

It is a sad state of affairs that so many adolescents and young women fall prey to the dieting scourge. “Young girls are becoming more afraid of becoming fat than they are of nuclear war, cancer or losing a parent.” (Maury Povich) Plump women are accused of being indulgent, even vulgar, while this attitude is in complete disregard for women's health. Women are very different from men physiologically. Our bodies are designed for procreation, not deprivation.

The Women's Movement encouraged women to join the work force, to allow women the same privileges as men. What the movement failed to foresee was that women would not only be accepted into the workplace, but also be expected to be the primary caregivers, maintain a clean home, put dinner on the table and still look slim and svelte. Also, expectations arose for girls to achieve in sports and academics while remaining feminine and flawlessly beautiful. This lifestyle is ripe for an eating disorder. With all of these pressures, the one thing the adolescent or adult has complete and utter control over is what food she puts into her body. The eating disordered female tragically denies herself nourishment amidst plenty. Why is there such a proliferation of bulimia and anorexia in modern Western society? What are the sociocultural aspects to eating disorders? Can we define the components of this cultural phenomenon? Three potent issues will be discussed including a changing female role with women attempting to strike a balance between achievement and traditional roles, a preoccupation with appearance and body image linked to the influence of mass media, and cultural and identity conflicts.

Overview

In their article, "Sociocultural Aspects of Eating Disorders," theorists F.J. Raphael and J.H. Lacey argue that eating disorders are a "counterproductive solution to intolerable conflict."¹

For a pubescent girl there often appears to be difficulty in reconciling her increase in fatty tissue with her self-concept. Puberty is often a trigger for developing an eating disorder. Girls must face changing bodies and a burgeoning sexuality. Additionally, how the media and the fashion industry represent women may play a significant role in the prevalence of eating disorders. External controls of women may also be a contributing factor in keeping women dependent upon other's expectations, their families and in sexual relationships. The traditional role can conflict with contemporary culture's expectations that women succeed in careers and school and should strive for equality and independence.

My own observations suggest that the changing status of (and expectations) for women plays a role [in the increase of anorexia nervosa]. Girls whose early upbringing has prepared them to be "clinging vine" wives suddenly are expected at adolescence to prove themselves women of achievement. This seems to create severe personal self-doubt and basic uncertainty. In their submissive way, they "choose" the fashionable dictum to be slim as a way of proving themselves of deserving respect.ⁱⁱ

The sociocultural theory of eating disorder causation is that they are more likely to occur in groups that value thinness,ⁱⁱⁱ especially in Industrialized societies of mass consumerism. For example, women earn more money than men in only two industries: modeling and prostitution!^{iv} Girls are socialized to place a premium on appearance as a means for achieving popularity, status, and partners of the opposite sex. It is natural for people to look to societal standards for their personal concept of beauty. And, as the gulf widens between a young woman's weight and the perceived ideal, she tends to express a great deal of dissatisfaction with her body. Her response can involve disordered eating.

Endnotes

ⁱ F.J. Raphael and J.H. Lacey. "Sociocultural Aspects of Eating Disorders." *Annals of Medicine*, 1982. p. 544.

ⁱⁱ Gordon, Richard. *Anorexia and Bulimia: Anatomy of a Social Epidemic*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers, 1990. p. 30.

ⁱⁱⁱ Pipher, Mary. *Hunger Pains: The Modern Woman's Tragic Quest for Thinness*. New York: Ballantine Books, 1995. p. 72.

^{iv} Dittrich, Liz. "About-Face Facts on the MEDIA." Internet: *About-Face.org*, 5/3199. p. 1.

Description of the Disease

In 1995, the U.S. Centers for Disease Control estimated that 11 million persons have eating disorders.^v Incredibly, *forty percent* of fifth grade girls in the U.S. have been on at least one self-inflicted diet!^{vi} Bulimia is characterized by cycles of bingeing and purging. Anorexia Nervosa presents as self-starvation resulting in weights at least 15% below normal.^{vii} Both psychological disorders involve an intense fear of becoming fat, an obsession with food, and distorted body image. Anorexia typically begins in early adolescence while bulimia usually occurs later in adolescence, being most common among college-age females.

Changing Roles and Male Culture

Some theorists suggest that our male-dominated culture and eating disorders may be correlated. While women seek equality with men politically and economically, the vision of a weak, dependent, starving waif might assuage men who feel threatened by the notion of equality of the sexes and female empowerment. The reality of our society is that women still have little control in breaking through the barriers of a male-dominated culture. In this context, the idea of controlling weight as a means to feel more powerful is understandable. This can be attributed to the message that a girl's self-worth is largely dependent on how she looks. Further, the eruption of eating disorders in the latter part of the Twentieth century is important when looking at the sociocultural trend toward increased achievement expectations of women alongside the traditional expectations of female nurturance and selfless caretaking.

^v About-Face website. "Body as History." Internet: *About-Face.org*, 5/31/99.

^{vi} "Dear Abby column." *Los Angeles Times*. September 10, 1996.

^{vii} Farley, Dixie. "Eating Disorders: When Thinness Becomes an Obsession." *HHS publication no. 86-221*. USDA. May 1986. p. 2.

This brings us to the next area of discussion: the notion that eating disorders arise as a counterproductive solution to intolerable conflict. Changing social roles, parental issues, the first major romantic relationship, and environmental changes are considered the bases for such conflict. The solution reached by many young girls is an attempt to diet and lose weight in an effort to conform to the societal standard for thinness and regain a sense of control over their lives. Sadly, girls who feel a deficient sense of self (Bruch) latch onto this deadly solution as a means to achieve some sort of an identity at a time when she is experiencing rapid changes in her body, especially in her primary and secondary sex characteristics. Erik Erikson posits that a critical period for development is adolescence and a disruption in social roles or cultural expectations can create epidemic symptoms of identity confusion.^{viii} “An obsession with food, weight, and body shape...becomes a defensive substitute for dealing with the conflicts associated with the achievement of an identity.”^{ix}

Body Image

To be a woman is to have a body image problem.^x Ninety percent of all women overestimate their own body size,^{xi} ninety-six percent of women surveyed feel overweight,^{xii} and on any given day in the United States, fifty-six percent of women are on diets!^{xiii} Body image is defined as a person's mental concept of his or her physical appearance. In anorexia and bulimia, the body image becomes distorted and extreme dieting and binge-purging are adopted in a frantic effort to conform to what is really an impossible body shape. Women will go to extremes in their pursuit of slimness, even jeopardizing their health through crash diets, ingesting diet drugs like Redux and Phen-fen, and resorting to plastic surgery. The diet and fashion industry

^{viii} Gordon, p. 51.

^{ix} Gordon, p. 69.

^xPipher, p. 4.

^{xi}Ibid, p. 3.

^{xii}Ibid, p. 20.

^{xiii}Ibid., p. 5.

fuels and exploits their struggles: Marketdata Enterprises, Inc. estimated the size of the weight loss industry for 1994 at \$32,680 billion.^{xiv}

Media Influence

Marilyn Monroe, Twiggy, Kate Moss: Fashion symbols of the 50's, 60's and 90's, their images have been plastered across billboards and magazine spreads where impressionable young women seek clues for the ideal look. When asking why body image is so skewed among Western women, sociocultural theorists point to the media and fashion industry as one megapowerful source. According to the website, *About-Face.org*, out of our daily bombardment of 400-600 advertisements, 1 in 11 are about beauty. While the ideal body shape has changed over the years, one potent issue remains the same: the media glamorizes a body that is unattainable and genetically impossible for all but a tiny percentage of the population. That famous women admit to bouts with eating disorders adds to the glamour of the disease (Princess Di, Jane Fonda, Jamie Lee Curtis). "Bulimia almost has celebrity status, the 'in' thing to have," says Dr. Sue Bailey, director of Eating Disorders Clinic at Washington D.C. Hospital Center.^{xv} Finally, there is little question that the commercial exploitation of insecurities regarding body image has had an impact on the rise of eating disorders.^{xvi} Recently, Congress decided to confront Hollywood about its role in contributing to the outbreak of violence among students. While they should be lauded for their efforts, an assault on the media's portrayal of emaciated models as the beauty ideal should be considered, too.

Conclusion

Anorexia and bulimia are the fallout from a noxious culture that propagates an unrealistic beauty ideal. The media and our culture of svelte are much to blame for our society's emphasis

^{xiv} Dittrich, Liz. "About-Face facts on Body Image." Internet, *About-Face.org*, 5/31/99. p.1

^{xv}Farley, p. 1.

on slimness and the detrimental effect it has on women's body image. We live in a culture that values individual achievement. Americans take pride in the cultural value that one can always improve oneself through hard work, and that one must strive for individual perfection. Young women are apt to use their bodies as a way to prove their worth, to prove their ability to succeed at something when changing roles and gender identity are confusing and ambiguous. Preventive measures such as education are desperately needed in schools. A fundamental change in the way

^{xvi}Gordon, p. 81.

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the media portrays the ideal woman must be altered. Girls should be encouraged to focus on external achievements such as sports or academics, rather than on their internal beauty. Beauty pageants, gymnastics clubs, ballet companies and modeling agencies need to address this epidemic by supporting a healthy body appearance and positive self-esteem. Until our society makes these and other changes, and until our culture changes the messages it transmits to women, this epidemic will continue unchecked.

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