like her except I'll dress better.*

—Eight-year old girl quoted in Chapkis (1986, p. 7)

Can feminists be attractive? The answer to this question demonstrates a fascinating relationship between social acceptance of a political movement and perceived attractiveness. When women first began to demand suffrage in the 19th century, the media focused on the ugly feminist. Wolf (1991) states: "Lucy Stone herself, whom supporters saw as 'a prototype of womanly grace . . . fresh and fair as the morning' was derided by detractors with 'the usual report' about Victorian feminists: 'a big masculine woman, wearing boots, smoking a cigar, swearing like a trooper'" (p. 18).

In 1975, Goldberg, Gottesdiener, and Abramson published a study in which female college students were first asked about their attitudes on "women's liberation" (about half were for it, half against) and then photographed. Next, female and male college students were asked to rate the photographs for physical attractiveness. The results indicated no relationship between the photographs' ratings and views on

feminism. However, when the experimenters asked a different group of students to guess which of the women in the photographs supported "women's liberation," they found that both female and male college students rated the *unattractive* women in the photographs as feminists (p. 114).

Four years later attitudes had shifted (Johnson, Holborn, & Turcotte, 1979). Undergraduates were shown photographs of women and asked to predict which ones were supporters and which critics of the feminist movement, and which were active or passive supporters (p. 228). Both female and male students selected the more attractive women as *supporters* of the feminist movement! Female students (but not males) also selected more attractive women as more active participants in the movement (p. 229).

Men's attitudes about preferred physical characteristics in males have also been found to be related to attitudes toward women. Maier and Lavrakas (1984) asked male college students to rate male silhouettes (arms, upper trunk, lower trunk, and legs), and also gave them a questionnaire about attitudes toward women. They found that men who had negative attitudes toward women preferred a "tapering V" body. Women, in fact, did not seem to prefer a "tapering V" body in men as much as men did (pp. 425-426). The authors note: "If males have negative attitudes toward women (some of which may be related to a fear of femininity), one way to exercise control is by developing a strong body" (p. 431).

Over time, the negative stereotype of the ugly "women's libber" has changed. The studies reviewed here suggest the importance of attitude similarity in perceived attractiveness; as college students are increasingly endorsing feminist values, they are also viewing others with similar attitudes as attractive. This finding generalizes to other kinds of attitudes as well. Berscheid and Walster (1974) found that students who were placed in discussion groups rated group members who shared their viewpoints as more attractive than those who disagreed with them (p. 175).

What can account for the change in the public's view of the attractiveness of feminists? Feminists have argued that the media have cleverly brought images of the women's movement into product promotion. As Rowbotham (1973) has stated,

... if a section of middle-class women manage to alter their position in society through agitation there is no reason why [advertisements] should not present these women with a spurious sense of liberation by inverting male-female roles in certain cases, and presenting men as commodities. (p. 423)

Women have feared the feminist movement precisely because of its association in the mass media with ugliness and inattention to appearance. I have been amazed by the number of women who have told me that they cannot be feminists because they like lace, and also the number who have told me that they are feminists despite liking lace. Of all the images available to women, it always seems to be lace that is mentioned. Imagine my surprise when I saw the following in a local newspaper:

I am a flexible feminist. That doesn't mean I do back flips in front of Planned Parenthood. It doesn't mean I am half-hearted about supporting the women's movement. It does mean that when I march on Washington in a prochoice demonstration, underneath my sloppy sweater and oversized overalls I may sport a set of lacy lingerie. (Older, 1991, p. 11)

What is conveyed by the image of lace, and what has it come to symbolize during the feminist movement? Lace is flimsy, vulnerable, sexy—the epitome of feminine apparel. It is acceptable to be a feminist, but only if one still appears feminine. It is the symbolism that is critical; no one can see the lacy lingerie of the prochoice protester, but she knows it is there. Women's refusal to wear appropriate clothing is more threatening to the institutions of social control than any actions or words, however radical.

Wolf (1991) has presented convincing evidence that the more legal and political rights women gain, the greater the backlash by institutions of social control. She states:

During the past decade, women breached the power structure; meanwhile, eating disorders rose exponentially and cosmetic surgery became the fastest-growing medical specialty. During the past five years, consumer spending doubled, pornography became the main media category, ahead of legitimate films and records combined, and thirty-three thousand American women told researchers that they would rather lose ten to fifteen pounds than achieve any other goal. More women have more money and power and scope and legal recognition than we have ever had before; but in terms of how we feel about ourselves *physically*, we may actually be worse off than our unliberated grandmothers. Recent research consistently shows that inside the majority of the West's controlled, attractive, successful working women, there is a secret "underlife" poisoning our freedom; infused with notions of beauty, it is a dark vein of self-hatred, physical obsessions, terror of aging, and dread of lost control. (p. 10)

Women who want to resist social norms often resist cosmetic rituals, and may stop wearing makeup, allow hair to grow under their arms or on their legs, and go without a bra. Freeman (1986) states: "[A] woman who fails to play her proper part, even through a trivial act like

the omission of a bra, will soon be seen as a threat to the whole system" (p. 52). As noted earlier, it is not surprising that feminists were labeled "bra burners" even when the issues they advocated covered a wide range of sociopolitical topics. According to feminist historians (Brownmiller, 1984), feminists never burned bras; the image was probably created by the media to correspond to the burning of draft cards by men and, by comparison, to trivialize women's concerns. Men protested war, while women protested feminine clothing.

Feminists have adopted certain appearance norms to indicate group membership, one of which is refusal to shave body hair. As Brownmiller (1984) has argued, hair has been used throughout history to make political statements, and a hairless body has come to be a major component of femininity. Even short hair on women's heads has been considered an act of defiance. In 1915, Charlotte Perkins Gilman conceived of a futuristic society in which women were free from men and wore their hair short (Brownmiller, 1984). Basow (1991) asked over 200 women who were members of professional organizations why they did or did not shave body hair. Women who shaved did so to be feminine and attractive, and because it was the norm. Women who did not shave body hair frequently identified themselves as feminists and as lesbians.

### SUMMARY: WOMEN'S APPEARANCE AS SOCIAL CONTROL

*It is very little to me to have the right to vote, to own property, et cetera, if I may not keep my body, and its uses, in my absolute right.*

—Lucy Stone, 1855 (quoted in Wolf, 1991, p. 11)

Mary Daly (1984) has examined strategies for changing women's rights in a patriarchal society, defining "plastic passions" as those that preoccupy and enervate women and result in feelings of disconnectedness. Daly states:

The plastic passions, moreover, are endless in the sense that they cause those whom they infect/infest to feel deprived of purpose, end, final causality. Whereas genuine passions or e-motions move the woman experiencing them out of the fixed/framed state, plastic passions stop her dead. They function to hide the agents of her oppression/repression. (p. 201)

Daly's advice: Women need to collectively remember (a process she refers to as "metamemory," p. 357) other ways in which women have

been oppressed in the past (e.g., foot binding, corsets) and express their outrage.

The feminist and social science literatures indicate that physical appearance has important consequences for women, who are looked at and objectified more than are men. Women's attractiveness has important consequences for their social and interpersonal success, and even for the success of the men in whose company they are seen. In this regard, the media perpetuate stereotypes about physical appearance and set norms for attractiveness. Women who are not Caucasian, heterosexual, able-bodied, and young are viewed as less desirable in U.S. society, and are also made invisible by their virtual absence in the media. Women are expected to invest enormous amounts of time and money in products and procedures (e.g., weight loss) intended to enhance their beauty.

Women's appearance norms are notable for the submissive status they indicate. Physical characteristics of dominance include increased size and use of space (such as height and weight; Frieze, Parsons, Johnson, Ruble, & Zellman, 1978, p. 322), yet women are expected to reduce weight and take up less space. In comparison to men's, women's clothing (e.g., short dresses, high heels) is more constricting, and permits less mobility and a smaller range of body postures. Although men are permitted and encouraged to stare at women, women's staring at men may be viewed as aggressive (Frieze et al., p. 331).

Schur's (1984) book *Labelling Women Deviant* describes the process by which women are objectified. Society's preoccupation with their looks is a major element. Women are portrayed as "depersonalized body parts" (e.g., breasts); their bodies are exploited (e.g., via pornography); they are treated as "decorative" objects, which are "collected" by men upon whom they confer status; and they are evaluated by narrow standards of conventional beauty. Consequently, women become preoccupied with their appearance, are obsessed with improving deficiencies, view themselves as objects, and respond to other women as competing objects (Schur, 1984, p. 33). It is important to emphasize that despite the research indicating marked benefits for attractive women, most women do not feel that they belong to this class. Schur states that the "definitions of female deviance are, in fact, so extensive that virtually every woman becomes a perceived offender of some kind" (1984, p. 37).

The importance of women's appearance norms is reflected in the fact that women have discarded gender roles on many fronts, but continue to worry about their looks, as reflected in the dieting epidemic. Rodin et al. (1984) argue that women's concerns with their appearance have not lessened as they have changed other traditional gender roles (p. 291). On the contrary, when women increase their rights, there is immediate retaliation by institutions of social control. The media have struggled to

portray women who resist traditions as ugly; feminists and lesbians are women who don't shave their legs.

Women's appearance norms are not created by women, and they are not healthy for women. Rather, the norms profit men, define the erotic, pump money into the economy, and restrict women's power.

If, as women, we stopped responding to social control of appearance, we would reclaim a great deal of energy, sensation, insight, and time. As Freeman (1986) has stated, we would be able

... to admit to feelings of hunger, satiation, lethargy, anxiety, exhaustion; to recognize the hyperactivity and insomnia caused by diet schemes; to observe awkward posture and loss of balance; to notice compulsive rituals of running to the mirror or climbing on the scale; to question the hours spent creaming, brushing, tweezing, outlining, examining, counting, covering, coloring, and agonizing over each inadequacy; to sense when pain is felt in connection with the daily cosmetic routine—soreness, stinging, aching, pinching, itching, burning, numbness. (p. 220)

To recognize the social control of women's appearance does not mean that we cannot act and look in ways that make us feel beautiful. We have long been made to feel guilty and immoral because we do not meet unattainable and debilitating standards of attractiveness. It is time to take control of our bodies. As we do so, we must tolerate differences, for other women may make other choices. Such a change would be radical, not trivial, as the media would have us believe. The institutions of social control, well aware of women's potential power, have much to lose when women discard restrictive and oppressive norms. The more rapidly women acquire freedom and power, the greater the backlash will be. We will hear that women "are going too far" (Wolf, 1991, p. 16), and will be presented with new modes of fashion that immobilize. The women's "movement" itself may be stalled by the constriction of individual women's "movements." A century ago, women were encouraged to be still, because activity would make them ill. In the intervening years, women's gains have required more sophisticated and subtle techniques to induce conformity.

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## 4

## *Faces of Female Discontent: Depression, Disordered Eating, and Changing Gender Roles*

DEBORAH PERLICK  
BRETT SILVERSTEIN

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, women who have striven to achieve intellectually, professionally, or politically have confronted massive barriers as a result of being female. We suggest that many such women have experienced ambivalent feelings regarding their gender, and that for centuries, women experiencing what we term "gender ambivalence" have developed a syndrome comprised of disordered eating, depression, anxiety, poor body image, menstrual dysfunction, somatic symptoms (e.g., headaches, breathing difficulties, or insomnia), and sexual indifference. Several descriptions of this syndrome have appeared in the medical literature over the centuries.

The Hippocratic texts of Greece (4th century B.C.) described a "disease of young women" (Lefkowitz & Fant, 1982; Littre, 1853) beginning at about the menarche, characterized by amenorrhea, wasting away, great hunger, vomiting, depression, suicidal ideation, anxiety, aches and pains, and breathing difficulties.

In the 17th through 19th centuries, a disorder known as "chlorosis" was commonly diagnosed among young women. Allbutt (1901) described chlorosis as a malady of women beginning in adolescence that appeared in most girls of the era. Symptoms included amenorrhea, appetite disturbance, depression, anxiety, headache, breathing difficulties, and insomnia, as well as disturbed body image: "Many young