

Constructing Gendered Identities through Discourse: Body Image, Exercise,
Food Consumption, and Teasing Practices among Adolescents

by

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines body image ideology within the larger context of adolescent social networks and the physical environment of a high school, specifically focusing on factors that may be contributing to the current overweight/obesity epidemic among youth. I explore the ways in which adolescents construct gendered identities through talk about body image as well as adolescent practices and discourses regarding exercise and food consumption, including how their perceptions of what it means to be athletic and healthy intersect with their perceptions about body image ideals and norms. I further discuss ways in which adolescents construct moral identities through 'othering' discourses about overweight and obese people, including teasing practices. A primary goal of this ethnographic research project is to integrate the study of body image, food consumption, exercise, and teasing practices among youth in order to contribute a contextualized understanding of how youth perceive and enact these behaviors in their daily lives.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Obesity Epidemic

This dissertation research took place in the midst of an obesity epidemic. Americans have become the fattest population in the world. During the year I conducted field research, U.S Surgeon General Richard Carmona stated that obesity represents a greater threat to Americans than weapons of mass destruction, referring to obesity as “the threat from within” and a “health catastrophe” (Carmona 2003, 2004; Johnson 2003). Since 1980, obesity rates have doubled among children and tripled among adolescents (CDC 2004). Currently, 1 out of 3 children and adolescents age 6-19 is overweight or at risk of becoming overweight and 65% of adults are overweight or obese. Further, among newborns to 2 year olds, the prevalence of overweight is 11% (IOM 2005). In terms of ethnic differences, 24% of Mexican-American and African-American adolescents are overweight, while 14% of white adolescents are overweight. Among girls, African-Americans have the highest rates of obesity and among boys, Mexican-Americans have the highest rates of obesity (IOM 2005).

Contributing Factors

Reduced levels of physical activity are partially responsible for rising obesity rates. Not only are Americans becoming increasingly sedentary in general, but requirements for physical activity in schools are diminishing, which means that children and adolescents have fewer opportunities to exercise. Research suggests that one-third of 9th-12th graders nationwide are not engaging in physical activity and that 10% of teenagers engage in no physical activity. Health experts recommend that children engage

in a minimum of 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous physical activity daily. However, research shows that students enrolled in PE classes spend approximately 25 minutes exercising. Further, most schools do not require daily PE for all students. According to a School Health Policies and Program Study, only 8 percent of elementary schools, 6.4 percent of middle schools and 5.8 percent of high schools provide daily physical activity for all students throughout the school year (IOM 2005).

Poor nutrition is also to blame for rising obesity rates among Americans. Researchers have suggested that increased portion sizes combined with an environment where high fat, calorie laden foods are more readily available than low fat, healthier options is causing Americans to gain weight (Brownell & Horgen 2004; Nestle 2002; Schlosser 2001). Specifically, school food environments have been criticized for offering a plethora of foods that are processed and highly fattening, such as pizza, French fries, candy and soda (Brownell & Horgen 2004; Nestle 2002).

In addition to the junk foods available on school campuses, advertisements encouraging kids to consume these foods are found throughout schools as well in the form of 'Channel One' television, ads on school buses and marquis, book covers with junk food ads, fast food sponsorships of school activities and incentive programs, and soda contracts. Public schools continue to lose government funding, which means that after-school programs and electives, such as music, sports, art, drama, and physical education often have to be reduced or eliminated. As a solution to this problem, many schools have signed contracts with soda companies giving Coke or Pepsi exclusive vending machine rights on the campus. Not only do schools get a cut of the profit, but

the soft drink companies often offer incentive programs whereby the school may earn bonus money through increasing sales year to year (Nestle 2002).

The argument for this kind of school-corporate partnership is that the revenue generated by such partnerships funds programs that might otherwise be terminated, such as band, art, drama, sports, and physical education as well as enrichment activities like field trips. The argument against school-corporate partnerships is that they are putting children's health at risk and contributing to the obesity epidemic by encouraging kids to consume junk food and by normalizing junk food consumption so that children become unquestioning consumers of these products both in and out of the school environment. Furthermore, since youth are required by federal law to attend school, they are essentially prisoners to fast food, junk food and soda product advertising.

Health, Social, and Economic Consequences

There are serious health and economic consequences associated with obesity. For children born in the U.S. in 2000, the risk of developing type 2 diabetes is 30% for boys and 40% for girls if obesity rates level off (IOM 2005). In addition to diabetes, health problems associated with obesity include high cholesterol and hypertension (Erickson, et al. 2000). Furthermore, research suggests that overweight youth who are teased by peers have greater levels of body dissatisfaction as adults and are at higher risk for developing negative body images and low self-esteem (Grilo, et al. 1994). In terms of social and economic consequences, research indicates that obese and overweight adolescents have a harder time in school both academically and socially (Degher & Hughes 1999; Eder, et al. 1995; Nichter 2000) and that obese adults tend to complete fewer years of school,

marry less, and have lower household incomes during early adult life than their non-obese counterparts (Gortmaker, et al. 1993).

National health care costs associated with obesity have exceeded health care costs associated with smoking. Obesity-associated annual hospital costs for youth alone have tripled over the past two decades and are now at an estimated \$127 billion (IOM 2005). During a recent National Governor's Association meeting (C-SPAN 2006), former president Clinton reported that the United States government spends 16% of its GDP on healthcare, which is 5% or \$700 billion more than any other country spends on healthcare related costs. Clinton stated, "...We may foreclose America's economic leadership in the future by consuming untold amounts of our national income on otherwise unnecessary healthcare costs."

Research Overview

While most researchers have acknowledged that obesity results from a combination of 'toxic' food environments, sedentary lifestyles, and poor exercise habits, very little research has been done that examines how these factors work in concert to perpetuate the impending obesity crisis. An important issue that remains to be examined is how body image ideology, obesity stigma, food environments and exercise habits among youth are interrelated. In other words, do these social factors converge in the daily lives of adolescents, and if so, how? This dissertation is the first ethnographic study to examine the ways in which social factors such as body image ideology, obesity stigma, food consumption and physical activity work in concert to influence cultural norms associated with body size and shape among adolescents.

Another notable absence in the extant literature on obesity related issues among adolescents is the voices of youth. Voices of adolescents are either overshadowed by the voices of scholars or entirely absent. For example, research documenting the ‘toxic’ food environments that exist in public schools, including the prevalence of soda, snack machines, and the fattening foods on school grounds, often fails to explore the ways in which youth interact with these products. How often and when do they purchase junk food items? Are they concerned with the ubiquity of such foods in their environment or do they like having access to junk food at school? As an anthropologist, I am less interested in choices offered to youth and more interested in what students choose to purchase and why they make those choices. As Frenn and Porter (1999) point out, “If interventions to promote healthy lifestyles are to be successful, they must be based on a thorough understanding of adolescents’ perspectives within their own reality” (179).

To date, most of the research on adolescent obesity is quantitative and based on survey research. There is a need for ethnographic research that integrates body image, food consumption, exercise practices, and weight-based stigma among youth in order to contribute a clearer understanding of how youth perceive and enact health-related behaviors in their daily lives. Thus, the goal of this dissertation is to explore how adolescents interact with aspects of their social environments that influence body image ideologies and possibly body weight. These factors include discourses about health, attitudes about their school food environment, ideas about physical activity as it relates to body image goals, and weight-based teasing as it is experienced by adolescents in the school environment.

In order to begin combating the rapidly rising overweight and obesity rates among youth in the U.S., researchers and public health officials must first understand why adolescents are making the food consumption choices that they make, how their physical and social environments both within and outside of school contribute to their food consumption choices, and the extent to which their social and physical environments make regular physical activity possible. Recently, in a speech to the National Governor's Association (C-SPAN 2006), former president Clinton argued that the only way to fight obesity is for people to consume fewer calories and burn more calories through exercise and that in order to achieve these goals we must "change the culture." Clinton stated, "We have a huge cultural problem and unless we change it, our children may grow up to be the first generation of Americans with shorter life spans than we have." My dissertation research addresses this call-to-action by examining how adolescents interact with socio-cultural factors that contribute to obesity, including the food environment, physical activity classes, health classes, obesity stigma, and body image ideology.

I analyze the ways in which these social factors intersect in the daily lives of youth, focusing on how adolescents are socialized into cultural norms associated with gendered body image ideology, food consumption and exercise practices, and obesity stigma through everyday discourses and social practices. The theoretical questions that guided my research and analysis are:

- How are gendered body image norms and ideals constructed and communicated through everyday discourse among youth?

- What delineates the boundaries between normal weight and overweight and how are adolescents socialized into those boundaries through gossip and teasing?
- What role does the gendered body play in situating teens within the heterosexual marketplace of a high school campus?
- How do adolescents enact gendered identities through body presentation, participation in PE classes, food consumption, and discourse?

By examining body image and obesity through the lenses of culture and language, I shed light on the ways in which youth construct their identities in relation to gendered body image norms and the obesity epidemic.

The Dissertation: Outline of Chapters

The goal of this dissertation is to explore the ways in which adolescents embody gendered and moral subject positions with regard to body image ideology, obesity stigma, physical activity, and food consumption. To this end, I examine body image ideology within the larger context of adolescent social networks and the physical environment of the high school campus. I also analyze the ways in which adolescents construct gendered identities through talk about body image and explore adolescent practices and discourses regarding exercise and food consumption, including how their perceptions of what it means to be athletic and healthy intersect with their perceptions about body image ideals and norms. I further examine ways in which adolescents construct moral identities through 'othering' discourses about overweight and obese people, including teasing practices.

In Chapter II, I discuss the theoretical frameworks that inform my research, situating my study within current theoretical literatures. In Chapter III, I set the scene for the dissertation by providing descriptions of the field site, discussing my role as anthropologist in the high school, and outlining methods used to collect data.

Chapter IV maps out the social spaces inhabited by various cliques and discusses the ways in which adolescents negotiated gendered identities and social group alignments through elements of personal style, such as clothing, stance, body image, and discourse. I also discuss how social cliques were perceived by both members and outsiders with relation to the socially constructed spaces they inhabit.

Chapter V focuses specifically on the ways in which adolescents socially constructed gendered body image norms and ideals through discourse, personal style, and social interaction. The discussion about how adolescents constructed social alignments and gendered identities through clothing styles continues in this chapter, with a specific focus on situating adolescents' clothing styles within their discourses about body image ideology. The ways in which masculine and feminine identities were constructed through adolescents' discourse about body image ideology are also examined.

Chapter VI examines the issue of weight and size based teasing, including a discussion of how boundaries between normal weight and overweight were negotiated discursively. Within the context of gendered body image ideologies, I discuss who was teased the most, the different forms teasing took, and how adolescents coped with being teased by their peers. Adolescents' discursive construction of themselves as weight-

conscious is discussed as well as the normalizing effect that teasing has on body image ideology among youth.

Chapter VII examines adolescent discourses about exercise as well as gendered participation patterns in PE classes at the high school. This chapter further explores the link between gendered body image ideologies, perceptions of athleticism, and participation in physical activity. Observational data from physical education classes is examined with regard to gendered patterns of participation as well as interview data about gendered perceptions of athletic ability.

Chapter VIII examines adolescent discourses of health. In this chapter, I describe the school food environment and discuss the ways in which adolescents negotiated their gendered body image goals with the proliferation of ‘junk’ food that surrounded them. Chapter IX concludes with a summary of my research findings and a discussion of policy implications.

II. THEORETICAL OVERVIEW

In this dissertation, I explore the ways in which gender norms are negotiated through face-to-face communication, especially with regard to the socializing and normalizing functions of discourses about body image. In other words, how are body image norms, ideals and transgressions constructed and communicated through everyday discourse among youth? Further, what delineates the boundaries between normal weight and overweight and how are adolescents socialized into those boundaries through discourse? There are several theoretical perspectives that inform my research. First, I draw on scholarly works from linguistic anthropologists who have situated adolescent discourses within the social processes of identity construction. Next, I turn to theoretical literatures on embodiment that examine the body as a site for gendered identity work and moral transgression.

Discourse and the Body

Following in the theoretical traditions of symbolic interactionism (Mead 1934; Goffman 1959), phenomenology (Schutz 1970; Garfinkel 1967), and conversation analysis (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974), linguistic anthropologists argue that meaning is socially constituted through communicative interaction rather than mental processes. Jacoby and Ochs assert that one goal of linguistic anthropologists who study language interaction is to understand “ways in which the co-authoring of activities in turn helps to maintain and transform the social identities of the participants, the institutions in which these activities are embedded, and the ideologies that inform and legitimize their ongoingness” (1995: 175).

Bakhtin (1935) offers further insight into understanding the ways in which discourse analysis can illuminate the processes of identity construction through his concept of multivocality. Bakhtin argues that utterances are not singly authored, but are instead multivocalic in nature, drawing on the ideas and words of others. He writes, "...A variety of alien voices enter into the struggle for influence within an individual's consciousness (just as they struggle with one another in surrounding social reality)" (1935: 348). These multiple voices representing multiple meanings, ideologies, and social realities alternately emerge through discourse interactions as individuals adopt multiple subject positions in an effort to negotiate their identities.

In her writings about adolescent girls' discursive resistance against dominant feminine ideologies, Brown (1998) asserts that through the appropriation of conflicting discourses, girls 'try on' identities. Drawing on Bakhtin's (1935) concept of ventriloquation, Brown explores the multitude of conflicting gendered ideologies that girls voice as part of their developmental process. In this dissertation, I extend Brown's study of gendered discourses by examining the multiple subject positions enacted by both girls and boys as they negotiate gender norms and social identities with regard to body image through discourse.

As Brown (1998) illustrates, discourses appropriated by adolescents include dominant gender ideologies represented through mass media. The influence of popular culture media images on the social construction of body image norms has been well documented. Critical discourse analysts (Bordo 1993; Connel 1995) and anthropologists (Nichter & Nichter 1991; Nichter 2000) have examined the messages that television

commercials, men's and women's fashion magazines, and popular movies have communicated about gendered body image ideals in the United States. Advertisements for hair and makeup products, body shaping lingerie, exercise machines that promise to flatten the stomach, tighten the buttocks, and firm up the thighs in no time, plastic surgery, Botox injections, and a vast array of wrinkle reducing creams lead American consumers to believe that the body is transformable.

Additionally, popular reality television shows like 'Extreme Makeover' and 'The Swan' illustrate the extent to which an unattractive or average looking person may be literally transformed from head to toe into a beautiful person. Bordo (1993) asserts, "Popular culture does not apply any brakes to these fantasies of rearrangement and self-transformation. Rather, we are constantly told that we can 'choose' our own bodies" (247). The message is clear: not only do we have the ability to shape our bodies at will, but we have a responsibility to conform to beauty norms established and reproduced by the media. For if individuals have the power to achieve thin bodies, then being fat represents laziness and weakness, qualities which are highly devalued in American culture (Bordo 1993, 1999).

Although mass media discourses are a powerful means through which body image ideals are communicated and normalized, Cameron (2000) reminds us that consumers of popular culture are active interpreters of what they see, alternately accepting and resisting messages about beauty, body ideals, and fashion. For example, Nichter (2000) found that when asked, "Who most influences your look," forty percent of the adolescent girls in her study said that nothing influenced them, indicating a desire by these adolescents to

perceive and portray themselves as independent and therefore not influenced by “peer pressure” or the media. However, as Nichter (2000) points out, many of the participants specifically and consistently discussed how the media influences them in other interviews. This illustrates the ways in which consumers of popular culture media may alternately reject and acknowledge media influences regarding their body image ideals. Thus, in addition to deconstructing popular media images, it is equally important to understand the ways in which individuals within local communities interpret, appropriate, and interact with those images through analysis of everyday discourse interactions.

Discourse, Identity, and Youth

Youth scholars have explored the ways in which adolescent girls negotiate and socialize each other into gender norms through analyses of everyday conversational interactions among friendship groups. Anthropologists, for example, have examined processes of identity construction through symbolic creativity (Willis 1990) and semiotic practices (Shaw 1994). Drawing on the notion of *bricoleur* (Hebdige 1979, although originally discussed by Levi-Strauss 1966), some anthropologists have analyzed the ways in which youth appropriate and recombine existing objects of the dominant culture, including clothing, stance, gesture, and language, in new ways to create a distinctive style (Bucholtz 1996, 1999; Chesire 2000; Coates 1999; Eckert 1989, 1996; Eckert and McConnell-Ginet 1995; Eder 1993, 1995; Mendoza-Denton 1996, 1999; Nichter 2000).

For example, Mendoza-Denton (1996) has analyzed the ways in which Latina gang girls use make-up and other tools of personal style to align against perceived feminine norms. In a similar way, Eckert (1993) has examined the ways in which pre-

adolescent girls experiment with language styles in addition to nail polish, lip gloss, hair style, clothing, and new walks in developing identities within the heterosexual marketplace. Focusing on nerd identity, Bucholtz (1996, 1999) has studied the ways in which adolescent girls use elements of personal style, such as clothing, make-up and nail polish in mismatched ways that flout conventional displays of gendered identities in addition to using male pseudonyms and hyper-standard speech to align their identities against perceived feminine and masculine norms. Expanding this perspective, I explore how boys and girls combine discourse, stance, clothing, and body presentation as a means for constructing gendered identities. More specifically, I analyze the ways in which clothing style is gendered and tied to body image norms as well as social status. In other words, what role does the gendered body play in situating teens within the heterosexual marketplace of a high school campus?

Nichter (2000) has analyzed the multifunctional nature of 'fat talk,' a discourse genre used by adolescent girls to co-construct their identities as responsible for the way they look while also communicating a multitude of other messages to peers, such as signaling general feelings of stress, calling attention to perceived flaws before others do, soliciting peer support, and aligning with perceptions of feminine norms. In this dissertation I further examine discursive constructions of body image ideals among male and female adolescents, exploring the gendered boundaries of 'fat talk.' Additionally, I explore other ways in which youth discursively construct their identities as weight-conscious, such as narrative reproductions of fat stereotypes, gossip, and teasing practices.

Eder (1993) has analyzed the ways in which adolescent girls use teasing as a means for strengthening female friendships and flirting with boys and more broadly, how insulting, teasing, collaborative storytelling, and gossip by both boys and girls function to co-construct normative feminine identities within a public middle school environment (Eder, et al 1995). I build upon Eder's teasing research to examine direct and indirect teasing among adolescents, exploring the emotional and social consequences of each. I further examine gendered components of teasing to uncover differences in the ways in which girls and boys tease and who gets teased the most frequently.

In particular, the analysis of gossip as a discourse genre has the potential to provide unique insights into the ways in which adolescents construct and communicate body image norms. Research on gossip among adolescent girls has illustrated the ways in which girls construct and reinforce normative feminine identities (Coates 1999; Eckert 1993). Similarly, recent research has examined the ways in which men utilize gossip as a means for constructing and displaying heterosexual masculinity within all-male friendship groups (Cameron 1997; Johnson & Finlay 1997; Kiesling 2002). I further explore gendered components of gossip in this dissertation. In addition to analysis of gossip in all-male and all-female friendship groups, I examine gossip in mixed gender interactions.

Eckert (1993) asserts that gossip functions as a means for keeping track of social norms as well as keeping track of individuals' behavior in relation to those norms. Eder, et al. (1995) builds on this assertion, illustrating the ways in which collaborative gossip strengthens group solidarity, allowing participants to express shared beliefs, especially

about physical appearance norms. I explore alternative functions of gossip in this dissertation, examining how it may be utilized to exclude individuals. More specifically, I discuss the relationship between gossip and teasing within the context of obesity stigma. In addition, I examine gossip and teasing as boundary markers for body size and shape, focusing on how these two discourse genres are gendered.

The Body as a Site for Gendered Identity Work

The body is a primary means through which people negotiate social meanings and identities. Durkheim (1912) explores the role of the body in tying individuals to collective moral ideologies and locally defined social norms in his discussion of religion as a social construct. For Durkheim, the body represents a totemic symbol that may be literally inscribed upon the flesh, thereby tying individuals to their communities. Foucault (1975) also articulates the body's role in tying individuals to social norms through his writings about docile bodies. He asserts that discipline in modern society occurs partially through the institutionalized establishment of norms so that individuals are measured and judged by their ability to adhere to those norms. According to Foucault, discipline occurs specifically at the site of the body as social norms become internalized by individuals who self-regulate their behavior.

Foucault has been criticized by feminist theorists for his failure to address the ways in which male and female bodies are disciplined differently. Regarding *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1975), Bartky (1990) writes,

“...Foucault treats the body throughout as if it were one, as if the bodily experiences of men and women did not differ and as if men and women bore the same relationship to the characteristic institutions of modern life. Where is the

account of the disciplinary practices that engender the ‘docile bodies’ of women, bodies more docile than the bodies of men?”

Feminists have adapted Foucault’s theoretical concept of disciplined bodies to specifically examine the ways in which modern gendered body practices, such as bodily comportment, beauty rituals, dieting, and plastic surgery operate as forms of institutionalized social control for women (Bartky 1990; Diamond and Quinby 1988; McLaren 2002; McNay 1992). In this dissertation, I explore the question of whether or not girls internalize gendered norms to a greater extent than boys and subsequently feel more pressure to attend to their appearance. Are girls more harshly evaluated by their peers than boys, rendering girls’ bodies more docile than boys’ bodies?

Bordo (1993) reminds us that it was feminist theorists who first articulated the body as a primary site of “political struggle.” Butler (1990), for example, argues that gender norms are embodied by individuals through stance, speech and ways of thinking that come to be viewed as natural. Butler proposes that disruptions in routinized gender performances, where gender norms are questioned and subverted through practice, are the spaces within which individual agency resists dominant ideologies and that such practices often occur at the site of the body. Bordo (1993) writes, “Through routine, habitual activity, our bodies learn what is ‘inner’ and what is ‘outer,’ which gestures are forbidden and which required, how violable or inviolable are the boundaries of our bodies, how much space around the body may be claimed, and so on” (16).

Gender scholars, such as Young (1980), Connell (1983), and Bartky (1990) argue that gender norms are literally embodied through gestures and bodily comportment.

Young’s classic study on gendered bodily comportment in sports participation illustrates

that girls' body movement tends to be more restricted than those of boys. She notes, "For many women as they move in sport, a space surrounds them in imagination which we are not free to move beyond; the space available to our movement is a constricted space" (1980: 143). Bartky (1990) expands Young's analysis to encompass gendered bodily comportment more broadly. She describes an art exhibit by photographer Marianne Wex (1979) in which thousands of candid photographs of men and women in their daily lives depict gendered differences in bodily comportment. Bartky describes the gendered patterns revealed in these photographs as follows:

"Women sit waiting for trains with arms close to the body, hands folded together in their laps, toes pointing straight ahead or turned inward, and legs pressed together....Men, on the other hand, expand into the available space; they sit with legs far apart and arms flung out at some distance from the body" (1990: 68).

Similarly, Connell (1983) writes that "to be an adult male is distinctly to occupy space, to have a physical presence in the world" (19).

In addition to functioning as a means through which individuals co-construct identities, social meanings, and ideologies, discourse has the power to literally transform the shapes of bodies. Connell (1987) writes, "We may say, then, that the practical transformation of the body in the social structure of gender is not only accomplished at the level of symbolism. It has physical effects on the body; the incorporation is a material one" (87). The habitual embodiment of gender, which is facilitated through discourse, "...is translated not only into mental body-images and fantasies, but into muscle tensions, posture, the feel and texture of the body" (Connell 1987: 85). In this dissertation, I explore the ways in which adolescents enact gendered identities through

body presentation, participation in physical education classes, and food consumption practices. To what extent do youth construct gendered identities at the site of the body?

The Body as a Site for Moral Transgression

In *Discipline and Punish* (1975), Foucault outlines the process of disciplining bodies. He writes, “Discipline is an art of rank, a technique for the transformation of arrangements. It individualizes bodies by a location that does not give them a fixed position, but distributes them and circulates them in a network of relations” (146). The beginning of the nineteenth century saw health and body image norms become institutionalized through the medical practice of measuring, weighing, and documenting individuals’ body size and weight. By the mid-1900s, insurance companies were using bio-medical standards of height and weight to assess morbidity risk in individuals (Huff 2001; Ritenbaugh 1982; Schwartz 1986). This practice further institutionalized a normative standard for body weight as well as the ranking of individuals according to their adherence to this standard.

As Huff (2001) notes in her discussion of the history of fat-phobia, coercion is the crux of the normalization process. Through coercion, “the individual body is subjected to a culturally formed composite picture that reflects not so much an actual average as a cultural ideal. Difference from this ideal is perceived as a failure to achieve it. In this manner, quantifiable physical difference is transformed into aberration” (45).

Throughout this dissertation, I explore the boundaries between what adolescents deem ideal/normative and aberration.

As illustrated in the quote above, Huff (2001) argues that ‘quantifiable physical difference’ is how individuals are measured against the cultural ideal. While this is certainly true in medical settings and possibly some school settings where the height and weight of individuals is measured and recorded, the teenagers in my study did not have access to quantitative information on each others’ height and weight. How, then did the adolescents determine how fat is too fat? I explore how teens measure themselves and their peers against the cultural ideal and determine the point at which body fat become transgression. Moreover, how does body size affect one’s position in the high school’s social hierarchy?

The social meaning of body weight and shape has shifted throughout history (Bordo 1993; Brumberg 1997; Huff 2001; Stearns 2002). Bordo (1993) notes that during the mid-nineteenth century, corpulence symbolized economic prosperity, whereas by the end of the century, “social power had come to be less dependent on the sheer accumulation of material wealth and more connected to the ability to control and manage the labor resources of others” (192). In the 1980’s, as diet and fitness industries expanded, the locus for control and management shifted from the workplace to the body. As a result, overweight bodies came to represent laziness, weakness, and a lack of impulse control while thin, toned bodies indexed discipline and willpower (Bordo 1993, 1999; Crawford 1984, Connell 1995; Huff 2001).

Bordo (1993) writes, “Ultimately, the body...is seen as demonstrating correct or incorrect attitudes toward the demands of normalization itself” (203). Obesity represents an incorrect “attitude,” a willful failure to adhere to the norm. In a culture predicated on

bodily discipline as a primary foundation for moral identity, an important question for twenty-first century body image scholars is, how are Americans negotiating their conceptions of morality with the rapidly increasing rates of overweight and obesity?

In his discussion of social stigma, Goffman (1963) distinguishes between the stigmatized and the 'normal' as though a clear delineation between the two categories exists. Goffman asserts that stigmatized individuals display 'stigma symbols,' which he defines as, "Signs which are especially effective in drawing attention to a debasing identity discrepancy, breaking up what would otherwise be a coherent overall picture, with a consequent reduction in our valuation of the individual" (1963: 43-44). However, when body fat is the stigma symbol, how is the boundary between stigmatized individuals and 'normals' determined? How much body fat is too much? In this dissertation, I explore the boundary between 'normal' and stigmatized to better understand the point at which body fat comes to be viewed as a stigma symbol.

The concept of embodiment will serve as a useful overarching theoretical framework throughout this dissertation for two reasons. First, the topics of body image and obesity lend themselves to a theoretical framework that focuses on the role of the body as a mediator between individuals and society. Second, within the broader cultural context of the U.S., where personal appearance and body image are of utmost importance socially, especially among teenagers, the theoretical lens of embodiment may shed new light on body image issues that emerge throughout this dissertation. In the next chapter, I turn to the field site, discussing my role as anthropologist in the high school and outlining methods used to collect data.

III. SETTING THE SCENE: FIELD SITE & RESEARCH METHODS

This chapter situates my dissertation within the local community where it was conducted and describes the methods utilized. Also discussed are my experiences with recruiting adolescents to participate in the study and my role as anthropologist within the research setting. In addition, I examine challenges I faced through the course of my research experience as I negotiated my original goals for the study with the realities of the high school population.

Description of Field Site

Fieldwork was conducted in a large southwest city chosen for its ethnic diversity. In particular, the area where I conducted fieldwork has a relatively large population of Hispanics, a minority group that has not been studied extensively within the body image and obesity literature. In addition to ethnic diversity, I sought a socio-economically diverse school as well. Because my objectives were to understand a range of consumption choices including diverse topics such as food and clothing, it was important that participants have access to disposable income. The high school where I conducted my ethnographic research is located in the town of Montaña, which is a suburban farming community located approximately fifteen miles outside of Tucson. While some families in the community still ranch or farm for a living, many Montaña residents also commute to Tucson and other local towns to work. Two high schools serve the town of Montaña, Montaña High School and Desert Vista High School. The two high schools within this community somewhat reflect the rural/suburban dichotomy that exists within Montaña. Desert Vista High School students tend to come from middle class socio-economic

backgrounds and suburban neighborhoods (approximately 10-15% of students are on the school's free lunch program), while Montaña High School students come from lower socio-economic backgrounds and more rural neighborhoods (approximately 35-40% of students are on the school's free lunch program).

In terms of geographic location, Desert Vista high school is located within the newer suburban part of the community, being just off of the major freeway that connects Tucson to Phoenix. In contrast, Montaña High School is located in the older, more rural part of the community well off the beaten path. It takes a considerably longer time to get to Montaña High School from the freeway as you wind down country roads for about twenty miles toward a school that literally sits in the middle of farm land and/or undeveloped land with nothing else for miles around. Both schools have a representative population of white and Hispanic students, with approximately 30% of each school's student population being Hispanic and approximately 65% being white (3% are African-American and 2% are Asian). Desert Vista High School was ultimately chosen as the research site because of its higher socio-economic class and its more suburban location. As I noted earlier, in terms of body image and food consumption, students with greater purchasing power have more choices regarding what they eat for lunch and snacks as well as how they present their bodies through clothing styles.

Desert Vista High School, has been labeled an 'A+' school by the state of Arizona. This means that the school's standardized test scores are among the highest in the state. I remained quite impressed with the high school overall. As a former teacher in a poor rural Texas high school I was immediately and continually impressed by well

maintained buildings and grounds as well as the professional demeanor of faculty, administrators, and other personnel. This high school was in stark contrast to the school where I taught, which was poorly maintained with heating and cooling units often not working, ongoing problems with water leaks from bathroom plumbing, peeling paint, broken classroom desks that were often left in disrepair for entire school years, and problems with mold in the walls and ceilings of classrooms.

In contrast, Desert Vista building facilities were very well maintained with fresh coats of paint, regularly waxed floors, intact student desks that appeared clean with no graffiti, and functioning heating and cooling units. The grounds were similarly free of debris and the landscape design was aesthetically pleasing, with well trimmed trees providing shade in the main common area, and plants lining the covered walkway from the office to the main common area. Additionally, administrators and teachers maintained rules effectively at Desert Vista High School, something which was not a part of my own experience as a former teacher in a school where students openly smoked cigarettes as they wandered around campus and blatantly sold and bought drugs on the campus. Of course, restrictions on smoking have changed significantly in the eight years since I had taught high school. Nonetheless, I was impressed by the overall adherence to school rules by students at Desert Vista High School.

With my previous experience of social disarray on a high school campus in mind, at Desert Vista, I was surprised to learn that there was only one lunch period every day. The school serves approximately 2000 students with only about 200 venturing off campus for lunch each day, according to the principal (juniors and seniors had off

campus lunch privileges). In my early days on campus, I asked the principal how they were able to maintain order when almost the entire student body was converged at the same time with limited supervision, especially since there were only a handful of lunch monitors each day. The principal assured me that it worked rather well and my own observations throughout the school year confirmed that he was largely correct. Fights rarely occurred and I never saw anyone smoking or doing drugs, which is not to say that it did not happen. I did smell cigarette smoke in the girls' bathrooms on a few occasions, but considering the fact that 2000 students attend Desert Vista, the problem hardly seemed out of hand. Actually the substance of choice at Desert Vista among both adults and adolescents appeared to be sugar, something I will discuss at length in subsequent chapters.

I learned during the course of the school year through conversations with teachers and informants that the community was fairly religious, consisting largely of people who belonged to various Christian religions. As a result, the school was conservative in its teaching policy. The health teacher, for example, told me that he was required to teach abstinence as the only form of effective birth control and that he was allowed to use the word 'condom' in class only to teach that condoms are not 100% effective as a birth control method. Although many schools throughout Arizona have adopted 'abstinence only' curriculum in order to receive federal funding, the current health teacher, who was from the local area, linked this conservatism in sexual education curriculum guidelines to the prevalence of conservative religious practices within the community. He estimated that about 30-35% of the student population was Mormon, explaining that there was a

seminary across the street that Mormon students frequented throughout the day. In fact, there was a section of the campus where Mormon students congregated during lunch and break times that many students referred to as ‘Mormon Corner.’ Additionally, there was a large Southern Baptist church with a membership of over 3,500 located near the high school that many faculty members and a handful of students I talked with attended.

Recruitment Process

Fifty participants were recruited from the freshman class, which consisted of approximately 550 students. I was interested in studying freshmen because they had recently made the transition into high school, where they would have to re-negotiate their places within a broader social context. I also chose to recruit freshmen for my research because students at Desert Vista High School were only required to take one year of physical education and it was standard practice for students to take PE as freshmen. Since part of my study involved observing and participating in PE classes, it was important that I recruit students who would be enrolled in the physical education program. For this reason, recruitment was done through physical education classes, all of which were co-ed. I also chose to recruit participants from PE classes instead of other required classes, such as English or Math, because it would be easier to collect consent forms in classes I would be observing on a regular basis.

I began by obtaining permission from all six of the physical education teachers to give presentations to their classes about my study. During recruitment presentations, when I explained that I study body image, I asked students what they think that means. Responses to my question included “how you look,” “if you like the way you look,”

“your health,” “what your body looks like,” “your image of your body,” “your hairstyle,” and “how you dress.” One female student responded by explaining that she thinks the average is changing because kids are getting fatter. Some students took this opportunity to announce some of their own body image concerns. For example, over the course of my class presentations, several boys stated that they were sometimes teased for being small. Similarly, some of the girls made comments about wishing they were thinner. Some students’ willingness to talk about body image issues so openly, especially in front of their peers, surprised me. I had been concerned that adolescent boys in particular would feel too self-conscious to talk with a female stranger about body image related issues. However, the forthright statements that several boys made about their body image concerns during my recruitment presentations somewhat allayed my concern.

In fact, both male and female students seemed excited about the study and eager to participate. Many students asked if I would be able to take everyone who returned a signed form or if I would have to choose only some and wondered how they could ensure being chosen. Whereas I had originally been concerned about obtaining enough participants, now I worried that I would have too many and be faced with the difficult decision of choosing from among them. Because students’ responses to participating in the study were so positive and enthusiastic, I originally only planned to recruit from five or six PE classes. However, after handing out approximately 100 consent forms to students who indicated that they wanted to participate, only a handful of forms were returned to me. For this reason, I decided to expand my recruitment efforts to include all thirteen freshman PE classes. When I had finished recruiting from all of the PE classes

(approximately 500 students), I had handed out approximately 250 consent forms, all to students who indicated interest in participating. As a result of these additional recruitment efforts I only received another 15-20 signed forms. I wanted to recruit a total of fifty participants and at this point had only obtained about half of the sample.

Obtaining the remainder of signed consent forms proved to be quite a challenge. I was handing out the consent forms during PE, a class where students did not have their backpacks with them; they dressed out for class and left their belongings in the locker rooms. I had hoped that my presence in the PE classes would serve as a reminder for students to return the signed consent forms. However, I found that even when my presence in PE classes did serve as a reminder, by the time students returned to the locker rooms at the end of the period, they had usually forgotten about handing in the forms. With female participants it was easy to follow up because I could enter the girls' locker room after class and actively seek them out. However, following up after class with boys was more difficult because I did not have access to the boys' locker room. Even if I waited outside of the locker room in order to ask boys for the forms, I often missed them in the throng of students rushing out of locker rooms as soon as the bell rang. In addition, there were several students who said that they had lost their signed forms or who kept forgetting to bring the signed forms to school with them.

A month into the study I had recruited thirty girls and fifteen boys. I still needed an additional ten male participants and it appeared as though I had recruited all the participants I could through PE classes. I decided to take advantage of opportunistic moments when students on campus asked me who I was and what I was doing at the

school. Any time a male student asked me about myself, I attempted to recruit him into the study. I began positioning myself near groups of boys during lunch as well in hopes that they would ask me who I was. Through these methods, I was able to recruit an additional five boys. I decided to stop there because at that point I wanted to focus all of my efforts on observations and interviews.

Description of the Sample

Of the fifty study participants, thirty informants were female and twenty were male. The sample was approximately half white and half Hispanic. My original research plan focused on examining gender and ethnic differences as key variables in adolescent discourses about body image, food, exercise, and teasing practices. Although I had carefully chosen a high school that would enable me to recruit an adequate number of Hispanic and white participants, as I began my fieldwork I was surprised to learn that for the adolescents at Desert Vista, the most salient social categories appeared to be gender and social group affiliation and not ethnicity. During interviews, participants explicitly oriented toward gender and social group affiliation when answering questions and rarely if ever oriented toward ethnicity.

Over the course of the school year, I became increasingly skeptical of the social meaning of ethnicity among adolescents. During interviews, I learned that some informants who had initially identified themselves as white were at least part Hispanic. For example, one female participant who had originally indicated that she was white, later told me during an interview that if she could change one thing about the way she looks, she would make her skin lighter because she does not like looking Hispanic. I

asked her why she thought she looked Hispanic and she sheepishly told me that she was Hispanic. Similarly, I learned through an interview with a male informant who had initially identified himself as white that he was actually part 'Hispanic' as well. These interactions made me question the lived meaning of categories such as 'Hispanic' and 'white.' This issue became even more prominent as I talked with students who self-identified as 'Hispanic,' but socially aligned with primarily white peers and who expressed negative opinions about the 'Mexican' social group on campus. It became clear to me that ethnicity was defined through social practice rather than family lineage for these youth. Nichter (2003) cautions researchers against imposing ethnic labels onto research subjects, stating, "When using the term 'ethnicity' it is important to differentiate between an ethnic identity one assumes in context and an ethnic label that is imposed by others" (139). I realized that if I were to analyze my data according to ethnicity, then I would have to impose my own categorization onto informants because their perceptions about what it means to be 'Hispanic' and 'white' were neither consistent nor apparent.

In terms of home life, about half of the fifty study participants had parents who were married and half had parents who were divorced or separated. This mirrors the national average (Centers for Disease Control 2005). Of the twenty-five participants whose parents were no longer together, ten lived in single parent households, primarily with their mothers, and the remainder lived with one parent and either a step-parent or the parent's live-in partner. Among participants who lived in two-parent households (forty), seven had one parent or guardian who stayed at home, while the remainder had parents who both worked. Two informants with a stay-at-home parent or guardian indicated that

a parent stayed home by choice to take care of the house and kids while the remainder had a parent who was unemployed, retired, or disabled.

It was difficult to obtain socio-economic status data from the study participants. Informants usually displayed only partial knowledge that about what their parents did for a living. Many were able to identify where their parents worked, but did not know what their parents' job titles were. For example, several informants said that one of their parents works at Raytheon, a local defense and aerospace system company, but did not know what their actual job within the company was. Raytheon employees, as in any corporation, represent a wide variety of educational and salary levels, including engineers, secretaries, lab technicians, and maintenance workers. Other participants gave similarly vague answers indicating that their parents worked at hospitals, the local military base, mortgage and insurance companies, and local grocery stores. When asked where her dad works, one female informant said: "A long time ago-not a long time ago-but a while ago, he worked for the phone company and I don't know what happened to that. It looks like he still works there but I'm not sure. And then he also works for a mortgage company I think" (Jamie). This example illustrates the vague quality of many answers I received in response to questions about parent employment.

The most illuminating data about socio-economic status emerged during interview discussions about how much money participants received each day for lunch and what kinds of clothes they liked to buy and wear. It was during these discussions in interviews that informants would sometimes offer indirect information about their family's socio-economic status. For example, when I asked informants about lunch money, I found out

that two of my informants participated in the school's free lunch program. It was in response to this question that students would talk about how much money their parents gave them for lunch as well as allowance money they received. Additionally, during discussions about constructing personal styles through clothing choices I gleaned information about participants' socio-economic status as I listened to them talk about where they shopped for clothing, how often they shopped for clothing, what clothing brands were their favorite, and whether or not they could afford to buy their favorite brands of clothing.

Based on the direct and indirect information I was able to gather about socio-economic status during interviews, I would classify the majority of my sample as middle class and only a handful of participants as lower middle class. Most of the study participants received various amounts of allowance and lunch money each week that they used to buy food, clothes and entertainment related items such as movie tickets and music CD's. From what most informants said during interviews, they had to budget their money in order to buy things that they wanted, indicating that they had access to a modest disposable income. There were only a handful of informants who said directly during interviews that their parents did not have much money, indicating that they could not afford to buy the clothing brands or styles that they wanted. It should be noted that the high school freshmen I interviewed were too young to legally work, which meant that they were highly dependent upon their parents for money.

When asked to describe the mood of their houses, about a third of the sample described their homes using adjectives such as "hectic," "tense," "stressful,"

“depressing,” and “chaotic” Another third described their homes using adjectives such as “easy-going,” “exciting,” “fun,” “happy,” “mellow,” “relaxing,” “good,” and “calm.”

The remainder described their homes as being a combination of these elements, using phrases such as, “Happy with some down times,” “Normal. Fighting, getting along, and fighting,” “Sometimes happy, sometimes rough,” “Usually good and sometimes bad,” and “Everything.” This range in responses reflected the diversity of participants’ home situations that included parents who were divorced, separated, married, and re-married.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the religious conservatism that existed in the local community where I did my research. My sample reflected the religion demographics of the local community. Forty out of fifty informants went to church regularly with most attending Catholic or Non-denominational Christian churches. Other religions practiced by informants included Baptist, Mormon, Lutheran, Pentecostal, Jehovah’s Witness, and Judaism. Two informants self-identified as agnostic. It should be noted that because the participants in my study were minors who still lived with their parents, it cannot be assumed that their religious practices reflect their beliefs. A few informants indicated that they attended church because their parents forced them to. Additionally, with the exception of one female Mormon participant, informants never talked about their religious beliefs during interviews. While attending church regularly would likely have some degree of influence on one’s worldview, to understand the ways in which these adolescents’ religious and moral beliefs tie into their body image related ideologies would require a different kind of study than the one I conducted.

Data Collection & Analysis Methods

A variety of data collection methods were utilized, including ethnographic observation, participant observation, individual interviews, and focus group interviews. Having obtained subject and parental consent, all but three individual interviews were audio recorded and all focus group interviews were video recorded for subsequent transcription and analysis. In addition, detailed interview notes of each individual interview were taken for analysis purposes. Participant and ethnographic observations were recorded through note taking and subsequent ethnographic journals kept by the researcher.

The high school principal gave me permission to call students out of classes to conduct interviews. In order to facilitate this process, the principal assigned one of the office secretaries to the task of looking up class schedules of students I needed to interview and writing passes excusing them from classes. A student worker delivered the passes for me. I expressed concern to the principal that I would be adding a significant amount of work to the secretary's already busy day because I would ultimately need to call fifty students out of class twice during the course of the school year. He assured me that this would not be a problem and said that he wanted to provide me with whatever support I needed to facilitate my research. In an effort to minimize classroom disruption, I tried as much as possible to call students out of class at the beginning of the period and complete interviews within the time frame of one class period. Desert Vista high school had a modified block schedule, meaning that three days a week all classes met for approximately one hour and two days a week half of the classes met for one and a half

hours. I conducted as many interviews as possible during block days when classes met for one and a half hours, but I did have to conduct interviews during ‘regular schedule’ days, which generally resulted in the students missing approximately one and a half class periods. I always checked with students I had called out of class to make sure they felt comfortable missing that class. A few times students asked to be sent back to class because they were reviewing for or taking an exam. For the most part, students indicated that they were happy to be taken out of class in order to participate in interviews.

I interviewed each participant twice during the course of the school year with the exception of two female participants who left the school after being interviewed only one time. The first interview lasted approximately one hour and focused on body image ideologies and teasing practices. Informants were asked to describe their ideal body image as well as how they felt about their own bodies. Individual body image goals and what informants were doing in terms of diet and exercise to achieve their goals was also discussed. Additionally, informants were asked to describe what their peers look like in terms of body image as well as how they talk about their own and others’ bodies with friends. Informants responded to questions about body size with regard to dating as well as both personal experiences with and observations of teasing.

The second interview lasted approximately one and a half hours and focused on diet and exercise. Participants were asked about what kinds of exercise they did and how often, how they define exercise, and what types of exercises they perceived as being more appropriate for girls and boys. Participants also answered questions about PE, including what they think about their PE class, how they feel about dressing out, appearance-related

concerns they had during PE that may affect participation, and how they felt about the co-ed nature of their PE classes. In addition, topics that had emerged as particularly salient during the first interview were followed up as well. Emergent topics of importance to these adolescents included six-pack stomachs, muscle tone, and gender as well as perceptions of girls who are considered athletic. Questions about food consumption included discussion about what makes foods healthy or unhealthy, what foods and drinks they consume at school and outside of school, reasons for eating besides hunger, with whom they tend to eat junk food, and dieting practices. Other behaviors including sleep, drug use, and tobacco use were asked about as well. Also included in this interview were questions about their families and households, such as who they lived with, what their parents did for a living, religious affiliation, and what types of activities their family did together for fun.

In addition, six focus group interviews were conducted with some of the participants and their friends; these interviews lasted for approximately one hour each. The focus group interviews were less structured than the individual interviews because I wanted to allow participants to talk more openly about particular topics, such as junk food and advertising, body image and the media, teasing on campus, perceived gender differences in exercise participation and food sharing practices, and perceptions about different social cliques on campus. Focus groups were comprised of friendship groups in order to encourage participants to talk more freely. Of the six focus groups, three were all female, two were all male, and one consisted of both males and females.

In addition to interviews, I conducted extensive ethnographic observations in various locations throughout the school, including the areas where students ate lunch, the girls' locker room, P.E. classes, health and life skills classes, and hallways during passing periods. The primary goal of these observations was to explore discourse about body image and teasing practices in the every day lives of adolescents across contexts within the high school environment. Observation of physical education classes enabled me to document gendered patterns of participation among youth as well as discourses about body image. Lunchtime observations provided me with data on food choice availability as well as consumption patterns, food sharing practices, and surveillance and monitoring across gendered lines. In each of these contexts I was able to observe a variety of interactions among adolescents including teasing and bullying, flirting, and body image talk.

Participant observation, which I conducted at lunchtime and in physical education classes, yielded some of the most interesting data. Occasionally, during the lunch hour I would choose an empty table right before lunch period began and sit with whoever came to the table to eat. I experienced interesting responses from adolescents as a result. One day a group of girls walked over to the table where I was sitting, threw their book bags down and proceeded to say things like "I shouldn't eat today because I feel fat" and "I need to diet but I'm hungry." When they asked who I was and I told them that I was a researcher studying body image they all laughed and talked to me about body image for a while.

Another day I sat at an empty table and no one came over when lunch period started. Finally, a boy timidly approached and asked how I was doing. As we made small talk, I looked up to see a group of about four boys staring at us from several feet away. They eventually approached and laughingly told me that they did not know what to do when they saw a girl sitting at their table because girls never sit with them. When they asked who I was, I explained that I was a graduate student at the University of Arizona conducting dissertation research on adolescents' perceptions about body image and other related social issues. My explanation prompted an interesting conversation about body image among the group members. On another occasion, I sat on a bench and was later joined by three adolescents I had never interacted with, two of whom sat on either side of me and one who sat on the ground right in front of me. They jokingly teased each other about being fat and other things while completely ignoring me; I sat amongst them for thirty minutes and was never acknowledged.

After observing in physical education classes for about six months, I decided to dress out (I changed in the private teachers' bathroom) and actually participate with students in various PE classes. I chose to do this for two reasons. First, I wanted to experience on a visceral level how much exercise students were getting in PE classes, especially since for many students this was their primary or only source of regular exercise. Second, interview data and observational data indicated that boys and girls participated differently in PE, with boys being more active and girls being more passive. I wanted to explore this phenomenon from the perspective of a student in the class rather than an observer on the sidelines. In addition, in interviews many informants noted that

much of body image related discourse and direct teasing occurred during PE classes. I was not able to hear much as an observer because I was too far away from students to overhear individual conversations. Also, as an adult observer positioned on the sidelines of physical education classes, PE teachers were often drawn to talk to me for much of the class period, making it difficult for me to focus on observing student interaction. Physically participating in the classes allowed me to pay closer attention to what students were doing and talking about.

In all, I conducted one-hundred individual interviews and six focus group interviews. Thirty-two of the one hundred individual interviews were transcribed by me. These transcribed interviews consisted of the first and second interviews with sixteen informants (four Hispanic males, four Hispanic females, four white males, and four white females). Although all individual interviews were not transcribed due to time constraints, detailed interview notes were taken either during or directly after each interview. Additionally, I listened to all of the interviews that were not transcribed and selectively transcribed portions that were particularly relevant to topics of analysis. All six of the focus group interviews were transcribed. All interview transcripts, interview notes, and field notes were coded for thematic analysis using Atlas.ti software.

My research was greatly facilitated by the cooperation and support of administrators and teachers at the high school. The school principal, who was himself writing his dissertation, told me that he understood the importance of cooperation and support in doing dissertation work and that he would provide me with anything I needed in order to collect the necessary data. True to his word, I was assigned a secretary who

called students I needed to interview out of class and helped me find rooms to conduct interviews. When the weather allowed, I conducted interviews outside but when it was too cold or raining I was given access to the conference room or an unoccupied office. Regarding class observations, all of the teachers I approached were very welcoming and indicated that I may attend their classes whenever I wished. It was this cooperation by school administrators and teachers and access to students and places around the school that allowed me to collect such a wide variety of data.

Walking a Fine Line: My Role as Anthropologist

My previous career as a high school English teacher influenced my subsequent experience as an ethnographer in a school setting. As a high school teacher, I remember being exhausted after each day of teaching and often feeling as though I had made very little impact on any student's life. My short career as a high school teacher was fraught with stress as I struggled daily with classroom behavioral issues, problems with truancy, literacy, and failure rates for which I was ultimately held responsible. Although I knew that my role as ethnographer would be very different than that of teacher, I was still apprehensive about returning to the high school setting to conduct my field research because my most recent experience in a high school setting had not been positive. As I began my fieldwork endeavor I felt both excitement and trepidation, taking solace in the knowledge that at least this time I was a researcher and had no responsibility for managing the behavior and intellectual growth of the adolescents with whom I worked. One of my primary concerns in returning to the high school setting was how I would negotiate my role on the campus. How would students at the high school see me and in

what ways would my experiences as a former high school teacher color my fieldwork experience? Would I be able to shed the anxiety I felt about returning to a high school campus and more importantly, would I be able to let go of my former teacher identity in favor of a new and unfamiliar identity as researcher?

On the first morning of fieldwork my struggle with the role I was to play became apparent. Ironically, my first struggle was at the site of my body. I stood in front of my closet at 5:45 a.m. feeling insecure about what I should wear. I did not want to dress too much like a student since I would be meeting teachers all day and I wanted them to take me seriously as a researcher. However, I also did not want to look like a teacher for fear that students would think of me as an authority figure and not feel comfortable talking openly with me. I needed to choose an outfit that would make me look like someone in-between a student and a teacher. That first day I decided to wear jeans from the ‘Gap’ and a green and white polo style shirt from ‘American Eagle’ with clogs. I felt confident that at least I was probably wearing acceptable clothing brands, although I was worried about the style of my outfit. These thoughts consumed me during my twenty-five minute drive to the high school. It occurred to me during my commute that morning that a researcher may be in much the same position as an adolescent—both feeling the need to be liked by “everyone” in the community and being rendered very insecure by that need. I often felt like an insecure adolescent throughout the school year as I worried about what people thought of me and whether or not my clothes were both ‘cool’ and age appropriate.

Colleagues and friends with whom I have talked about my research have told me that they would find it very difficult to return to a high school setting to conduct research because their memories of high school are too fraught with adolescent angst. Similarly, one of the research assistants from Nichter's (2000) 'Teen Lifestyle Project' is quoted as saying, "Sometimes when I go to the high school to do interviews, I feel so self-conscious...so conspicuous...as if everyone is looking at me...it's as if I'm fifteen all over again" (2000: 182). Oddly, my experience doing research on the high school setting did not trigger memories of my own adolescent insecurities. Rather the quote above by one of Nichter's graduate research assistants perfectly captures what I felt as a young high school teacher. I found that doing research at the high school triggered emotions I felt as a young teacher rather than as an adolescent, probably because my memories of being a high school teacher were a part of my more recent past than my memories of being a high school student.

As a former high school teacher, I was much attuned to the central role that school rules play in maintaining order among students. The hierarchy of public schools is generally such that there are two roles with regard to rules: individuals who are expected to enforce the rules and individuals who are expected to follow the rules. As a researcher, I fit neither role and wondered to what extent I would need to adhere to student rules. On my first morning at the high school one of the assistant principals gave me a tour of the school, providing me with an opportunity to ask her how some of the rules would apply to me. For example, the student handbook states "No backpacks in the lunch area." I carried all of my field equipment around in a backpack and had no secure

place to store it during lunch. I correctly presumed that the administrators would have no problem with me carrying my backpack during lunchtime observations. In fact, the assistant principal told me that the only rule she expected me to follow was dress code. Although I was given the freedom to disregard the majority of the school rules, I knew that in doing so I was aligning myself with authority figures rather than students. Thus, the real question for me was, ‘do I want to disregard school rules and risk being placed by students in the same category as authority figures?’ Aside from carrying my backpack during lunch, I decided to follow the remainder of rules that applied to students, which meant that I did not use my cell phone, tried to arrive to classes on time, and abstained from eating or drinking in classes.

My role as researcher in the school continued to feel somewhat ambiguous throughout the school year as I was frequently mistaken for a student by both teachers and adolescents. This was something that I had also struggled with a great deal as a very young high school teacher and I spent the years during my teaching tenure working hard to exude qualities that I thought a respected authority figure should possess such as confidence, officiousness, and a stern expression that I clung to until I was absolutely certain that my students would show me the respect that I needed to teach effectively. These qualities served me well as a high school teacher and were necessary for my mental and emotional survival at the time, but I knew that they would hinder me greatly in my role as a researcher. My embodied experience of being a high school teacher had to be constantly renegotiated throughout the school year as I struggled to find my place as a researcher within the high school community.

Part of creating that authoritative image as a high school teacher included wearing very professional clothing. When I walked into Desert Vista on the first day wearing jeans and a casual shirt I felt naked, literally stripped of my authoritative armor. I continued to struggle with my clothing choices throughout the school year. One particularly hot day in September, I was standing outside observing a PE class when I was attacked by ants that had crawled inside of my clogs and were biting my bare feet. When I mentioned this to the PE teacher she asked me why I felt the need to dress nicely every day, especially if I was going to observe PE classes all day long. She wondered why I did not wear tennis shoes like the PE teachers did. I thought about her suggestion to dress more comfortably and cringed at the thought of walking around the high school campus in tennis shoes, shorts, and a t-shirt. Although I thought it was appropriate for the PE teachers to dress for exercise, for me that attire seemed entirely too casual. I simply could not completely let go of my former teacher persona. More practically, I did not want students to associate me with PE teachers by dressing like them because many informants had expressed a dislike for their physical education classes. I continued to walk this fine line between student and authority figure all year as I struggled to exude just the right image.

A likely consequence of attempting to walk the fine line between established roles at the high school was that people did not know where I fit in. As I explained earlier, I was often mistaken for a student throughout the school year by teachers, students, and security guards. One day as I walked off campus during lunch to explore the McDonald's across the street a teacher yelled at me to come back. As I approached her

she asked to see my ID card and I explained that I was not a student at the high school but that I was a researcher from the University of Arizona. Before the security guards figured out who I was, they regularly asked me to present a hall pass as they saw me walking around campus during class periods. In addition to being mistaken for a student throughout the school year, one student asked me if I was evaluating the school and another asked if I was an FBI spy sent to identify students who were using and selling drugs. In fact, when I began my research I worried that students would mistake me for a 'narc' and avoid interacting with me. While this student and his friends' perception of me as an 'FBI spy' did not appear to be widespread, it concerned me nonetheless.

One time I exploited my ambiguous role to break up an impending fight between two male students. One of the students was a freshman participant in my study, who I will call Jack, and the other was a very muscular varsity football linebacker. The older student towered over Jack, pushing him and threatening to beat him up. Jack was literally shaking and stuttering as he asked the older student to leave him alone. Out of concern that Jack would suffer serious injury if the older student hit him, I walked over to the interaction, physically placed myself between the two of them and told the older student that he needed to stop threatening Jack immediately. The older student asked me, "Who the fuck are you?" I told him that I was a teacher at the school and that he needed to come to the office with me right away in order to avoid getting into more trouble than he was already in. The words came out of my mouth before I even realized what I was saying. He did accompany me to the office, where I was asked by the assistant principal to write up a disciplinary referral describing the incident. This experience mentally

transported me back to my days as a high school teacher. When I later considered my actions, I felt uncomfortable for having misrepresented myself but I ultimately believed that my intervention was appropriate given the circumstances.

By virtue of the fact that I was working with a relatively large number of participants representing many of the social groups on campus, gaining in-group status with social cliques proved to be much more difficult than I had originally anticipated. When I planned my research design I had originally envisioned eating lunch with participants and their friends so that I could hear body image discourses firsthand. I soon realized that students were taking note of who I sat with as they made comments such as, “I saw you sitting with the Jocks/Goths/preppy kids yesterday.” I was surprised to learn that students were actively observing me just as I was them. As I will discuss in the next chapter, social groups at the high school were both fluid and cohesive. I found that among the relatively cohesive groups to be described in Chapter 4, some were perceived negatively by others and loyalty to the group was valued and in some cases expected. My movement among groups throughout the year prevented me from fully integrating into any of them. I was most widely accepted among less structured and lesser known social groups.

Additionally, as I discuss in the next chapter, individuals associated with the more cohesive social cliques marked their membership largely through personal style, such as clothing, hairstyles, makeup, discourse, and stance. If my aim had been to gain acceptance among one social group instead of many, then it would have been reasonable to adopt the group’s personal style in order to fit in. However, it would have seemed

disingenuous and even ridiculous to constantly alter my personal style in terms of clothing, hairstyle, make-up and stance as a means for fitting in with the various social cliques on campus. Furthermore, style-shifting between teacher and student discourse was challenging enough without having to constantly style-shift between discourses of the various cliques with whom I associated. As a result, I adopted a somewhat generic teenage discourse style with the most noticeable feature being frequent usage of the discourse markers 'like', 'um', and 'you know.' This 'one-size fits all' teen discourse style may have further hindered my in-group status among certain cliques who actively constructed their identities in contrast to what they perceived to be mainstream teen culture.

In terms of discourse, I was struck by the markedly different interaction styles between teachers at the high school and my colleagues at the university. My university colleagues tend to take more time to communicate ideas, often pausing to reflect on what they have said, to ponder what they want to say, or to search for just the right word to convey their intended meaning. In contrast, school teachers tend to talk in short fast bursts, getting their points across very efficiently. The nature of teaching in public school requires that teachers simultaneously monitor student progress, attend to student inquiries, manage student behavior, monitor the progress of the lesson plan, and mentally map transitions into subsequent lessons. These processes happen constantly and simultaneously throughout the work day, creating the need to communicate in a highly efficient manner.

The succinct communication style of high school teachers is familiar to me since I used to teach high school, but it was jarring when I first encountered it during fieldwork because I had not been in the public school setting for five years. I was also struck by my loss of this interaction style as a result of time spent in graduate school. It was a conversation I had with a PE teacher, who I will call Mrs. Roy, during a class she was teaching that made me aware of the different interaction styles. After getting everyone started with the football throwing activity, Mrs. Roy approached me to ask what exactly I was studying. I began to explain my study and as I formulated my explanation, I retreated into my head, the kids and footballs fading out of my consciousness. Suddenly, Mrs. Roy ran off without explanation to get a group that was off task back into the activity. I was jarred back into the reality of hyper fourteen year olds running around a field throwing footballs haphazardly through the air. It was then that I realized that Mrs. Roy had needed the condensed thirty second version and that I would have to reconnect with the communication style from my days as a high school teacher. This was made difficult by the fact that I was living and conducting research in the city where my graduate program is located and therefore still interacting with academic peers and advisors on a regular basis.

The teachers whose classes I observed often interacted with me as a colleague, possibly because they knew that I was a former high school teacher. This was especially true with PE teachers who spent a great deal of class time talking to me while they supervised their students. The topics of conversation initiated by teachers usually included talk about individual students in their classes, classroom interpersonal dynamics,

school politics, job-related frustrations, and sometimes even issues related to their personal lives. Two of the teachers in particular treated me as a confidante and I subsequently developed a friendship with them over the course of the school year. In addition to obtaining valuable information from the PE teachers during these conversations, I enjoyed the adult interaction.

However, these conversations often interfered with my observations, especially since one of my primary goals in conducting observations of PE classes was to hear students talking about their bodies and teasing each other. Additionally, I worried that students might start to associate me with their PE teachers, which might hinder my relationships with participants who did not like PE and/or their PE teacher. At one point, I was in the girls' locker room talking to the PE teachers and afterward, as I walked by students who were dressing out, one of my informants asked me what I was doing in the PE teachers' office. When I told her that I was talking to the PE teachers, she said, "Ew stay away from them." This was yet another reminder that I needed to take care with the image I projected and maintain the ambiguous identity I had so carefully constructed.

In the next chapter I turn to the high school social scene, describing prominent social cliques that students discussed in interviews, examining in-group and outsider perceptions of these social cliques as well as how adolescents in my study constructed their identities in relation to their perceptions of social cliques they described. I further explore the nature of adolescents' social networks at the high school and the extent to which social groups were both cohesive and fluid.

IV. THE SOCIAL SCENE: NEGOTIATING SPACE & PLACE

Adolescence is a period of transition during which peer group affiliation becomes a central concern (Brown 1999; Cotterell 1996; Nichter 2000). Especially during transition periods, such as the freshman year of high school, adolescents must negotiate their place within the multiple social environments of their high school campus (Eder, et al. 1995). In doing so, they construct and negotiate their social identities. However, this negotiation of place within the adolescent social hierarchy can be difficult because the peer environment is a “complex social ecology” (Brown 1999) within which networks are dense, hierarchical, and greatly influenced by social alignments (Brown 1999; Eder, et al. 1995). While social groups are fluid to a certain extent, some social groups align themselves against each other so that membership may affect access to other social groups (Eckert 1989; Eder, et al. 1995). Research shows that social status is highly important to adolescents, often taking primacy over academic success (Coleman 1961). For this reason, it is important to contextualize adolescent behavior within the high school social scene.

At Desert Vista High School, there are a handful of relatively cohesive social cliques that many informants identified by name and described in a fairly consistent way during interviews. Although a variety of names were assigned to these identifiable social cliques, they were consistently described by informants in terms of dress, stance, music preferences, the physical space they occupied on campus, and other elements of personal style. The concept that identities are constructed within and through social contexts is a well-established area of anthropological theory (Mead 1936; Sapir 1927;

Whorf 1941). With regard to youth, anthropologists have examined identity construction through symbolic creativity (Willis 1990) and semiotic practices (Shaw 1994). Drawing on the concept of *bricoleur* (Hebdige 1979; Levi-Strauss 1966), some linguistic anthropologists (Bucholtz 1996, 1999; Eckert 1993, 1996; Goodwin 1990, 1999, 2002; Goodwin and Goodwin 1992; Mendoza-Denton 1996; 1999) have analyzed the ways in which youth appropriate and recombine existing objects of the dominant culture in new ways to create a distinctive style. In this chapter, I similarly explore the ways in which the social groups at Desert Vista High School combine elements of clothing, makeup, music preference, body image ideology, discourse, and physical space to construct unique social identities.

These identifiable social cliques constituted only a small percentage of the total student population. The social dynamics at Desert Vista High School were both fluid and cohesive, a reflection of “the unstable and shifting cultural affiliations which characterize late modern consumer-based societies” (Bennett 1999). As many informants explained, a majority of students at the high school were members of small friendship groups that were not widely known or identified by students as established social cliques. Even within the more cohesive social cliques, individuals often associated with members from other social groups. Within the Birmingham School of research, ‘subculture’ has long been the unit of analysis for examining social relations among youth (Hebdige 1979; McRobbie 2000; Redhead 1997; Willis 1990). However, adolescence researchers have begun to rethink the extent to which ‘subculture’ accurately reflects youth social networks (Bennett 1999; Cotterrell 1996; Eckert 1989). Bennett (1999) argues that the

notion of 'subculture' implies defined social boundaries that do not exist. Instead, identities are socially constructed through group affiliation and are more fluid than fixed. In this chapter, I contextualize the cohesive social cliques that have relatively wide-known identities within the more fluid social dynamic of the high school culture.

The Goths

During interviews, the Goths/ Punks were one of the most widely talked about social groups among informants during interviews. This group was referred to by some informants as 'Outcasts' (a name which was also used by informants to identify people who do not belong to any group) and 'the Lowdown People' (by one informant). Although 'Goth' and 'Punk' were the two labels used most frequently by members to identify the group, for readability purposes, I will refer to this social clique simply as 'Goths' throughout the dissertation. The Goths were a relatively large group, consisting of approximately 40-45 adolescents. Members included both white and Hispanic students.

When I asked informants what distinguishes Goths, black clothing was the most frequently indexed identity marker. This perception was perpetuated by the fact that the majority of the group members did in fact wear primarily black or dark colored clothing. During lunchtime, this group was the most readily identifiable because of its relative unity in clothing color. When I conducted my first lunchtime observation, I immediately noticed the 'sea of black clothing' (my field notes) that comprised the Goth group. A male informant who described himself as an 'Outsider' (in the sense that he did not belong to any particular group), explained that at the beginning of the school year he

wore black eye make-up and black nail polish in an effort to look Gothic: “Well like in the beginning of the year it was, I was kind of going for like really Gothic, you know, like black nails and make-up and stuff.” This example illustrates the observation among many students that the Goth identity was closely tied to the color black.

While many Goth informants primarily wore dark colored clothing and defined black clothing as a distinguishing feature of their group during interviews, some Goth members expressed frustration with the ways in which the Gothic identity was often defined only in terms of clothing color. Cory, a self-identified Goth, who wore a fitted Superman t-shirt underneath a black Dickies jacket, tight-fitting, faded blue jeans, and white sneakers the day I interviewed her, explained:

“...So I had a black sweatshirt on and a black pair of pants and I said ‘Does this look okay for PE?’...And um my friend said, ‘Well you look Gothic’ and I wanted to tell her so bad ‘You don’t know what Gothic is. You have no idea what you’re talking about’ because she is more on the preppy side....Basically someone thinks if you’re wearing all black you’re automatically Goth, which is stupid. They think that if a guy wears makeup he’s Goth, which is wrong. They think that if a girl wears black makeup that she’s a Goth, which is wrong....And, I don’t know, people just don’t understand at all. They have no idea.”

For Cory, “Goth isn’t a fashion statement. It’s a state of mind more or less.” In fact, she distinguished between her group and other people who “dress with all black and stuff for attention.” When asked what is the defining feature of the Goth group, Luke, a male Goth informant who typically dressed in loose-fitting black clothing and had naturally dark hair that fell to his shoulders, explained that in addition to wearing black clothing, they all listen to the “classical or heavy metal rock...like ‘Black Sabbath,’ ‘Led Zeppelin,’ ‘ACDC,’ a lot of those bands and then some of the new (bands) like ‘System of Down,’

and ‘Disturbed.’ That kind of stuff.” This informant’s comment also illustrates that Goth identity extends beyond clothing color.

However, Cory’s and Luke’s descriptions of Goth identity was implicitly contested by others who, when asked about the defining feature of Goths, said simply that Goths wear a lot of black. Leslie, an energetic, effusive girl with bright green eyes, freckles, and long, brown hair she generally wore up in a ponytail, identified herself as a ‘Non’ (short for ‘non-popular’). She explained that she and her friends “don’t care” about clothing:

“We’re like ‘we have jeans and we don’t care’....I fall into the don’t care style. Like I wear basketball shorts to school and, you know, I wear like nice jeans, nice cute shirts, but it’s not like the decked out dresses...And yeah, I follow the don’t care style because I can look nice if I want to, but I’d rather just be comfortable when I go to school. And yeah, I just don’t care about what I wear. It’s okay” (Leslie).

In this interview segment, after describing her own clothing preferences, Leslie compares her “don’t care” style with Gothic style, which she portrays as carefully crafted. As illustrated in the following quote, Leslie initially characterizes the Goths as falling into the ‘don’t care category’ as well. However, she subsequently rejects this categorization, explicitly contesting the idea that Gothic identity is not tied to fashion:

“There’s like the Gothic people and like they don’t care either I guess. I guess you could put ‘em in the don’t care (category). But they’re making like a fashion statement. People say like Goth is a frame of mind, not a fashion statement but it’s a fashion statement. They’re like ‘I’m this way so I’m gonna paint my nails black and my eyes’ or something like that. And I don’t really have respect for people like that cuz if it’s a frame of mind then you don’t really have to dress a certain way to let people know you’re like this. It should just be enough to let yourself know” (Leslie.).

For Leslie, Goth identity is at least partially about making a statement through fashion because to paint one's nails and eyes black, practices she associates with the Goths, is to make a statement about one's 'frame of mind' through one's fashion choices.

A characteristic also associated with Goths, by both self-identified members and outsiders, was a lack of concern for following normative or popular fashion trends and for what others think of their physical appearance. A lack of concern for following popular fashion trends was discussed as a positive attribute by group members who explained that Goths do not judge people based on physical appearance. In fact, when asked to describe her group, one Goth informant told me, "The Goths don't judge you for how you look." When I asked her what the defining feature is of Goths she explained that "they just accept people." Many Goth informants similarly described group members as being very accepting of a wide variety of people. Eddie, a soft-spoken Goth who generally wore dark colored clothing and straightened his light brown hair with a flattening iron, explained to me during an interview that Goths are "not as worried about perfection with clothing as most people are." He contrasted Goths with Jocks, who "wear like Tommy Hilfiger and like their hair to be really neat and such things like that."

However, outsiders perceived the Goth disregard for following normative fashion trends negatively, associating their look as unclean and unattractive. For example, in reference to a Goth student who had been a frequent target of teasing by his peers, a female informant who was not part of an identifiable social group, told me that people used to make fun of his 'grungy' clothing style, saying things to him like, "When's the last time you took a shower?" She also explained that a group of students recently lit a

paper bag of dog excrement on fire and threw it against the front door of his home.

Another Goth informant explained that a female member of her group used to be called Marilyn Manson (a male rock star) by students in other social groups because she had long hair that was dyed black. Kenny, the male informant who attempted to create a Goth identity through the use of black eye makeup and nail polish described numerous incidents when his peers would make fun of him, calling him “crazy” and “gay” and looking at him with expressions of disgust.

In line with their image of accepting many different kinds of people, Goth members represented a relatively wide variety of body sizes. This is a trend that I noticed during my lunchtime observations and that was confirmed by informants during interviews. When asked to describe the various body sizes and shapes that he sees around campus, Eddie, a member of the Goth group, explained:

“...We have a pretty wide variety of just physical image wise. Like there’s a lot of taller kids that are actually pretty strong and we have smaller ones and there’s some overweight people. With um the jocks and everything that hang out more by the cafeteria, they’re actually all pretty much in shape because they’re all athletic and everything. None of them are overweight and everything....Um well over where we sit under the clock in the corner, um there’s a couple of girls that like have a little meat on them....Over by the cafeteria all them because, you know, it’s the more popular group and they’re more, almost seems rude saying that, but they’re more obsessed with looking good for the guys. So and then a lot of them are really skinny and stuff.”

Goths not only accepted people of different sizes but they sometimes explicitly rejected normative body image ideology through discourse. For example, Luke, a self-identified Goth, explained that he and his friends made fun of ‘six packs stomachs,’ a physical characteristic that was widely coveted by other teenage males at the high school. He and his friends jokingly said things like, “I’ve got a 1 1/2 pack” and “I’ve got a keg.” Luke

explained that he thinks people with six packs have “nothing better to do with their lives than pay too much attention to their looks.” It is important to note that while members of this group appeared to be invested in projecting an image of rejecting normative body image ideology through acceptance of people with a wide range of body sizes and jokes about six pack stomachs, during individual interviews many Goth individuals did in fact express concern for how their bodies looked, a subject that will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

During interviews, many Goths explicitly contrasted their image with that of the Jocks/Preps regarding body image, personal style, and language use. Cory, a female Goth member, explained:

“Well we all have really weird and off the wall personalities. We’re not like anyone else we’ve met. Whereas if you talk to a preppy person they’ll say-even though a lot of us say ‘like’ a lot because it’s more of a sentence filler, but they kind of overuse it I guess. And, you know, they’re always like flirting with other guys. They’re always doing just kind of stuff where you look at them and you’re like ‘Wow if I ever get like that, please shoot me’ you know.”

Interestingly, in this quote, Cory makes frequent use of the discourse marker ‘like’ in the process of criticizing Jocks/Preps for overuse of this same discourse marker. Just as Goths alternately rejected normative body image ideology and expressed concerns about the ways their bodies looked, in the quote above, Cory utilizes what she perceives to be a form of popular teen discourse in the course of explicitly criticizing others’ use of it.

As discussed in an earlier example, a male Goth informant contrasted the wide variety of body sizes in his group with the jocks who are “all pretty much in shape.” He also contrasted the girls in his group, some of whom have “a little meat on them,” with the popular girls who are “really skinny” because “they’re more obsessed with looking

good for the guys.” This informant contrasted Goths with Jocks/Preps in terms of concern with personal appearance as well, explaining that Jocks/Preps are more concerned with having “neat” hair and wearing the most stylish clothing brands. Another male Goth informant reiterated these perceptions during an interview. In response to a question about what kinds of teasing occur on campus, Luke explained:

“Like people will go ‘come on ladies’ and stuff, like the healthy, athletic people. That kind of annoys me because they just-so what? We don’t care about our appearance so much to have to have a great body. And then even if we do have a great body we don’t find it necessary to go and insult another person.”

Many Goth informants indicated during interviews that they are teased by Jocks/Preps because they do not conform to normative personal styles, a topic that will be further examined in Chapter 6. A female Goth informant summed up her perception of the relationship between Goths and Jocks/Preps by saying, “Well like Preppies hate Gothics and Gothics hate Preppies and everybody else....”

The perception that “Gothics hate preppies and everybody else” was echoed by other informants. A female focus group participant who was not a member of the Goth clique said the following about this group: “They kind of act like they don’t want to talk to anybody else.” Other informants described Goths as “people who don’t like anybody,” people who “don’t like to socialize” and “reserved.” Even the physical space that the group occupied communicated a perceived desire for distance from other social groups. On the west side of the central commons area there was a tall brick wall with a large clock near the top that was visible to everyone in the commons area. Located in the center of that wall was the entrance to a long, narrow corridor lined with brick on the top and along both sides. This corridor was open at the commons entrance and gated at the

opposite entrance. The Goths primarily congregated in the narrow corridor, spilling out to the commons area just beneath the large clock so that they were not only physically separated from other social groups, but they were largely out of sight as well.

The Goth group presented a different identity to outsiders than among members. Although many non-Goth informants described Goths as being anti-social, lunchtime observations and interviews with Goth informants revealed that they were indeed quite sociable, albeit amongst themselves. While this group separated itself from other groups through clothing style and the physical space they occupied, Goth informants repeatedly indicated that they welcomed and accepted any outsider who wanted to join their group. In fact, several Goth informants indicated that they became part of the Goth group because no one else would talk to them. Similarly, an informant whose boyfriend was Goth explained to me during an interview that a lot of people are intimidated by her boyfriend because he is 6'4" and wears a black trench coat. However, in reality, she said that he is very friendly, which I found to be true when I talked with him during lunchtime and during a focus group interview in which he participated. None of the Goth informants whom I spoke with explicitly discussed reasons for socially and physically separating themselves from other groups. However, interview data in which Goth informants explicitly contrasted their identities with those of Jocks/Preps suggest that this may have been a strategy for further aligning their image against those of other groups, such as the Jocks/Preps. This also may have been a means for Goths to protect themselves against teasing that was leveled against them for 'being different,' a topic that will be discussed at length in Chapter 6.

The Jocks/Preps

I use the name Jocks/Preps to define the so-called ‘popular crowd’ because the majority of informants (both members and non-members) used these two terms interchangeably when talking about this social clique. One informant referred to this group as “the Popular Mob” and another as the “Popularity Group.” However, for the majority of informants, this group was known as the Jocks and/or the Preps. I should also note that this group was comprised of the freshmen Jocks and Preps; Jocks and Preps who were in other grade levels did not socialize with these freshmen during lunch. Like the Goths, members of the Jocks/Preps included white and Hispanic students.

From lunchtime observations and interviews, I learned that the Jocks/Preps were primarily comprised of male athletes, such as basketball and football players, and thin girls, some of whom were members of the dance team and cheerleader squad, but most of whom did not participate in team sports. The female athletes were not a part of this group, possibly due to the relatively widespread perception among male informants that many of the female athletes were “masculine,” a topic that will be discussed more thoroughly in subsequent chapters. When I asked a male Jock/Prep whether or not the female jocks hang out with them he indicated that they do not and further explained that he did not know where they hang out during lunch. Thus, the term ‘Jock’ in the ‘Jocks/Preps’ label does not refer to the girls in the group but only to the boys. Because this group was comprised of girls who were explicitly not Jocks (but were instead Preps) and boys who were Jocks, I will retain the double label of Jocks/Preps throughout this dissertation.

Through interviews and informal conversations during lunchtime observations, I learned that the Jocks/Preps were considered by many to be the proverbial ‘popular crowd.’ In fact many informants explicitly stated that the Jocks/Preps were the popular group and often used the terms ‘Jocks,’ ‘Preps,’ and ‘Popular Group’ interchangeably when talking about this social clique. One informant, who used the terms ‘Popular Mob’ and ‘Preps’ interchangeably, described this group as “...the people with like the hot guys and the hot girls clenched together.” She went on to describe a typical lunchtime image of the Jocks/Preps:

“Every day they’re in the same line with the same people. He wears like the same shirt every day cuz he’s a football quarterback. You know he has to. And um she’s tall and she’s so skinny...”

As Leslie’s comments suggest, the Jocks/Preps were generally perceived to be the ‘beautiful’ people as well as the most socially powerful. Kirk, a tall, lean, muscular Jock/Prep with short blond hair and blue eyes, who was incidentally the quarterback for the freshman football team, explained to me during an interview that the senior football players “just pretty much run the school.” Jerry, a short, skinny boy who looked young for his age, indirectly acknowledged the privileged social class of Jocks/Preps when he said during an interview that he wanted to be on the basketball team because all of the basketball players seem to have girlfriends.

Informants largely described male members of the Jock/Prep clique in terms of clothing style and sports participation. A male Jock/Prep informant said the following about his male friends’ clothing style:

“Well, if you want to fit in like with my friends then I think you just like go with like preppier clothes, not like greasy. I mean you look nice and all but not like

really baggy stuff. More like just stuff-I don't know how to explain it. Just more preppier stuff. And then um like some of my friends like dress like me. And then there's like some that wear lots of football jerseys, basketball jerseys, um just stuff like that" (Kirk).

A male informant who was not a member of the Jocks/Preps explained to me during an interview that the current popular style for guys is anything with a Hollister label and more generally a "casual beach style." He further explained that a male student who is not a part of the Jocks/Preps runs the risk of being teased if he wears this clothing style. Other informants similarly identified the Hollister clothing label with Jocks/Preps: "Like people in my English class they're like 'well if you wear Hollister and all this stuff then you're like a prep'" (Abbie). Kirk, the freshman quarterback, explained that he and many of his friends buy their clothes at stores like 'Abercrombie & Fitch,' 'Hollister,' and 'American Eagle.'

While informants also associated female members of the Jock/Prep social clique with brand of clothing (one even referred to them as "the Hollister girls"), Jock/Prep girls were more frequently described in terms of clothing fit (tight vs. loose), body size, and behavior. Leslie, the self-identified 'Non,' explained:

"I mean I don't want to be mean. There are some larger girls who wear the tight shirts and I'm just like 'you know, I know that you feel-maybe you feel better about yourself but...it's not attractive to see.' And...like the big style is like the tight tank tops with like a jacket over it and you can do that but I think you have to be, not necessarily like a certain way, but you have to hang out with a certain group of people. Cuz if you look at like the groups of people,...we're like 'we have jeans and we don't care.' And then there's like the dancers with their boyfriends of course (referring to the girls in the Jock/Prep group)."

In this quote Leslie reiterated what John said about clothing fashion being closely tied to social status when she explained that in order to "pull off" wearing the stylish clothes,

girls “have to hang out with a certain group of people,” referring to the Jocks/Preps.

However, whereas Leslie focused on clothing fit (“tight tank tops”) in her comment about current fashion trends for girls, the focus of John’s comment about current fashion trends for boys was on clothing label (“Hollister”) and style (“casual beach style”). These examples suggest that social status was more closely tied to body size for girls than for boys because the tight clothes that the Jock/Prep girls wore showed more of their bodies.

Girls in the Jock/Prep group were also talked about in terms of body size. Eddie, a self-identified Goth, described popular girls as being “really skinny” because “they’re more obsessed with looking good for the guys.” The popular girls were also described as being “freakishly skinny” and “toothpicks” by female informants who were not members of the Jock/Prep group. During an interview, a female informant who was not a Jock/Prep explained:

“The skinny girls...like the dancer girls and the cheerleaders will all hang out with a smoothie and their boyfriend beside ‘em....They’re sittin’ there all huddled-I mean they’re shivering cuz they have nothing on their bones....”

A male informant, who was not part of a recognized social clique, explained that while guys are teased by their peers for being thin, it is the thin girls who are most popular. In fact, when I asked informants during interviews who are the most popular girls on campus, most indicated that it was the thin girls, especially those who wore revealing clothing, such as short skirts and tight shirts. The school dress code stated that “the acceptable length of dresses, skirts and shorts will be determined by placing the hands at the sides of the body and the thumbs should touch the lower hem of the garment” (Desert Vista student handbook). This meant that girls could wear skirts that barely covered their

buttocks and exposed most of their thighs (in order to better visualize this dress code rule, try standing up straight with your hands at your sides and notice how far down your thighs the tips of your thumbs reach). Regarding shirts, the school dress code required that straps be at least 2.5 inches wide and stated that they must not expose “any part of the torso,” including the “stomach, chest, and cleavage” (Desert Vista student handbook). Girls were able to sidestep this rule by wearing baggy zip-up sweatshirts over tight, revealing tank tops and then unzipping the sweatshirts during lunch while they socialized with friends.

In addition to being described in terms of clothing fit and body size, girls who associated with the Jocks/Preps were described by informants in terms of behavior. Leslie described to me the kinds of conversations she overheard among members of the dance team in the girls’ locker room:

“Who (are) we gonna make out with in the back of the bus today. You know like in the back of the bus there’s no light and so the cool guys who wanna get kissed go back there. And uh they talk about like how-mostly like what they did with their boyfriend....”

During a lunchtime observation, Leah, a soft-spoken, academically inclined student who did not identify with any particular social group, explained that the Jocks/Preps do drugs, drink, and go to parties. She described the girls in that group as “fast,” explaining that most of them have already had sex. Leah said she recently heard a story about how one of the girls in the Jock/Prep group got alcohol poisoning several weeks before and then came to a football game drunk the following weekend. According to Leah, when people asked the girl why she was drinking after what had happened, she reportedly said, “I don’t care. I’m still gonna drink.” Leah’s imitation of what the girl reportedly said was

performed in a high pitch and with rising intonation at the end of the phrase, a stereotypically diminutive and hyper-feminine speech style. Nichter's (2000) study of adolescent girls revealed a similar type of critical discourse among girls. She explained that "gossiping about other girls...served to level the playing field-it provided an opportunity to lessen the advantage an attractive girl may have over other girls" (Nichter 2000: 24).

Talk about girls' sexual behavior was certainly not restricted to the Jock/Prep girls. As Eder, et al. (1995), Orenstein (1997) and Tanenbaum (1999) discuss, there is a double standard for girls and boys regarding sexual behavior more generally, independent of social status. At Desert Vista High School, this double standard was reflected not only in the presence of talk about Jock/Prep girls' sexual behavior and the absence of talk about Jock/Prep boys' sexual behavior, but more broadly in informants' general discussions about sexual activity and social reputation. The point I want to emphasize here is that during interviews, the only specific talk about girls' "fast" sexual behavior, was in reference to the Jock/Prep girls. In interviews, no one explicitly linked their comments regarding the sexual behavior of girls to girls in any other social clique. Aside from specific references to sexual activities of Jock/Prep girls, informants' talk about girls' sexual behavior and social reputation was generalized, referencing girls in general rather than girls in particular groups. This may be due to the perceived higher social status of the popular girls, which, as Nichter's (2000) research shows, can result in both admiration and envy. Research on adolescent girls illustrates that the 'popular' girls tend to be targets for criticism by other girls (Eder, et al. 1995; Nichter 2000; Orenstein 1994).

During lunch, the Jocks/Preps were located at the opposite end of the commons area from the Goths. The area that the Jocks/Preps occupied was located against a largely un-shaded portion of the wall that surrounded the main commons area. During lunchtime observations I often saw a row of male Jocks/Preps lined up against that wall, talking with each other and people who approached to socialize with them. From this vantage point, they had a view of the entire main commons area which they appeared to watch as they talked with each other. From that wall, the group fanned out into that corner of the commons area. Directly in front of the guys who stood against the wall was where the girls and some of the other guys in the group would socialize with one another.

During lunch, it sometimes appeared as though Prep girls were ‘performing’ for the Jock/Prep guys who stood lined up against the wall. For example, during one lunch period I observed a group of three thin girls wearing short skirts and fitted tank tops, who were members of the dance team, interacting with each other in the space directly in front of the Jock/Prep guys. The girls were putting their hands on each others’ shoulders as they whispered in each others’ ears, putting their hands in each others’ back pockets, jutting out their hips as they talked, and petting each others’ hair. The unique aspect of this interaction was the exaggerated way in which these girls gestured with their hands and bodies as they interacted, often glancing at the guys as they did so. The central location of the girls within the commons area invited others to watch them. In fact, it appeared as though the girls were checking to see whether or not the Jock/Prep guys were watching them. The guys were in fact watching, which is reminiscent of the ‘male gaze’ discussed by adolescence researchers such as Nichter (2000) and Eder, et al. (1995).

Nichter (2000) writes, “This gaze carries with it the potential for sexual objectification.” In this case, the girls’ short skirts and fitted shirts certainly accentuated the likelihood of their being sexually objectified by those watching.

The Mexicans

A group known as ‘the Mexicans’ or ‘Chicanos for Life (CFL)’ occupied the space adjacent to the Jocks/Preps. I will refer to this group as the Mexicans because this was the label most commonly used to describe this social clique among members. Outsiders commonly referred to the group as ‘Chicanos for Life,’ claiming that this was what the group members called themselves. However, I never heard a member of the Mexicans refer to their group as Chicanos for Life. Other labels that were occasionally used by outsiders to describe this social clique were ‘Hard Core Mexicans,’ ‘Homies,’ ‘Gangster Kids,’ ‘Thugs’ and ‘the Bad People.’ The guys in the group usually wore baggy clothes with tennis shoes and the girls typically wore tighter fitting clothes, often including mini-skirts and high heeled shoes. Both the girls and the guys in this group wore jewelry. Almost all of the group members, both male and female wore gold or silver medallions of various sizes around their necks. Additionally, many of the girls wore multiple gold hoop bracelets spelling out their names, with each letter of their first name engraved on a different bracelet. Large, gold hoop earrings often dangled from their earlobes as well. The guys tended to have very short hair and the girls tended to have long, dark hair that fell past their shoulders. All members of this group appeared to be Hispanic and socially aligned with what was perceived by many informants to be a ‘Mexican’ or ‘gangster’ identity. The terms “Mexican” and “gangster” were in fact used

interchangeably by outsiders to describe this group, a phenomenon that will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

When asked to describe his clothing style, a thin, Hispanic boy named Jesse explained, “Like the style that I choose is like what grownups describe like gangster and all that kind of stuff.” When I interviewed Jesse in the spring, he wore an oversized navy blue Arizona Diamondbacks jersey with a large, round silver medallion hanging around his neck, a large silver watch, baggy jeans, and white brand name tennis shoes. Ricky, another member of the Mexican group told me that he could not afford the name brands that his friends wore but that he wore baggy t-shirts and jeans. He told me that he buys plain t-shirts without logos or designs printed on them so that no one can tell he buys his clothes at Wal-Mart. When I asked Jesse whether or not guys of various sizes can look good in the clothing style he and his friends display, he explained that body size and height have nothing to do with being able to “pull off” a clothing style:

“They (guys who are not part of the Mexican group) wouldn’t want to wear like baggy jeans and stuff like that cuz they’d call ‘em like wanna be gangsters and stuff. Like most people that wear my type of clothes are either like Mexican or black....I’ve just grown up with people like that and like I’ve had this style since I was a little kid....It’s about attitude, the way you walk, the way you talk, um people you grew up with and hung out with since you were young....”

Jesse’s comment was similar to what other informants said about social alignment being a greater determinant of clothing style choices than body type for guys.

At the high school, I noticed that this group consisted of about twice as many boys as girls. When I asked Hispanic female informants I interviewed about the uneven ratio of boys to girls in the Mexican group, most indicated that they did not know why the group had so few female members. However, in response to this question, several of the

Hispanic girls I talked with indicated that although they felt pressure to hang out with the Mexicans, they chose not to because of the group's ethnically restrictive nature. The group members were perceived by outsiders as emphasizing their ethnic identity through personal style, stance, and label (referring to the fact that they called themselves 'the Mexicans').

Many of the Hispanic girls I talked with who did not choose to join the Mexican group, socialized primarily with white teens. For example, one female Hispanic informant who did not identify with any particular social group explained, "They think all Hispanic kids should hang out with them and they probably don't like me because I hang out with white kids." Mary, a Jock/Prep Hispanic informant, who was a cheerleader for the high school, told me that she used to be a member of the Mexican group, but when her boyfriend in the group cheated on her with another female member, the girls in the group "started being mean" to her. At that point she decided to hang out with the Jocks/Preps instead, despite her ethnicity.

Unfortunately, I was unable to collect much data on the Mexican group from informants I interviewed, even those who were themselves members. While these informants were forthcoming with regard to topics of body image, food, and exercise, they were not forthcoming about the dynamics of their social group in the same way that Goths and Jocks/Preps were. For example, when I asked a male Mexican informant whether or not all of the social groups get along, he replied, "Not really. Kind of" and was reluctant to elaborate, laughing nervously when I asked him what he meant by his comment.

It is possible that membership to the Mexican group was highly restrictive, even more so than other social groups. My lunchtime observations and attempts to interact with the Mexican group support this hypothesis. For example, during an interview discussion about body image, Jackie, a shy, friendly girl who was a member of the Mexican group, asked me to come see her during lunch one day because she wanted to introduce me to her two best friends and show me pictures that they had drawn of the “perfect” girl. According to Jackie, she and her friends frequently talked about body image concerns and, during one of their recent body image conversations, they each drew pictures of what they thought the perfect girl looks like. A few days later during lunch, I saw Jackie and her two friends standing on the edge of the Mexican group and I approached them. Greeting me with enthusiasm, Jackie introduced me to her two girl friends (also members of the Mexican group), who greeted me only with a perfunctory “hey” before turning their backs to me.

Jackie tried to initiate conversation by explaining that one of her two friends had just had her belly button pierced. I asked to see the piercing and the girl lifted her shirt to show me. The other girl then said that she was thinking of getting a tattoo and asked me if I had any. When I told her that I had two tattoos she asked to see them. Although I felt embarrassed to lower the waist band of my jeans in order to show them to the girls, I decided that it was necessary in order to facilitate the interaction. When I showed them my flower and sunshine tattoos they appeared to be unimpressed. At that point one of the girls announced that they needed to go and Jackie said goodbye as her two friends turned away from us and began walking toward the cafeteria. My sense that the interaction had

not gone well was confirmed by the fact that Jackie never again approached me or asked me to come see her during lunch. Unfortunately, I never saw the pictures that she and her friends had drawn of the “perfect” girl because one of Jackie’s friends kept the notebook containing the drawings.

In the main commons area at lunch, I observed this group closely as I struggled to figure out how I might approach them. To do this, I would sit on the benches that separated the Mexicans and Jocks/Preps. One day during lunch as I sat facing the Mexicans, I noticed that the girls began to back away further into the shade while several of the guys moved forward to the edge of the shaded area that they occupied. They began to stare at me intensely as they stood with their arms crossed. I looked away several times, but they continued to stare, occasionally licking their lips in a sexually suggestive manner. I eventually turned away from the group completely and felt too intimidated to make further attempts at observation or conversation with members of this group outside of formal interviews with Mexican informants.

During a focus group interview, two female informants, who were not a part of the Mexican group, described similar experiences:

Mia: Well all the Mexicans hang out together in the little ramada.

Jen: And then stare at you.

Mia: Yeah.

Another female informant who did not identify with any particular social clique, said, “They won’t have anything to do with any other groups. They just keep to themselves.” While other groups, such as the Jocks/Preps and Goths were described similarly by

outsiders, of the social cliques I attempted to interact with, the Mexican group was the only one with which I was unable to gain or maintain any degree of acceptance.

Although Mexican informants were reluctant to talk with me about their group, non-Mexican informants readily shared their opinions with me about the group. Whereas furthering questions were often needed in order to elicit informant attitudes about other social cliques, most of the opinions that informants expressed about the Mexican group were unsolicited. During interviews and casual lunchtime conversations, as informants would list the names of various social cliques, they would often pause to express their primarily negative opinions of the Mexicans. For example, a male informant who did not identify with any social group described the Mexicans as “wannabe gang members.” He explained that they have a ‘gang’ (he rolled his eyes and gestured scare quotes with his hands as he said the word ‘gang’) called Chicanos for Life and that the group “acts like a gang and jumps people in and stuff” (he rolled his eyes as he said this phrase). He further explained that “they think they’re all tough because they’re from Mexico but no one takes them seriously.”

The image of these group members as “thinking they’re tough” was echoed by other informants. A female informant who did not socially align with any particular social group said, “A lot of them (Mexicans) are from Mexico and they think they are tough” and a Kirk, the freshman quarterback, explained during an interview that a member of the group named Chico “thinks he’s all like gangster cuz he’s from Mexico and stuff.” In the context of a focus group discussion about bullying and fighting, a male Goth informant said, “You yell at one of ‘em (Mexicans) you got the whole group on

you. So I have a little saying: ‘You mess with one bean, you get the whole burrito.’” As these examples illustrate, informants explicitly linked the perceived tough stance of Mexican group members to their being from Mexico, which draws upon the stereotypical “machismo” image of Mexican males. Hill (2001) points out that “macho” simply means “male” in conversational Spanish, but through the semantic pejoration of Spanish loan words, has come to mean “tough.” Similar to Hill’s (2001) assertion about the semiotics of ‘mock Spanish,’ I argue that in order to understand my informants’ descriptions of the collective Mexican group identity at Desert Vista, one must have access to negative images of traditionally Spanish speaking males as violent.

This stereotype of the violent Mexican was further reified through non-member informant references to the group as “gangster kids”, “gangstas,” “wannabe gangsters,” and “homies.” Whether or not this was the image that the group members tried to project is unclear because I was unable to collect data on members’ self-perceptions. A Mexican informant acknowledged the outsider perception of his group’s image as “gangster” during an interview, describing him and his friends’ clothing style as one that “adults describe like gangster.” However, this acknowledgement does not imply whether or not the creation of a “gangster” image is intentional. It was also unclear whether or not the majority of the Mexican group members were actually from Mexico. The Mexican informants I interviewed were not in fact from Mexico but were all from Tucson. However, these informants referred to their own group as “the Mexicans” and even referred to the table where they congregated during lunch as “the Mexican table.”

From interviews, I learned that tension existed between the Mexicans and Jocks/Preps. At lunch, these two groups were separated by only a few concrete benches in the main Commons area and were in each others' direct line of sight. In contrast to the open, sunny area that the Jocks/Preps claimed, the Mexicans occupied an area that was shaded by an awning and located in a relatively small corner of the Commons area. One informant who did not identify with any particular social group explained that he has heard people refer to the area occupied by the Mexican group as "Little Mexico." The area between the two groups was described by many informants as the place where most school fights happen. According to informant reports, even fights that did not involve members of the Jocks/Preps or Mexicans occurred most commonly in that space. However, informants who talked about fights indicated that most fights occurred off of school grounds due to fear of suspension. While I did hear from administrators and students about occasional fights that occurred on campus, I never actually observed a fight in the nine months I spent conducting fieldwork at the high school.

Although the extent to which physical fights occurred between the Jocks/Preps and Mexicans was unclear, many informants either implicitly or explicitly talked about problems that existed between the two groups. During a focus group interview in which two male Mexican members participated, I asked them to describe what happens between the Jocks/Preps and Mexicans:

Reggie: We'll just like talk crap to each other.

Ricky: Talk yeah.

Reggie: And then other times just like-

Ricky: -Throw stuff like bottle caps.

Reggie also explained that the previous year one of the Jocks/Preps drew a line between the groups “like messing around like there was a border.” During an individual interview, Kirk, the freshman quarterback, described an incident between members of the two groups:

“...Like um my friend’s brother was walking out of football practice one day. He’s a senior and like there’s this kid Chico and like he thinks he’s all like gangster cuz he’s from Mexico and stuff. So he (Chico) comes out and um he’s all flippin’ him off and all this stuff. And my friend’s brother...like I’d just say like they’re all seniors and they just pretty much run the school. They play football and it’s like no one really messes with them cuz they’re just-they’re big and no one would even think of doing it except them (referring to Mexicans) because they think that they can protect themselves and stuff.”

Although tension existed between these groups, Kirk explained that some individuals in these two groups were friends with each other: “...And then over by like to the left there’s all like, um more like the gangster kids....And sometimes there’s problems you know....But like sometimes like some of my friends are friends with the people that sit over to the left.” In fact, despite the disparities between groups, this kind of social crossover and interaction occurred commonly. Informants explained in interviews that many students at Desert Vista High School grew up together so that people who were currently members of one social clique may have friends from childhood who were now in a different social clique. This illustrates the observation noted earlier by Bown (1999) about the social fluidity of peer group affiliation. A male Jock/Prep informant explained:

“Like all like the athletes hang out together. And then like a whole bunch of like kids that we’ve just grown up with and that we’re like really good friends with. And then like some kids are like more gangster looking that we hang-cuz we’ve just grown up for so long there and we just wanna be like best friends. And like a couple of my friends are like that I’ve known for a long time.”

However, social crossovers between groups could sometimes be awkward. Eddie, a Goth informant, explained that sometimes during lunch he approaches the Jocks/Preps to talk to his friends and that his presence within this group is often met with ambiguity:

“Depending on the group, like I don’t know, like the ones that hang around where I usually hang out (referring to the Goths) they’re actually really cool to hang out with. You could talk to them for a long time. And same thing with the people over at the lunch by where the cafeteria is (referring to the Jocks/Preps). But then some of them (referring to female members of the Jocks/Preps) are just-some of the girls over there, they just feel as if uh they shouldn’t like talk to me because I’m usually like one of the very few people that go over there and talk. But when I do go over there they feel as if they shouldn’t talk to me because I don’t look as if I belong within that group and stuff.”

Eddie typically wore a lot of black clothing, wore his dark hair about chin length, and usually straightened it with a flat iron. This style was a contrast to the Jock/Prep guys who wore their hair short and dressed in “preppy,” “casual beach style” clothing. Thus, although friendships sometimes crossed group boundaries, it was not common enough to go unnoticed.

The Emos

There were groups that informants perceived to be exclusive to the extent that members socialized only among themselves. One such group was known as the ‘Emos’ (short for ‘Emotionally Disturbed’) or ‘Scene Kids.’ While the origins of the label ‘Emo’ were unclear, it was the name most commonly used to identify this group among informants I interviewed. Tyler, an exceptionally tall Goth boy who wore a long, black trench coat to school every day, explained, “Scene Kids. If you’re not scene you’re uncool and they don’t like you period....They don’t like anyone.” A female Goth informant said, “...They (Emos/Scene Kids) think they’re better than everyone else and

you can tell they think they are.” Lunchtime observations revealed that the Emos were a relatively small group, consisting of about ten or fewer individuals. They typically occupied a space in a shaded corridor on the southeast corner of the main commons area. However, I occasionally saw the Emos walking around various parts of campus together during lunch as well. This group did appear to be somewhat exclusive as I rarely saw outsiders socializing with them.

Members of this group were easily identifiable because they wore brightly colored clothing that often had “a bunch of stripes and polka dots” and they had “really short choppy hair that like flips up kind of.” Informants explained to me that the guys in the group wear “vintage shirts” and “girl pants,” meaning that they literally bought pants in the girl’s department of stores. Jesse, a male Mexican informant said about the male Emos, “They wear like tight pants, tight girl pants and like strange shirts.” When I asked Jesse what he meant by “strange,” he said, “They’re like funny looking...They’re like t-shirts but they’re kinda tight. Um I think it looks funny.” The girls often wore little bows in their hair, vintage jewelry, such as pearl necklaces, and “lots of eyeliner.” According to a female Goth informant, Emos “like to be seen and on top of the fashion world.” Informants said that Emos are interested in “underground” or “unknown” bands, such as ‘Him,’ ‘The Blood,’ ‘Bright Eyes’ and ‘Electric Six.’ Kira explained, “They won’t like main core bands. Like as soon as one of their favorite bands gets mainstream they’ll start hating them.”

The body aesthetic in this group was uniformly thin; one informant who did not belong to a social clique described them as being “extremely skinny.” In fact, during

lunchtime observations of Emos, I noticed that all members of this group were thin, both male and female. I asked a male informant who did not identify with any particular social group why this was so and he explained, “Well because like with like the guys and stuff there’s been like, you know, traditionally it’s like masculine and strong and stuff. Well the whole entire Emo thing like emotional, you know, that’s not usually like a guy thing. So I guess just like the converse of it you know.” Kira, a female informant who identified with the Goths said that “the (Emo) guys are willing to cry and they won’t act extremely manly or try and put on a front of being extremely masculine.” Tyler explained, “I think the scene kids are usually transgender. I honestly do. Not transsexual. Transgender.” When I asked him what he meant by ‘transgender,’ Tyler said, “Transgender is where you look like a guy, you act like a guy you’re a guy and you have a girlfriend. You’re straight and everything but deep inside you feel like a girl. Or girls will have the same thing but be like a guy.”

While Tyler’s comment about Emos peripherally addresses girls, informant explanations about the thin body aesthetic and clothing style of the Emos/Scene Kids primarily addressed males in the group. Aside from Tyler, no informant commented on why all of the girls in the group were thin. One possible explanation for this is that the male Emos were purposefully taking a stance against the muscular male body ideal, while the girls in the group were aligning with the normative thin female body ideal. Several of the informants who described Emos discussed the trend for males in the group to wear “girl pants,” often commenting that they found this “strange.” Unfortunately, I did not have any Emo informants with whom I could further explore these issues. I attempted to

recruit Emos through an informant who had friendship ties to the group, but was unsuccessful. Most of my consent forms were never returned and one Emo told me that her mother did not want her to participate in the study.

Other Social Cliques

When I asked my informants during interviews to describe the social scene on campus, they often provided names of other social cliques without actually discussing them. These groups tended to be smaller and therefore less visible, generally consisting of fewer than ten members. For example, there was a group of guys referred to by some informants as the “Sea-Walkers,” who occasionally performed hip-hop dances at school events. Informants also mentioned “Skaters,” “Bikers” (meaning individuals who ride BMX bicycles), and “Student Council Kids.” These groups were not described as having a specific place on campus where they congregated during lunch. Informants also made frequent references to “Mormon Corner,” explaining that this was where all of the Mormons congregated. “Mormon Corner” was located outside of the commons area, near the library. Aside from explaining where “Mormon Corner” was located, informants did not express opinions or further describe this group.

Informants also mentioned that the “Lesbians” or “Lesbians and Weirdoes” congregated in the breezeway leading to the gym, which was located right next to the small corridor where the Goths gathered. I did notice girls kissing each other sometimes when I walked through this breezeway during lunch. It is important to note here that only a few informants mentioned the “Lesbians” in discussions about social groups on campus and the utterance of the label was generally accompanied by facial expressions of disgust

with very little unsolicited verbal commentary. Homophobic attitudes largely emerged through teasing behaviors, especially among all male friendship groups. This is a topic that I will discuss further in Chapter 6.

Just past this breezeway there was a large group of about twenty students who socialized in front of the gym. Some of them played a game they called “Wall Ball,” which involved throwing a rubber ball against a brick wall and then trying to catch it as it bounced back. The majority of these students stood in groups talking with each other. A teacher who patrolled the area during lunch told me that these were the “Special Ed kids” and another informant referred to them as the “Athletic Losers.” Although this was a relatively large group, at lunch they were relatively hidden in a shaded area behind a brick wall that enclosed the main commons area. Inside the gym there was a large group of about thirty boys who played basketball every day during lunch. No informants ever mentioned these students, but I noticed them during my lunchtime observations. Like the students who played “Wall Ball,” these boys who played basketball every day during lunch were well out of sight inside the gym, rendering them somewhat invisible to their peers as well.

The Social Scene: Fluid or Cohesive?

Although there were recognized social cliques on campus that informants either discussed at length or briefly mentioned, my lunchtime observations revealed that the majority of students were members of small friendship groups rather than identifiable social cliques. During lunch every day, there were small groups ranging in size from approximately two to ten people located all over campus. Some of these groups

congregated in an area to socialize and some wandered around campus as they socialized, often stopping to talk with other small groups. For example, one informant explained that she and her three girlfriends primarily socialized among themselves during lunch, sometimes “branching out” to talk to other groups. When I asked another female informant which social group she belongs to, she replied:

“I’m not really in a group. Me and my best friend just walk around everywhere. Like down there by the PE locker room there’s like all the Punks and Gothic people...I visit them a lot and then like in that hallway going down there there’s like just weird people hanging out there (referring to the group referred to as “Lesbians” and “Lesbians and Weirdoes” by other informants). I know some of them too. There’s just like people everywhere and like we don’t ever stay in one place cuz we’re not the kind of people to do that. Like we go to every single group and hang out with people and then go back to a different group. And there’s just popular groups and then the Mexicans and then there’s Punks and Goths. Then there’s just like anybody else that wants to hang out and they’re just everywhere.”

This informant’s description of lunchtime social dynamics reflects what I observed throughout the school year. While there were some distinguishable social cliques that tended to congregate in the same place each day during lunch, for the most part relatively small groups of students would stand, sit, or walk around campus socializing with each other.

Why do researchers, myself included, focus so intently on high profile social cliques that represent only a small fraction of the larger adolescent population, when the majority of teenagers belong to small, relatively anonymous friendship groups? In September of 2003, I accompanied my co-advisor, Norma Mendoza-Denton, to Northampton, England to attend a conference on youth subcultures hosted by the CCCS. A major recurring theme during this conference was the issue of how to conceptualize

youth group dynamics in a way that acknowledges both the importance of relatively cohesive subculture identities and the fluid nature of teen social networks. This conference symbolized a crucial turning point for the CCCS, a group whose research had previously focused entirely on youth subcultures as cohesive social groups with shared identities and social practices. I find myself struggling with this issue once again as I attempt to capture the significance of Desert Vista's major social cliques, such as Goths, Jocks, Mexicans, and Emos, without erasing the overall diversity of the student population.

Although the social cliques I described in this chapter represented a small segment of the overall high school population, I have attempted to illustrate that their social influence extended much further than the 'boundaries' of their group identities as a wide range of adolescents from the high school oriented toward these groups through discourse about the Desert Vista social scene. Even though a majority of teens were not members of a cohesive, recognizable social clique, they frequently expressed opinions about these groups during interview discussions about body image, personal style, teasing, and the social hierarchy at Desert Vista High School, simultaneously constructing these groups' identities as well as their own identities in relation to these groups.

I assert that this orientation toward recognized social cliques by non-members functioned as a way for adolescents to negotiate their own identities and values in relation to the imagined and co-constructed identities of highly visible social groups. Just as members of some social cliques constructed their identities in opposition to one another,

like the Mexicans and Jocks/Preps, for example, teenagers who did not belong to a recognized social clique also negotiated their identities in relation to the identities they attributed to these highly visible groups. In the next chapter, I turn to an analysis of body image norms and explore how social constructions of the ideal body varied according to gender and social group affiliation.

V. GENDERED IDENTITIES: DISCOURSES ABOUT THE BODY

This chapter examines the ways in which adolescent girls and boys constructed gendered identities through body presentation and discourse about body image. The discussion of how adolescents constructed social alignments and gendered identities through clothing styles will continue in this chapter, with a specific focus on situating adolescents' clothing styles within their discourses about body image ideology. Additionally, boys' and girls' body image goals will be examined within the larger context of their discursive constructions of feminine and masculine identities. Specifically, the ways in which adolescent boys and girls constructed and socialize each other into normative gendered body image ideology by appropriating various elements of style, including clothing, stance, and discourse will be explored.

Gendered Clothing Norms

In Chapter 4, I examined the ways in which clothing communicated social group alignment among adolescents at Desert Vista High School. In addition to marking social alignment, clothing is an important means through which adolescents “try on” identities. As noted by youth researchers (Bucholtz 1996, 1999; Eckert 1993, 1996; Goodwin 1990, 1999, 2002; Goodwin and Goodwin 1992; Mendoza-Denton 1996, 1999), adolescents appropriate various elements of style, including clothing, hairstyles, make-up, stance, and language to construct social identities. My research reveals that body image ideology and body presentation are also important elements of style appropriated by youth to construct identities and communicate social alignment. In this section, I will explore how clothing fit and brand was closely tied to body image ideology and body presentation.

As I illustrated in the previous chapter, during interview discussions about social cliques, informants described Jock/Prep guys according to clothing style and brand names while Jock/Prep girls were described in terms of clothing fit. I discovered through interview questions focusing on body image ideology that this gendered clothing classification extended beyond the Jocks/Preps. As part of the first interview, I asked male informants to describe popular clothing styles for boys and female informants to describe popular clothing styles for girls. In response, girls overwhelmingly indicated that ‘tight’ and ‘revealing’ clothes were currently in style: “Um right now for um for our age, probably like mid section showing and like a lot of cleavage and like shorter things and stuff like that” (Allie-no social clique affiliation); “Just stuff that’s a really tight fit. Um revealing I think” (Demi-no social clique affiliation); “Just tight jeans and tight shirts that are probably low cut like in the front” (Jamie-Goth); “Just like tight clothes or like a tight shirt with some tight jeans” (Jackie-Mexican). “Like...hip huggers that’d be low and tight and the shirt would be skin tight, like really tight. Just tight (Jill-no social clique affiliation).” During a conversation about the upcoming homecoming dance, one female informant, who did not belong to a social clique, explicitly equated ‘tight’ with ‘cute’ when she explained that she was going to wear a “tight-I mean cute-little black tank top.” As these examples illustrate, female informants across social groups provided strikingly similar descriptions of the most fashionable clothing style for girls.

Some female informants explicitly equated tight clothing with femininity. Demi, a normal weight girl who wore her burgundy dyed hair in a bob that fell just below her ears and did not belong to a social clique, referred to tight fitting clothing as ‘girly’ during an

interview. She explained that people call her a tomboy for wearing baggy clothes instead of “girly (meaning ‘tight’) clothes.” The day I interviewed Demi, she explained that she does not like to wear “girly clothes...because they’re uncomfortable. You’re always like pulling down your shirt or you know stuff like that. I have like this girlier shirt under this and I put my sweatshirt over it cuz I was just like tired of it.” I asked to see the “girlier shirt” and she unzipped her sweatshirt to reveal a tight-fitting t-shirt. Similarly, Jamie, a Goth female informant who was 5’4” tall and weighed 145 pounds, equated baggy clothing with boys and tight clothing with girls when she said during an interview, “I used to wear like a lot of baggy clothes. Like I used to kind of dress like a guy. And now lately I’ve just been wearing only tight jeans and stuff...”

Male informants also equated tight clothing with femininity during interviews when they described the tight-fitting pants that male Emos wore as “girl pants.” As discussed in Chapter 4, Emo guys, who were known for wearing “girl pants,” rejected masculine norms by wearing tight-fitting clothing, listening to “emotional” music and using flat irons to style their hair, a beauty ritual generally associated with females. Just as the gang girls Mendoza-Denton (1996) studied utilized make-up and other tools of personal style to align against feminine norms, Emo guys used tight-fitting clothing as a means for aligning against perceived masculine norms.

With the exception of Emo guys, who were consistently described as wearing tight fitting clothes, male informants from a variety of social groups, including Goth, Mexican, and Jock/Prep, as well as male informants who did not identify with any social group, consistently reported that the ‘right’ fit for guys’ clothes is “not too baggy but not

like all tight on you” (Reggie-Mexican). When I asked what constitutes “too baggy,” this informant responded, “Like so that you’re pants are all like hanging all low and your shirt’s all hanging down to your knees or whatever.” Kirk, the freshman quarterback, concurred, saying, “I don’t really like like really baggy, just maybe like a little bit.” Ricky, an overweight Mexican informant, explained that wearing name brands is important but it is equally important to “wear ‘em right you know.” He explained that “wearing ‘em right” means “like not baggy baggy but...not like tight. Just like normal. Just like have my shirts loose and my pants loose and just you know wear ‘em how they’re supposed to be worn.” In addition to indexing femininity, male informants indicated that tight-fitting clothing restricts movement. A male informant who did not identify with a social clique, explained, “They (clothes) have to be loose because I mean in the tight clothes you can’t move.” Wearing clothing that is loose enough to allow for movement was especially important to Jock/Prep guys, who explicitly linked body image goals with athletic performance, a topic that will be further discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Although male informants commented on clothing fit during interviews, they primarily referenced clothing brand when I asked them to describe the kinds of clothes that were currently in-style for guys. A male Goth informant told me that the stylish clothing for his group members is “...like stuff from Hot Topics. Not Tommy Hilfiger.” Another male Goth informant indicated that while Hot Topics is the store where he likes to buy his clothing, “what’s in style is like a lot of California stuff really. Like Hollister and that sort of thing.” When asked to describe clothes that were currently in style for

guys, Jesse, a Mexican informant who was 5'9" tall and weighed 128 pounds, told me that he buys clothes at a store called K-Momo, explaining that he likes to wear brands such as South Pole, School of Hard Knocks, Phat Farm, and Echo. Ricky, another Mexican informant, who was wearing an oversized Sean John shirt when I interviewed him, said that he likes to wear clothing made by Sean John, Rockawear, Phat Farm, FuBu, Polo and "like Anchor Blue for pants." He also explained that "shoes is a big thing....you just gotta wear the right shoes like." When I asked him what are the right shoes, Ricky listed the following brands: Airforce One, Nike, K Swiss, and Lugs. Kirk, the freshman quarterback, told me that he and his friends buy their clothes from Hollister, American Eagle, and Abercrombie & Fitch.

These examples illustrate that not only was wearing brand name clothing important for male adolescents, but name brands and even clothing stores were specific to social cliques. Male members of social cliques such as the Jocks/Preps, Mexicans, and Goths all wore different clothing brands and shopped at different stores according to their group's style of dress. Knowing which the 'correct' clothing brands were and displaying those brand name labels was an important part of group membership for male adolescents. However, brand name clothing was expensive and could be cost restrictive for many adolescents. Tim, a tall, skinny boy who did not belong to a social clique, told me during an interview that he wants to wear "skating brands" like Dickies, Element, Emerikus, and DC, but that he cannot afford to buy them. Tim explained that he loves to skate and does so every chance he has. I wonder to what extent Tim's membership to the Skater group was restricted by his inability to buy the clothing brands that the group

displayed. While some male informants claimed to be unconcerned with clothing brand, they often contradicted themselves during interviews. When I asked a male informant who did not belong to a social clique what kinds of clothes were in style for guys, he replied,

“Well, actually it’s kind of hard to say because like my family-I mean my mom doesn’t have much money and my dad dang sure doesn’t have that much money so every once in a while...we’ll go to Old Navy. And I like brand names and whatnot. But I mean it really doesn’t matter to me what style it is as long as I think it looks good.”

Ricky, the Mexican informant who told me during an interview that he did not worry about buying brand names is the same informant who later said that it is important to wear name brand shoes.

Other male informants who could not afford to buy brand name clothing often portrayed themselves as clever for resisting the overpriced brand name merchandise. Sammy, male informant who had recently transferred to Desert Vista High School and did not yet have many friends at the school, claimed during an interview that he was not interested in clothing labels, saying, “Uh I don’t care about the brands. It just doesn’t matter cuz people get like five hundred dollar clothes and I’m like that’s ridiculous. You can get that at JC Penney’s for like twenty dollars.” However, he contradicted himself several minutes later by saying that he likes to wear shirts “with logos on them and stuff.”

During lunch one day I observed a group of four guys standing by the Jocks/Preps (it was unclear to me whether or not they were members of this social clique) comparing clothing labels. When one of the guys pointed to the Dickie label on his khaki pants, another responded by pointing to his own khaki pants and saying” Yeah! And I got these

pants for half of what you paid.” A third guy in the group then pointed to his Quicksilver brand belt. The fourth guy nodded approvingly, lifting up his shirt to reveal the same belt. At this point, they began inspecting each other’s shirt labels by folding back the collars of each others’ t-shirts to look at the tags. These boys were clearly concerned with wearing the right labels despite their protestations otherwise.

Cost was not the only constraint placed on clothing worn by adolescents at the high school. I learned during interviews that tacit rules dictating who was allowed to wear particular clothing styles and brands existed among boys and girls and that the consequence for breaking those rules was teasing and being gossiped about. Informants indicated that limitations existed regarding clothing styles in terms of brand for boys and fit for girls. During interviews, both male and female informants talked about these tacit clothing rules in terms of who can and cannot ‘pull off’ the fashionable styles. For guys, ‘pulling off’ a clothing style through the display of brand name labels was tied to group affiliation, social status, and stance and for girls ‘pulling off’ the tight, revealing clothing style that female informants deemed fashionable, was tied to body size.

When asked whether or not everyone could wear the stylish clothing labels, male informants indicated that labels and styles were restricted based on social affiliation and stance. In fact, in response to a follow-up question about whether or not body size affects a guy’s ability to ‘pull off’ certain clothing styles, informants explicitly indicated that body size was not a factor, often pointing out that they themselves are ‘small’ or ‘scrawny’ but can successfully wear the clothes they deemed stylish. A male informant

who was not a member of any social group explained that “you’ve gotta act all big and tough to wear gangster style clothes because people will pick fights with you.”

Jesse, a tall, thin Mexican informant confirmed that stance was important for ‘pulling off’ his style of clothing, which he described as ‘gangster’: “...It’s about like attitude, the way you walk, the way you talk...” When I asked Jesse to describe the way members of his group walk and talk, he said that they “talk slang and like most of the people always cuss a lot and stuff and they joke about things and like um you gotta walk-I don’t know-but like you can just tell in how they walk.” When I asked Jesse whether or not body size affects one’s ability to successfully wear gangster style clothing he indicated that body size was not a factor and pointed out that he is “really skinny.”

Social affiliation also placed constraints on clothing labels that guys were allowed to display. Ricky, a Mexican informant explained, “You can’t wear like real cool clothes like Sean John and all that and hang with like the nerdy group.” Kirk, the freshman quarterback, said, “...There’s like kids who like when they were like in middle school and stuff they just kind of annoyed people a lot. So like when they do (wear the labels that Jocks/Preps wear) people are gonna say something to them.” When I asked Kirk how these kids annoyed people he explained that they tried too hard to fit in with the Jocks/Preps. Another male informant who did not belong to an identifiable social clique concurred, explaining that “small” popular guys can wear the preppy clothing labels but a guy who is not popular, regardless of his body size, will get made fun of for wearing those clothing brands. Interestingly, it was only male informants who talked about the

tacit rules of guys' clothing brands and styles. No female informant commented on guys' clothing styles during interviews.

In contrast, both male and female informants talked about girls' clothing in terms of who could 'pull off' the tight, revealing clothes that girls identified as stylish. This commentary was often unsolicited and in-depth, much more so than talk about guys' ability to 'pull off' clothing styles. Allie, an overweight female informant who was not a member of any social clique said that in order to wear the tight fitting clothes that are currently stylish for girls "definitely you have to have like a certain type of body." She explained:

"(Sigh) You have to be skinny and you have to look good in it. You can't just have everything like hanging out.... Like you can't have your stomach hanging out cuz that just looks bad anyways (laughs). And um like you can't have your fat showing. It's just not right."

Jill, another overweight female informant, who did not belong to a social clique, told me during an interview that she does not like to wear tight clothes because she does not think she looks good in them: "...I don't think I have the body for it so I don't really dress like that. I just wear the loose stuff. I don't wear tight tight clothes." In this quote, Jill displays her knowledge of the tacit rules regarding which girls can 'pull off' wearing the tight clothes and acknowledges her willingness to conform to the rules by wearing loose-fitting clothing.

Although body image ideals for women in the U.S. have shifted throughout history, the importance of appropriate body presentation has remained constant (Bordo 1993; Brumberg 1997). The "body project" of girls throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has revolved around controlling and containing one's body. While girls in

the 1950's used girdles to contain their flesh, as clothing styles increasingly became more revealing in the latter half of the twentieth century, achieving thin, toned bodies became an imperative for girls (Brumberg 1997). At Desert Vista High School, having a thin, toned body was a requirement for gaining access to the tight-fitting, revealing clothes that girls deemed to be fashionable.

However, showing off one's flat stomach and thin thighs by wearing low rise jeans, halter tops, and mini-skirts symbolized more than access to fashionable clothing through adherence to normative feminine body image ideology. The presentation of taut flesh represented a powerful form of cultural capital within the heterosexual marketplace. According to Foucault, the body is "subjected to a normalizing judgment that both homogenizes individuals, by proclaiming a universally applicable standard, and differentiates them, by ranking them according to their difference from an unattainable ideal" (Huff 45). It was the girls who could "pull off" wearing the tight, revealing clothing who resided at the top of the adolescent social hierarchy. Not only were these girls envied by their female peers, but they were desired and pursued by the most popular, handsome boys. Girls who failed to achieve the norm were considered deviant, especially when they broke the tacit rules governing female body presentation by inadvertently showing their fat in an effort to "pull off" wearing tight-fitting clothing.

Male and female informants emphasized the importance of girls wearing their proper clothing size and often went into great detail to describe the appearance of girls who wore clothing that was too small or too tight. In the context of talking about girls' clothing (a topic that was initiated by one of the participants) during an all male focus

group, Ricky, an overweight Mexican participant, said that some fat girls do not know they are fat because they wear clothes that are “too tight.” The other focus group participants responded with comments like, “It’s nasty;” “Once they have a roll it’s bad. It squishes out, pops out;” “It’s like cottage cheese.” During an all female focus group, when the participants were talking about girls gossiping and spreading rumors about each other, the discussion turned to girls who wear clothing that is too small:

Mia: Like you’ll see a girl and say ‘what was she thinking when she got up this morning? Why would she wear that?’ I hate it when big girls wear little clothes.

Jen: And then it squeezes here and squeezes here and then there’s like this chunk just hanging out here.

Mia: They look better if they wear like their size clothes.

Similarly, during a mixed gender focus group, while talking about shopping and girls’ clothing sizes, a tall, thin male Goth participant said, “The thing I hate most when it comes to girls’ fashion is the fact of let’s say they’re supposed to wear like a size seven or eight and then they fit into like a size three.... And then right here they have like all this fat hanging out.” Other participants responded with the following comments: “Yes ugh ugh;” “It’s so gross;” “They have like big ole fat rolls.”

The socialization of body image norms occurs on many levels. Feminist scholars have illustrated the ways in which the advertising of diet products, exercise equipment, and plastic surgery procedures perpetuates and reifies the thin, toned body as normative for women (Bordo 1993; Brumberg 1997; Nichter & Nichter 1991). Everyday discourse is also a powerful vehicle for socialization. Identities, ideologies, and meanings are negotiated and co-constructed moment-to-moment through everyday conversational

interactions (Jacoby and Ochs 1995). This process was clearly illustrated in the adolescents' discussions of how girls should present their bodies in clothing. Focus group participants in the examples above co-constructed appropriate body presentation norms for girls through mutually agreed upon descriptions of what is not acceptable. Through everyday conversations such as these, adolescents construct and reify normative body image ideology, and negotiate their own identities in relation to that normative ideology.

Bakhtin (1935) conceives of a “dialogic self” that is socially constituted through past interactions with other people. Irvine (1996) expands Bakhtin’s notion of multivocality from the self to the speech interaction: “Rather than multi-vocal, we might consider a speech situation to be multiply dialogical: it is not just the speaker who is doubled (or multiplied) by other voices, but a set of dialogic relations that are crucially informed by other sets—shadow conversations that surround the conversation at hand” (1996: 151-52). Thus, the influence of everyday conversations that adolescents engage in regarding body image extends beyond the scope of the present interaction, drawing on past conversations and informing future interactions with other individuals. Through this process, adolescents are socialized into normative body image ideology and taught that the consequences of transgressing include being gossiped about and teased by one’s peers.

For example, during a mixed gender focus group discussion about girls whose clothes are too tight, a male informant pointed to a girl standing nearby and stated that she is an example of a girl who wears clothing that is too tight. The group proceeded to

talk about the way her body looked in the clothing she was wearing, evaluating in detail the fit of her clothing:

Eddie: Pink skirt (pointing to a girl standing nearby).

Kira: She's really nice.

Eddie: I'm just saying.

Kira: And she's wearing bigger sizes. It's not like she's like trying to wear-

Tyler: -She's wearing big sizes because she is big.

Laura: She's not showing pudge. It's not hanging out everywhere...She's not fat. She's not-

Kira: -She's a little chunky.

Although ultimately the focus group participants concurred that the girl in question was in fact wearing an appropriate clothing size, this is an example of the ways in which adolescents negotiate female body presentation norms through gossip. Eddie began by pointing out the girl in the pink skirt as an example of a girl who wears clothing that is too tight. One of the female participants then protested on the grounds that she is "really nice," arguing that she is wearing appropriate size clothing that does not show any "pudge." It is through this type of everyday discourse that adolescents become socialized into body image and body presentation norms.

During an all male focus group interview, an overweight Mexican participant explained that "some fat girls act like they're skinny" by wearing "them short little skirts." When I asked whether or not people tease these girls a short, skinny Mexican participant said that people "talk trash" behind their backs. Just as girls' clothing choices were talked about more frequently than boys' clothing choices and evaluated by both

males and females, these examples illustrate that girls who failed to follow the tacit rules for how clothing should fit were gossiped about and teased more frequently than boys who broke the rules because they were subject to criticism by both genders.

Coates asserts, “One of the chief things that is being done in the talk of teenage girls is the construction of gendered subjectivity: in the girls’ case, the construction of femininity” (1999: 125). As illustrated in the examples above, both male and female focus group participants negotiated appropriate body presentation for girls and taught those presentation norms to others through gossip. Recent gender and language research has illustrated that, in contrast to previous assertions that gossip is “women’s talk” (Coates 1988), men engage in gossip as well (Cameron 1997; Johnson & Finlay 1997; Kiesling 2002). My research supports these findings, illustrating the ways in which male and female adolescents co-constructed feminine body image norms through gossip about girls. Eckert argues that by participating in gossip, girls “increase their stake in the norms, simultaneously tying together the community and tying themselves to it” (1993: 35). In this way, girls participate in their own subjugation, unwittingly presenting themselves for scrutiny by their male and female peers.

Male and female informants perceived girls as being more concerned with their appearance than boys, which was a probable consequence of being subjected to harsh and widespread criticism by peers.

Nicole: So do you think girls are more insecure overall than guys?

Jen: Yeah.

Nicole: Why?

Mia: Just cuz guys don't have to do-like girls, they have to have the cute hairstyle, they have to have you know the new 'in' makeup, they have to have the pushup bras, the cute underwear,...you know the cute skirt, the cute shirt. Like everything.

Jen: Guys I guess just don't really-I mean they care about their looks but it's not that hard to wear baggy pants and a baggy shirt. I mean if girls did that I'm sure they would be less insecure you know because that wouldn't show their body as much. But like girls, you know, they think they have to look cute constantly, so they have to wear the tight clothes and everything. They'll put on jeans and think 'oh those are too tight so I guess I'm fat cuz they don't fit me right and this girl wears this size so she's skinnier than me and I don't look as good and na na na.'

Mia: I do that.

Jen: And 'you look better in that shirt than I do' or 'those pants fit you better than they fit me' and just stuff like that. Like when my friends borrow my clothes like the pants will look looser on them than on me and I'm like 'oh I guess I'm fatter than you cuz they fit me better than they fit you na na na.' Just stuff like that.

Nicole: You don't hear guys talking like this?

Jen: No I don't.

Many female informants talked about the pressure to "look cute constantly" and expressed concern about choosing clothing to wear to school, the clothing size they wear as compared to the sizes their friends wear, and the difficulty of finding clothing to buy that fits just right. From what female informants said about clothing fit, the goal for many adolescent girls appeared to be wearing clothing that was as tight as possible without allowing any fat to show.

In contrast, male informants talked about clothing choice as being virtually effortless. When I asked male informants how they picked out clothing to wear or buy, many said that they just pick something clean and "throw it on." One male informant

said, “I mean like...when I like dress up in the morning like...I just put on something comfortable you know. I don’t really care.” Another male informant echoed these sentiments, explaining, “I wake up at six-thirty and put my clothes on and brush my teeth and I’m gone.” Many informants indicated that girls feel pressure to look more “put together” than guys because girls are more harshly evaluated by peers based on appearance. During an all male focus group, a Mexican informant explained that girls who don’t “look good like in a nice way” are thought to be “scrubbin it,” which means that “they just don’t care that day. They put on whatever.” The focus group participants explained that because girls are competitive with each other about clothing and appearance in general, it is important for them to look nice in order to avoid being gossiped about.

Looking nice entailed much more than clothing fit for girls. The conversation excerpt earlier between Jen and Mia illustrates the numerous elements of personal style girls felt pressured to maintain, including clothing fit, hairstyle, make-up, and even undergarments. Girls are socialized into appearance norms through gossip, teasing, and explicit discourse about the way clothing should fit, make-up should be worn, hair should be styled, etcetera. The fact that this normalizing discourse occurred among males and females, served to doubly reinforce appearance norms for girls.

From my perspective as a researcher who witnessed gossip, teasing, and discourse about how girls should look, I found myself gradually becoming more concerned with my own appearance as the school year progressed, internalizing the gendered norms established and reified through the adolescents’ discourse. In writings about the

disciplining of bodies, Foucault (1975, 1980) asserts that norms for behavior, which are initially imposed from external sources, eventually become internalized so that individuals begin to police themselves. Norms for appearance operate in much the same way, as they are established through the media and reproduced through the discourses of everyday life. Gossip among male and female teenagers about girls' appearance reproduces and reifies appearance standards for girls, which eventually become internalized so that the constant worry about appearance becomes normalized as a part of constructing feminine identity. As the male focus group members indicated, while it was fine for a guy to "be scrubbin it," girls were expected to put a lot of effort into their appearance.

Gendered Body Image Norms

In light of the pressure girls felt to "look cute all of the time," which was directly linked to the way clothes fit their bodies, it is not surprising that when I asked female informants to describe what they would most like to change about their bodies, the majority said that they wanted to lose weight, have flat stomachs, and have thinner thighs. Just as girls from all social groups indicated that tight-fitting clothing was the most stylish for girls, I found that, as in Nichter's (2000) study, girls' body image goals "crosscut all groups" (Nichter 2000: 63).

During interviews, female informants often explicitly linked body image goals to clothing size and fit. As discussed previously in this chapter, informants considered tight and revealing clothing to be the most fashionable for girls. However, access to that clothing style was limited to girls with thin and toned bodies. For example, female

informants said that a flat stomach is necessary for wearing clothing that reveals one's midsection. In response to my question of why she wanted a flat stomach, Jackie, a Mexican informant who was 5'5" tall and weighed 137 pounds, explained, "...When you have that (a flat stomach) like you could wear little tops. You could wear bathing suits and do mostly anything." Jackie's use of the verb 'can' illustrates her knowledge of the tacit rules governing who was able to wear tight and revealing clothes. She sought to achieve the flat stomach that would allow her to "pull off" wearing the "little tops" and "bathing suits." Allie, an overweight female informant who did not belong to a social clique, explained that she would like a flat stomach "...cuz like pants and everything it's all focused around your stomach...." Another female informant said that she wanted to be thinner "because there are a lot of cute clothes for skinny people."

For some female informants, being able to fit into certain clothes was directly tied to self-esteem. Allie explained during an interview, "Like when you go to a store and you try on clothes and stuff and if they don't fit that makes you feel less confident with yourself and less satisfied with who you are." Leslie, who was 5'5" tall and weighed 142 pounds, explained,

"Well I don't think I'm fat but like...you know when you go and try on clothes and you see like the shirt on the little mannequin and you're like 'God it's the sexiest most awesome thing' and you try it on and you're like 'No'...and my friends are like 'Do not wear that.'"

In addition to the anxiety associated with being able to fit into clothing at stores, girls felt pressure to fit into each others' clothing as well. Female informants explained during interviews that it was common for girls to share and trade clothing. For a girl who wore

larger sizes than her friends, this could be an embarrassing and exclusionary social practice. Jamie, a female Goth who 5'4" tall and weighed 145 pounds, explained:

“...my friends like they wanna like either borrow my clothes or like I let them borrow shirts and stuff. But when they wanna borrow pants I don't let them because none of my pants fit them cuz they're (referring to her pants) too big and when they wanna let me borrow their pants none of them fit me....it brings me down a lot.”

Just as shopping at the same stores and displaying the same clothing labels indexes group membership for guys, sharing clothing was a marker of group membership among teenage girls. Not being able to participate in clothes sharing with female friends made girls feel like outsiders.

Many female informants told me during interviews that they felt pressure to look as good in clothes as their friends did. During interviews, I asked female informants which girls on campus receive the most positive attention from guys and the majority said that the thin girls who “wear little bitty clothes” (Mia and Jen) were flirted with by guys the most frequently. A female informant explained:

Angie is like the girl who...all the guys like. So like when I go running with her she wears like little tiny wife beaters and like these shorts where like her butt hangs out and I feel very uncomfortable running with her. Like I'd rather run by myself and not be compared to like her, you know (laughs). I don't know.

This informant clearly feels like she is being compared to her friend, who “all the guys like.” She has internalized and learned to anticipate the “male gaze” (Bordo 1993; Goffman 1976; Mulvey 1975). Mia, a female informant who was 5'6" tall and weighed 142 pounds, explains in the following quote that, even in physical education class, girls competed to look the best in their exercise clothes.

Mia: ...Like in my PE class like Jen she wears like shorts and like her butt's hanging out and you can like see her crotch and she likes to stretch in front of guys. Like she likes to show off. And then like, you know, she always like lifts up her shirt and plays with her belly button ring and she has like the tiny waist....And then just like all the girls feel like they have to like match up, so more girls start wearing like short shorts. And, you know, I like to wear like pants during PE cuz I don't like to shave my legs every day so (laughs).

Nicole: Okay so people feel like they have to wear the short shorts too.

Mia: Yeah. Short shorts and you know instead of wearing like the baggy PE shirt you have to wear the cute little logo one that matches the short shorts or something like that.

This example further illustrates girls' awareness of being scrutinized by their peers and the pressure they felt to look as good as the other girls in tight, revealing clothing.

While some informants attempted to reject the pressure to compete with friends over appearance, they often succumbed to the pressure as the school year progressed.

Leslie, a normal weight female informant who explicitly and vehemently rejected feminine norms the first time I interviewed her, had changed her perspective six months later when I interviewed her again. During the first interview, Leslie repeatedly denied feeling pressure to be thin or wear tight clothes. She talked at length about eating large amounts of food without feeling guilt, comparing herself to female friends who worried about eating too much for fear of gaining weight. Leslie wore long, baggy basketball shorts, baggy t-shirts, and tennis shoes. She wore no make-up and typically wore her hair back in a ponytail. As the school year progressed, I began to notice that Leslie had replaced her baggy clothing with fitted clothing and that she had begun to wear make-up. When I interviewed her again in the spring, instead of rejecting feminine norms, she expressed a desire to shed her 'tomboy' identity in favor of a more feminine look:

I've always been like a tomboy but I wanna get out of it. When I go out with my friends...I don't look, you know, nice. But I should. I should get more ready than I do. This is like the biggest pressure I feel. Like my three best friends are like really pretty. I'm like the ugly duckling of the group and I mean I'm okay with that but like they're getting like boyfriends every day and I'm feeling like maybe I should be doing something more. Because they flirt with guys at the mall all the time and I'm just sitting there. I want to get up with my friends a little bit. They all have skirts on and I don't want to be like in basketball shorts and tennis shoes.

With her desire to look as good as her friends, Leslie began to express concern about the appearance of her body. During the second interview, Leslie told me that she wanted a flat stomach so that she could wear fitted shirts without her "love handles" showing.

Male informants also talked about girls competing to look better than each other in tight clothes. During an all male focus group interview, the participants were explaining that girls wear tight clothes "to impress guys" and that girls are more concerned with their appearance in general than guys are. When I asked the group to elaborate, they explained:

Ricky: I mean guys don't really compete with each other like with what you're wearing. Girls do.

Nicole: So girls are more competitive with each other about that kind of thing?

Robbie: Yeah.

Nicole: What are guys competitive about?

Reggie: Like sports and stuff.

Ricky: Not really anything except that. Like sometimes it could be clothes and stuff...Like I could be wearing like Wal-Mart and they could be wearing like Tucson Mall.

Two important points are raised in this excerpt of the conversation. First, Ricky distinguishes between the ways in which girls and boys are competitive about clothing.

He explains that girls are competitive about “what they wear,” referring to how they look in clothing, whereas boys compete over clothing brand. Second, Reggie and Ricky explain that while girls compete over appearance, boys compete over “sports and stuff,” a topic that will be elaborated upon later in this section. Adolescence researchers (Eckert 1993; Goodwin 1990, 1999, 2002; Mendoza-Denton 1996, 1999; Nichter 2000) have documented the competitive nature of adolescent girls’ relationships. My data illustrates the “cooperative competition” that Eckert (1993) writes about. Eckert’s research on adolescent girls’ interactions indicates that while girls compete to establish status among their peers, they attempt to frame their competition as cooperation because dominant gender norms identify competition with masculinity and cooperation with femininity. The girls in my dissertation study cooperated through the sharing of clothing while they competed to look better than each other in the clothing. What were these girls competing for? As Ricky and Leslie both indicate in the transcript segments above, girls vied for the highest status in the “heterosexual marketplace” (Eckert 1993) in order to attract the attention of high status male peers.

Adolescent males were just as invested as girls were in vying for a top position in the social hierarchy and attracting the attention of high status female peers. Virtually all of the male informants, regardless of social group affiliation, said that they wanted to be more muscular, or as one male Jock/Prep informant said, “...to grow muscle” (Cole). Recent research on boys’ body image ideals suggests that boys want muscles that are so large that their bodies would not realistically be able to support the weight of their muscles (Pope, et al. 2000). In contrast to this research, the adolescent boys in my study

indicated that there was a limit to how muscular they wanted to be. Several male informants from a variety of social cliques cited Arnold Schwarzenegger as an example of someone who is too muscular. A male Mexican informant explained that being as muscular as Arnold Schwarzenegger is “gross”:

Nicole: Can a guy be too muscular?

Jesse: Uh yeah.

Nicole: Okay. What’s too muscular for a guy?

Jesse: Like Arnold Schwarzenegger.

Nicole: Like you wouldn’t want to look like that?

Jesse: No.

Nicole: How come?

Jesse: It’s just gross.

Nicole: What’s gross about it?

Jesse: Their muscles are like bigger than their heads.

A male Goth informant explained that he thinks that muscle is “alright for guys, but not too much cuz then it gets kind of creepy.” When I asked how he defines too much, the informant said “When veins start popping out and things like that.” Some female informants echoed these sentiments. Jamie, a female Goth informant, explained that she is attracted to guys who are “buff enough to defend themselves” but explained that guys who have too much muscle, like professional bodybuilders, are “scary.” When asked whether or not she thinks it is attractive for guys to have muscles, another female Goth informant explained:

“I don’t know. When they’re all strong and everything I don’t know it makes you kind of feel inferior like ‘Wow you’re pretty big.’ You know, I mean it’s not necessarily a bad thing but I’m saying if they’re like huge I don’t find it attractive at all. Like in those muscle magazines I think that’s gross really. I mean if you’re average you know that’s (laughs).”

Individuals featured in bodybuilding magazines were referenced frequently among both male and female informants as examples of what it looks like to be too muscular.

In contrast to girls’ ‘cooperative competition,’ the boys in my study openly competed with each other. While some male informants claimed to be competitive about athletic ability and clothing brands rather than body image, my interview and observation data illustrates that boys were just as competitive about body image as girls were.

Informants reported that boys compete with each other over muscle, strength and six-pack abs. For example, one female informant told me that she has heard guys say to each other, “I can bench press two hundred pounds” or “I have a six-pack.” When I asked Kirk, a male Jock/Prep informant who was 6’3” tall and weighed 148 pounds, to describe how he and his friends talk about body image, he replied, “Like ‘My six-pack’s better than yours’ and stuff....It’s like a competition.” In response to this same question, a male Goth informant, who was 6’ tall and weighed 150 pounds, replied, “They’re (guys) more focused on other people in relation to themselves....It’s like, you know, like ‘I’m bigger than you. I’m tougher than you.’ That sort of thing.” During another interview, Jerry, who was 5’6” tall and weighed 120 pounds, described a recent conversation he had had with a male peer who claimed to have lifted fifty pounds at the gym the previous day. Jerry told me in the interview that he responded by saying, “Yeah, me too,” which he admitted to me was a lie. Eder, et al. (1995) asserts that verbal dueling is a means for

adolescent boys to establish a hierarchy among male peers and illustrates how physical strength is linked with dominance among adolescent boys. As the examples above illustrate, the boys in my study incorporated assertions of physical strength into verbal dueling matches to negotiate social rank among male peers.

Male informants gave a number of reasons for wanting more muscle. When asked about body image goals, many male Jock/Prep informants explicitly linked their goal to obtain more muscle with a desire to improve athletic performance. For example, Kirk, who was quarterback for the freshman football team and also played basketball and ran track, told me during an interview that he wanted “bigger legs” so he could jump higher and “bigger arms” so he could throw further. Another male Jock/Prep informant explained:

“...Like when basketball season comes around then I start working my calves for like jumping and stuff. Like I work my abs so when I get hit it doesn't really hurt. And then like um my back muscles, I work those for like throwing and stuff....”

Jerry, a male informant who aspired to be on the school's basketball team, said during an interview that he wished he were taller, had “bigger calves” and “bigger biceps” to help him perform better in basketball tryouts. Sammy, who 5'5" tall and weighed 133 pounds, said during an interview, “I would like um stronger legs and stuff so I can run a lot faster and stuff.” This informant also described contests he and his friends would sometimes engage in during lunch, to see who could jump the highest or run the fastest. Interestingly, among male informants, it was only the Jocks/Preps who explicitly linked their goal of being more muscular to improved athletic performance.

While the male Jock/Prep informants frequently indicated that they wanted more muscle to improve athletic performance, many admitted that their goal to obtain more muscle was appearance related as well. In the context of describing how he and his friends talk about body image, Kirk explained:

Kirk: We'll say like 'I wish I could get like um more like upper body strength or like lower body strength.'

Nicole: When you say, 'I wish I could get more upper body strength or lower body strength' are you talking about being strong, looking bigger or both?

Kirk: Probably looking bigger.

Informants from other social groups also indicated that they wanted to obtain more muscle for aesthetic reasons. Alex, a normal weight Goth informant, explained during an interview that he wants to start lifting weights "for big arms and everything." When I asked Alex why he wanted big arms, he laughed and said, "Isn't that self-explanatory...? It's attractive. It is to me anyway." Some male informants also indicated that having bigger muscles would make them feel more confident. During an interview, Eddie, a normal weight Goth informant said that he wanted "stronger biceps" and when I asked him why, he replied, "It's just kind of almost like a guy thing. I just want stronger arms....It just makes you feel more confident."

Male informants often indicated that girls are attracted to muscular guys, sometimes citing this as their reason for wanting bigger muscles. Ricky, an overweight Mexican informant explained during an interview that if he were more muscular, he would "...get more girls...I'd have more friends too cuz people would be like 'aw if I chill with that guy I'll get more girls.'" Just as girls wanted to look good in tight-fitting

clothing to attract boys, the boys in my study indicated that they wanted more muscles in order to attract girls. Male informants were correct in their belief that girls find muscles attractive on boys. With the exception of one female Goth informant, who said that muscles “don’t look good on guys or girls,” all of the female informants in my study indicated that they were attracted to muscular guys. As one female informant said, “Girls want muscular guys.”

In fact, muscle tone indexed masculinity to the extent that displaying muscle was an important part of constructing and displaying a masculine identity. A Mexican female informant explained that guys with muscles are attractive “because a guy is supposed to look like he’s capable of doing everything.” A male informant, who was not a member of any social clique, explained that for guys, “the goal is muscle because muscle is strength and strength is power.” Both male and female informants overwhelmingly indicated during interviews that they associated muscles with boys and that muscles do not “look right” on girls. Jackson, a normal weight informant who was not a member of any social group, said that guys are not attracted to muscular girls “...because girls are supposed to be housewives and ladylike and muscles don’t go with that (image).”

Interestingly, data linking muscles with masculinity primarily emerged during interview questions about whether or not muscles look attractive on girls. The vast majority of male and female informants from a variety of social groups expressed strong, negative opinions about girls having muscles. Male and female informants used the following adjectives to describe how muscles look on girls: “guyish,” “manly,” “manish,” “weird,” “gross,” “like ‘ew,’” “ugly,” “creepy,” “scary,” “nasty,” “butch,” “odd,”

“unhuman,” “unnatural,” and “intimidating.” For example, an overweight female informant said, “Like on a girl...if you look really um muscular then you kind of look like a guy.” Eddie, a Goth informant, explained why he is not attracted to girls with muscles:

Nicole: What about for girls to have muscle? Does that look good?

Eddie: Uh not really cuz with girls it’s usually not about them trying to look strong or anything. It’s more about them just being fit and in shape and skinny.

Nicole: Okay. Would you date a girl who was muscular?

Eddie: Probably not.

Nicole: How come? Like what does that mean to you?

Eddie: It’s almost kind of creepy....If they’re like really big and muscular and everything then they’ll like probably beat you up (laughs) and uh that wouldn’t be too attractive for me.

In this interview excerpt Eddie links muscles with strength, masculinity, and the power to ‘beat up’ someone, all traits that he finds unattractive in a girl.

The image of an imaginary muscular girl ‘beating up’ her boyfriend pervaded informants’ discourse about muscular girls and was the primary reason given for why boys felt intimidated by muscular girls. Both male and female informants indicated that boys would be intimidated by girls who display muscles. As Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) note, “Hegemonic masculinity emphasizes the possibility of physical force. It has been a central symbolic component in constructing heterosexual men as different from both women and homosexual men—in principle able to beat up either” (484). When asked whether or not muscular girls are attractive, Kenny, a normal weight male informant, responded,

“If a girl’s like really really buff they’re usually really really butch....I’ve gone out with a butch girl and it was too much like dating a guy and it was scary. It’s kind of scary to go out with a girl that can beat you up cuz you know like if you forget an anniversary or something you’re screwed.”

Kenny explicitly links muscle with masculinity by describing a muscular girl as ‘butch’ and comparing her to a guy. In addition, he expresses concern about dating a girl who could ‘beat him up.’ Similarly, a male Mexican informant said during an interview that he does not find muscular girls attractive because “...you don’t want a girl that can beat you up....” Male informants also indicated that they wanted to be stronger and more muscular than their girlfriends to avoid being teased by male peers. One informant explained that he would want to be friends with a muscular girl but not have a romantic relationship with her because “You’d get made fun of cuz your girlfriend sticks up for you rather than you sticking up for your girlfriend.” A female informant echoed this concern when I asked her whether or not she thinks guys would be attracted to a muscular girl:

“... They might think about how like if they ever get into a fight then his girlfriend would have to protect him and then he would feel really down. Like he would probably start yelling at her because he’d feel like he’s not powerful enough to defend himself and he’d feel pretty weak. So he’d have to think of something to bring himself back up.”

This informant is clearly aware of her male peers’ need to feel stronger and more powerful than girls to the extent that she portrays an imaginary boy behaving aggressively toward his girlfriend because she is stronger than him.

Many female informants displayed an awareness of male peers’ opinions about muscular girls during interviews. When I asked female informants whether or not they

think guys would find muscles attractive on girls, most said no because they thought guys would find muscular girls intimidating:

Nicole: What about girls who are muscular? Do you think guys find that attractive or do you think that's attractive?

Cory: No. I think it's intimidating for a guy?

Nicole: Oh. Tell me about that.

Cory: Well if a girl is bigger than you and stronger than you and you're a guy it's just kind of scary...and they've said that, you know. They've said like, 'Well if a girl was stronger than me or if she's bigger than me, you know, that's kind of intimidating and I wouldn't really go out with her or whatever.'

Nicole: So guys have actually commented on how that would be intimidating?

Cory: Yeah, how that would be weird almost if the girl's bigger than the guy. Cuz generally the girl's supposed to be small and petite or whatever.

In this excerpt, Cory not only echoes the opinions of her male peers regarding muscular women, but she gives primacy to their opinions over her own. In my question, I asked her to comment on either boys' opinions of muscular girls or her own and she chose to discuss what boys think of muscular girls instead of what she thinks.

Not only did female informants display knowledge of boys' negative opinions about muscular girls, but some had internalized those opinions very explicitly. Several girls who had muscle tone as a result of sports they participated in indicated that they wanted to "get rid of" their muscle tone because it caused them to look masculine. One female informant, who was 5'2" tall and weighed 120 pounds, explained that she is muscular because she participated competitively in gymnastics for ten years and said that boys often expressed a desire to have muscles like hers. She also said during the

interview that she thinks muscles look “ugly” on girls and that guys do not find it attractive. Jen similarly said that working out for cheerleading has made her legs muscular and that guys often commented that her legs are bigger than theirs. Jen explained that she thinks guys should be more muscular than girls and that guys are not attracted to muscular girls because “girls are supposed to be petite and just sit there looking cute.” As these examples illustrate, body image norms that require boys to be stronger and more muscular than girls are directly tied to gendered perceptions about athleticism and exercise and may in fact impact girls’ desire to participate in sports. This is a topic that will be examined at length in Chapter 7.

Both of these girls expressed dislike for their muscular bodies, voicing implicit concern that male peers view them as masculine. They are clearly aware of their male peers’ negative attitudes about muscular girls and have internalized those attitudes. These examples echo the findings of Brown (2002) in her research on adolescent girls’ resistance of dominant gender norms. Drawing upon Bakhtin’s (1935) concept of ventriloquation, Brown writes,

“Women and girls who speak through patriarchal voices do so in part to appropriate the power these voices have in the world, and yet the voices they speak carry with them the attenuation of female power, both personal and political. Such ventriloquation of conventionally feminine voices thus unwittingly reflects and contributes to a larger cultural silencing of women” (2002: 123).

These girls like many others I spoke with, voiced dominant gender ideologies regarding body image norms that they had internalized.

Male informants indicated that even more important than achieving an overall muscular physique is to achieve “six-pack abs.” All of the male informants, with the

exception of one Goth, indicated that they would like to have six-pack abs. When I asked male informants why they wanted six-pack stomachs, I heard a variety of responses. Some informants indicated that they did not know why they wanted six-pack stomachs. One informant said, “I don’t know. It’s just the cool thing right now” (Tim). Others indicated that they wanted six-pack stomachs because they liked the way it looks and because they think girls find it attractive: “It (a six-pack stomach) turns girls on” (Reggie); “Uh it (a six-pack stomach) just kind of shows like a better body and girls tend to go for better bodies most of the time” (Eddie). Many informants associated six-pack stomachs with strength. A male Goth informant said that girls like for guys to have six-pack stomachs “because it shows that they are strong.” A female informant similarly explained that girls are attracted to guys with six-pack abs because “...it just looks good and...like girls like to have strong strong boyfriends. Like tough usually.” Kenny explained to me during an interview that he wanted a six-pack stomach because “it looks very strong and very manly.” These examples illustrate the extent to which six-pack abs indexed strength, which in turn indexed masculinity.

Based on what male informants said during interviews, six-pack stomachs were a powerful form of ‘symbolic capital’ (Bourdieu 1972) among these adolescents.

However, symbolic capital functions differently for adolescent boys and girls within the “heterosexual marketplace” of a high school campus (Eckert 1993; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1995). While boys gained status through the display of their own six-pack abs, girls gained status through their relationships with boys who had six-pack abs. Due to tacit female body image norms disallowing girls to display muscle, most girls did not

want to obtain six-pack abs themselves, but instead wanted to obtain a boyfriend who had six-pack abs. As I heard informants discuss in detail boys' six-pack stomachs during interviews, it became clear to me that the adolescents I talked with knew which guys had six-pack abs. I began to wonder how this form of symbolic capital becomes public knowledge when it was typically covered by baggy clothing at school. When I asked about this during interviews, informants explained to me that boys who have six-pack abs would literally announce it and lift their shirts to display their stomachs to peers of both genders. Tim, a normal weight informant, explained during an interview that "If someone has a six-pack they gotta tell everybody." When I asked him to describe how they tell people about their stomachs, he explained, "A lot of times like after school, as soon as they get like outside the gates out here to the parking lot, they'll like take their shirt off and walk around." In this case, the display of symbolic capital in the heterosexual marketplace was more than just a metaphor. Boys were literally advertising their six-pack abs for the visual consumption of their female peers.

A female informant told me during an interview that guys compare their six-pack abs by lifting up their shirts and saying, 'My six-pack is better than yours' while girls watch. Kenny explained that guys with six-packs show them off:

Nicole: How do people know who has a six-pack?

Kenny: When people have a six-pack they let everybody know.

Nicole: How do they let people know?

Kenny: They'll just lift up their shirt and they'll be like 'Yeahhh' (Quoted speech performed in creaky voice)

Nicole: Really?

Kenny: Yeah...Or if like he's talking to some girl and then like after a while if he wants to impress her or something he'll just show her his six-pack and she'll be like 'It's so pretty' (Quoted speech performed in exaggerated high pitch).

Boys displayed their six-pack stomachs to each other as a means for competing with male peers for status and they displayed their stomachs to girls in order to attract and impress them.

Informants indicated during interviews that information about which guys have six-pack stomachs was also spread by girls who have "felt it." Jamie, a female Goth informant explained:

"Um usually their girlfriends or girls they've been with spread rumors about the guy having a six-pack. And then people want to see it and usually guys don't mind showing it off...."

Girls who "spread rumors" that guys they have "been with" have six-pack stomachs increased the social capital of the guy by attracting attention to his stomach muscles, which were a highly valued commodity among teens. By virtue of their relationship with the guy, these girls increased their own value within the heterosexual marketplace as well. This phenomenon supports Eckert & McConnell-Ginet's claim that "For girls, institutional success derives less from individual achievement than from the kinds of relations they can maintain with others (1995: 491).

Male and female informants explained during interviews that girls' discourse about boys often centered on speculation about and admiration of boys' stomach muscles. Kenny told me during an interview that he often hears girls say things like, "My guy has a six-pack. Yours doesn't" or "My guy's hotter than yours." When I asked an

overweight female informant to describe a typical conversation she and her friends have about six-pack stomachs, she shyly answered: “Um (laughs) how nice their stomach is and like even if the skin color looks good with their six-packs. Just stuff like that.” One day during an interview that I was conducting outside in the main commons area, Nicky, a normal weight informant, explained that she and her friends often speculate about the stomachs of boys they are attracted to, saying things like, “Ooh I wonder if he has a six-pack.” As soon as she said this, the bell rang, signifying a passing period and Nicky left to find her friends. As I sat there waiting for the break to end, two girls stopped in front of my table to talk and I overheard the following exchange:

1st Girl: I want to marry a firefighter.

2nd Girl: No, you don’t want a firefighter cuz they cheat on their wives.

1st Girl: Yeah I want a muscly one with a six-pack.

This was one of those insightful moments during fieldwork where I was able to witness firsthand adolescents enact the very discourse practices that informants had consistently described to me in interviews.

Just as most informants said that muscular girls were not attractive, the majority of male and female informants indicated that girls should have “flat, toned stomachs” rather than six-pack stomachs: “...I definitely wouldn’t see a girl with a six-pack like looking that good cuz like that’s kinda muscular. Like but if you have a flat stomach like that’s nice” (Demi.). Male and female informants primarily used the adjectives “gross,” “intimidating” and “weird” when I asked whether or not six-pack stomachs look attractive on girls. Informants also indicated that girls with six-pack stomachs are “too

buff,” “too muscular” and “manly.” Kirk told me during an interview that a six-pack stomach would not look attractive on girls because “it’s too manly and muscular.” Jill, an overweight female informant said, “Um I don’t personally think that six-packs look very good on girls. It kind of looks gross and a little too muscular. It looks good on guys but I don’t like it so much on girls.” She said that she associates six-pack stomachs with “big and bulky” football players. During an all male focus group, Tad, who was overweight, said that he does not find girls with six-pack stomachs attractive because, “...if they have a six-pack and you don’t then it’s kinda weird.” These examples illustrate that informants’ gendered perceptions regarding overall muscle tone were reflected in their perceptions about six-pack stomachs as well.

Regardless of social group affiliation, male and female informants articulated strikingly consistent images of masculine and feminine body image norms during interviews. As the examples above illustrate, informants tended to associate masculinity with strength, muscle, and six-pack abs and they tended to associate femininity with thin, toned, bodies. As one overweight male informant said, “You don’t want a girl full of fat but you don’t want her full of muscle.” When I asked informants where their perceptions about body image came from, many acknowledged “the media” or “society.” The extent to which the media influences body image norms has been well documented (Bordo 1993; Brumberg 1997; Heilman 1998; Nichter and Nichter 1991; Wolf 1991). It is estimated that the average American watches 3-4 hours of television per day (Brownell & Horgen 2004: 100). Factoring in other forms of popular media consumed by Americans, such as fashion and lifestyle magazines, movies, and music, it becomes clear why media

images have a significant impact on our gendered body image ideals. Informants from a variety of social groups acknowledged the media as being a major influence on people's perceptions of gendered body image norms. Kirk explained why he thinks muscles look good on guys but not on girls:

Kirk: I guess it's like the way society's supposed to be. Like the image of a girl and a guy, it's what you see on TV and stuff.

Nicole: So what is the image of a girl that you see on TV?

Kirk: Like...not short but not like tall and skinny, pretty and stuff.

Nicole: And what about the image of a guy that you see on TV?

Kirk: Like...tall, muscular and athletic.

When I asked informants how six-pack stomachs became so popular for guys, several individuals referred to infomercials that advertise "ab machines," such as "BoFlex" and "Six Second Abs." For example, Sammy, a normal weight informant, told me during an interview that he wanted a six-pack stomach after seeing "those infomercials for ab machines where the guys are huge and have six-packs." In addition to television, a couple of female informants indicated that music influences their body image ideology. For example, Mia, who was 5'6" tall and weighed 142 pounds, explained during an interview that her low self-esteem was partially the result of comparing herself to her "perfect" friend: "...Every single guy likes her cuz of her body you know. She has like the really tiny waist you know and the big butt and that's what they like...She's like they say on songs." Another female informant similarly said that "the songs say that guys like big butts and big boobs."

Only a few informants claimed that the media did not influence their ideas about body image. Leslie, who was 5'5" and 142 pounds, attributed the pressure girls feel to be thin and beautiful to the media but denied feeling that pressure herself:

“It’s all the media...We all have a self-conscious thing in the back of our mind telling us ‘I could be a little skinnier. I could be a little skinnier...If we didn’t have the media and if we didn’t have those underwear models with the beautiful stomachs and the beautiful everything then we wouldn’t base our opinion on that. We have to look like them and if we don’t look like them then we’re bad....I don’t think that. This is the way I look and I’m not gonna get like the make-up magazines and say ‘Oh this girl looks pretty and so I’m gonna put this on.’”

Notice that in this transcript segment, Leslie constructs herself as resisting the media influences to which other people succumb. While she acknowledges that “we all” think we need to be thinner and that the media influences “our opinions,” she later distinguishes herself as someone who accepts the way she looks. Although few expressed contradictory statements such as Leslie’s about the extent to which they were influenced by the media, disparities about body image concerns did exist. As I discussed in the Chapter 4, some male Goth informants expressed a rejection of normative body image ideology during interviews. However, in this chapter, I have illustrated that virtually all of the adolescents in my study, regardless of social group affiliation, articulated body image goals that were consistent according to gender. This shows the ways in which some of the adolescents in my study attempted to negotiate their awareness of the media’s power to influence public perceptions with the desire to view themselves as individuals capable of resistance.

'Fat Talk,' 'Ugly Talk,' and 'Wish Conversations'

In the previous section, I discussed the ways in which girls enacted 'cooperative competition' (Eckert 1993) with regard to body presentation. Data analysis of interview transcripts revealed that cooperative competition extended to girls' discourse about body image ideology as well. Girls competed with each other to look the best in tight and revealing clothes, vying for the attention of male peers. Yet, at the same time, girls supported each other through a discourse genre Nichter refers to as 'fat talk' (2000). My research supports Nichter's (2000) findings that 'fat talk' serves multiple social functions among adolescent girls, including building rapport, soliciting peer support, calling attention to perceived flaws before others do, and aligning with perceptions of feminine norms. For example, girls said during interviews that it is common to engage in 'fat talk' while "pigging out" on junk food:

"It's like sometimes like we're over at a friends' houses...and we'll be eating and we'll be just like 'I'm so fat' because we'll just be eating everything and that's like slumber party talk" (Allie).

'Fat talk,' or as Allie calls it, 'slumber party talk,' functioned to build rapport among girls at the slumber party.

One day during lunch a group of girls walked over to the table where I was sitting, threw their book bags down and proceeded to say things like "I shouldn't eat today because I feel fat" and "I need to diet but I'm hungry" before leaving to buy lunch. When the girls came back, one was eating a large iced brownie and another was drinking a soda and eating a candy bar. As Nichter (2000) notes, engaging in 'fat talk' before consuming fattening foods serves as a "public presentation of responsibility and concern

for appearance” (51) among girls. Engaging in fat talk prior to consuming fattening foods also functions as a way for girls to solicit permission from friends to consume fattening foods or reassurance that they can eat what they want because they are not in fact fat. Nichter (2000) points out that “girls are socialized to rely heavily on external acceptance and feedback to inform their identity” (48). In the case of ‘fat talk,’ positive feedback is delivered in the form of reassurances from friends that a girl is not fat.

Female informants indicated that, in addition to engaging in ‘fat talk’ prior to eating large amounts of food, sometimes girls will call themselves fat after eating a lot of food. Kerri, who was 5’5” tall and weighed 161 pounds, explained that if she is with friends and eats “too much” she will sometimes say, “I feel fat now.” In response, her friends will insist that she is not fat. In this case, Kerri appears to be eliciting support from her friends by saying that she feels fat and is rewarded by friends who assure her that she looks good.

Mia explained that she and her friends will often engage in ‘fat talk’ while they are trying on clothes:

“We’ll just be like looking in the mirror. Like we’ll try on jeans you know and like they’ll like be really big (in terms of clothing size) and we’re like ‘Oh my God I’m so fat’ or you know you’ll just be like ‘Oh my God I feel so bloated. I’m so fat’ (laughs) you know.”

In this instance, ‘fat talk’ functions as ‘rapport talk’ (Nichter 2000; Tannen 1990), communicating alignment with feminine norms that dictate how girls’ bodies should look in clothing and allowing girls to call attention to perceived flaws in themselves before others do. As Nichter’s (2000) findings illustrate, ‘fat talk’ provides an indirect means for soliciting support from friends. I witnessed this firsthand while I was in the bathroom during lunch one day. Two normal weight girls stood in front of the mirror fixing their

hair, tugging at their clothes, and applying lip gloss. One of the girls said, “This shirt makes me look fat, like I’m trying to hide something.” The other girl replied, “Speaking of trying to hide something, I need to hide this gut.” At that point, they both turned and walked out of the bathroom. Through self-criticism these two girls were offering support to each other and building solidarity. Similarly, through this ‘ritualistic speech’ (Nichter 2000), they reinforced feminine norms that paradoxically require girls to wear tight, revealing clothing *and* hide their body fat.

When asked why girls call themselves fat, a majority of informants, both male and female, indicated that it is because they are “fishing for compliments.” Jen explained, “I think they just want to hear ‘No you’re not. You’re skinny. You’re pretty.’” In accordance with Nichter’s (2000) findings, informants in my study indicated that the most common replies to a thin or normal weight girl calling herself fat is “No you’re not” and “Shut up.” However, in contrast to Nichter’s (2000) research, informants in my study indicated that fat girls do in fact engage in ‘fat talk.’ Male and female informants indicated that when fat girls call themselves fat, the response is rarely “No you’re not” or “Shut up.” Instead, informants said that a prolonged and uncomfortable silence is the most typical response when a fat girls says, “I’m so fat.” During an interview, Nicky explained that she has an overweight friend who sometimes participates in ‘fat talk’ by calling herself fat. Nicky said that when her overweight friend calls herself fat it essentially shuts down the conversation, resulting in an awkward silence, which is then broken by someone in the group who changes the subject. Similarly, a male informant was explaining the ‘fat talk’ ritual among thin girls during an interview and added that

“sometimes fat girls say that.” When I asked him how people respond when a fat girl calls herself fat, he mimicked looking uncomfortable by exaggeratedly looking everywhere but at my face, punctuating this gesture with a prolonged silence.

Conversation analyst Anita Pomerantz (1984) has written that a first speaker’s assessment of someone or something known to participants invites a response of either agreement or disagreement. When a thin or normal weight girl says to her friends, “I’m so fat” the expected or preferred response is a statement of disagreement, such as “No you’re not” or “Shut up.” However, when fat girls say “I’m so fat” to her friends, the response is often silence. According to Pomerantz, “When no overt disagreement is made, the self-deprecating party tends to treat the self-deprecation as implicitly confirmed by the recipient” (1984: 93). A female informant illustrated this point when she explained during an interview that she has experimented with various responses to normal weight friends who call themselves fat. In an effort to discourage ‘fat talk’ among her friends because she finds it annoying, Teri will often either change the subject or tell her friends to ‘shut up’ in response to the statement “I’m fat.” Teri explained that when she has tried responding to one friend’s initiation of ‘fat talk’ with silence, her friend often expresses concern that Teri agrees with the self-deprecatory statement.

Earlier in this chapter, I argued that for the adolescent girls in my study, clothing simultaneously represented a site of competition as well as a means for building rapport. Within female friendship groups, sharing clothing communicated in-group status and girls who wore larger clothing sizes than their friends were excluded from this rapport building activity. My research illustrates that just as fat girls were excluded from clothes

sharing rituals, they were excluded from 'fat talk' as well. Nichter's (2000) findings and my dissertation research illustrate that thin and normal weight girls often initiate 'fat talk' as a means for building rapport, constructing social alignment, and soliciting support from friends. 'Fat talk' establishes and communicates in-group status among girls. This strategy for establishing in-group status, building rapport, and obtaining support from friends is unavailable to fat girls, once again placing them at the margins of their friendship groups.

During interviews, a couple of variations on 'fat talk' emerged. Informants described a type of discourse that one overweight female informant labeled 'wish conversations.' When asked to describe 'wish conversations,' Allie replied, "Um 'I wish I was skinnier,' 'I wish I didn't look like this,' 'I wish I looked like her,' 'I wish I had her hair, her eyes, her lips,' stuff like that." Another overweight female informant explained, "We just start talking and I usually say that I wish I could be skinnier and my face was cleared up and that's about it." Other female informants indicated that 'wish conversations' can encompass more than physical appearance. Sarah, a normal weight informant, explained that sometimes when she and her friends are at the mall and they see a pretty girl with her boyfriend, they might say to each other, "I wish I looked like her" or "I wish I had that (referring to the girl's boyfriend)." During an interview, I asked Mary, an introverted, soft-spoken girl who was 5'4" tall and weighed 153 pounds, whether or not she and her friends talk about body image and she replied:

"Yeah like when we're like walking and we see a crowd and we're like 'ooh wish we could be pretty like them' or like 'skinny like them'Like if they have more friends or they have boyfriends it's like 'we wish we could have those.'"

In this transcript segment, Mary presents being thin, pretty, having more friends, and having a boyfriend as a package deal. She echoes the sentiment expressed by many female informants that the thin, pretty girls are the ones who 'have it all.'

This concept of linking body image goals to a lifestyle package is reminiscent of Nichter and Nichter's (1991) assertion that advertising works through metonymy, which is the linking of a product with its features as well as with a lifestyle package. As a result, consumers are not simply purchasing a product, but they are buying into a lifestyle. Similarly, the girls in my study believed that by attaining the perfect body, they would gain access to the perfect life (Nichter & Nichter 1991; Nichter & Vuckovic 1994). As I discussed earlier in this chapter, female informants indicated during interviews that it was the girls who wear tight, revealing clothing who received the most positive attention from boys and that access to tight, revealing clothing was limited to girls with thin, toned bodies. From what female informants said during interviews, they appeared to view their bodies as gatekeepers that would either restrict or allow access to an ideal lifestyle package, which included an abundance of friends, a cute boyfriend, and the ability to wear and look good in the most stylish clothing.

Another variation on 'fat talk' that emerged during interviews with girls was a focus on specific body parts as opposed to the whole body. Cory, a female Goth informant explained, "Like some (girls) will be like 'my legs look too fat,' 'my stomach isn't tight enough,' 'my boobs aren't big enough, 'my this, my that.' Just tons of stuff." This discourse sometimes encompassed 'wish conversations' as well. For example, another female Goth informant said, "I mean like if a movie star person is on TV they'll

be like ‘Oh I wish um my legs looked like that’ or ‘I wish my stomach looked like that’ you know.” The scrutinizing of individual body parts reflects body image concerns of female informants, the majority of whom indicated that they would like flatter stomachs and thinner thighs. The low-riding, tight jeans and cropped shirts that girls described as being stylish highlight one’s legs and stomach, marking these body parts as primary areas of concern for girls.

‘Fat Talk’ Among Boys

Interestingly, male and female informants indicated that guys engage in ‘fat talk’ as well. However, in contrast to girls, informants said that guys use ‘fat’ and ‘ugly’ interchangeably. In response to an interview question about whether or not guys engage in ‘fat talk,’ a female informant explained that they do:

Nicole: Do guys ever say ‘I’m fat?’

Mia: You know I never thought they did but this year I have like met like a hundred guys who do. Like this guy Rubin is like ‘I’m so fat. I’m so fat.’ I’m like ‘you’re like a toothpick.’ He’s so skinny. And this guy named Jared he’s like ‘Yeah I’m so fat’ you know. And this guy named Josh is like ‘Yeah I’m fat.’

Nicole: Who are they saying this to? Are they saying it to other guys or are they saying it to girls?

Mia: To like girls. Like when a girl’s like ‘Yeah I’m fat or something they’ll be like ‘No you’re not. I’m ugly and I’m fat’ you know (laughs).

Male and female informants indicated that guys initiated ‘fat/ugly talk’ with girls in order to gauge girls’ level of interest in them. During an all male focus group, Tim, a normal weight participant, said that guys will say, “I’m so ugly” or “I’m so fat” to girls as a way of determining whether or not a girl finds him attractive. According to Tim, if the girl

disagrees with his self-deprecatory statement, then he interprets that to mean that she does find him attractive; however, if she changes the subject or responds with silence, then he knows that she does not find him attractive. Engaging in ‘fat/ugly talk’ is a way for guys to mitigate potential rejection by girls. During an all female focus group, Mia and Jen described a typical ‘fat/ugly talk’ exchange initiated by guys:

Mia: You’ll be on the phone with a guy and he’ll be like, “You wouldn’t like me. I’m ugly.’

Jen: Yeah. ‘You wouldn’t like me.’

Nicole: Okay kind of replay a typical conversation because I can’t imagine it.

Mia: They’ll just somehow bring up ‘Who do you like?’

Jen: Yeah. ‘Who do you like?’

Mia: And then they’re like ‘You wouldn’t like me’ you know. ‘I’m ugly. I’m fat.’

Jen: Or ‘Do you think I’m cute?’ And you’re like ‘Yeah.’ And they’re like ‘No you don’t. I’m ugly’ or ‘I’m not you’re type...’

Similar to what individuals said about why girls engage in fat talk, many informants indicated that one function of guys’ ‘fat/ugly talk’ was to elicit compliments from girls. Female informants told me that it is usually “the guys who are hot” who engage in ‘fat/ugly talk.’ As Mia explained, “They know they’re cute. They just want to hear it.” These examples illustrate that eliciting compliments from girls by calling themselves fat or ugly was one of the ways in which guys determined what girls thought of them.

Informants indicated during interviews that when guys engage in fat talk, they need to do it with girls. If guys initiated ‘fat/ugly talk’ with male peers, they ran the risk of being called ‘gay’ or ‘a girl.’ One female informant explained that she has a male

friend in PE who sometimes calls himself fat and people often respond by saying to him, “You’re such a girl.” Another female informant explained during an interview,

“Guys...aren’t gonna say ‘Hey dude I look really fat don’t I?’ I mean they’re not gonna say that to their (male) friend or their friend’s gonna think like they’re gay or something...”

Male informants indicated that when a male friend called himself fat in front of guys, the response is never to disagree. One male informant explained that he has a friend who is “a little chunky” and he sometimes says he wishes he could lose his “pudge.” Reggie said that the guys in their group will usually laugh and tell him jokingly that he could do sit-ups to lose his “pudge.” During an all female focus group, informants explained that guys would never engage in ‘fat/ugly talk’ with other guys because “...if they said it to a guy...and the guy’s like ‘No you’re not’ they’ll be all ‘Whoa gay.’”

When asked whether or not guys engage in ‘fat talk,’ some informants explained that while girls call themselves fat, guys call each other fat. One female informant explained that she often hears guys jokingly say to each other, “You’re fat” or “You’re ugly.” She said that a typical response is, “Yeah I know” or “Give me a cheeseburger.” During an interview, in the context of talking about how guys and girls talk about their bodies, Demi reiterated this form of joking among guys:

Demi: Um they (guys) call each other fat all the time.

Nicole: So the opposite of girls.

Demi: Yeah. (Laughs loudly) Yeah.

Nicole: So how have you seen guys respond when someone calls them fat.

Demi: Um some guys are like ‘I know’ and stuff. Like they just kind of take it. Um yeah they just kind of mess around with it.

Nicole: Are the guys fat?

Demi: No. It's just what guys do now. It's what they do.

This kind of joking among guys represents an inversion of 'fat talk,' a discourse genre associated with femininity.

In the previous section, I illustrated how male informants associated a high level of concern and insecurity about appearance with femininity, while they associated a casual attitude toward appearance with masculinity. While it was okay for guys to be "scrubbin it" girls were expected to take great care with every aspect of their physical appearance. Similarly, in this section, I examined the gendered boundaries of 'fat talk,' revealing the tacit rules that restricted males from participating in this discourse genre with male peers. Male adolescents were clearly aware of the tacit gender rules regarding 'fat talk;' they utilized it in the presence of female peers as a means for gauging whether or not girls are attracted to them. However, the male participants in my study understood the social boundary that prohibited them from engaging in 'fat talk' with male peers. 'Fat talk' indexed a concern with appearance that participants in my study associated with femininity. For males to participate in 'fat talk' among male peers communicated alignment with feminine norms, which might result in being called 'gay' or 'a girl.' Just as 'fat talk' functioned as a rapport building mechanism for girls, the inversion of fat talk for humorous purposes functioned in the same way for guys.

Butler (1990) states that gender performance becomes routinized through mundane repetition that comes to be viewed as natural, resulting in dominant gender ideologies. She writes, "The subject is not *determined* by the rules through which it is

generated because signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition* that both conceals itself and enforces its rules precisely through the production of substantializing effects” (1990: 145). In this chapter, I have illustrated the ways in which adolescent boys and girls ‘perform’ normative gendered body image ideology by appropriating various elements of style, including clothing, stance, and discourse. Male and female adolescents in my study socialized their peers into normative gender ideology by engaging in gossip and variations of fat talk with peers. Specifically, the girls in my study enacted feminine identities by displaying their bodies in tight, revealing clothing, engaging in ‘fat talk’ and ‘wish conversations,’ and talking about boys’ muscles and six pack stomachs. The boys in my study constructed masculine identities by wearing baggy clothing while paradoxically being concerned with what lies beneath, displaying and competing with each other over muscles and six pack stomachs, engaging in ‘fat/ugly talk’ with girls, and inverting ‘fat talk’ for humorous purposes with male peers. In the next chapter, I turn to gendered body transgressions, examining gossip and teasing among adolescents within the context of obesity stigma.

VI. BODIES THAT DON'T CONFORM: TEASING PRACTICES

This chapter will explore weight stigma as an enactment of moral identity through analysis of teasing behaviors among adolescents. Chapter 5 focused on the ways in which adolescents discursively construct normative heterosexual identities through body presentation and talk about body image ideals. Also examined were the gendered body image ideals that adolescents enacted and perpetuated through discourse and body presentation. In essence, whether or not the adolescents in my study were able to achieve the bodies they desired, they effectively displayed knowledge of gendered body image norms and socialized each other into those norms through discourse. In addition to constructing gendered identities through discourse about body image norms and ideals, displaying knowledge of gendered body image ideals also functioned as a way for teens to construct moral identities with regard to body image. Nichter (2000) asserts that when a girl engages in 'fat talk' it functions as a "public presentation of responsibility and concern for her appearance" (51). Similarly, findings from the present study suggest that discourse about body image ideals and norms enabled the adolescents I interviewed to embody a sense of personal responsibility for the way that their bodies look.

In this chapter, I continue discussing the ways in which adolescents embodied moral subject positions with regard to body image ideology by focusing on youth discourses about overweight and obesity as well as teasing practices. I begin by exploring the link between body image and moral identity through a discussion of the ways in which adolescents talked about people who are overweight. I will discuss the ways in which informants emphasized the role of personal responsibility in maintaining

normal body weight and how they reinforced popular stereotypes about fat people through discourse. The second part of this chapter will be devoted to examining the teasing practices of adolescents as I explore ways in which teens who failed to conform to body image and body presentation norms were teased by their peers. Gender differences in perceptions of overweight teens are explored as well as the consequences of teasing.

As Americans continue to gain weight en masse, moving further and further away from popular and medical conceptions of body image norms and ideals, I wondered whether or not the connection between moral identity and adherence to body image norms was shifting or loosening. In other words, as the numbers of overweight and obese Americans continue to rise, is the stigma associated with being fat as strong as earlier research indicated (Cash & Roy 1999; Cramer & Steinwart 1998; Neumark-Sztainer, Story, and Faibisch 1998; Puhl & Brownell 2001) or are youth becoming more accepting of their overweight peers? Considering the high rates of obesity and overweight among Americans, I reasoned that at least some of my study participants would be overweight and that the majority would at least know someone who is. As adolescents encounter more and more overweight people in their daily lives either out in public or within their close social networks and as they struggle with being or becoming overweight themselves, has overweight become less deviant and more normalized?

I was originally interested in understanding what adolescents thought about the ‘obesity epidemic’ as a means for understanding how it may be influencing their body image ideals. However, what primarily emerged from interview discussions about the

nation's obesity epidemic was a discourse of morality that positioned fat people as lazy and slovenly. Informants, regardless of body size, constructed their identities in opposition to the fat people they described as having no impulse control, emphasizing the role of personal responsibility. Discourses of responsibility enabled these adolescents to highlight the role of individuals in managing their own fat through diet and exercise.

Discourses of Responsibility

Moral identity is closely tied to the concept of personal responsibility because a person's ability to control his/her weight is viewed as a reflection of willpower and discipline. Someone who lacks discipline is considered lazy and indulgent, undesirable character traits that result in weight gain. Overweight individuals are perceived as letting themselves slip and not caring about how they look. During discussions about the current 'obesity epidemic,' informants acknowledged the role of a social environment where fast food is plentiful and physical activity is replaced by labor saving devices and sedentary forms of entertainment, like television and video games. However, most, like Kenny in the following example, stressed individual responsibility and people's ability to control their weight through hard work and discipline.

Kenny: I mean in our class there's this guy, huge. I mean it kind of like makes me angry because it looks like he doesn't do anything about it.

Nicole: Huge like overweight or muscular?

Kenny: Like really really overweight. I mean you know like with breasts.

Nicole: So it makes you mad?

Kenny: Well it doesn't really make me mad. It just makes me kind of like sad for him because I mean he has the power to make it go away. But I mean he doesn't care and it's sad.

Similarly, when I asked Kirk, a Jock who was the quarterback of the freshman football team, about his thoughts on the increasing rates of overweight and obesity in our country, he said: “I think that if you get overweight it’s your fault and that it’s your problem, not anyone else’s. It’s your problem to deal with. I don’t feel bad because you got yourself there.” In both of these interview excerpts, the informants emphasized the responsibility of individuals in managing body weight. Both informants indicated that fat people have the capability to lose weight and Kenny even expressed anger over the fact that an overweight boy in his class “doesn’t do anything about it.” Implicit in Kenny’s and Kirk’s statements is the belief that not only do fat people have the power to lose weight, but they have a responsibility to at least look like they are trying to lose weight.

Informants expressed disbelief and sometimes anger when they perceived that a fat person did not appear to want to lose weight. For example, when I asked Leslie, a normal weight girl, what she thought about the obesity epidemic, she responded with a description of a fat person that she had seen eating at the McDonald’s across the street from the high school:

“Usually when we have band practice, we head over to McDonalds and there is this person I see there all the time and they’re gettin’ bigger and bigger. And they have like four things of fries and two hamburgers and a slushee and a drink and they’re just eating away perfectly like (makes loud, piggish noises to imitate the sounds this person makes while eating). You’re like ‘Why are you doing this to yourself? You don’t need that much food.’ And even then, if you really wanted that much, couldn’t you start doing something about it and getting maybe better food, not McDonalds every day for lunch?”

Notice that Leslie began by telling a story about an overweight individual that she generally sees eating in McDonalds. However, she quickly moved from describing this individual to talking about fat people in general. For her, this person’s overindulgent

eating habits have come to represent those of all fat people. Leslie appeared to be offended by the sight of a fat person eating large amounts of fattening food because it signaled what she perceived to be a lack of concern with his body weight.

Many informants I talked with about the obesity epidemic acknowledged influences in the social environment as well as emphasizing the role of individuals in weight management.

Nicole: Why are Americans getting fatter?

Jill: Um, I think a lot of it has to do with fast food. They're coming out with like more different fast food places to go to and that has a lot to do with it because the more fast food that's out there, the more people can go get it like when they're on the run. Instead of making the nice dinner, they go to McDonald's or Taco Bell....And some people don't have that high of a metabolism, so when they do eat it, it just sits there and it turns into fat and then a lot of people become obese. And they don't watch what else they eat. Like if you have McDonald's, maybe you have something else the next day, like something healthier.

Jill, who was overweight herself, alternately placed blame for the obesity epidemic on both individual choices and social factors. While Jill acknowledged that the prevalence of fast food restaurants is a contributing factor, she also emphasized the importance of individuals watching what they eat. Informant responses about the obesity epidemic reflect conflicting scientific discourses that are playing out in the media, whereby public health researchers blame individuals who "refuse to do what is good for them" (Gard & Wright 2005: 7) and nutritionists and social psychologists blame the food industry for their role in creating an ever increasing 'toxic' food environment.

Although there was acknowledgment among some informants of the factors in the social environment that contribute to increasing rates of obesity among Americans, the

majority of informants indicated that it is ultimately the responsibility of individuals to maintain a healthy weight. As a means for demonstrating that people can lose weight if they “want to” or “try to,” some informants told narratives recounting their own successes with weight loss. Consider the following transcript excerpt from a conversation I had with Kenny:

When I was a little kid I used to be made fun of for being fat. People would call me like ‘fat’ or ‘tubby....’ Like I mean sometimes I’d wear like a wife-beater or like a ribbed undershirt or something like that and like you know I kind of had like a little belly just sticking out. Every once in a while people would be like, ‘Dude, tuck that belly in’ or something like that. I mean it always made me feel bad but it also made me think. If I wouldn’t have been dissed I probably wouldn’t have tried to get better looking and more in shape.... See, most people take it as a diss and hate themselves more and when they hate themselves more they’ll just eat more and they won’t care about how they look. But like with me, it made me think that all I had to do was just try harder to look better or try harder to get in better shape.

Here, Kenny contrasts himself with individuals who do not have the discipline and willpower to lose weight. The moral of Kenny’s story is that overweight people have the ability to lose weight and more importantly, they have a responsibility to ‘care about how they look’ and ‘try harder to look better.’ Kenny, who at the time of our interview was 5’7” tall and weighed 150 pounds, juxtaposes the success of his own struggle with weight loss with the failure of people who remain fat and in doing so, emphasizes the role of personal responsibility.

These adolescents had clearly internalized pervasive media messages that alternately assign blame to individuals and the environment. They acknowledged that, although surrounded by an array of high fat, high sugar foods and drinks, it is ultimately the responsibility of individuals to make sensible food consumption choices.

Interestingly, this internalization of personal responsibility rhetoric manifested in feelings of guilt for indulging in fattening foods rather than in making healthier food choices. In fact, discourses of guilt were closely tied to discourses of responsibility, a topic that I will examine at length in Chapter 8.

The point that I wish to make here is that adolescents enacted moral identities through *discourses* of responsibility that set them apart from the overweight peers they teased and despised as opposed to food consumption related *behaviors*. In other words, the teens I interviewed who criticized fat people for eating too much junk food were also consuming junk food regularly on the high school campus. It was primarily through discourse that teenagers distinguished themselves from overweight individuals.

Fat Stereotypes as Lived Ideology

Stereotypes of fat people as lazy, slovenly couch potatoes were prevalent throughout informants' discourse about the obesity epidemic. These stereotypes are predicated on the assumptions that individuals have control over their body weight and fat people do not care enough about their appearance and/or health to maintain a socially acceptable body weight. Research shows that children as young as five years old attribute negative stereotypes to fat people, characterizing them as lazy, sloppy, ugly, mean, dirty, lonely and stupid (Cash & Roy 1999; Caskey & Felker 1971). Some of these attitudes were reproduced in the discourse of my study participants as well.

'Lazy' was the adjective most frequently used by informants during interview discussions about why Americans are getting fatter. Not only were fat individuals described as lazy, but Americans in general were accused of laziness. For example, I

asked Alex, a normal weight male informant, during an interview, ‘When you see a fat person what are your first thoughts?’ The following discussion ensued:

Alex: Average American (laughs).

Nicole: Tell me more about that. What do you mean?

Alex: Well, because America’s a fat country. We’re suing McDonald’s for it. It’s kind of sad.

Nicole: What do you think is making Americans fat?

Alex: Because we are just lazy. Like if you look at the kids, I mean none of us wants to go to school and in some countries kids would kill to go to school. They would, you know, be ecstatic about an education. But we’re like, ‘No that’s work, you know. I just want everything handed to me’ and that sort of thing....Also like fast food and stuff. You know, it’s easier than sitting down and making yourself a decent meal. You know it’s easier to go up the drive-through at McDonald’s and get yourself that super size fry and a Big Mac and a diet Coke (laughs). We’re in a fat lazy epidemic right now. Way worse than SARS.

In this excerpt, Alex attributes obesity to laziness. Although he uses the inclusive pronoun ‘we’ to discuss the ways in which Americans in general are lazy, the underlying assumption in his commentary is that, while all Americans struggle with tendencies toward laziness, it is fat people who lose the struggle. In other words, it is the fat people who eat too many meals at McDonalds because it is easier than cooking. He explicitly connects fat with laziness when he says, “We are in a fat lazy epidemic right now.”

Closely tied to the stereotype of fat people as lazy was the perception among informants that they are slovenly as well. Descriptions of fat people as lazy and slovenly were prevalent throughout interview transcripts. For example, during an interview discussion about teasing, Leslie, who was 5’5” tall and 142 pounds, said the following:

Leslie: There's some people who let their bodies slip. Like they could be skinny and they just don't do anything about it. I don't care how big you are, you need to take care of yourself.

Nicole: What are you seeing that indicates that they're not really taking care of themselves?

Leslie: Well, their hair first of all. That's like the first thing I see. Like it would look oily. And their face would just be-like people can have like a dirty look to their face. You know when like you see somebody and think 'Oh wash your face dude.' And their clothes are kind of dirty and hanging off them.

Leslie explicitly associates obesity with a lack of personal hygiene. According to her, people who 'let their bodies slip' by becoming fat are too lazy to make the effort to clean their bodies or clothes. In another interview, I asked Demi, a tall, normal weight girl with an athletic build, to describe the kinds of guys she is attracted to. During the course of this discussion, she told me that she would not want to date an overweight guy. When I asked her why not, she explained,

"Cuz like maybe if the guy's chubbier he doesn't care like about appearance. Like you can tell when people try to look good and stuff. Like there's this guy in my PE class and he's chubbier and you can tell he doesn't care like at all and he doesn't want to do anything to fix it. Like I work out, but I'm still not like skinny, so like that's being lazy and just not caring too. It just bothers me. I don't like the fact that you have no interest in what you look like. I don't like that at all."

I then asked Demi how she can tell that the boy in her PE class does not care about his appearance and she said, "Like maybe his hair isn't brushed or just his like clothes are all wrinkly. You can tell he just like picked 'em out of the laundry or something. Just stuff like that." Here again, Demi links fatness with slovenliness. The stereotype of fat people as slovenly is an extension of the stereotype that they are lazy. In other words, just as fat

people are too lazy to lose weight, they are also too lazy to attend to basic personal hygiene.

These stereotypes were further reproduced during interviews about the obesity epidemic through informants' descriptions of fat people as couch potatoes who lie around eating all day in front of the television. For example, when I asked Kirk, the freshman quarterback, why he thinks more and more people are becoming overweight, he said, "Just goin' home, eatin', layin' on the couch the whole day." Similarly, Jesse said about obese people, "They just sit around and do nothing." During an interview discussion about the obesity epidemic, Leslie said, "Obese people are just people who keep eating and keep eating and keep eating and not get up and exercise, not do anything. Their life is eating and watching TV." The image of the couch potato has become an iconic symbol associated with obesity in American culture. Not only is this image reproduced in the media, but it was frequently reproduced in the discourse of my study participants. Gard and Wright (2005) argue that "the visual and verbal imagery of the 'couch potato' are significant because they sum up what appear to be widely held understandings of the 'obesity epidemic.' In short, the 'couch potato' reminds us that we are fat because we are lazy" (22).

The discourses of adolescents in my study are a reflection of popular attitudes toward and stereotypes about fat people. "The 'obesity epidemic' is, in short, a modern-day story of sloth and gluttony—Western life has produced a never-ending array of temptations which we have not had the self-discipline or moral fibre to resist" (Gard and Wright 2005). Gard and Wright (2005) argue that this story of moral failing has been

reproduced in the popular media and in scientific discourse through an emphasis on individual choice in the fight against obesity. These discourses of personal responsibility and moral failing were consistently reproduced by the informants in my study as well, illustrating the socializing, normalizing power of the media and everyday discourse. Through discourses of personal responsibility and narrative reproductions of fat stereotypes, adolescents were able to construct their identities in opposition to overweight individuals. Another, more cruel means of embodying moral, body conscious identities that adolescents at the high school engaged in was teasing their overweight peers.

Direct vs. Indirect Teasing

Two types of teasing were identified among informants in my study, direct and indirect. Indirect teasing is a form of teasing that informants described as making derogatory comments about someone's appearance, behavior, or character behind that person's back. Indirect teasing is similar to gossiping, and in fact many informants referred to this 'behind the back' teasing as gossip. I use the phrase indirect teasing as a means for contrasting it to face-to-face teasing, which is what I refer to as direct teasing. I chose the terms direct and indirect teasing because these are terms that some informants in my study used to describe teasing that they have observed and experienced on the high school campus.

The majority of informants indicated during interviews that most teasing at the high school was indirect, meaning that in theory the person being teased could not hear what was being said about him/her. A common scenario that informants described was

that of a group of friends commenting on the appearance of individuals who walk by them during lunch. Allie, an overweight female informant, explained:

“We’ll be at lunch and um my friends will notice girls that are bigger than average...and um sometimes they’ll be like ‘Well what is she wearing?’ or ‘Does she not know that you’re not supposed to step out of the house like that?’ or just stuff like that.”

During an interview, I asked another female informant to describe teasing that she had seen or experienced at school. She explained that most teasing is indirect: “Like if we see a fat guy walking by and eating chips we might whisper to each other that he should stop eating those chips.” Cory, a very thin girl who reportedly wore size double zero pants, described a similar scenario: “Like if you’re with your friends, they’ll be like ‘Oh look at that girl. Look how heavy she is.’ It’s kind of thinking out loud basically.” I asked another female informant during an interview whether or not she has seen students get teased about the way they look and she replied,

“They won’t tell them, but I hear them comment that ‘Oh that guy’s too tall’ or ‘this girl’s too tall’ or ‘that girl’s too skinny’ or ‘she’s fat.’ Just stuff like ‘Oh look at her. She has no legs’ or ‘She’s too skinny. She has no taste’...Just stuff like that.”

From what the majority of my informants said during interviews, this type of indirect teasing was a normal part of every day conversation among adolescents. As Cory said, “It’s kind of thinking out loud....” I found that indirect teasing crosscut social groups as well as gender. Male and female informants from a variety of social groups reported engaging in indirect teasing during interviews.

Although indirect teasing may appear to be less publicly and immediately humiliating than being teased directly in front of one’s peers, the emotional effects can be

just as damaging for teenagers. Informants explained during interviews that the targets of indirect teasing often ended up hearing what was said about them as it spread through social networks. When I asked Cory to give me examples of comments that she and her friends make about others, she said,

“If they’re eating something, it’s like “Look how much she’s eating’ or something like that. Or like if you’re going to a place or whatever, then it’s ‘Oh I hope the restaurant’s not completely empty’ or something like that. They’ll just say little things like that. And the person a lot of times doesn’t hear it but sometimes it’ll get back to ‘em and you can tell they take it to heart a little bit.”

The following interview excerpt represents a typical description given by informants of teasing that occurred on the high school campus:

Nicole: What about teasing? Do kids on this campus get teased for appearance, body size, or that kind of thing?

Leslie: No one will like go into a circle and go ‘ha ha ha you’re fat.’ But people will talk behind their backs.

Nicole: Tell me about that.

Leslie: Like you’d be in a circle and let’s say Suzi, the really fat girl, walks by. Everyone will get silent and they won’t go ‘Ha Suzi’s fat,’ you know. They’ll go in the circle and whisper ‘guys she’s humongous’ (spoken in a whisper) and the other one will go ‘yeah I know’ (spoken in a whisper).

Nicole: So it’s more like whispering behind the back.

Leslie: Yeah and then you end up hearing it. So I guess it’s teasing. But it’s not people trying to purposely make you feel bad I guess. It’s teasing indirectly you could say.

During an interview about personal teasing experiences, Jamie, a female informant who was 5’4” tall and weighed 145 pounds, described her firsthand experience with being the target of indirect teasing: “Like we were at this church camp or whatever...and like I

guess he told one of his friends that I was fat and he hated me and then like I found out and I felt like really bad about it.” As these informants’ examples illustrate, it was common for people who were teased indirectly to hear what had been said about them.

Several informants said that teasing was more direct in elementary and junior high school than in high school, a finding which is supported by recent research on bullying behaviors among youth (Macklem 2003). In fact some of the most brutal teasing stories recounted during interviews were accounts of direct teasing that occurred during elementary or junior high school. During an interview segment about teasing, Leslie described the differences between teasing that occurred prior to high school versus teasing that occurred in high school:

“...In elementary school definitely it was teasing. I remember there was this one girl named Andrea and she was this fat girl and nobody liked her because she just didn’t have like a personality. But she just did things and the boys would throw cupcakes at her and everyone would laugh and go ‘ha ha ha ha....’ It was horrible in elementary school. Kids would go home and cry. And in seventh grade it didn’t really change but nobody like threw things at you. It was just like ‘Oh you’re fat.’ In high school it’s not teasing, it’s like what other people say about you.”

Leslie makes a distinction between face-to-face teasing, which she says is more common in elementary and junior high school, and talking behind people’s backs, which she says is primarily what happens in high school.

Allie similarly explained that, although direct teasing occurs on the high school campus, it was much more prevalent in junior high school. When I asked Allie to describe teasing that she sees or experiences on the high school campus, she said:

“Like one of my friends Marissa, she gets teased um about being overweight and she’s um obese. But they call her like the Dairy Queen and like um just different stuff....Like now I don’t see it as much but last year (in junior high school) like

they'd call people 'Jello' or stuff like that and um her in particular (referring to Marissa), they wouldn't let her go into certain places. Like if we were walking they'd make her like go back or turn around."

Kenny explained that when direct teasing occurs on the high school campus, it is often done very subtly so as to avoid teacher reprimands:

"Most people nowadays like they're kind of afraid to do it (referring to direct teasing) because they're afraid to get in trouble because like teachers are starting to crack down on it and make sure people don't do it. So like I see like people will like walk next to a person and whisper in their ear and then all of a sudden the person's happiness or their face expression would just like totally change. I mean you see that in somebody's face and their eyes get kind of sad."

Other informants similarly indicated that students would often tease their peers in class by making disparaging comments to someone when the teacher's back was turned or as they walked by someone's desk on the way to the pencil sharpener. These comments were made quickly and quietly so that teachers did not notice. For this reason, I had to rely largely on informants' accounts of both direct and indirect teasing experiences in collecting data on this topic.

Despite the often subtle nature of direct teasing, I did witness a few examples of this phenomenon during my time on the high school campus. For example, during one of my observations of PE class, as students were standing around the gym waiting for directions from the teacher, I heard a boy named Joshua repeatedly and loudly call another boy named Kyle "Pillsbury Dough Boy." Although Kyle laughed in response to being called "Pillsbury Dough Boy," I was not at all convinced that he thought it was funny because his laughter sounded forced. It was not clear why Joshua was calling his classmate "Pillsbury Dough Boy" because Kyle did not appear overweight to me. I made the mistake of asking Joshua why he was calling Kyle "Pillsbury Dough Boy" and he

replied matter-of-factly, “Because he’s fat.” I felt mortified as I realized that I had inadvertently pushed this teasing incident to a higher level, resulting in Kyle being called ‘fat’ in front of a group of his peers. I had clearly forgotten or maybe never even realized just how insensitively and cruelly teenagers can behave toward each other.

Despite what informants said about the majority of teasing on campus being indirect, when I asked them to describe examples of direct teasing that they had either witnessed or experienced, most were able to quickly recall one or more incidents. This may be indicative of a high occurrence of teasing on the high school campus. Informants described vivid and brutal accounts of direct teasing that they had witnessed or experienced firsthand on the high school campus. For example, during an interview about teasing, a female informant said that earlier in the week she saw a guy wave at a fat girl as he walked by her during lunch and say, “Do you want a wave to go with that roll (referring to her rolls of fat)?” Similarly, a male informant told me that during lunch people will say things to fat kids, such as “Do you know you’re fat?” and “Why don’t you do something about your weight?”

In response to my question, “Can you give me examples of teasing that occurs on campus?,” Kenny said, “Well you got ‘Wide Load’ you know that’s kind of popular and um mostly jokes like, ‘You’re so fat you fell through the Grand Canyon and got stuck’ or something like that.” Informants also described incidents where people would yell out “fat ass” or “lose some weight tubby” as a fat person walked by on campus. During another interview, when I asked for examples of teasing, Nancy described a recent incident that occurred in her English class. During an episode of Channel One, there was

a brief story about elephants and someone in the class pointed to the elephant on the television screen, saying, “Hey, Joey looks like that elephant.”

Mia described a firsthand experience she had with being teased during an interview. Mia was 5’6” tall and weighed 142 pounds. Although Mia was not overweight by medical standards, she told me several times during interviews that she had very low self-esteem because she felt fat. Mia said that one day in PE class, she was wearing shorts, which, she explained she feels uncomfortable wearing because she is self-conscious about the way her legs look. That day, the students had to run around the track for five minutes and as Mia ran, she felt sharp pains in the backs of her thighs. When Mia turned around, she saw that one of her male classmates was shooting the backs of her legs with a BB gun. She asked him why he was doing that and he replied, “Your legs jiggle.” I asked Mia if the student got into trouble for having a BB gun in PE class and she said that the teacher did not notice.

This example illustrates how easy it was for students to directly tease each other even in supervised contexts without consequence. While this scenario is an extreme example of direct teasing, during my lunchtime and PE observations, I heard students yell out “fat ass” a number of times. However, it occurred so quickly and in the midst of such large crowds of students, that I was never able to determine who had said it to whom. I imagine that the teachers have an even more difficult time determining the source of these types of insults as they are generally focused on teaching, classroom management, and addressing students’ questions during classes.

Gender Differences in Teasing Behavior

One day during lunch I was sitting with a group of male and female sophomores in the main commons area. Two of the boys in the group were laughing as they repeated earlier comments they had made to their friend, Shelly, a normal weight sophomore girl who was also present. One of the boys, who I will call Ray, laughingly said to the girl, "Yeah and you freaked out when I called you fat the other day." She replied, "I can't believe you said that to me." He said, "I can't believe you are still hung up on that. You aren't fat." Ray turned to me and explained, "Last week we were walking to class and as she was going through the door I told her she wouldn't fit because she was too fat. But I was totally kidding." She challenged him further by asking, "What does being fat mean to you?" He frantically scanned the courtyard to find an example of someone who was fat, but the bell signaling the end of lunch had already rung and most people were headed to their classes. After failing to find a concrete example of a fat person, he turned to the girl and said, "Someone whose stomach goes out farther than their chest." She was clearly not convinced that he had truly been joking when he called her fat as she stormed away looking hurt and angry. Two days later, I sat with Shelly and her girlfriends during lunch. As the girls each announced what they were going to buy for lunch, Shelly said, "I shouldn't eat because Ray called me fat" as she slumped forward over the table with her head bent down.

My observation and interview data indicate that girls were most frequently teased by their male peers and that this teasing was primarily direct in nature. For example, during an interview about teasing, Jamie, who was 5'4" and weighed 145 pounds,

described an emotionally painful incident that involved being teased directly by a boy she liked:

“He was talking with his friends and I walked by and he started making fun of me. I just joked around with him and made fun of him back. Cuz at first he was just joking around I guess. He probably was still joking around at the end, but then he just like called me fat and I just laughed and walked away and like took it to heart later on....At first I just found it funny cuz that’s what I usually find things like that as. But later on I just was thinking about stuff and it made me feel kinda bad cuz I didn’t feel like I was accepted.”

This example illustrates not only the form that direct teasing took, but also the negative consequences to the self-esteem of girls who were teased about their bodies. Research by psychologists (Crocker & Garcia 2005; Grilo, et al. 1994; Thompson, et al. 2005) suggests that negative effects of weight-based teasing among adolescents can reach into adulthood.

Nicky, who at the time of the interview, was 5’3” tall and weighed 139 pounds, explained that she has several large friends who get teased for being fat. In particular, one of Nicky’s friends, who she described as being “really big” is teased frequently, mostly by boys who say the following to her: “You’re like the empire state building, just extra large;” “You hippo;” and “Get away from the vending machine.” Another of her female friends has been called “short and stout,” “short and fat,” and “love handle maker” by male peers. During an interview, Mia, a normal weight girl, described her emotionally painful experience with being teased by male peers:

“Like, you know, I had a pair of pants in my backpack and um this guy Kyle took ‘em out of my backpack and Amber was all ‘what size are those?’ and Kenny’s all like ‘a million bigillion’ or whatever. And he was like this really short kid and he put ‘em on and they were like falling off of him.... I was like really embarrassed and he’s like ‘whose are these?’ And I’m like ‘Oh they’re Justine’s.’ I didn’t wanna tell him they were mine. And they were like saying ‘Oh my God

these things are huge. You could like fit two people in here.’ And you know they were really my pants. But I just, you know, like had a mask on, not letting it show. But I wanted to cry so bad.”

This is the only direct teasing incident in my data involving a girl teasing another girl.

Although Amber, a girl Mia had earlier identified as her best friend, participated in the teasing event, it was primarily the boys who led the teasing and heightened the embarrassment Mia felt by putting the pants on to demonstrate how large they were and exclaiming that the size is ‘a million bigillion.’

When I asked informants during interviews whether they thought more girls or boys engage in indirect teasing practices, most associated this type of ‘gossip’ with girls. While the majority of my interview and observational data reveals that boys’ teasing tends to be more direct, male and female informants noted that boys do engage in indirect teasing as well. During an individual interview, when I asked Jesse whether or not kids at the high school get teased, he replied, “Yeah. Like normally behind their back. But a lot of people get picked on too.” I asked Jesse to give me an example of what one of his friends might say about people behind their backs and he explained, “Like he’d be talking about how like this guy’s a loser. Like he’ll go ‘He’s a loser. He’s skinny. I could take him easily’ and stuff.” Similarly, when I asked Reggie what kinds of conversations he has with his friends about body image concerns, he answered, “Um like we talk about what people are wearing and stuff. Like there might be times when we talk about how some kids are really tall but then there’s all the other short kids (laughs). And yeah, sometimes we talk about fat kids.”

During an all female focus group interview, Mia and Jen were discussing the various ways in which girls engage in gossip about each other, when Jen said, “But the thing is, guys talk about each other.” I asked Jen to tell me about that and she explained,

“Okay, my boyfriend has a friend named Drew and Drew is my best friend. And Drew is really skinny. He’s like just tiny and he has like no muscle. And Javier (referring to her boyfriend) will tell me, ‘Drew’s just too small. Tell him to go to the gym and work out or something. He’s just so skinny na na na.’ And I’m just like ‘Why do you care?’ (laughs) ‘Why do you care if he’s skinny?’ Or he’ll tell me, ‘Yeah, but Jeremy’s kind of fat na na na.’ You know.”

In the previous chapter, I discussed the ways in which boys competed over who had bigger muscles or better abs. These examples by Jesse, Reggie, and Jen, illustrate how boys competed with each other over muscle tone in more indirect ways.

During an interview with Ricky, an overweight male informant, I asked him whether or not he and his friends discuss body image concerns with each other and he responded by describing the ways in which he and his male friends engage in indirect teasing:

Ricky: Like sometimes with like a big kid we’ll be like ‘he’s fat’ (laughs). We’re like ‘that kid’s real bony’ and like ‘you could break him in half’ and stuff like that.

Nicole: So mostly just like jokes about people walking by?

Ricky: Yeah. We don’t really like talk about what we look like and stuff. We just really keep that to ourselves you know.

Nicole: So you very rarely talk about the way you feel about yourselves?

Ricky: Yeah. It’s mostly like other kids.

Nicole: Okay. Like what other kinds of comments do you guys make?

Ricky: ...Like just doggin’ ‘em. Like ‘oh he’s fat’ and all that and like ‘look at bony over there’ and ‘toothpick’ and all that. Dog on ‘em (laughs).

Nicole: Okay. What about girls? Do you guys ever-?

Ricky: -Yeah. Usually like ‘oh you could break her in half probably like cuz she’s tiny’ and then like some girls are big so we’d just be like ‘whoa she’s pretty big’ and stuff. Stuff like that.

This is an example of the ‘male gaze’ I discussed in chapter 5, whereby girls were subjected to the scrutiny of their male peers. However, the term ‘male gaze’ may in fact be limiting in scope. Data from my dissertation research clearly illustrates the ways in which girls subjected each other to harsh scrutiny as well.

Girls’ appearance was harshly evaluated by both male and female peers, which may result in fat girls experiencing weight stigma to a greater degree than fat boys.

Ricky, who was overweight himself, explained during an interview about teasing:

Nicole: Who do you think it’s worse for, fat girls or fat guys?

Ricky: Fat girls (laughs as he says it).

Nicole: Why?

Ricky: Cuz...girls, they have to impress somebody like to get guys and stuff. I think it’s worse. Like I’d rather be a fat guy than be a fat girl.

Nicole: Okay. How come?

Ricky: Just cuz like you’ll get made fun of more by girls and guys. And it could be guys you like and stuff....

Similarly, Susan told me during an interview that it is harder to be a fat girl than a fat guy. She said that fat guys can still “get girls,” explaining that there is a fat guy on campus named Ricky (referring to the same Ricky from the previous transcript segment) who “always has girls hanging off of him.” Susan also pointed out that in the media “you see all of these fat rap guys who have beautiful, thin women all around them.” Ricky’s

and Susan's analyses were representative of what other male and female informants had to say about this topic. When I asked informants during interviews whether overweight boys or overweight girls are teased more, most indicated that they thought overweight girls had a more difficult time socially:

Nicole: So who do you think has a harder time socially, girls who are overweight or guys who are overweight?

Tim: Girls.

Tad: Yeah.

Nicole: Why do you guys think that?

Tim: Like it's more normal for guys to be overweight cuz like for girls, if they're overweight no one's really gonna like them. Cuz like the image is like skinny like Britney Spears.

Nicole: So it's more normal for guys to be overweight?

Tim: Yeah.

Nicole: Why do you say that?

Tim: It's the way it is. Like some guys who are like really really really overweight they're gonna get made fun of, but if you're a little bit overweight it's okay. I mean if you play football you can't be like really skinny, you gotta be kind of overweight.

This interview segment illustrates that boys have a broader normative body image range than do girls, lending support to Bartky's (1990) assertion that female bodies are rendered more docile than male bodies in the United States. As Tim explains, for girls the norm is Britney Spears, but guys can get away with being larger because it is "more normal" for them to be big, especially if they participate in a contact sport, such as football, where

being large is a requirement. In contrast, there is no social space within which it is considered normal or attractive for girls to be large.

Interestingly, in two of the examples above, both Reggie and Ricky responded to my question regarding how they talk about body image with their friends by describing conversations they have about the way other people look. In fact, when I questioned Ricky about this he explicitly stated that he and his friends “don’t really talk about what we look like and stuff.” As I discussed in the previous chapter, ‘fat talk’ is a safe space for thin and normal weight girls to vocalize body image concerns and elicit emotional support from friends (Nichter 2000). While it was considered acceptable for boys to engage in this type of conversation with girls, it was considered ‘gay’ or ‘girlie’ for a boy to engage in this type of discourse with his male friends. As I illustrated in chapter 5, boys were just as invested in and concerned about their physical appearance as girls. However, there is no ‘safe space’ for boys to talk with each other about their body image concerns. The only appropriate way for boys to engage in body image discourse with each other is to engage in gossiping and teasing behaviors about the appearance of others, a topic I will explore at length in a later section examining boys’ locker room talk.

Gossips and Mean Girls

In light of the fact that it was overwhelmingly boys who directly teased girls about their bodies, I found it interesting that the stereotypical image of mean girls pervades popular media discourse and was reflected in discourse of the teens in my study as well. Such images are represented in movies like *Heathers* (1989) and *Mean Girls* (2004) (both about a group of popular girls who behave cruelly toward their peers and

attempt to sabotage each others' social lives through relentless and destructive gossip) and books like *Queen Bees & Wannabes* (2002). Simmons writes, "Since the dawn of time, women and girls have been portrayed as jealous and underhanded, prone to betrayal, disobedience, and secrecy" (2002: 16). Research by a number of youth scholars has shown that the stereotype of girls as deceitful gossips is pervasive among adolescents (Brown 1998; Eder, et al. 1995; Nichter 2000; Simmons 2002).

The movie *Mean Girls* was showing in theaters during the year I conducted field work. I asked informants in focus group interviews whether or not they were familiar with the movie and what they thought about the stereotype that girls are mean to each other. Most focus group participants, both male and female, said that girls are meaner than boys. Interestingly, when I asked focus group participants to elaborate, they invariably reproduced stereotypes about girls as gossips, as in the following interview segments:

(1)

Anna: Girls are terrible to other girls.

Nicole: Give me some examples.

Abbie: Like if you wear like short shorts one day then you're a slut automatically.

Anna: Sad.

Nicole: Okay, so what else?

Anna: Um there has been like some fights between girls because like one person talks about another person and they hear stuff.

Abbie: Yeah it's always he said she said.

Linda: They spread a lot of stuff and rumors. If they don't like you then a lot of times they'll start spreading rumors just cuz they don't like you. Or they won't like you-

Abbie: -for some reason they'll just like come up with shit.

Linda: Yeah or they won't like you because like you wear a shirt to school that they have or that they wore the same day or because like supposedly one of your friends doesn't like 'em. Like really stupid stuff. And then they just start spreading like really evil rumors.

(2)

Ryan: I think girls can be more mean than guys at times.

Martin: Yeah.

Ryan: Like towards each other I'm sayin. Like starting rumors.

Martin: Yeah.

Ryan: And sometimes like movies make it seem, I don't know, but it seems like girls start a lot more rumors and they'll make up stuff about other girls.

The stereotype of girls gossiping is not only prevalent in media and everyday discourse. It has been inadvertently reproduced within social science research focusing on gendered differences in interaction and communication styles. Building upon research which questioned the assumption that boys' communication styles are competitive and girls' cooperative, adolescence researchers (Bucholtz 1996, 1999; Eckert 1993, 1996; Eckert & McConnell-Ginet 1995; Goodwin 1990, 1999, 2002; Mendoza-Denton 1996, 1999; Nichter 2000) have focused on girls' discourse patterns within friendship groups. Through linguistic analysis of social interaction among adolescent girls, these researchers provided more dynamic and realistic depictions of how girls draw upon a full range of linguistic resources as they discursively negotiate complex and fluid gendered identities.

Gossip was a particular area of interest among some adolescence researchers (Coates 1999; Eckert 1993) who examined the ways in which girls utilize gossip to both build rapport and compete with each other, illustrating that girls' interactions can be both cooperative and competitive. This seminal research broadened the ways in which we conceptualize female interaction and gendered communication patterns in general. However, an unfortunate consequence of this research on the functions of gossip in female friendship groups was that gossip as a discourse genre became associated with girls in the scholarly literature and was for many years assumed to be 'women's talk' (Coates 1988), thereby reifying the popular stereotype of girls as gossips. Recently, however, linguistic anthropologists (Cameron 1997; Johnson & Finlay 1997; Kiesling 2002) have questioned the notion that gossip is 'women's talk' by analyzing men's discourse in all male friendship groups. These researchers have illustrated the ways in which men utilize gossip to build rapport and construct hetero-normative masculine identities, debunking the myth that it is only or primarily women who engage in gossip.

It is also important to understand the role that boys play in perpetuating girls' gossip, especially insofar as girls' gossip centers on competing to gain status within the 'heterosexual marketplace' through their relationships with high status boys (Eckert 1993; Eckert & McConnel-Ginet 1999). Not only were girls teased more frequently and directly by their male peers than their female peers, but girls told me during interviews that it was sometimes their own boyfriends who teased them about their bodies. Lacy told me during an interview that boys will sometimes say things like "Your boobs aren't as big as hers" or "Why don't you get a tan like hers" to their girlfriends. She explained

that this negative commentary fuels competition between girls as it encourages girls to compare themselves with each other and worry about how they “measure up.” Lacy’s analysis of boys’ critical evaluations of their girlfriends’ bodies is similar to that of Eder, et al. (1995), who found that boys’ comparison of girls based on looks contributed to “appearance anxiety in girls” (107). Eder, et al. (1995) argues that anxiety incited by boys’ evaluation of girls’ appearance fuels female gossip, which functions to further heighten girls’ insecurities about the way they look.

Similar to what Nichter (2000) found in her research on adolescent girls and body image, Sarah, a normal weight girl who was a member of the high school’s cheerleading squad, told me during an interview that boys sometimes tell their girlfriends to go on diets. She said that her boyfriend once said to her, “Why can’t you look like your sister?” Sarah then explained that her sister is really skinny and that his comment hurt her feelings because she felt like he was telling her to go on a diet. Jen, another normal weight girl who was a member of the cheerleading squad, similarly explained that her boyfriend once grabbed the side of her stomach and said, “Look at that roll.” When she told him that his comment was rude, he replied by saying that he was just joking. Later on in the interview, when I asked Jen about her exercise habits, she told me that she works hard to strengthen her stomach muscles by doing sit-ups because she wants a “good stomach.” I wondered to what extent Jen’s goal to improve the appearance of her stomach was influenced by her boyfriend’s comment and what the lasting effects of his “joke” would be on Jen’s self-esteem.

Boys' Locker Room Talk

Not only does my data reveal that boys engage in gossip through indirect teasing, but I have also described how girls were teased about their bodies directly much more frequently by their male peers than by their female peers. This data calls into question stereotypes of 'mean girls' and gossip as 'women's talk,' begging the question, "Are girls really meaner than boys?" To further explore this issue, I will examine interview data about direct teasing that occurred in the boys' locker room at the high school. Although I was obviously unable to gain access to the boys' locker room to conduct observations, during interview discussions about teasing, boys told me stories of the cruelest teasing I heard during my time on the high school campus.

During an informal conversation I had with boys in a health class, I asked them to describe teasing that they have seen on campus. The boys all responded by recounting teasing behavior that they had seen in the boys' locker room. They told me that small, scrawny boys are called "small penis" because "the assumption is that their penis is proportionate to their body size" and that overweight boys are called "tittie boys" and told that they need to wear "man bras" because they have breasts. During interviews, male informants told me that skinny boys are placed in trash cans and shoved inside lockers by larger boys and that they are routinely shoved, pushed, and tripped by larger boys as well. A male informant told me during an interview, "There's definitely more teasing in the (boys') locker room than anywhere." Another male informant told me during a conversation about teasing on campus that he tries to get dressed and leave the

locker room as quickly as possible because “it’s not a very positive environment,” clearly an understatement.

One day, I was sitting with two of the female PE teachers in their shared office, which was located in the girls’ locker room, and Mrs. Roy was telling Mrs. Wyatt that a ‘scrawny’ boy in her 6th period class had been “picked on” in the locker room yesterday. Apparently, an older student poured a soda down the boy’s back. The boy’s mother called one of the assistant principals to complain about the incident and said that her son was upset and crying all afternoon. The recounting of this story sparked a conversation between the two teachers about the social environment of the boys’ locker room in general. Mrs. Wyatt explained to me that a lot of harassment and teasing occurs in the boys’ locker room because the male PE teachers do not supervise the area. In contrast, the female PE teachers took turns supervising the girls’ locker room during dress out times to make sure that no one misbehaves.

I asked them what other incidents they have heard about regarding the boys’ locker room and Mrs. Roy told me that she has a short, skinny male student who refuses to dress out for PE because he has been bullied so badly by boys in the locker room. He would not tell her what the boys have done or said to him in the locker room, but he adamantly refused to go back in there. Students were required by all PE teachers to wear different clothes for PE than they wore to school and students lost points on their final grade for failing to comply. However, Mrs. Roy explained that she had to make a deal with this student that if he wore tennis shoes to school she would not take points away from his grade for failing to dress out. I attempted to recruit him into my study because I

wanted to interview him about his experiences in the locker room, but he kept ‘forgetting’ the signed consent form at home. During informal conversations I had with him in PE class, I tried to ask him about teasing on campus and he would always change the subject or respond with vague answers, such as “I don’t know.”

Later that week, when I observed one of Mrs. Roy’s PE classes, I immediately noticed that all of the boys had their backpacks in the gym. This was unusual as they generally stored their belongings in the locker room during PE class. Mrs. Roy told me that yesterday, a number of personal items had been stolen from the locker room and as a result, the boys were worried about leaving their backpacks in there again. I asked one of the boys in the class for details about the incident and he explained to me that about thirty locks had been broken open, placed in the urinal, and “peed on.” After class, I asked Mrs. Wyatt what she thought about the theft in the boys’ locker room and she said that she was not surprised because she has heard about some very cruel ‘hazing’ incidents that have occurred in there. She told me that last year an upper classman put his penis in the hand of a freshman boy as he was walking out of the locker room. Mrs. Wyatt said that the freshman boy was “very upset, horrified actually” as a result. Mrs. Wyatt also told me that a couple of years ago members of the wrestling team allegedly ejaculated onto a cookie and forced a freshman team member to eat it. She heard about the ‘cookie’ incident third hand and admitted that it may or may not be true. However, the fact that such stories circulated through the school was significant in and of itself. Even if this incident did not actually occur, such lore contributed to the normalization of a hazing culture that clearly existed in the boys’ locker room.

In contrast, when I asked girls during interviews whether or not teasing occurred in the girls' locker room, they unanimously indicated that they had never experienced or witnessed teasing in the locker room. My observations confirmed what they had to say, as I spent a great deal of time in the female PE teachers' offices, which were located inside of the girls' locker room. In fact, a few female informants gave examples of positive comments they had received about their bodies while dressing out. For example, one female informant said that girls have told her that they "want her abs" while dressing out for PE, a comment that she clearly took as a compliment.

My point here is not to reestablish the stereotype that boys are competitive and girls are cooperative, nor is it to debate whether boys or girls are meaner. Rather, I wish to encourage a broader view of gendered communication patterns, especially with regard to teasing and gossiping behaviors. I think that something was lost in the effort by feminist researchers to prove that girls' communication can be both cooperative and competitive. With the focus so intently on girls, attention to boys' communication patterns has faded into the background. The point is not to claim that girls are not mean or that they do not tease and gossip, but rather to demonstrate that boys are also mean and that they too tease and gossip. More research involving the analysis of both boys and girls needs to be done with regard to teasing practices and gendered communication patterns in general.

'You're Fat! Just Kidding:' Joking Around versus Teasing

When I asked informants to describe teasing that they have seen or experienced on the high school campus, many distinguished between teasing and 'joking around.'

The main distinction between these two categories appeared to be who was doing the 'teasing.' In-group teasing among friends was labeled 'joking around' and informants claimed that it was all in fun. Informants considered teasing to be more mean-spirited because it generally did not occur between friends. Instead, teasing consisted of someone outside of one's social group either gossiping about them or directly teasing them with malicious intent. I found that the distinction between teasing and 'joking around' occurred primarily during discussions of or references to teasing behaviors among boys. For example, when I asked male informants whether or not they had ever been teased by peers, they would generally qualify stories about friends teasing them with a phrase such as, "but it was all in fun" or "I knew they were just joking." This led me to wonder, are boys just joking around when they tease their friends about their body size and is this really how boys who were teased by friends interpreted their words? Or were boys who got teased by their friends putting up a brave front and pretending not to care?

During an interview, Eddie, a normal weight boy, was explaining to me that he was "a lot bigger" in the beginning of the school year than he was currently. I asked Eddie whether or not anyone used to tease him about being bigger and he explained:

Eddie: Yeah. Like my friends would give me a hard time about that. But it wasn't something I took serious or anything. You know it was just something that they joked around with during lunch and stuff.

Nicole: Okay. Like what would they say? What are some examples of how they would joke with you?

Eddie: Just like sometimes like when I would say something that was just totally out there and just like really stupid, they would just say 'Shut up. You're fat.' Or just somethin' stupid like that.

Nicole: Okay. So what motivated you to lose weight?

Eddie: Even though I know they (referring to his friends) didn't mean anything by it, just the fact that they were calling me fat. And I know they didn't mean anything by it at all, but that also kind of, you know, just brung (sic) me to try to lose some weight.

Nicole: You knew that they were just joking?

Eddie: Yeah.

Nicole: But does it also kind of register too?

Eddie: Yeah, it still gets you sometimes.

In this transcript segment, Eddie goes to great lengths to emphasize that when his friends called him fat, they were "joking around." He repeats his interpretation of their benign intentions twice, explaining that he knew "they didn't mean anything by it." However, at the very end of this example, Eddie admitted that his friends' 'jokes' motivated him to lose weight and that it was hurtful, saying "...it still gets you sometimes."

There was a perception among both male and female informants that, unlike girls, boys are not emotionally hurt by teasing:

"And like guys, they can take it (referring to teasing). They'll just be like 'yeah whatever' you know. Like they don't care. And like girls, they get all emotional and start crying and all that" (Ricky).

However, my data reveals that boys may not be as impervious to weight-based teasing as they seemed. Ricky, an overweight boy who was a member of the Mexican group, described how he and his friends 'joke around' with each other: "We'll just be teasing each other and they'll be like 'Oh you're fat' and I'll be like 'Oh you look like a twig' or 'You're ugly' and like we'll just be messing around, you know." Later, during a focus group interview with two girls who were friends with Ricky, they referenced him in the

course of a conversation about teasing. Mia and Jen were discussing girls gossiping about each other when I asked, “What about guys? Do they give each other a hard time?”

The following exchange ensued:

Jen: Mm hm. Some guys do. Like Ricky. All his friends are like ‘yeah fat na na na.’ They call him fat but he doesn’t mind. He jokes around.

Mia: Yeah, he doesn’t let it get to him. Like it was me and Ricky and his cousin and they were like, ‘Ricky, you’re leaning the car to one side.’ They were all like, ‘Get out and walk. Maybe by the time we get there you’ll look like me’ you know. And Ricky was all, ‘Shut up.’

Jen: (laughs) I mean they give him a hard time but he doesn’t care. Or maybe he cares, you know, but he doesn’t show it. He doesn’t say anything. He jokes around with them.

Mia: He’s all ‘I’m a fat Mexican’ (laughs).

Mia and Jen acknowledged that while Ricky may feel hurt by his friends’ teasing, he does not ‘show it.’ From conversations I had with Ricky during interviews, it seemed to me that his friends’ teasing may have been more hurtful than he let them believe. In response to an interview question asking about his exercise habits, Ricky explained that he will go through brief periods where he exercises at the gym regularly, but for the most part, he does not exercise at all outside of PE class. I asked him what motivates him to exercise during those periods when he is going to the gym regularly and he replied,

“Well, people will just make fun of you. Like sometimes they’ll be like ‘Oh you’re fat’ and all this and like it doesn’t offend me that much, but I’ll be like ‘Well, I need to start going (to the gym) again.’”

Notice that in this transcript excerpt, Ricky says, “It doesn’t offend me that much,” indicating that while the teasing does offend him at least a little bit, he can handle it.

According to Ricky, the teasing is what motivates him to go to the gym and work out, ostensibly to lose some weight and avoid future teasing by friends.

In the following interview excerpt of an all female focus group, the participants discuss gendered responses to weight-based teasing:

Demi: Like in PE class guys will just be like ‘you’re fat’ like to other guys.

Leslie: But yeah like some guys just don’t take it personally. You know it’s like if you call a girl fat she’d be like (mimics a shocked and upset facial expression). And guys, you go ‘you’re fat’ and they go ‘I know’ and they like lift up their shirt. That happened to me in class. Riley did it. He picked up his shirt and I was like-

Nicole: -Someone called him fat?

Leslie: Yeah and he’s like ‘yeah I know I’m fat.’

Lori: I think guys are just as self-conscious about it as girls are.

Demi: Yeah.

Nicole: So what’s the deal with them seeming like they’re not?

Leslie: Because that’s like the guy image.

Demi: Yeah, they don’t want you to know that it hurts them or whatever. If you call a girl fat, they’ll go cry. If you call a guy fat, they’re like ‘huh.’ Like they just laugh about it.

In this interview segment, Demi, Leslie, and Lori negotiate the meaning of guys laughing off jokes about their weight in an effort to maintain “the guy image.” Eder et al. (1995) assert that the code of normative masculinity requires boys to “deny pain and suppress feelings” (72). In fact, Eder et al.’s (1995) research of boys’ teasing behaviors found that if boys responded emotionally to being teased by another boy, “the exchange would immediately escalate to more serious insulting” (74). The pressure boys feel to ‘play it

cool' in the face of teasing may contribute to the verbally and physically abusive culture of the boys' locker room that I discussed earlier in this chapter. It prevents boys from reporting teasing incidents to teachers for fear of being thought of as 'girlie' or emotional.

During a mixed gender focus group interview, I was able to witness firsthand friends 'joking around' about each others' weight. The participants consisted of two boys and two girls, all of whom were friends. As I was setting up the camera and audio recording equipment in preparation for this focus group, the four participants sat around the table 'joking' with each other. The following exchange was recorded:

Laura: Tyler, you're fat enough for me.

(All except Tyler laugh loudly)

Laura: I'm just kidding. I'm just kidding Tyler. Tyler, I was just kidding.

Tyler: (Pointing to his non-diet soda) Wait. I don't need this. I need to diet. I'm fat.

Laura: If anyone's fat it's this Cheeto (referring to a cheese flavored snack).

(At this point, I went around the table asking each participant to describe their social clique affiliation and Tyler brought the conversation focus back to the previous teasing incident that had occurred between himself and Laura.)

Nicole: Laura, what group do you hang out with?

Laura: I don't know (laughs). I don't really classify as anything.

Tyler: Annoying.

Laura: What did you say?

Tyler: Annoying.

Laura: You're so mean.

Tyler: You called me fat.

(Kira and Eddie laugh.)

Laura: I was just kidding.

(Kira and Eddie laugh.)

Tyler: Who's the mean one? Do I always run around and call you fat? No.

Laura: I was just kidding.

(At this point in the interview, I changed the topic and asked the group about their food sharing habits. This question led to a discussion about 'fat talk' and Tyler brought the conversational focus back to the teasing episode between himself and Laura for a second time.)

Tyler: Another thing that annoys me is when a girl will like turn around and look at another girl that's fatter than her and then think that that girl's skinner. Like Kira probably thinks that Laura is skinnier than her when honestly she's not.

Laura: What?

Tyler: No offense.

Eddie: (To Laura) See. Now you've become a fatty all of a sudden.

Laura: Tyler, just shut up. I'm gonna cry. When I called you fat I was just kidding and you're all serious.

Tyler: Hey, I didn't call you fat. I just said-

Laura: -Yes you did.

Tyler: I just said you're bigger than Kira. It's just a fact of life. And then look at white skirt (referring to a girl standing nearby). You probably think that she's skinnier than you.

Laura: No. She's fat.

(laughter)

Although Laura insisted that she was ‘just joking’ when she called Tyler fat, Tyler was clearly upset by her comment. He brought the conversational focus back to the teasing incident twice during the focus group interview in order to both confront her and insult her. This incident led me to wonder whether or not weight-based teasing is ever really interpreted by the target as just a harmless joke and how the line between joking and teasing gets negotiated among interlocutors.

When I asked Leslie, Desi, and Lori during an all-female focus group interview whether or not there is a difference between teasing that is ‘all in fun’ and teasing that is mean-spirited, they had this to say:

Lori: I think all teasing is really mean. Like I don’t think there’s anything fun about it. I mean it’s just not fun. It’s not nice.

Leslie: Yeah, but people do joke around. Like people joke around with me all the time and they’re not serious.

Lori: Well we can joke around with each other and we’d be fine.

Nicole: Because you’re friends?

Leslie: Yeah.

Desi: I think people have taken the joking around thing out of proportion, like cuz it’s bull crap if someone like says something about someone else than then they’re like ‘Oh I’m just joking.’ Like it probably really hurt they’re feelings. Do you know what I mean? Like there’s joking and there’s just saying you’re joking. Like everybody’s like ‘I’m just joking’ but they’re not.

Leslie: People can say exactly what they mean and then follow it up with ‘I’m just kidding.’

As these girls pointed out, boundaries between joking and teasing are blurred, which allows individuals to make offensive and hurtful statement to friends under the auspices

of ‘just kidding.’ In a presentation about meaning and intention in media discourse, Jane Hill (2005) stated that in the United States there is a tendency to prioritize speakers’ intentions over the meaning and effect of utterances, resulting in the speaker’s ability to deflect responsibility for offensive utterances. The phrase “I was just joking” allows speakers to say virtually anything without taking responsibility for potentially negative or hurtful effects of their utterances. In the case of weight-based teasing, people can get away with calling someone fat as long as they frame the utterance as just a joke. At this point, if the listener continues to take offense then she is accused of having no sense of humor (Hill 2005).

In her research on girls’ aggression, Simmons (2002) found that girls used humor to insult each other indirectly. She writes, “Humor is an especially popular way to injure a peer indirectly. Joking weaves a membrane of protection around the perpetrator as she jabs at a target” (78). Simmons (2002) explains that girls who are targets for such ‘joking’ feel pressure to hide their hurt feelings for fear of being thought of as hypersensitive. As I discuss earlier in this section, adolescents in my study associated this type of stoic reaction to ‘joking’ with boys. Interview and observational data from my study reveal mixed findings. For example, girls reported voicing hurt feelings when their boyfriends made negative comments about their bodies under the guise of ‘just kidding.’ Similarly, in the example above, Tyler became visibly upset when one of his friends ‘jokingly’ called him fat during a mixed gender focus group interview.

However, I have also presented a number of examples where boys and girls both indicated that they smiled through the ‘joking’ incident even though it made them feel

badly about themselves. It is possible that group dynamics have an effect on how adolescents react to jokes that hurt their feelings. For example, close friends, such as Laura, Tyler, Eddie and Kira from the example above, may feel more comfortable letting each other know when their jokes are hurtful. Mixed-gender interactions may also influence joking interactions. In chapter 5, I illustrated that, while it was considered 'gay' for boys to engage in 'fat talk' with other boys, it was socially acceptable for boys to engage in this type of discourse with girls. It may be the case that, while in the presence of girls, boys have more freedom to show emotion and vulnerability.

The Role of Social Cliques in Teasing

While the line between joking and teasing is ambiguous among friends, informants indicated that there is no such thing as 'just joking' between people who are not friends. A common scenario described by informants involved a student being directly teased by someone in a group as he or she walked on campus alone. Informants explained that social groups function as protective buffers against teasing and that people who walk on campus alone are the likeliest targets for direct teasing. Consider the following two interview excerpts:

(1)

Nicole: Tell me about teasing that happens on campus.

Kenny: Most people, they won't pick on anybody unless they're alone....Like if somebody's big and they're walking alone, they'll be like 'lose some weight tubby' or they'll call 'em like 'fat ass' or something.

Nicole: So it sounds like if somebody is walking around alone and they're overweight then they may be more of a target for teasing.

Kenny: Yeah. If they're alone they'll definitely get made fun of more than if they're with somebody.

Nicole: Is that true in general? Like if anybody's walking around alone are they kind of a target for teasing?

Kenny: Oh yeah, because I mean they stand out. I mean like walking around alone and being fat, you stand out. But like walking around alone and like with you there's fat people, skinny people, and kids who climb on rocks, then it's cool.

Nicole: What about anybody walking around alone though? Are they kind of a target too?

Kenny: Anybody? You can always get made fun of if you're alone cuz like if you're alone you know that some people are looking at you different.

Nicole: So it's pretty important for everybody to have a group that they're with quite a bit.

Kenny: Yeah, cuz I mean most of the time it doesn't really matter if you're fat. It just matters if you're like alone.

(2)

Nicole: Okay. Tell me which kids have the hardest time in school in terms of like getting picked on or getting teased. Who gets the worst of that?

Reggie: Like I'd say if you like hang out with people at lunch in like your group, you wouldn't really get like picked on. But it's like when you're walking around like just by yourself, like you're alone.

Nicole: Okay. So tell me more about that. So like being with your friends kind of protects you from getting picked on you think?

Ricky: Yeah cuz you're with a group.

Reggie: Yeah.

Ricky: No one wants to really mess with you if you're with a group of people.

These two examples illustrate the importance of being part of a social group at the high school. As Kenny pointed out, being part of a crowd allows individuals to blend in with

their peers more effectively, whereas standing or walking alone makes people stand out so that they are more likely to be scrutinized and subsequently teased by their peers. However, mere group affiliation is not enough to protect most teens from teasing. As Reggie pointed out in the second example above, in addition to having a group, it is important to be in your group's presence at all times.

The hierarchical status of some social groups may play a role in the level of protection that members have. Kirk, who was a member of the Jocks/Preps, explained to me during an interview why he does not get teased by other students at the school:

Nicole: Have you ever been teased by anyone at school?

Kirk: I don't wanna be cocky or anything, but like I'm kinda a big time athlete. I'm like a starter on the football team. I'm the starting quarterback and in basketball I'm a starter. And I just don't think people wanna say stuff and then if they do say stuff I think they're probably scared of my friends.

It is possible that for the Jocks/Preps, their high status position in the Desert Vista social hierarchy acted as a protective shield from direct teasing whether they are alone or with their friends. This may be true for the Mexicans as well because they were perceived as 'tough' by their peers, a stance that they may have consciously enacted for this purpose. A male Goth member named Tyler explained during a focus group interview that nobody "messes with" the Mexicans because "If you yell at one of 'em, you got the whole group on you." The perception that members of the Mexican group are tough and that they will defend each other against outsiders who tease them may have provided an additional layer of protection against direct teasing for these individuals. For members of these two groups, displaying social affiliation through clothing and other elements of personal style

may have provided a protective buffer from direct teasing even when they were away from their groups.

In contrast to the Jocks/Preps and Mexicans, members of stigmatized social groups who did not enact 'tough' identities, such as the Goths may have been more likely targets for teasing because of their group affiliation. Because the Goths projected an image of being unconcerned with clothing trends and body image norms, they tended to be frequent targets of teasing by peers. The Goths flouted normative fashion trends, actively constructing unique and individualistic identities. As one female Goth informant said of her group, "We have really weird and off the wall personalities. We're not like anyone else..." Male and female Goth informants recounted experiences where they were called 'fat,' 'ugly,' 'gay' and teased for being too thin by outsiders. A female Goth informant named Cory told me during an interview that in PE the jocks sometimes called her male friends 'ladies' for being thin and lacking muscle tone. She explained, "...They're always gonna find something wrong with you in their perspective that they think is wrong. I mean they think you should look a certain way and if you don't look that way they'll make fun of you for it."

The Goth clique functioned as a sort of safe space for social misfits who did not easily fit in with other groups. For this reason, the Goth clique had a relatively large membership, probably the largest of all of the major social groups. During lunch period, there were generally 40-45 students congregated in the area occupied by Goths. As I discussed in Chapter 4, the Goth clique was physically isolated from other major social groups, which potentially provided an added layer of protection from teasing by

outsiders. When the Goths congregated during lunch and other break times throughout the school day, they were fairly insulated from other groups. However, during the majority of the school day, which required students to follow their individual class schedules, Goths were dispersed. Luke, a Goth member, explained to me during an interview that people in his group were frequently teased for being “different.” He said that this teasing mostly occurs when he or one of his friends is in class “with a bunch of jocks” and does not have the protection of the group. During classes, jocks would often “gang up” on lone Goth members to tease them.

In fact, it is important to point out that while I have focused on weight-based teasing behaviors in this chapter, many informants told me that it was not just the fat kids who were teased. Anyone who stood out from the crowd, both literally and figuratively, was teased by their peers, including loners, nerds, homosexual and bisexual teens, and people who had mental and physical disabilities. Even minor aspects of a person’s behavior or physical appearance that adolescents perceived to be different from the norm could incite teasing, such as wearing glasses, having a big nose, carrying the wrong type of backpack, laughing too loudly, trying too hard to fit into a group, or wearing the wrong style of shirt. One female informant told me about a teasing episode she witnessed where the teasing escalated into violence toward a boy simply because he was “nerdy:”

Allie: Um guys get teased because they’re short and they’re not cute. They get like pushed around and beat up. And like one time this kid, they’d always make fun of him because he had a roll backpack and because he um wore the strap sandals all the time. They’d always make fun of him. And one time like this kid just started beating him up on the bus.

Nicole: What kind of backpack did he have?

Allie: One of those ones that you roll around.

Nicole: Oh I see. So why were they making fun of him?

Allie: Cuz he was nerdy and he wasn't dressed right and um nobody liked him because of his image and so this kid just started beating him up.

As Cory pointed out in an earlier quote, anyone who did not fit into the perceived normative image was teased. In the example above, the boy on the bus was not just teased; he was physically assaulted by another boy because he projected a nerdy "image."

I will conclude this section with a story about a freshman boy named Paul, who was teased mercilessly by classmates because he was "different." Paul, a member of the Goth group, was not a participant in my study, although several of his close friends were, which is how I learned about his experiences with teasing. Paul's friends described him as quiet, shy, and a little nerdy. He was on the thin side, wore glasses, and had brown hair that fell over his forehead, earning him the nickname 'Harry Potter.' On Valentine's Day of the year I conducted fieldwork, Paul committed suicide. To say that Paul's friends were shocked and saddened by the tragic loss of their friend would be an understatement. In truth, they were devastated.

The day after Paul's suicide, I sat by the Goth kids during lunch because I wanted to see firsthand how they were handling the loss of their friend. I saw a lot of spontaneous crying and hugging that afternoon. Someone would be laughing or talking with friends one minute and would suddenly be crouched by a wall crying the next. A student band was playing nearby in honor of "Appreciate Diversity" week and they played an REM song called "Everybody Hurts" about "holding on" to life in the face of despair. As I listened to lyrics urging listeners to "hang on when you're sure you've had

enough of this life” because “everybody cries and everybody hurts sometimes,” I watched the Goth kids crying and hugging each other in an effort to deal with the pain of their loss. I felt incredibly sad as I remembered stories these teenagers had told me during interviews about their experiences with being teased and I thought about the suffering many of them probably endured in silence every day. Paul’s suicide was a powerful reminder of how turbulent and painful adolescence can be and probably is for many teenagers.

In the spring semester, when I interviewed participants who had been friends with Paul, they would often talk about him during discussions about teasing. It is through his friends’ stories that I learned of the daily teasing that Paul endured at high school. In the following focus group transcript segment, some of Paul’s Goth friends described his experiences with being teased:

Nicole: Okay. What about teasing? Who gets teased the worst? And I don’t mean like fun teasing among friends I mean like-

Kira: -Paul got teased so much.

Nicole: Tell me about that.

Eddie: Paul, yeah.

Kira: Did you hear about how like the day before he killed himself like some preppy kid was throwing dog poop at him?

Nicole: At school?

Kira: No when he was walking home.

Laura: When he was walking home from the bus.

Nicole: Why did he get teased?

Kira: Because he was different.

Eddie: Cuz he was different.

Nicole: Like very different?

Eddie: I don't know it's just-

Tyler: -Well he just acted a lot different than most people. Most people will just talk among their friends and whatnot and he was just a kid that would just like, I don't know how to explain it, he just acted so different from people.

Eddie: He was just kind of there to watch.

According to another one of Paul's friends, he was teased or "nagged" daily by his classmates:

Nicole: Who gets teased the most at school?

Mia: Like the Gothic kids like Paul.

Nicole: Okay. What do people say to them? What do they get teased for?

Mia: Just like little stupid things. Like you couldn't even really point 'em out. It's more like nagging on them than really teasing. But nagging is just as worse. Like every day they have to say something, you know.

Nicole: Like what? Is it because of the way they dress or-?

Mia: -Yeah, the way you dress or you know 'when's the last time you took a shower?' Stupid stuff.

Nicole: So was Paul teased a lot?

Mia: Yeah. People used to call him Harry Potter and then like there was this kid, Jessie, and he used to like tackle Paul at the bus stop and make fun of him. Then he'd light dog poop on fire and throw it at his house. And like yesterday when he found out (about Paul's suicide), he like didn't even care. All he said was 'Oh well.' And I don't know how you could say 'oh well' when you could've had an impact on someone like taking their life.

Paul did not leave a suicide note explaining why he took his own life. Of his friends who I talked with, none of them was aware of anything in particular going on in Paul's life to make him resort to such drastic actions. At a loss for a specific, concrete cause for Paul's suicide, his friends often talked to me about his struggles with being teased by classmates at school, usually describing the incident involving a classmate throwing dog feces at him the day before he killed himself. Although it was impossible to know why Paul committed suicide, his friends indicated that the teasing he suffered through on a daily basis was likely a contributing factor to his feelings of unhappiness.

Social Functions of Teasing

Discussions I had with teens about teasing during the course of fieldwork led me to wonder, why do adolescents tease each other? What is the motivating force behind all of this teasing and meanness? More specifically, why are fat kids teased? During an interview about teenagers being teased for their weight, I asked Cory why she thinks fat kids are teased. In other words, why does the mere sight of a fat body provoke such cruel behavior? She replied:

“People look at them (fat people) and they say, ‘Gee you’d think that they could actually um do something about their weight. You’d think that they could walk or something.’ I guess they’re (fat people) offensive because people think that they can just fix it automatically. It’s like ‘Um stop eating so much, ‘Cut down on the fat intake,’ ‘Cut down on your carbs, on your sugar and everything.’ They think that they can just fix it just like that because they’re never had to experience being heavy. People who’ve never experienced being heavy don’t understand it. They have no sympathy for it.”

Research by social psychologists on obesity stigma indicates that “the more people believe that weight is a function of willpower, exercise, diet, or self-indulgence, the more negative an attitude they express” (Crandall & Reser 2005: 83). Although many of the

adolescents in my study acknowledged environmental factors that contribute to obesity, most, like Cory in the quote above, emphasized the role of personal responsibility. Negative attitudes about obesity generated by people's belief that body weight is controllable may contribute to the teasing of fat people.

However, the question of why negative attitudes about obesity led to the anger that some of my informants expressed toward fat people and the cruel teasing scenarios that adolescents described to me remains unanswered. When I asked Kenny why people find fatness so offensive, he explained:

“Cuz they're (fat people) different. People don't like what's different....When people see someone who's overweight or fat they're afraid of becoming like that. They don't want to see that possibility.

In this quote, Kenny explains that people do not like fat people because they are 'different' and that 'people don't like what's different.' Researchers theorize that teasing may serve as a boundary marker for negotiating and maintaining social norms. Thorne (1986, 1993) claims that teasing functions as 'borderwork' by maintaining boundaries and asymmetries between social groups. Huff (2001) similarly writes, "The stigmatization process serves to secure the boundaries of the normal; that is, the spectacle of the fat body confirms and consolidates the identity of the normal body" (52). Weight-based teasing may function as a way for normal-weight teens to construct boundaries that mark fat people as 'different' and reaffirm their subordinate status within the high school's social hierarchy.

However, the boundary between normal weight and overweight is ambiguous. If body fat represents what Goffman (1963) calls a 'stigma symbol,' then how are the

boundaries between normal and aberrant that teens constructed through teasing defined in the first place? Huff (2001) asserts, "...Because all bodies contain some fat, the boundaries of the norm are never quite secure. Each individual body harbors the potential for corpulence. Corpulence is thus a slippery stigma; the boundary between fat and thin is an anxious one" (52). As Huff notes in this quote, all bodies contain fat and therefore have the potential to become overweight. Kenny's earlier comment echoes Huff's assertion that "the boundary between fat and thin is an anxious one" (2001: 52). He states that the existence of fat people represents the possibility of fatness and that people are afraid of that possibility. The fear of corpulence may serve as a strong motivating factor for the 'borderwork' Thorne (1986, 1993) writes about. Furthermore, fear of fatness is likely heightened by the current obesity crisis, where it seems as though no one is exempt from becoming fat (Gard and Wright 2005).

Earlier in this chapter, I posed the question, "As the numbers of overweight and obese Americans continue to rise, is the stigma associated with being fat as strong as earlier research indicated or are people becoming more accepting of their overweight peers?" My data indicates that despite the fact that obesity rates in the U. S. continue to rise, obesity stigma appears to be as prevalent as ever and may in fact be getting worse. Psychologists note that "little theoretical work has been developed to further our understanding of why people tease and why this experience affects people in a negative way" (Thompson, et al. 2005: 146). More research needs to be done on the etiology of teasing behaviors, especially with regard to weight stigma. In the next chapter, I revisit

the topic of gender and the body as I examine how adolescents constructed gendered identities through participation in physical activity.

VII. EMBODYING THE IDEAL: SOCIAL MEANINGS & PRACTICES OF EXERCISE

This chapter examines the link between gendered body image ideologies, perceptions of athleticism, and participation in physical activity. As I discussed in Chapter 5, male and female participants in my study explicitly associated muscles with masculinity and they described girls who displayed muscle tone as ‘weird,’ ‘gross,’ ‘intimidating,’ and ‘butch.’ Girls who had developed muscle tone through participation in competitive sports told me during interviews that they wanted to ‘get rid’ of their muscles, explaining that boys sometimes teased them for having ‘man muscles.’ These girls expressed concern that their muscle tone caused them to look masculine, thereby lowering their status in the heterosexual marketplace. This interview data suggests that body image norms requiring boys to be stronger and more muscular are tied to gendered perceptions of athleticism and may impact girls’ desire to participate in sports.

In this chapter, I analyze what participants had to say about how boys and girls construct gendered identities in PE class, comparing their perceptions with my own ethnographic observations. Gendered participation patterns in PE are explored from the perspectives of adolescents I interviewed. I also examine adolescents’ perceptions regarding what types of sports and exercises are deemed culturally appropriate for males and females and how these gendered stereotypes are tied to body image norms I discussed in Chapter 5. Girls’ resistance against traditional gender roles through physical activity is explored, including a discussion of what boys think about girls’ participation in traditionally male sports, such as wrestling and football.

'Hogging the Ball:' Gendered Participation Differences in PE Class

At Desert Vista High School, all freshmen were required to take one year of PE. Beyond the required one year of PE, students could choose to take elective exercise classes, such as aerobics, strength and conditioning, and dance. All of the freshman PE classes were co-ed, with a typical enrollment of 25-35 students. PE classes were structured around team sports activities, such as softball, football, basketball, lacrosse, team handball, and tennis. One PE teacher replaced team sports two days a week with what she called 'body sculpting' exercises, which consisted of running a mile or more and doing strengthening exercises, such as sit-ups, push-ups, leg lifts, squats, and lunges. All of the other teachers followed the traditional team sport focused PE curriculum. In addition to the team sports activities, all of the PE teachers had their students do warm-up exercises and stretches at the beginning of class during roll call. On block days, when classes met for one and a half hours, the first thirty minutes of PE was devoted to a literacy activity, which usually required students to read one or two articles from newspapers or magazines about health, fitness, obesity, or nutrition and fill out a worksheet answering questions about the articles. If there was time after completion of the written exercise, teachers usually led a class discussion of the article.

Much of my time at Desert Vista High School was spent observing physical education classes. Early on in my field research I noticed a fairly consistent pattern in how boys and girls participated in PE. Boys tended to participate in designated sports activities more actively, while girls participated more passively. I first saw this pattern emerge during a series of 'open gym' days, which meant that students could participate in

any sports activity they chose for the class period. Typically 'open gym' days occurred when it was raining outside, forcing all of the PE classes to converge in the space of one small gym. Although I live in the desert and normally welcome rainfall, I grew to dread rainy days during my year of fieldwork because they meant I would spend four to five hours in a noisy, chaotic, and crowded gym.

However, what initially seemed to be a random disarray of frenzied activity turned out to yield informative observational data regarding gendered patterns of participation. Once I was able to tune out balls flying through the air, kids dashing around the floor, and headache inducing noise levels, I began to discern a pattern whereby the majority of girls would sit, stand, or walk around the edges of the gym talking in small groups while most of the boys actively played basketball and volleyball in the middle of the gym. In any given class period during an 'open gym' day, I would see only a handful of girls playing volleyball or basketball with the boys or with each other in the middle of the gym. This was true of boys standing or sitting at the edges of the gym as well. The few boys who did not participate in sports with their male peers flirted with groups of girls located around the edges of the gym floor.

During organized sports activities, I also noticed that boys participated more actively than girls. This was especially true during team sports, such as football, softball, lacrosse, and soccer. While boys focused intently on the game at hand and physically exerted themselves, often working up a sweat, girls tended to stand around watching or flirting with the boys. The primary difference in gendered participation patterns between organized sports activities and 'open gym' was that girls generally stood on the playing

field instead of on the sidelines during organized sports activities. During team sports, PE teachers frequently called out to girls who were just standing on the playing field, encouraging them to get involved in the game. Teachers' directives for girls to participate more actively during team sports often went unheeded as girls either responded with excuses or simply ignored their teacher.

One day, I was standing on the gym sidelines with Mrs. Roy, watching her students play basketball. She had divided the class into two mixed gender teams. There were two petite, blond cheerleaders with pink, shiny glossed lips, perfectly manicured fingernails, and dyed blond hair worn in cute, trendy styles, who were not participating in the game. Mrs. Roy rolled her eyes as she turned to me and exclaimed, "They are such Barbie dolls!" Several times during the class period, Mrs. Roy yelled at the two girls to participate in the game and each time, their response was to bend over, pretend to tie their shoe laces and exclaim in exaggeratedly whiny voices, "I'm fixing my shoe." At one point, I looked over in their direction and saw the girls literally striking a pose in front of the basketball game in progress. One girl was standing with her hip jutting out while the other leaned against her with her elbow resting on the first girl's shoulder, opposite hip jutting out. They both had disinterested, pouty expressions on their faces.

In addition to girls who stood on the playing field but did not participate and girls who flirted with boys from the sidelines, there were a few girls who actively participated in the designated sports activity. However, girls who participated often employed unique, unconventional techniques to gain the upper hand during games. For example, during a mixed-gender game of lacrosse, I observed several girls flirting with boys from

the opposing team in an attempt to distract the boys from the game so they could obtain the ball more easily. The girls would pat boys' rear ends with their lacrosse sticks and place their sticks between boys' legs, making the boys laugh. They would then take advantage of the distraction they had created through flirtation to obtain the ball. When the girls caught the ball, they would hold it to their chests or cradle it like a baby and giggle while running away from opposing team members.

During various team sports, such as football, soccer, and softball, I often observed girls giggle or squeal as they tried half-heartedly to obtain the ball or prevent the other team from scoring. More often, I observed girls moving aside to avoid an approaching ball rather than trying to catch or block it. These observations are consistent with Young's (1980) analysis of gendered body comportment in sports. Young (1980) asserts that "women tend not to reach, stretch, bend, lean or stride to the full limits of their physical capacities..." (149). In other words, women tend not to throw their whole bodies into a physical task the way men do. Moreover, Young (1980) observes that women tend not to occupy the entire physical space available to them, which serves to further limit their range of motion and active engagement in physical activity. In contrast, Connell (1983) writes, "to be an adult male is distinctly to occupy space, to have a physical presence in the world" (19). He points out that sports help socialize boys into heteronormative masculinity by teaching them how to demonstrate force, which he defines as "the irresistible occupation of space" (18) and skill, which he defines as "the ability to operate on space or the objects in it (including other bodies)" (18). Young's and

Connell's assertions about gendered differences in body comportment echo my observations of mixed-gender sports activities in PE.

However, the gender differences in body comportment with regard to physical space that I observed in PE account for only part of the reason why girls participated more passively than boys. When I interviewed girls about their attitudes toward PE, I learned that most felt marginalized and excluded during mixed-gender sports activities. Many of the female informants told me that boys tended to only pass the ball to other boys, making it difficult for girls to get involved in the game. When I asked Allie, a soft-spoken overweight girl, how she felt about having boys and girls together in PE class, she replied, "Sometimes like the guys leave the girls out a lot. Like the girls really want to play and they leave us out because they don't think that we can handle it." Allie's comment is representative of what many of the girls I interviewed said about their experiences in PE class. In the following transcript segment, Demi explains why she thinks girls do not participate as actively as boys:

Nicole: What would you change about PE if you could?

Demi: I think like there should be just like girls' PE and just guys' PE cuz like you've got like the big guys that like wanna play all tough and stuff and you've got like the girls that wanna play but they can't because like the guys are like all over the ball and stuff.

Nicole: Okay. So do you think that the co-ed nature of classes kind of discourages girls from participating?

Demi: Yeah.

Nicole: What is it about the guys' presence in PE that causes girls to participate less do you think?

Demi: They just feel less qualified I guess.

According to Demi, girls “feel less qualified” than boys when it comes to participating in mixed-gender sports activities. The stereotype that boys are more skillful than girls when it comes to sports and athletics was frequently reproduced by both male and female informants during interviews and is a topic that will be explored at length later in this chapter. The point I wish to make here, is that one of the primary reasons girls stated for participating less actively than boys in PE activities was that boys excluded them from playing, typically by ‘hogging the ball.’ Bryson (1987) argues,

“Negative evaluations of women’s capacities are implicit in the masculine hegemony in which sport is embedded. This has the effect of promoting male solidarity through the exclusion process which provides support and fuel for negative male attitudes towards women. Women themselves finish up accepting that men are more capable than they are” (350).

At Desert Vista High School, boys’ exclusion of girls from mixed gender team sports in PE was likely a contributing factor for why girls felt ‘less qualified’ to play.

When I asked boys whether or not there were differences in how boys and girls participated in PE, most reiterated what girls had said about boys participating more actively:

Nicole: Do the guys and girls in your PE class participate differently?

Tim: Yeah.

Nicole: How so?

Tim: Uh like all the girls won’t run all the time.

Tad: Yeah.

Tim: Like they won’t play basketball. They don’t always participate and the guys always wanna play.

Nicole: So um what do the girls do? Like let's say you're playing basketball or whatever, what are the guys doing and what are the girls doing?

Tim: We'll be playing and they'll be watching.

Tad: Yeah, they'll just like sit there and talk to each other.

Tim: Yeah, sometimes they play but not very often. Only when Miss Wyatt tells them to.

Nicole: Why do you think that is? Why aren't the girls playing sports as much in PE?

Tim: No idea.

In contrast to the girls I interviewed, who blamed their lack of participation on boys' domination of the ball during games, boys placed responsibility for girls' passivity during PE sports activities onto girls. As in the transcript segment below, boys often claimed that girls did not want to participate in PE:

Nicole: Do guys and girls participate differently in PE?

Reggie: Yeah.

Nicole: How?

Ricky: Guys are more active. We're more into the sports than girls.

Reggie: Yeah.

Ricky: Like some girls are into it but some girls are just like 'Oh no I don't wanna play. I can't hit the ball' (Quoted portion spoken in high pitch, mock whiny tone).

Reggie: Like they're like, 'I can't do that.' Cuz like we had to run eight laps you know in Miss Wyatt's class and some girls will be like 'Oh I can't do it. I'm not gonna do it and stuff.'

Nicole: What about when you guys play team sports like basketball or football or whatever? Are there differences in the way that the girls and the guys participate?

Robbie: Girls just don't wanna do it usually.

Reggie: Yeah. Then there's some girls that do and there's like some girls that try but they're not really-

In this focus group transcript segment, the boys suggest that girls willfully choose not to participate in PE because girls feel inept when it comes to sports. Earlier in this section, I quoted Demi as saying that girls participate less actively than boys in mixed gender sports activities because girls feel 'less qualified' in the presence of boys. Whereas Demi attributed girls' feelings of athletic ineptitude to boys' domination of the games, boys I interviewed did not acknowledge their own role in girls' lack of participation.

'It's Just a Game!' Gender Differences in Attitudes about PE

Another reason that girls cited for not actively participating in PE activities was that they did not view PE as a forum for serious competition. According to Jill in the transcript segment below, what she views as "just a game for a grade," boys view as serious competition:

Nicole: Are there like patterns of participation with guys and girls?

Jill: Guys really participate more and take it seriously. Like they get mad if you miss.

Nicole: And how do you feel about that?

Jill: I mean I don't really think it's necessary to get all mad because I mean it's not like you're playing professionally or anything. It's just a game for a grade. I think they take it a little too seriously.

Nicole: Has anyone ever gotten mad at you for missing a point or a goal or anything like that?

Jill: Not really. No, usually the guys get mad at the guys for doing that.

Nicole: Why do you think that is?

Jill: I think they think the girls don't really care about the game and that they're like not into it....Like in basketball guys only pass (the ball) to each other and not really to the girls. But sometimes Mr. Perry lets us girls go on one side of the court and boys on the other side so that the girls can separate into two teams and guys can separate into two teams cuz he sees it happening.

Interestingly, in this transcript segment, Jill says that boys put pressure only on other boys to play well because boys do not think girls "care about the game." As I will discuss later in this chapter, although girls appeared to lack skill and competitive drive during mixed-gender sports, on the rare occasions when boys and girls were separated in PE, girls actively competed against each other in an effort to win.

During an interview discussion about gendered differences in PE participation, Cory, a very thin, petite girl who was a member of the track team, explained that while girls are capable of excelling in sports, they do not take PE seriously and therefore choose to not put forth much effort for PE related activities:

Nicole: Do boys and girls participate in PE differently?

Cory: Boys just kinda play and, I don't know, they don't hold back I guess. Whereas like if a girl doesn't want to do something she'll just sit there and won't do anything.

Nicole: So like the girls don't necessarily play as hard?

Cory: Yeah. Although in track they do.

Nicole: Do you think for girls it matters whether or not it's a school sponsored sport or PE?

Cory: Well yeah, if their heart's really in it and if they really want to do it then they'll push themselves. But just for PE they don't think it really counts I guess.

Cory differentiates between competing in PE and competing in an extra-curricular sport. She juxtaposes the girls on her track team, who “push themselves” with girls in her PE class who “won’t do anything.” Here, Cory reiterates what Jill said earlier about girls viewing PE as “just a class” and not a forum for serious competition.

In contrast, boys clearly viewed PE as a forum for showing off their athletic skills and competing against one another. A male informant named Jesse, like many other boys I interviewed, told me that boys were competitive in PE. When I asked him why, Jesse replied, “I don’t know. It’s fun to show off your skills....Just like show each other up.” According to another male informant, while girls run as little as possible in PE, “...guys try to run the mile as fast as they can and try to push themselves to try to get it done like as fast as they can.” Girls observed similar competition among boys during PE, often describing boys as “trying to impress everyone” and “showing off” in an effort to athletically outdo their male peers.

The intense competition with which many boys approached PE sports activities was immediately apparent to me during my observations of PE classes. In contrast to girls, who typically did not exert enough physical effort to break a sweat, I observed that boys were often sweaty, flushed, and out of breath by the end of PE class. During games, I often heard boys make comments to each other, such as “You suck,” “You run like a girl,” and “I bet you can’t hit that.” After a game, boys on the winning team would often gloat to boys on the opposing team, saying “Ha, we beat you!” to which I once heard a boy reply, “Oh that was just my practice round.”

In addition to actively competing in organized sports activities during PE, I frequently observed boys devise various impromptu competitions during free time in PE, an observation which echoes previous research on gendered play (Thorne 1993). For example, one day in Mrs. Wyatt's PE class, students finished a written exam about the rules of basketball early and had 15 minutes of free time at the end of the period. While most of the girls stood around talking with each other, I noticed that a group of boys took turns climbing a peg-board on the wall, competing to see who could climb the highest. Another group of boys competed to see who could jump up and touch the highest point on a nearby basketball hoop, and a third group of boys competed to see who could run up the gym bleacher steps the fastest.

My observational data of PE classes suggests that girls may feel freer to compete during PE sports activities when boys are not involved in the game. PE teachers I talked with told me that their students performed better in class when boys and girls were separated during activities. For this reason, the teachers occasionally separated boys and girls during team sports so that girls and boys only played with and competed against students of the same gender. One day in the spring, I walked out to the soccer fields to observe Mrs. Roy's final PE class of the day. As I approached, I saw Mrs. Roy assembling teams for team handball and doling out equipment to students. I noticed that she had separated the boys and girls and had sent the boys to the other side of the field to play. She smiled when I walked up and excitedly told me that this would be a fun class for me to watch because the girls "get really feisty with this game." In fact, she warned

me to stay clear of the field because “they get rough.” I was intrigued by her words because I had yet to see girls “get really feisty” during any PE activity so far that year.

I witnessed a considerable change in the way the girls played team handball that day. I watched in amazement as the girls engaged in genuine athletic competition, chasing each other in an effort to obtain the ball, diving for the ball, and throwing themselves in front of the goal in order to block the other team from scoring. The girls were alert and focused, calling out directives to team members, such as “pass me the ball,” “watch out on your left,” and “go right.” I was struck by the confidence these girls exuded as they played team handball, all of the self-consciousness that I had previously witnessed gone. Later that spring I interviewed one of the girls who played team handball in Mrs. Roy’s class that day and I asked her if she prefers to exercise with girls or guys. The following conversation ensued:

Mia: Girls.

Nicole: How come?

Mia: Like in PE like if Mrs. Roy will put like all the girls in a game, then like the girls actually participate. Like I don’t remember what game we were playing, but we wouldn’t do anything cuz you know the guys would only pass to the guys and the girls don’t wanna embarrass themselves. But when she put all of the girls together we were like tackling each other during the game.

Nicole: I saw that.

Mia: Yeah.

Nicole: When you guys were playing team handball, right?

Mia: Yeah, that’s what it was. And like we’d all go attack Marie and she’d fly down. We like got all rough. It was like so much funner than with guys.

And then with guys you know you're like prepping up, you know, to make sure you still have the lip gloss in your pocket and stuff.

In fact, Mia's sentiments about co-ed PE are representative of the majority of girls in my sample. Only a few female informants told me that they liked co-ed PE because it allowed boys to see that girls can be good at sports. These were the few girls who attempted to actively participate in PE sports activities. However, most girls told me that they did not like having boys in the class because boys excluded them from playing. Girls also told me that having boys in their PE class made them feel self-conscious about how they looked. As Mia said, in co-ed PE the girls are "prepping up...to make sure you still have the lip gloss in your pocket...." This is a topic that will be further examined in the next section.

Girls' comments that PE is "just a class" and not a forum for serious athletic competition may have functioned as a defensive strategy against boys who accused them of "doing nothing" and being "lazy" in PE. During a mixed gender focus group, I asked the participants whether or not boys and girls participate differently in PE. A male informant named Jesse said, "Girls for the most part refuse to run too much. They refuse to do anything too much. Girls will do the bare minimum to get passed." Kira replied, "I have an A in there stupid....Anyway, what's the point? What are we running for? Absolutely nothing." Kira justifies her passive participation in PE class, constructing herself as being smarter and more practical than the boys in her class because, while they exert effort unnecessarily, she puts forth minimal effort and still earns an 'A' in the class. The implicit message embedded in her argument is that she could compete if she wanted

to, but she chooses not to because the payoff is not sufficient to merit her attention and time.

'Does My Hair Look Okay?' Gendered Concerns in PE Classes

Appearance-related concerns may have hindered some girls' participation in PE class as well. On one particularly hot afternoon in September, as I stood outside watching kids run around the track, sweat began to dampen my hair and trickle down the sides of my face. It was one of those blazing hot days when the temperature was above 100 degrees and the air was perfectly still with no breeze to offer relief from the heat. As I stood there dreading the prospect of feeling sweaty and sticky for the rest of the afternoon, I wondered whether or not these adolescents worried about getting sweaty in PE and smelling badly for the remainder of the school day, especially during the fall and spring months when Tucson is particularly hot. In addition, I wondered whether girls worried about messing up their perfectly applied make-up and carefully styled hair while exercising in PE. Was this possibly another reason why girls participated less actively than boys in PE?

I decided to ask informants what kinds of things they worried about during PE as part of the second interview in order to determine the extent to which appearance and hygiene concerns might impact their level of participation. Male and female informants who had PE early in the morning told me that they did not worry about sweating because the weather was fairly cool in the mornings. Similarly, informants who had PE during the last period of the day also told me that they were not worried about sweating or messing up their hair because they could go home and shower right after class. However,

the informants who had PE during the middle part of the day expressed concerns about sweating and messing up their hair. For teenagers who prioritized physical appearance, the threat of being sweaty and having messy hair for part of the school day was serious.

Girls I interviewed were primarily concerned with messing up their hairstyles during PE. Some girls rushed to change back into their school clothes as quickly as possible so that they could restyle their hair before going to their next class. However, by the time students walked back to the locker rooms from the playing fields at the end of PE, they typically had less than ten minutes to change clothes before having to head out to their next class. As some girls pointed out, this did not leave much time for restyling one's hair. During the year I conducted fieldwork, stick straight hair was in vogue, which meant that some girls spent a great deal of time every morning straightening their hair with flat irons. One female informant who had thick, coarse, wavy hair that fell to the middle of her back, told me during an interview that she spends one and a half hours every morning blow drying her hair straight.

Another female informant told me during an interview that her hair is "her thing." She explained that she colors it regularly, taking great care to touch up the roots, and straightens it every morning with a flattening iron. When I asked her if she worries about anything during PE, she responded, "Um, I usually don't wear makeup, so that's not really an issue. Like my hair, I'm really picky about that, so yeah. Like if my hair gets messed up like I freak out." I asked Demi whether or not her hair-related concerns ever affected her level of participation in PE and she replied, "Sometimes. It depends. Like if

it's windy and like my hair's going everywhere, like I'll stop and fix it. Like, I don't care if the ball's coming. Like (laughs) that's just kind of how I am."

Although hair was the primary concern for girls I interviewed, some girls worried that their makeup would get messed up as a result of participating in PE. One girl told me that she "reapplies makeup nonstop" throughout the day and rarely lets anybody see her without it. She explained to me during an interview that she worries about her makeup smearing during PE:

Nicole: What do you think of PE?

Mia: I think it'd be better if like during games and stuff they'd put like all of the girls on one side. Also, like in the summer here it's so hot and they make you run.

Nicole: So you don't want to have to run outside when it's hot?

Mia: Yeah. Cuz like then girls don't wanna put all their effort into it cuz then their makeup's gonna smear.

Nicole: Is that something you worry about during PE?

Mia: Yeah. I don't really care about my hair. My hair is just like whatever. But makeup is important.

Another female informant described an elaborate beauty ritual she engaged in daily that involved applying makeup in the morning before school, washing it off right before PE, and then reapplying it after PE.

Girls also worried about how their bodies would look while they exercised in front of peers, especially in front of boys. Jamie, a girl who was 5'4" tall and weighed 145 pounds, told me during an interview about PE related concerns that in addition to worrying about her hair, she worries about how her stomach looks when she runs:

Nicole: What do you worry about during PE?

Jamie: I'm sometimes worried about hair cuz my hair's like usually a mess in PE. And then, I don't know, like when I run, I can feel my stomach go up and down. So that bothers me.

Nicole: Do you not like the way it feels for your stomach to go up and down or are you worried about the way it might look?

Jamie: Probably both.

Nicole: Um, do you think that worrying about your stomach affects your participation in PE?

Jamie: Yeah. That's probably the main reason why I don't like to run.

Another female informant, whom I discussed earlier with regard to being teased about her legs, told me that she worries about the way her legs look when she runs in PE:

“I don't like when we do the testing. Like I hate running across the floor when you do like the sprints back and forth. I feel like when everyone's sitting on the ground like, you know, my legs are jiggling and the floor is moving and I get really embarrassed.”

As I discussed in Chapter 5, girls felt pressure to “look cute constantly” and actively participating in PE made this gendered imperative particularly challenging. Looking good all of the time not only necessitated careful attention to hairstyle, makeup, and clothing, but it also required that girls hide their fat. PE made the personal management of fat difficult for girls, because when they moved their bodies, they worried that their body fat would visibly move as well.

Wearing baggy t-shirts and sweat pants would appear to be a simple, straightforward solution to the problem of hiding one's fat. However, as I explained in Chapter 5, girls felt pressure to wear tight, revealing clothing even in PE because the ability to ‘pull off’ this fashion trend greatly increased girls' social capital within the

heterosexual marketplace. Additionally, the intense Arizona heat made it virtually impossible to wear long pants during PE because this would cause girls to sweat more, which in turn would cause their hair and makeup to become even messier. Bartky (1988) writes,

“The woman who checks her makeup half a dozen times a day to see if her foundation has caked or her mascara has run, who worries that the wind or the rain may spoil her hairdo, who looks frequently to see if her stockings have bagged at the ankle or who, feeling fat, monitors everything she eats, has become, just as surely as the inmate of the Panopticon, a self-policing subject, a self committed to a relentless self-surveillance” (81).

These girls’ concerns about their hair, makeup, and body image during PE exemplify the extent of their unconscious commitment to the ‘relentless self-surveillance’ about which Bartky has written.

Cockburn and Clarke (2002), who have written about gendered physical activity participation in Australia, alternatively view girls’ passive participation in PE as a form of resistance against teachers’ desires for students to enthusiastically engage in sports activities and the overall culture of PE, which they describe as hegemonic. Cockburn and Clarke (2002) argue that girls utilize the stereotypes of girls as passive and inactive to construct an “oppositional stance” (660). They write, “By emphasizing their (traditional) femininity as an identity that resists the PE/sporting culture, girls contribute to the marginalization of this culture” (660) and maintain their value in the heterosexual marketplace. However, the authors also note that this form of resistance is made complex by the fact that girls miss out on the health benefits of exercise. In addition, by emphasizing their traditional femininity in PE, girls are reifying popular stereotypes that

they are unskillful and disinterested in sports, which serves to further marginalize them within the classroom culture (Cockburne and Clarke 2002).

In contrast, the majority of boys I talked with did not express concern about sweating or messing up their hair during PE. When I asked boys during interviews if they worried about anything during PE, most simply replied, “No.” As a follow up question, I often asked boys, “What about getting sweaty or messing up your hair? Do you worry about those kinds of things?” A typical response to this question was, “No, that’s what deodorant, cologne, and hair gel are for” or “No, I just throw on some cologne and deodorant.” Although I did not have access to the boys’ locker room, I can attest to the fact that a number of boys employed these methods for combating sweat induced body odor. After PE, students who had finished dressing out early often stood just outside of the locker rooms while waiting for the bell to ring. It was mostly boys who did this because girls generally stayed in the locker room to reapply makeup and fix their hair until the bell rang. On the days I stood outside of the locker room socializing with students at the end of the period, I was often assaulted by the overpowering smell of cologne and spray-on deodorant every time a boy emerged from the locker room.

Several of the boys I talked with expressed concern about their athletic performance in PE. For example, one male informant told me during an interview that he did not like PE because he felt like he was “not good at it” and worried about what other kids might think or say about him. When I asked another male informant during an interview whether he worries about anything during PE, he responded, “When we jog, I like to make sure that I’m ahead of everybody else. I don’t like to lose. And if

somebody's ahead of me, it let's me know that somebody's better than me and I want to be the best." Another boy I talked with explained during an interview that he enjoys competing with his classmates during PE and that it is only when he returns to the locker room to change back into his school clothes that he worries about being sweaty from exercising. As I discussed in Chapter 5, boys associated concern about appearance with femininity. Just as boys talked about "throwing on" whatever clothes they could find in the morning before rushing out the door to school, boys also told me that they "threw on" deodorant and cologne to mask body odor that may be caused by sweating during PE.

In fact, when I asked boys during interviews whether or not they worried about sweating during PE, several responded by saying that girls worry about that more than boys. During an interview discussion about differences in the way girls and boys participate in PE, Kirk asserted that girls "just stand around" most of the time. When I asked him why he thinks girls do not actively participate, he replied, "Cuz they don't wanna get all sweaty." Similarly, during an interview with a male informant named Eddie, he initially admitted to worrying about getting sweaty during PE, but immediately retracted his statement, claiming that in reality it is girls who worry about that:

Nicole: Do you ever worry about getting sweaty and stinky during PE and then having to go through the rest of the school day like that?

Eddie: Yeah definitely.

Nicole: Does it affect your participation at all?

Eddie: Um sometimes it does. But I kind of wouldn't say that. It's more girls that worry about getting sweaty as opposed to guys.

Nicole: Do you hear them talking about it?

Eddie: Uh like um some of the girls and everything when we have to run a mile or something like that, they sit there and they like yell out that they don't wanna get sweaty and stuff like that."

Eddie seems reluctant to admit that he worries about getting sweaty during PE to the extent that it affects his level of participation. Concern about appearance was associated with femininity for these boys, whose discourse often highlighted the effortlessness of their own personal styles. In Chapter 5, boys juxtaposed their own efficient, carefree morning routines with girls who purportedly spent hours obsessing over their appearance. Here again, during interview discussions about PE, boys contrasted their own lack of concern about body odor with girls, who allowed their concerns about hair, makeup, hygiene, and body image to affect their participation in PE.

Girly Girls & Competitive Boys: Gender Stereotypes in PE & Beyond

Although boys associated concern over appearance with all girls, female informants I talked with classified girls who seemed preoccupied with their looks as 'girly girls.' After hearing this term several times during interviews with female informants, I decided to ask an all female focus group what it means to be girly:

Nicole: What does it mean to be girly? I keep hearing that word.

Anna: Worrying about the way she looks and her makeup all the time.

Linda: Yeah, just caring about themselves in terms of physical attributes.

Informants also described girly girls as being 'wimpy,' 'fussy,' and 'prissy' when it comes to participation in sports. When I asked one female informant to describe differences in how girls and boys participate in PE, she responded by performing her impression of girly girls: "It's kind of like you see in movies. Girly girls are like 'I don't

wanna throw the ball. I don't wanna catch it. I don't wanna'" (Spoken in an exaggerated high pitch, whiny voice). Boys performed similar imitations of the way girls behaved in PE class. For example, during a mixed gender focus group, one of the boys asserted that girls "refuse to do much of anything" in PE. To illustrate his point, he performed his interpretation what girls do in PE class: "Well I'm kind of girly and I just do the bare minimum because I hate physical education. I'd rather have my rolls (referring to rolls of fat)" (Spoken in an exaggerated, high pitch voice).

During interview discussions about PE, a few female informants criticized girly girls for making all girls look inept at sports. As one female informant said, "Girls have kind of built up a bad reputation for themselves when it comes to sports cuz they don't like to do 'em all." When I asked Kerri how she feels about co-ed PE, she exclaimed, "It drives me crazy when girls play softball and dodge the ball or when they play with press on nails." Allie similarly explained that she likes co ed PE because it provides girls with an opportunity to counteract negative stereotypes:

"I like it (co-ed PE) cuz like you get more of a chance to compete against the opposite sex. And I like that frankly because they get to know that girls aren't just spazzes and ditzes and don't know what they're doing."

A handful of girls, like Kerri and Allie in the examples above, expressed frustration regarding the behavior of girly girls during PE. These female informants indicated that they hoped to challenge the unfair stereotype that girls are 'wimpy' and 'whiny' when it comes to sports through their participation.

The perception that girls are less athletic, competitive, and skillful than boys at sports was commonly voiced by male and female informants. The most common

adjectives used by girls and boys to describe girls' participation in PE were 'girly,' 'wimpy,' and 'whiny.' Other adjectives used to describe girls' behavior in PE were 'lazy,' 'sluggish,' and 'slow.' In contrast, the most frequently used adjectives used by informants of both genders to describe boys' participation in PE were 'competitive' and 'serious.' The major difference between the discourse of boys and girls regarding these gendered stereotypes was that girls differentiated between girls and 'girly girls' in their descriptions of gendered participation. In other words, female informants relegated their negative characterizations of girls playing sports to 'girly girls.' In contrast, boys tended to describe girls in general as inept athletes.

Despite some girls' attempts to counteract the 'girly girl' image, negative stereotypes about girls' athletic abilities pervaded informants' discourse. For example, when I asked a male informant whether he prefers working out with guys or girls, he responded, "Girls are good to work out with when you want to be slow. You can be slow with girls." Similarly, another male informant indicated that he would rather exercise with girls when he wants to "just mess around" but with guys when he wants a serious workout:

Nicole: Would you rather exercise with girls or guys?

Kirk: Guys.

Nicole: How come?

Kirk: Cuz like we lift the same weight and stuff. I don't know if I was just messing around I'd rather be with a girl.

Nicole: How come?

Kirk: I don't know cuz it's just like funner flirting with girls.

Nicole: Okay so if it's serious workout time then it's with guys. But if it's just like messing around or working out for fun then girls.

Kirk: Yeah.

The implied message in these boys' statements is that girls are not serious athletes, and therefore not worthy opponents or teammates on the playing field.

In fact, a number of boys I interviewed did not view girls as capable athletes or serious competitors in PE sports activities. For example, during an interview discussion about teasing, I asked Kirk whether or not people are teased during PE class. The following conversation ensued:

Kirk: Yeah. Like if they're not any good (laughs).

Nicole: Okay, like what would someone say?

Kirk: 'You suck.'

Nicole: Do more guys or girls get teased for not being very good.

Kirk: Only guys.

Nicole: By girls or other guys?

Kirk: Guys.

Nicole: What about girls who aren't very good? Like do the guys pick on them too?

Kirk: Not really.

Nicole: Why do you think that is?

Kirk: Cuz I think that guys expect other guys to be good at sports and they don't expect girls to be as good.

Here Kirk acknowledges that boys do not expect girls to be skillful in sports. From what I observed and was told during interviews, girls seemed to be invisible on the co-ed playing field, as boys not only excluded them from participation in the game, but from competitive banter as well.

In a discussion about gendered interaction in high school athletics, Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) write, “Male camaraderie excludes women and includes other men as fellow ‘tough guys,’ to be slapped on the back, playfully punched around in certain contexts” (484). In fact, my observational data of PE classes suggests that one of the only ways for girls to get noticed by their male peers during PE was to flirt with them. The fact that boys did not view girls as competent athletes, let alone serious competitors, is a likely explanation for why they excluded their female classmates from playing in PE sports activities. Boys viewed PE as a forum to actively compete against each other and because girls were perceived as being less interested in the competition aspect of PE and less competent at sports, they were excluded from participating.

Gender stereotypes about athletics extended beyond PE class. Informants classified particular sports as being culturally appropriate for either girls or boys. In response to the question, ‘Are there sports you associate with boys?’ the most frequently occurring responses were football, hockey, baseball, and wrestling. When I asked informants which sports they associated primarily with girls, most informants cited volleyball, softball, and cheerleading. In addition, some informants made gendered distinctions between power walking or jogging and running, indicating that girls power walk and jog, while boys run. These participants’ classifications of masculine and

feminine associated sports are similar to findings from previous research exploring gender stereotyping and sports (Klomsten et al., 2005; Koivula 1995; Koivula 2001; Thorne 1993).

When I asked a male informant why he associates football and wrestling with guys, he replied, "They're more physical." Another male informant told me during an interview that he associates football and baseball with boys because these two sports "are aggressive and involve hitting." Other informants told me that boys play 'rougher' and can handle getting hit, whereas if girls were to get hit during a sport, "they'll like start complaining and cry." Similarly, a female informant explained to me during an interview that contact sports are for boys because girls would be afraid of getting hurt. Hargreaves (1986) asserts, "In sport 'masculine' identity incorporates images of activity, strength, aggression and muscularity and it implies at the same time, an opposite feminine subjectivity associated with passivity, relative weakness, gentleness and grace" (112). Informants' statements regarding socially appropriate sports for girls and boys reinforce the stereotype that boys are 'serious' athletes while girls are athletically inept and disinterested in sports. As one female informant so aptly put it, the popular perception is that "Guys wrestle and girls put on makeup."

Despite informants' perceptions that contact sports are for boys and that boys play sports more aggressively than girls, a number of girls in my study participated in traditionally male sports activities, such as boxing, hockey, and football. Five of my female informants told me that they play football with neighborhood boys sometimes on the weekends, three were taking boxing lessons after school, and one played in a

competitive co-ed hockey league. A female informant named Allie, who was noticeably overweight when I first interviewed her in the fall, had begun working out at a boxing gym when I talked to her again in the spring. She excitedly told me that boxing is the first sport she had been able to stick with because she enjoys the challenge and competition that boxing provides. When I asked Allie to tell me what she enjoys about boxing, her eyes lit up as she said, “Like now when I go to boxing, there’s a lot more guys there than girls, which is alright. And I think it’s kind of fun cuz like you get to kind of um box with somebody that usually would be out of your league. Yeah.” Another female informant explained that she enjoys taking kickboxing classes because it helps her to work off some of the anger and aggression she feels.

A surprising number of girls expressed their desire to try out for the school football team during interviews about exercise. Out of the twenty five girls I interviewed, six told me that they wanted to try out for football. Three of these girls did not pursue trying out for the team either because they felt intimidated because it was an all male sport or because their parents forbade it. However, the other three actively pursued trying out for the team by expressing their interest in playing to the football coach and/or showing up for tryouts. According to these girls, the coach would not allow them to try out because “football’s not a girl’s sport.” Lacy, a petite blond girl, described to me her thwarted attempt to try out for the team:

Lacy: I usually play football with just a group of guys at the park that’s down the street. Like every once in a while after I finish my homework I’ll go down there and play like tackle football or touch football. And I tried out for football this year.

Nicole: Really?

Lacy: Yeah but the coach said I couldn't play cuz I was a girl.

Nicole: What?

Lacy: He's very sexist.

Nicole: So, tell me what happened.

Lacy: Well I told him the day before tryouts, 'I'm gonna try out for football' and he said 'football's not a girl's sport.' That's what he told me when I was in the gym cuz he's in there second hour when I have PE. And my friend Heather was gonna try out too and my other friend Lily. And he said, 'football's not a girl's sport' and we said, 'well we're gonna show up.' And when we went down there for tryouts, he said, "Football's not for girls.' We were like 'okay.'

Nicole: So did you go to tryouts anyway?

Lacy: Yeah we went down there but then he just kinda said 'no.'

Nicole: Wow. Is it legal for him to exclude students from tryouts like that?

Lacy: Well, if it's his team, like if he started it, then he can pick who he wants to play.

Nicole: How did you feel about that?

Lacy: It was just kind of stupid.

Nicole: Are you going to try again next year?

Lacy: Probably not. My mom's afraid that I'm gonna get hurt.

The idea that contact sports are only appropriate for boys is tied to previously discussed gender stereotypes that associate boys with aggression and girls with fragility. Girls I interviewed, who played tackle football with male friends on weekends, took boxing and kickboxing lessons after school, played in a competitive hockey league, and expressed a desire to try out for the school football team, challenged these gender stereotypes.

Previous studies have documented girls' struggle to negotiate participation in sports with feminine identity (Cockburn and Clarke 2002; Garrett 2004b; Krane, et al. 2004). According to Krane et al. (2004), "Because of the influence of hegemonic femininity, sportswomen live a paradox of dual and dueling identities" (326). Similarly, Cockburn and Clarke (2002) discuss the social costs associated with girls' participation in sports. They describe the 'double identity' that athletic girls must negotiate in order to maintain a normative feminine identity and participate in sports. However, as they point out, "It is highly unlikely that girls can achieve being both physically active *and* (heterosexually) desirable, so they are often obliged to choose *between* these images" (661). This reflects what my informants had to say about the potential for a girl to be both feminine and athletic. Most girls told me that although they thought a girl could be both athletic and feminine, they did not think most people would agree. The majority of boys said that girls are usually either feminine or athletic, but not both. For example, one male informant told me that although it is possible for a girl to be both feminine and athletic, "normally girls are one or the other. It's hard to be two styles at once."

Female Athletes: Challenging Gender Norms

As discussed in Chapter 5, many informants associated having muscle tone with looking like a guy. Girls who displayed muscle tone were described by male informants as 'mannish' and 'intimidating.' Female informants were aware of these associations and many explicitly stated during interviews that they did not want to acquire muscle tone. Further, those who had muscle tone as a result of long-term participation in competitive sports told me that they wanted to 'get rid' of their muscles. In this section, I discuss the

extent to which informants associated athleticism with muscle tone and masculine identity. For many male informants, athleticism and strength associated with muscle tone went hand in hand with normative masculinity. For these boys, not only were girls with muscle tone masculine, but so too were athletic girls by virtue of their physical strength, skill, and agility, all traits associated with boys.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1995) argue that girls' varsity athletics does not carry the same high level of status as boys' athletics partly because, "...the association of the athlete with physical prowess conflicts with feminine norms, with notions of how a (heterosexual) girl should look and behave." When I asked the quarterback of the freshman football team whether or not he would be attracted to a female athlete, he explained that those are not the kind of girls guys typically want to date because they are usually "manli-ish, like lesbians." This response is typical of what boys had to say about female athletes, who were often described as having 'guy features' and being 'ugly.' Jesse, another male informant, similarly noted, "Most girls that are like really pretty, they don't do sports. They just like hang out with their friends all the time." Jesse makes it clear, as did many boys, that the competitive sports realm is reserved for boys and unattractive girls. Most boys I talked with said that although they would want to be friends with female athletes, they would not be involved in romantic relationships with them.

When I asked Ricky, an overweight male informant, whether or not he finds female athletes at school attractive, he replied, "If she's pretty then yeah (laughs) it's cool. But most of 'em are kinda ugly (laughs)." Later, during an all male focus group in

which Ricky was a participant, the topic of female athletes arose again in the context of a discussion about gendered appearance norms. In response to the question, “Are girls or guys more concerned with their appearance,” Ricky said,

“Mostly girls. They like always have to look good. Put on their makeup, do their hair. But some girls don’t care. Like athletic girls, they really don’t care. Like girls that play sports, they’ll just come in with their hair up and shorts and a shirt.”

In Chapter 5, I discussed gendered appearance norms that required girls to go to great lengths to look attractive, while boys could get away with ‘scrubbin it.’ In fact, boys associated spending time and effort on one’s appearance with girls, claiming that boys just ‘throw something on’ in the morning before school. Because girl jocks violated gender norms requiring them to prioritize beauty regimens over athletics, boys considered them unfeminine and therefore, unattractive.

In addition to describing athletic girls as ‘ugly’ and ‘manly’ because of their reported disregard for feminine appearance norms, boys associated athletic girls with power, strength, and skill, all qualities that they considered masculine. For example, during an all male focus group discussion about female athletes, one of the participants said that he would not want to date an athletic girl “...because they’re athletic, they’re like muscular and I wouldn’t want a muscular girl. I don’t want a girl that’s stronger than me.” The other participants emphatically agreed with this statement, one adding that he would “rather have her be my friend than my girlfriend.” Constructing normative feminine identities involves “more than just appearance; girls need to behave in a certain way too. In order to be socially acceptable as a ‘teenage girl’ they are required neither to

take part in sport—especially ‘boys’ sports’—nor to physically exert themselves in any other way” (Cockburn and Clarke 2002: 653).

In another all male focus group, the participants similarly agreed that they would not want to date an athletic girl. When I asked them why not, one of the boys explained, “Looks and um power. They have like more of like lesbian or guy features and like more power strengthwise.” This boy’s response to my question is very revealing because he explicitly links power and strength with degree of attractiveness in girls. His response implies that not only are athletic girls unattractive romantic partners because they violate feminine beauty norms by failing to wear makeup, style their hair according to the latest fashion trends, and wear tight, revealing clothing, but also because they are strong and powerful. As I discussed in Chapter 5, for girls to be considered attractive by their male peers, they must strictly adhere to a normative gender code that renders them weak, powerless, and slaves to time-intensive beauty regimens.

Underneath boys’ rejection of girls who displayed strength and athletic skill lay a fear of the potential for a girl to beat them in an athletic competition. In Chapter 5, I discussed gender norms requiring boys to be bigger and stronger than girls. This gender imperative extends to athletic ability as well. Boys talked about the fear of competing against female athletes and the humiliation they would feel if they were beat by a girl. For example, Jerry told me during an interview that he would rather exercise with guys because “girls might be better at the sport and show me up.” I conducted an all male focus group in which two of the participants were members of the school wrestling team.

At one point during the interview, I asked them if they had ever wrestled against girls in competition and the following conversation ensued:

Robbie: Yeah.

Reggie: Thankfully not (laughs).

Nicole: Robbie, how was it?

Robbie: Well, it's like really really really scary cuz like you're thinkin' man, if you ever lost, like cuz you have the whole team watching. But I've never ever ever seen a girl beat a guy, so.

Reggie: Like if you have a girl like in your weight class, you're like all scared cuz then you'd be like 'Oh is she gonna wrestle me' and then you're like (groan).

Nicole: Would it be worse to lose to a girl than to lose to a guy?

Reggie, Robbie & Ricky: Yeah (laughter).

Nicole: Why?

Robbie: Because you'll never see like girls win in all the tournaments that I've ever been to.

Reggie: Yeah, I've never seen a girl win.

Nicole: So what would it say about you if you lost to a girl? What would that mean?

Reggie: You would get dissed on pretty hard I would think.

Ricky: Yeah. I would be scared to walk around school.

Reggie: Yeah, It'd seem kinda-

Robbie: -awkward.

Ryan: Weak, yeah.

Eder et al. (1995) explain that aggression and toughness are socialized and reinforced through male sports culture. The authors found that boys policed the boundaries of toughness through ritual insults. According to Eder, et al. (1995), “Names such as ‘pussy,’ ‘girl,’ ‘fag,’ and ‘queer,’ associate lack of toughness directly with femininity or homosexuality. These names are used when boys fail to meet certain standards of combativeness” (63). The quote above illustrates the prevalence of gender stereotypes depicting girls as passive and weak and boys as tough and aggressive. If girls are considered weak when it comes to sports, then a boy who gets beat by a girl in sports competition will also be thought of as weak and will likely be teased by his teammates for transgressing a crucial gender boundary.

For boys, an even worse prospect than losing to a girl is losing to a girl with whom they are romantically involved. Boys I talked with told me that they would not want to date an athletic girl for fear that she might outperform them in sports. John, for example, explained to me during an interview that, although athletic girls can sometimes be pretty, “if she’s better than the guys, then the guys get embarrassed and don’t want to go out with her.” Sammy similarly explained that he would not want to date a girl who has muscle tone because that probably means she is athletic, saying, “She could beat me in arm wrestling and if you can beat me in arm wrestling it’s over (laughs).” I asked Sammy what it means to him if a girl beats him in sports and he replied, “I need to work harder” (laughs).

One of the ways in which boys display hetero-normative masculine identity is to be seen with girls who display hetero-normative feminine identity. Eckert and

McConnell-Ginet (1995) write, “Heterosexual femininity is constructed as directly contrasting with the superiority in physical strength embodied in hegemonic masculinity” (485). The more feminine a boy’s girlfriend is the more masculine he appears in comparison to her. Athletic girls explicitly challenge feminine norms by being strong, adept at sports, and rejecting beauty practices associated with traditional femininity, all of which function as an implicit challenge to normative masculine identity.

Girls displayed knowledge of boys’ attitudes toward female athletes. When I asked female informants, “Which girls on campus get the most positive attention from boys?” many responded that ‘girly girls’ who are petite, wear tight, revealing clothes, and participate in ‘feminine’ sports activities like cheerleading and dance get the most attention from boys. For example, Jamie explained that boys are more attracted to cheerleaders than female basketball players because,

“...basketball girls at school are more on their skills and their muscles than they are on their looks. And those cheerleader girls are all about looks and, of course, they have skill, but they’re mostly about looks. And usually guys want girls that will always look good for them and look good at school.”

Similarly, a female informant named Allie told me that she does not think guys are attracted to athletic girls. Allie had a unique perspective on this topic because she worked in the male dominated athletic training room every day after school and overheard boys’ conversations about girls:

“Like being in the training room, you hear it a lot. Like guys don’t think that like the girl basketball players are very attractive. I mean, they can be pretty facewise, but the guys will be too intimidated to go out with them. Like they don’t want a girl that can beat them at basketball (laughs).”

Another female informant similarly told me that girls in sports do not have boyfriends because boys are too intimidated: “They’re like, ‘Don’t want my girl to beat me.’” The implied take home message to girls who understood the negative stereotypes associated with female athletes was that they must choose between pursuing romantic relationships with boys and excelling in sports. In a social environment where girls gain status primarily through their relationships with high status boys, athletic girls may sacrifice not only the possibility of having a boyfriend, but also the potential for upward social mobility.

However, previous research shows that there are payoffs for girls who choose to actively and competitively engage in sports. Studies by Krane, et al. (2004), Hargreaves (1993), and Theberge (1997) revealed that female athletes may feel empowered by their participation in sports and proud of their accomplishments. I similarly found that some of the girls in my study expressed pride in their physical abilities. For example, Jamie told me that she had been involved in a co-ed hockey league since she was seven years old. When I asked her how many girls are in the hockey league, she explained,

“There’s a few girls. But right now I’m like the only girl on the team and that’s how it’s been like my whole life except for one season where we got a bunch of girls and had a girl team. We whipped everybody’s butt cuz we were just a lot better.”

Jamie spoke about her hockey accomplishments with a real sense of pride. I noticed when she talked about hockey, she looked me in the eyes and sat up straight, which was a contrast to the way she usually hunched over the table with her eyes cast downward.

Similarly, Allie, a shy, overweight, soft-spoken girl, surprised me when she said that she was taking boxing lessons. Allie explained that although she had initially signed

up for boxing lessons in order to lose weight, she now enjoyed the competitive aspect of it. Allie's eyes lit up as she said, "I really want to get in the ring and fight, which would be like awesome to me cuz I think that's like the greatest thing. Yeah, so I'm just trying to get trained for that and see if they'll put me in the ring." Like Jamie in the previous example, this normally introverted, soft-spoken girl talked about boxing with confidence and enthusiasm. Like the other girls I interviewed, Jamie and Allie expressed body image concerns during interviews and appeared to be insecure about their appearance in general. However, when these two girls talked about their involvement in sports, they seemed to forget about their body image concerns if only for a moment as they expressed pride and excitement over their athletic accomplishments.

As I discussed earlier, girls' active involvement in sports despite the potentially negative social ramifications may be viewed as resistance to normative feminine ideologies. Butler (1990) proposes that because gender is performed on a moment-to-moment basis, disruptions in the routinized performances, where gender norms are questioned and subverted through practice are the spaces within which individual agency resists dominant ideologies. She asserts, "...Agency, then, is to be located within the possibility of a variation on that repetition" (1990: 145). The enthusiasm and pride with which these girls talked about their participation in hockey and boxing represented disruptions in the routinized performance of normative femininity, as their athletic empowerment momentarily subsumed their body image concerns.

Social theorists remind us that gendered embodiment influences more than behavior, appearance, and desires; gendered embodiment has the potential for physically

transforming the body as well (Connell 1995; Garrett 2004a; Young 1980). Garrett (2004a) writes, “Through continuous bodily practice, gender is ‘performed’ and it is through the ongoing process of gender performance that the nature and meaning of people’s bodies are physically altered. Knowledge of gender becomes deeply inscribed in muscle and skeletal systems, posture, gaits, and styles of movement” (143). As I discussed in Chapters 5 and 6, for the adolescents in my study, the physical body symbolized the extent to which teenagers embodied normative gendered identities and moral subject positions. Body size and shape helped determine students’ places within the school’s social hierarchy as well as how they would be treated by their peers. The idea that active engagement in sports is so narrowly associated with normative masculine identity to the extent that female athletes were labeled ‘butch’ and ‘manly,’ may result in serious social and health consequences for girls. Boys I interviewed told me that girls are generally either feminine or athletic, but rarely both. The implicit message girls receive is that they must choose between being ‘girly’ and athletic. Either way, girls lose.

To be traditionally feminine is to be physically inactive, which carries both health and social consequences. Physical inactivity has been identified as a primary reason for the current obesity epidemic among youth (Brownell and Wadden 1992; French and Jeffery 2001; Hill and Peters 1998; Kohl and Hobbs 1998; Nestle and Jacobson 2000; Wadden, Brownell and Foster 2002; Weinsier, et al. 1998). Not only do girls who become overweight or obese risk health problems such as diabetes, high cholesterol, and hypertension (Erickson, et al. 2000; National Task Force on the Prevention and Treatment of Obesity 2000), but they are also socially marginalized by their male and

female peers. Athletic girls are considered unattractive by most boys and therefore have less potential for upward social mobility. How are girls supposed to embody the ideal, which requires being thin and toned, when actively engaging in sports undermines the requisite normative feminine identity? Although being involved in sports offers the rewards of pride and empowerment, in an environment that thrives on social hierarchy, pride and empowerment may hold less value than the potential for upward social mobility through relationships with high status boys.

An AAUW report (1998) revealed that fewer girls than boys participate in sports. This is not surprising in light of research showing that enjoyment and physical competence are strong determinants of physical activity among adolescents (Taylor, et al. 1997). In other words, if adolescents do not enjoy physical activity and/or do not feel competent at sports, then they are less likely to exercise. The girls in my study reported feeling 'less qualified' to play sports than boys, self-conscious about how they looked during co-ed PE, and frustrated that boys excluded them from team sports in PE. Negative experiences girls have in PE coupled with negative stereotypes about female athletes are likely factors for the lower rates of girls participating in sports. In the next chapter, I turn to another potential barrier for adolescents in their quest for the perfect bodies, the school food environment. In addition to describing the school food environment, I explore ways in which boys and girls negotiated consumption of fattening foods with their body image goals.

VIII. DISCOURSES OF HEALTH: NEGOTIATING ‘TOXIC’ FOOD ENVIRONMENTS

In this chapter, I examine how the adolescents negotiated the junk food saturated school food environment. First, I set the scene by describing Desert Vista High School’s food environment in terms of what foods and drinks were available to students as well as food consumption patterns I discerned during lunchtime observations. I then illustrate how girls engaged in food sharing practices as a means for negotiating their cravings for and consumption of the junk food available at school with their body image goals. In addition, I examine consumption of junk food as a moral transgression and illustrate how adolescents engaged in discourses of guilt as a means for displaying personal responsibility for managing their bodies.

Curly Fries Everywhere! The School Food Environment

Desert Vista High School offered a variety of foods and drinks for students to purchase throughout the day. One of the first things I noticed as I walked around Desert Vista High School was the large, brightly colored vending machines located throughout the campus. These vending machines, which contained an assortment of candies, cookies, pastries, bottles of soda, sports drinks, fruit juices, and water, lined each of the breezeways leading from the main commons area to outlying buildings. Additionally, vending machines were grouped along the edges of the main commons area, set within shaded enclaves that appeared to have been constructed specifically to house these machines. Vending machines even lined the gymnasium hallway leading to the locker rooms. According to several of the teachers I spoke with, vending machines were supposed to be locked during lunch so that the companies providing lunch fare for the

school did not have to compete with vending machine merchandise. This meant that vending machines were available to students before school, during the twenty minute mid-morning break, and during passing periods in between classes.

I often saw kids rushing to buy candy, chips and soda on their way to and from classes throughout the school day. According to Mrs. Wyatt, one of the PE teachers, food and drinks were strictly prohibited in the locker rooms. However, as Mrs. Wyatt pointed out to me, the placement of vending machines inside the gym directly in front of the locker rooms made this rule nearly impossible to enforce. One day, as I walked by the vending machines located in front of the locker rooms, I saw two boys holding the door of a soda machine open while other students grabbed bottles of soda, shoving as many bottles into their backpacks as they could fit. Mrs. Wyatt walked out of the locker room, saw what was happening, and ran out of the gym to find the vendor, who had apparently forgotten to lock the machine after restocking it.

Once the machine was locked, I followed Mrs. Wyatt into her office, which was located inside the girls' locker room. As soon as we were inside, she turned toward me, her face bright red, and exclaimed, "I hate those vending machines!" as she threw a pen across the room. She explained that she does not allow soda in her house and that her son, Kirk, who was a participant in my study, grew up not drinking soda. However, now that he was a freshman at the high school, Kirk was "free to drink it all day long." She further explained that the "vending machine issue" had been debated recently during faculty meetings. According to Mrs. Wyatt, the teachers who were in favor of having vending machines on campus were those who did not have children. They argued that

students would be faced with junk food for the rest of their lives and that they needed to learn to make their own decisions about what kinds of food to consume. Mrs. Wyatt countered that argument by pointing out that adults who know junk food is bad for them cannot control themselves as is evidenced in the ever-increasing obesity rates among the adult population. Exasperated, she asked, “How can we expect kids to control themselves around it (junk food), especially when they don’t know how bad it is for them?”

Not only was candy available from the vending machines, but the school bookstore offered an assortment of candy as well. In fact, the bookstore, which was located in the main commons area, sold candy all day long, even during lunch when vending machines were locked. In addition, the book store sold candy for almost half the price the vending machines charged. Many of the students I interviewed told me that they preferred buying candy from the bookstore because they could get more for their money. As one female focus group participant pointed out, “Like at the beginning of the year, whenever we used to sit over by the snack machines, like we would always get a Starburst in the morning and now we go to the bookstore and get like three candies for the same price as one Starburst from the snack machine.”

One day, I decided to go to the bookstore and check out the candy selection. I was surprised as I walked in to a tiny waiting area with a student worker standing behind a countertop that ran all the way across the room. No books were on display in the bookstore. In fact the only merchandise on display was an assortment of candy. I asked the girl behind the counter where the books were located and she told me that they were

stored in the back. The bookstore apparently functioned as book storage space for school issued textbooks rather than a store where books were sold. This was also where students could purchase tickets to school functions, such as plays and dances, and where they could buy the cheapest candy on campus.

During lunch, the school offered a variety of food items in the cafeteria as well as outside in the main commons area. All of the food items available were served a la carte style so that students could choose to buy any combination of individual food items. My first day of fieldwork began with an assistant principal named Ms. Swan giving me a tour of the high school. When we walked into the cafeteria, Ms. Swan led me to the spacious area set off to one side, where students could purchase food. There were three counters where students could purchase standard school lunch fare, which included main entrees such as corndogs, hamburgers, burritos, chimichangas, chicken strips, chicken poppers, and taquitos as well as side dishes such as French fries, Spanish rice, refried beans, mashed potatoes, and corn. The main entree items and side dish items were served on a rotation schedule so that different combinations of foods were available each day of the week. Students could also purchase prepackaged sandwiches and salads from these counters.

Sitting in the corner of these three cafeteria counters was a small bowl of fruit that contained three oranges and one apple. At the end of my first week observing lunch period, I noticed that the fruit in that bowl had not moved. I wondered how much fruit the cafeteria actually sold and whether or not they were able to sell the contents of the fruit bowl before the fruit went bad and had to be thrown out. When I asked the woman

behind the lunch counter how often she sold fruit to students, she impatiently told me she did not know. Throughout the course of the entire school year, I never saw a student either buy or eat fruit on the high school campus. I observed students with fruit only twice. Once, I observed two boys tossing an apple back and forth like a baseball in the main commons area during lunch and another time I saw a boy kicking an orange across the main commons area at the end of lunch period on his way to class. In fact, many of the informants I interviewed did not even know that the cafeteria sold fruit. When I asked an all female focus group what foods they would like to see added to the fare that was currently available at the high school, they responded:

Linda: Fruit.

Anna: Yeah, they don't have fruit here do they?

Linda: I don't think so.

Abbie: I don't think so. But they have Starbursts.

Linda: That's like the closest thing to fruit they have.

Anna: And Skittles.

Even students who knew about the fruit bowl and told me that they would like to see more "nutritional stuff" sold at the high school did not choose to eat fruit sold in the cafeteria. For example, during an all male focus group, I asked, "What do you think about the food here?" The following conversation ensued:

Tim: A lot of junk food.

Tad: Yeah.

Tim: Not enough nutritional stuff. I mean, if they have nutritional stuff, students don't eat it. Nobody buys it. Like the oranges, you never see anybody buy 'em.

Nicole: Have you ever seen anyone with an orange at school?

Tim: No.

Nicole: Have you ever bought one?

Tim: No.

Interestingly, Tim had told me during a previous interview that his favorite food was oranges. He said, "Sometimes I'll be sitting in class and I'll crave an orange for no reason." Tim's fondness for oranges stood out in my mind because he was the only informant I talked with whose favorite food was fruit. However, when I asked Tim which foods he typically ate at school, he replied, "Pizza, chips, and burritos." His answer led me to wonder, why did a boy who craved oranges at school choose to eat junk food instead? Later in this section, I will return to this question, arguing that the high school's junk food saturated environment normalized the consumption of junk food for students, rendering healthier fare either invisible or undesirable.

In addition to the counters where students could purchase standard school lunch fare, there was a coffee bar that offered a full range of Seattle's Best brand coffee drinks, hot chocolate, and oversized cookies, fudge brownies, muffins, and other assorted pastries. Ms. Swan offered to buy me a coffee and when we approached the counter, I asked the barista if she sold a lot of coffee to students. She told me that students mostly bought the sweet drinks, like hot chocolate, cappuccinos, and mochas as well as the pastries. As we left the cafeteria, I noticed a booth called 'Island Oasis' across from the

coffee bar where fruit flavored ‘slushee/smoothie’ drinks were sold. The flavors listed under the brand name marquee were Raspberry Mango, Raspberry Lemonade, Strawberry, and Cappuccino.

When we walked outside into the main commons area, the assistant principal pointed to a sign along the outer edge that read, ‘Skinny Vinnie’s,’ explaining that individual sized pizzas were sold there during lunch. At that point, I asked her whether or not the school offered name brand fast food items, such as McDonald’s or Taco Bell. She explained that the high school used to offer Taco Bell and Pizza Hut, but the school district was not turning a large enough profit with those companies, so they switched to a different vendor. Ms. Swan told me that the school still offered the same fast food items, such as pizza, burritos, and hamburgers, but that the food was simply produced by a lesser known company instead of the popular fast food chains. Ms. Swan said that during the mid-morning break and lunch period, food carts were rolled out into the main commons area as well, from which students could purchase bagels with cream cheese, mini-pizzas, French fries, chips, ice-cream, burritos, bottled sports drinks, and bottled water.

The first day I observed lunch period, my first thought as I saw students milling around with food was, “Curly fries everywhere!” The vast majority of students I saw who had food were walking around eating curly fries out of small cardboard containers. Upon examining the daily menu, which was posted on the wall inside the cafeteria, I saw that the food being served that day was chicken tenders (small fried pieces of chicken), curly fries (a type of French fry that is seasoned with spices and fried into curly shapes),

and salad. The chicken tenders and curly fries were served in individual sized cardboard containers that were approximately 4" x 6" and the salad was served in a Styrofoam cup about the size of a 1 cup measuring container. Most students had appeared to forgo the salad in favor of the curly fries and chicken tenders. The few side salads I saw appeared to contain a small amount of iceberg lettuce, a few shreds of carrot, and a generous amount of ranch dressing. In addition to being available in the cafeteria, curly fries were sold on the food carts in the main commons area. I saw more students eating curly fries that day than any other food item, a trend I noticed throughout the school year during my lunchtime observations. Curly fries appeared to be the main food staple at Desert Vista High School.

I did not see a lot of soda during lunch, which was not surprising since the vending machines were closed during lunch period. The beverage of choice appeared to be Island Oasis drinks, which were sold in the cafeteria. In fact, I noticed throughout the year that while lines for the food carts, 'Skinny Vinnie's,' the coffee bar, and the daily cafeteria fare thinned out by the middle of the lunch period, the line to Island Oasis was generally 15-20 people deep all period. I became curious as to why these drinks were so popular, so I decided to try one. I stood in line for about five minutes and when it was my turn to order, I asked the woman behind the counter whether the drinks contained real fruit or fruit juice. She replied, "Oh yes, I think they have real fruit. They're all natural. Only one hundred calories per eight ounces and no fat. Except for banana. It has fat." I decided to try a Raspberry Mango flavored drink, which tasted like pure sugar. After consuming about one quarter of the drink, my stomach began to feel queasy, so I threw

the rest away. I later looked up nutritional information for Island Oasis drinks (<http://www.coffeekinginc.com/index.html>) and found that for most flavors, fruit puree is the first ingredient and sugar the second. Most flavors are 110 calories per eight ounces (10 calories more than an 8 ounce can of Pepsi Cola) and contain approximately 20 grams of sugar (6 grams more than an 8 ounce Mars Milky Way candy bar).

In addition to the food available on campus, a McDonald's fast food restaurant was located directly across the street from Desert Vista High School. According to students I spoke with, this was a popular lunchtime destination for juniors and seniors who had off-campus privileges. One of my freshman informants, who had found a way to successfully sneak off campus for lunch, explained that she went to McDonald's with her friends for lunch about once a week. I asked her if McDonald's was typically crowded when she went for lunch and she replied, "My gosh, it's horrible. Like you can barely find a seat." I observed this firsthand one day when I walked over to McDonald's during lunch. Not only was the line about twenty people deep, but there were no seats available. While there, I discovered that the McDonald's was attached to a service station mini-mart, which meant that a wide variety of candies, pastries, chips, sodas, and sports drinks were available at the same location. In fact, a number of high school students were purchasing their lunches from among the assorted packaged goods at the Chevron station mini-mart. It was a virtual cornucopia of junk food.

McDonald's was also a common after school hangout for students at the high school. In particular, a number of students I interviewed, who stayed after school for sports, band, detention, or seventh hour classes, said that they frequented McDonald's

after school. Typically, after school activities did not begin right after the final class period of the day, so depending on the activity, students had twenty minutes to an hour of free time after school ended before they had to return to campus. For example, a female informant who had to stay after school every day for cheerleading practice explained that she often walked over to McDonald's with her teammates before cheer practice to get a milkshake and fries. She expressed concern that because of her after school trips to McDonald's, cheerleading was causing her to eat more junk food and subsequently gain weight. The fact that a number of my informants who participated in school sports frequented McDonald's before practice, made me wonder whether or not the health benefits associated with involvement in school sports were being undermined.

The availability of junk food both in school and directly across the street made it virtually impossible for teenagers to make healthy food choices. When I asked an overweight male Hispanic informant named Ricky to describe challenges he faced in his quest to lose weight, he replied, "There's food like everywhere. Like you can't really get away from junk food like no matter what." When I asked my informants where they were exposed to the most junk food, the majority said school. A female focus group participant explained:

"I think it's school because we're here every day, so we can get candy every day if we want to, which we pretty much do. At stores you have to go to the stores and buy it (candy) and then go back to your house. But at school it's easy because you have to go to school anyways."

As this informant pointed out, adolescents had easy and constant access to junk food at school because federal law requires that they attend school five days a week. The school was set up so that students would walk by at least one vending machine on their way to

and from each class of the day, which made junk food consumption both convenient and difficult to resist. As one female informant explained, she walked by the bookstore, where candy was sold, between almost every class period:

Linda: I pass there (the bookstore) between like every period. So like whenever I go past there it's like I wanna get something, but I hold myself back or restrain myself. And she does not do a good job of restraining me (referring to her friend, Abbie, who was also a focus group participant). Like I tell her not to let me like get certain things or not to let me get more than two candies or one candy or whatever and then she always goes in to buy candy.

Abbie: Like we'll be standing there and she's like, 'don't let me get anything' and then like first period she's like, 'I want something' and I'm like 'no' and she's all, 'no, I really want something.

Linda: I don't think they should have candy only cuz it's so tempting.

Linda's commentary about junk food being difficult to resist at school echoes what many informants told me during interviews. Despite students' best efforts to "restrain" themselves, many explained that they simply could not resist eating junk food while at school.

Interestingly, informants also told me that seeing their friends and classmates eat junk food all day at school made them crave it. One female informant explained, "Like you see people every day walking around eating candy and stuff and it's like 'ooh I want some.' They're like walking advertisements." Another girl I interviewed similarly told me, "I crave the taste of soda in my mouth, especially when I see someone else drinking it." She said that even if she is not hungry but she sees someone eating food, it sometimes causes her to crave that food: "Like the other day at lunch we were walking past Annie and she had a burrito, you know the ones I really like. And I wasn't even

hungry, but she had it so I was like, ‘Can I have a bite?’” As these teens pointed out, seeing their peers eat junk food functioned in much the same way as media advertisements, through the power of suggestion. Many fast food ads feature close-up images of people enjoying the food product as a means for selling it to the public (ex., Carl’s Junior’s “Don’t bother me, I’m eating” television commercials). The prevalence of junk food throughout campus combined with widespread consumption of such food served as a powerful and irresistible lure for these teenagers.

Furthermore, junk food consumption was not relegated to lunch period, passing periods, and the twenty minute mid-morning break. According to the adolescents I interviewed, students consumed junk food all day, even during classes. Consider the following focus group transcript segment:

Nicole: Robbie, you said that you try to eat healthy foods. Is this a challenge at school?

Robbie: Yeah, cuz there’s nothing here that like-

Reggie: -See, I couldn’t do that cuz like my friends are all around me eating good food and I’ll be like, ‘Oh I’m gonna buy that. I wanna go get one too.’ Either like you won’t eat or you’ll have the junk food.

Ricky: Yeah. Like if you don’t eat at lunch, there’ll be junk food in the classroom and stuff. Like you go up to people and say, ‘Oh let me have some.’

Reggie: Yeah.

Nicole: Okay. So someone always has something to eat.

Reggie: Like people eat after third period and then they’ll eat after lunch and stuff. And then in my fourth period class we eat all the time.

Ricky: And then the break kills it cuz like at break there’s food and some people just can’t like resist it. They’re like ‘Oh I should get something to eat.’

And then at lunch it's 'Oh I didn't eat that much. I should go get something to eat.'

As Reggie pointed out in the example above, eating healthy was not an option at the high school, not necessarily because healthy foods were not available, but because it was difficult for him to make healthy food choices when everyone around him was eating junk food. The school did in fact offer pre-packaged salads, sandwiches, and fruit in addition to the fried foods, pastries, and candy. However, the adolescents I spoke with felt overwhelmed with temptation to consume junk food at school because it was so pervasive. As Tim explained earlier in this section, "You never see anybody buy the oranges." Instead, people were buying and eating curly fries, fried chicken tenders, burritos, pizza, candy, and chips.

I was affected by the school food environment as well. I typically do not eat candy, chips or fried foods except on special occasions, such as parties or family gatherings. However, as the year progressed, I found myself craving Pop-tarts, brownies, chips, pizza, and candy bars. My cravings for junk food became so powerful that, toward the end of the school year, I felt irritated some days as I watched teenagers eat junk food all around me while I forced myself to eat the cheese sandwich on whole wheat bread and apple that I brought to school each day. The prevalence of junk food on the high school campus functioned to normalize the everyday consumption of candy, chips, soda and fried foods. Watching the kids consume junk food all day every day made me crave these foods too.

The second round of individual interviews was especially difficult for me because a significant portion of the interview focused on informants' food consumption behaviors

and their views on the school food environment. As informants listed food items they regularly consumed, such as Little Debbie snack cakes, Snickers candy bars, M&Ms, cinnamon rolls, Fruity Pebbles, and Cheetos, my mouth watered with cravings for these foods. Late in the spring, during the time I was conducting the second round of interviews, I began to give in to my junk food cravings, often stopping at a service station on the way home from school to buy a Rice Krispy Treat bar or a bag of cheese flavored chips. I understood firsthand the struggle to eat healthy that these kids fought and lost every day at school.

The Lure of Junk Food at School and Beyond

As I discussed in the previous section, although healthy foods, such as fruit and salads, were available at the high school, the overwhelming majority of students I saw during lunch chose to eat junk food instead. Even Tim, who had said that his favorite snack food was oranges, told me that he never ate fruit at school. Like his friends and peers, Tim chose burritos, pizza, and chips instead of fruit and salad. In the previous section, I argued that the prevalence of junk food on the high school campus normalized the consumption of junk food to the extent that adolescents at the high school, even those who genuinely liked fruit, automatically went for the junk foods. I decided to explore this phenomenon further during focus group interviews.

I asked informants, ‘Why do people choose to eat junk food instead of healthy food?’ One group of girls I interviewed told me that they preferred junk food because it was ‘funner’ than healthy foods:

Nicole: Why do we eat junk food instead of apples, oranges, and bananas?

Abbie: Cuz it's funner when you've got like the Flaming Hot Cheetos versus like an apple and an orange.

(laughter)

Linda: Yeah.

Nicole: What do you mean when you say it's funner?

Anna: It's got a better name.

Abbie: Cuz you have like the little tiger (referring to the depiction of an animated tiger on the packaging and in advertisements for Cheetos).

Anna: Yeah, the tiger that's flaming hot. And you have an orange. Just an orange.

Nicole: Okay. So the orange is boring next to the flaming tiger?

Anna & Abbie: Yeah.

Abbie: If you see like a basket of fruit, you're like 'Wow. Fruit' (Spoken in a monotone voice). You know, we've had fruit like forever. And then you see like Cheetos and you're like 'Wow! Food! Like, real food' (Spoken in an enthusiastic voice). For some reason, like junk food is better.

Nicole: What do you mean? Are you saying that Cheetos and other junk food is the real food?

Abbie: Yeah. Like it seems more like real food cuz nobody eats fruit hardly ever. Like nobody eats fruit anymore. It's just, like, fruit.

Nicole: Why else do we go for junk food?

Abbie: Well, like they advertise it a lot more than fruit. Like have you seen like the swirly commercial? The kid comes home and his hair's all like crazy cuz he goes on like a roller coaster. And he is the guy that like makes it all fun. You know, it's like we're gonna go on a trip and eat these Cheetos.

Anna: There's no commercials about apples and oranges. There isn't.

These girls make two important points in the transcript segment above. First, Abbie points out that she considers junk food to be “real food” because “nobody eats fruit anymore.” Because she rarely sees people eating fruit, Abbie does not think of fruit as a viable food choice, as “real food.” Second, the girls indicate that packaging and advertising for junk foods is more colorful and exciting than for fruit. As Anna points out, the “tiger that’s flaming hot” is more enticing than “just an orange.” In addition, commercials for junk food make the consumption of junk food seem fun and adventurous, like riding on a roller coaster or going on a trip. In contrast, Anna states that she never sees commercials for fruit.

The power of food advertising is well documented (Nichter & Nichter 1991; Brownell & Horgen 2004; Nestle 2002; Linn 2004). Studies have shown positive correlation between the amount of time children spend in front of television and the amount of junk food they consume (Galst and White 1996; Goldberg, et al. 1978). The government’s advertising budget for healthy foods is only a fraction of what junk food corporations spend to market their products (Brownell and Horgen 2004; Nestle 2002), the effects of which are reflected in the focus group discussion above. While Abbie was able to describe in detail a commercial for her favorite junk food, Anna pointed out that she rarely, if ever, sees commercials for fruits and vegetables. Furthermore, according to Linn (2004), marketing literature has begun to focus on the importance of making food ‘fun’, referring to this strategy as “Eatertainment”. As a result, kids aren’t just eating a food product that tastes good; they are consuming the fun, exciting, interactive lifestyle that comes with the product.

Although the school environment largely contributed to the normalization of junk food for students at Desert Vista High School, adolescents I interviewed told me that they were surrounded by junk food in other environments as well, including at home and at the mall. In fact, the mall was a popular weekend hangout for the adolescents I interviewed and a number of them told me that they liked to eat at a fast food Chinese restaurant called Panda Express located in the mall's food court. Interestingly, many of them specifically indicated that orange chicken was their favorite food from Panda Express. I had never eaten orange chicken from Panda Express and wondered why it was so popular among my study participants. I had the chance to find out during an all female focus group interview when the topic of junk food arose.

I asked the girls, "When do you go for junk food?" They immediately and unanimously told me that they always eat orange chicken from Panda Express when they go to the mall, which sparked a conversation about why they crave this particular food item:

Lori: It's good.

Demi: It is addictive. Even the drink cup knows you got orange chicken cuz like you get your cup and you sit down at the table and it says in big letters, "You did it again didn't you? Orange chicken" (laughs).

Lori: In orange letters on the cup.

(laughter)

Nicole: No way (laughs).

Demi: And if you go there, you *will* get orange chicken.

(laughter)

Leslie: Yeah, there's like Orange Julius and Cousin Subs and forty people are in line-

Lori: -For Panda Express. And their orange chicken tray is always empty when we get there. We're like, "We have to wait ten minutes! What?"

Demi: It's addictive. They like sprinkle salt in there.

Leslie: I think it's cocaine or something.

Lori: Oh, it's so good.

Nicole: It must be because when I ask people, 'What do you get to eat at the mall,' probably half the people I interviewed specifically said that.

Demi: Orange Chicken. Panda Express.

Lori: Yeah.

Leslie: I don't know how to say this, but like when I see the colors of Panda Express, I sprint to it.

(laughter)

Leslie: And it's good food. It's glistening food.

Demi: I want orange chicken now and that's so not cool.

Nicole: Yeah, me too. I want to go back to what Leslie said about the food glistening. What do you mean by that?

Demi: Really shiny. Like uh-

Lori: -Orange chicken. It has like this thick layer of like juice or something on it.

Demi: Yeah.

Leslie: Yeah. And like you're waiting in line and you're so hungry-

Demi: -(laughs) You just wanna jump over the counter.

Leslie: But, I don't know, like you're waiting in line and you just look up and you see all the food and you see 'em like scooping it in there and you're like (Pants like a dog).

Lori: Just can't wait. You like run to your table and you're like (Mimics eating fast with both hands).

Again, the power of advertising shines through in this focus group interview segment. Demi points out that the Panda Express drink cups have ads for orange chicken printed on them and Leslie says that when she sees the colors of Panda Express, she "sprints" toward them. In fact, at the time, this interview discussion felt like a commercial advertisement for orange chicken and looking back at the transcript, it reads like a script for a Panda Express television commercial. As these girls described the anticipation they felt when they stood in line at Panda Express, the addictive nature of orange chicken, and its glistening appearance, I actually found myself craving a food item that would normally hold no appeal for me. In the next two sections, I will examine adaptive mechanisms that informants, most of whom were female, employed in their efforts to negotiate the junk food saturated school environment.

Gendered Food Sharing Practices

One method girls used to limit their consumption of junk food at school was to share it with their girlfriends. When I began observing lunch period at the high school, I immediately noticed groups of 2-3 girls all over campus sharing one food item. In fact, this practice was so pervasive and immediately apparent that it was one of the first observations I recorded in my field notes. Throughout the school year, I frequently observed groups of girls sharing one carton of curly fries or passing around one burrito. For example, one day, I watched two girls share one cookie, three girls passing around

one Island Oasis drink, and two others sharing one chocolate muffin. In each case, only one food item would be shared among the group. This was a trend that I primarily noticed among thin white girls, although both white and Hispanic girls I interviewed reported sharing food with their girlfriends.

In contrast, I rarely saw boys share food with each other and I sometimes observed boys guard their food from friends in order to avoid sharing. For example, one day during lunch I walked into the lobby of the gym where a group of about twenty boys played basketball every day. I was amazed as I watched boys literally cram junk food into their mouths by the fistful. I observed boys drinking from liter bottles of soda, eating from family sized bags of chips, eating entire cartons of curly fries and chicken tenders, and inhaling slices of pizza. I was struck not only by the voraciousness with which these boys ate but also by the large amounts of food they consumed in comparison to girls. Whereas groups of girls took tiny bites from one food item, these boys were consuming as much food as they could hold in both hands.

Some of the boys who had already finished eating tried to obtain food from boys who were still eating. For example, Jerry, one of my study participants, stood in a corner hovering over his chicken tenders and curly fries, glancing around nervously as he ate. Another boy approached Jerry from behind, put his arms around Jerry and asked, "How's it going?" as he attempted to grab Jerry's food. Jerry angrily pushed the boy away, saying "Dude, get away." At that point, a boy walked in with a large box of Krispy Kreme donuts that a friend had brought him from an off-campus location, and he was immediately surrounded by about fifteen boys. The boy with the donuts held the box up

high above his head while other boys asked him for donuts and tried to grab the box away from him. He announced that he would not give anyone a donut because if he gave out one, then he would have to share with everyone. Mrs. Roy told him that she would only give the boys basketballs to play with if he gave her a donut, so he obliged. He waited until boys began taking basketballs out to the court to open the box and eat his donuts. Although this example was not representative of what I observed throughout the year, it illustrates the difference with which boys and girls approached food in general on the high school campus.

When I asked informants about the food sharing practices I noticed among girls on campus, most told me that girls shared food in order to both save money and to watch what they ate. A number of girls told me that they left their money at home in order to avoid purchasing junk food. Instead, they would take bites from their friends' food. For example, Kerri told me that she ate school food every day in junior high school and gained a lot of weight as a result. Kerri explained that she lost the weight by abstaining from school food and now that she was in high school, she kept the weight off by taking bites of food her friends purchased in order to limit how much she consumed. When I asked another female informant named Jamie about the food sharing practices I had observed among girls on campus, the following discussion ensued:

Jamie: Some of them are trying to save money and then they also try to watch what they eat, even though most of 'em are skinny. They try to watch what they eat so they don't gain weight and stuff.

Nicole: Do you ever share food with your friends?

Jamie: Oh yeah. Like we'll get one drink and we'll share from it or we'll just get like one thing of curly fries and we'll share that.

Nicole: Why do you do that? Is it a way for you to watch what you eat? Is it a way to save money?

Jessica: It's both.

Jessica's comments were representative of what many informants had to say about girls' food sharing practices.

However, some informants argued that girls' food sharing practices were only about watching what they eat and in fact had nothing to do with financial issues. Leslie told me that girls share food "so they can't splurge and eat a lot. They get a piece of pizza and think, 'Ooh this is bad, but if I share it it's not as bad.'" When I asked her if she thought girls ever shared food to save money, she exclaimed, "No, it's not at all to save money!" Similarly, participants in an all male focus group told me that sometimes they 'traded' food with each other because they didn't have enough money to buy their own food. I asked, "Do you think that's the same for girls? Is that why they share food too?" and the boys had this to say:

Ricky: Some girls will be like 'Oh I'm fat. I can't eat all this. Here, you eat it.'

Reggie: Yeah.

Ricky: Or 'I'm full. Eat this.'

Nicole: Okay. So do you hear girls talk like that a lot?

Reggie: Yeah. All the time.

Similarly, a female focus group participant told me that girls share food because "it makes them feel less fat about eating."

When I asked informants whether or not guys share food, most told me that boys don't share food with each other as often as girls do and that boys share food differently.

Although informants did indicate that boys share food, most told me that boys don't share as often as girls. Informants also described similar scenarios to what I observed in the gym when boys guarded their food in an effort to avoid sharing. For example, during an all female focus group, I asked the participants whether or not boys share food. Leslie replied, "Mm no. I've never seen a guy share food. I'm thinking about Sam right now. He has like eight taquitos and if you try to take one away he's all 'No!' (Spoken in a loud, high pitch shriek). They don't really share."

When boys did share food, gendered sharing norms dictated that boys share food differently than girls. Participants from an all male focus group explained:

Nicole: Do girls and guys share or I mean trade food differently?

Ricky: Kind of. Like we'll rip off a piece and be like 'here you go' and a girl's like 'here, take a bite' (laughs).

Nicole: So guys wouldn't take bites off the same burrito after eating from it themselves?

Reggie: We just kind of rip it off. Like I'd rather just tear it off if it's a guy, but if it's a girl it's alright (laughs).

Ricky: Yeah (laughs).

In the transcript segment above, I self-corrected after using the word 'share,' changing it to 'trade' because boys I interviewed seemed uncomfortable with the word 'share.'

When I asked boys whether or not they 'share' food with their friends, they often responded with nervous laughter. Sometimes, this nervous laughter would be accompanied by an uncomfortable silence and followed by the answer, 'no.' However, several boys answered the question, but changed the word 'share' to 'trade' or 'jack' in their response. 'Trading food' was the most common descriptive phrase used by male

informants, followed by ‘jacking food.’ My findings are parallel to those of Nichter et al. (2006), whose study of gendered smoking behaviors revealed that, “While it was acceptable for women to share a cigarette with both women and men, for men, it was not acceptable to share the same cigarette with other guys (21)”

A number of informants also noted differences in the kinds of foods that boys and girls share within same sex groups. Guys were described as sharing (trading or jacking) ‘finger foods,’ such as chips and curly fries, whereas girls were thought to share all types of foods. From what informants told me, boys avoided sharing foods that would require them to bite into the same food item. As one female informant put it, “I see girls share food with mouth contact, but I never see guys do that.” During an all male focus group, I asked Tad and Tim whether or not they ever see people share food and the following discussion ensued:

Tim: Yeah, me and my friends share food at lunch. But we’ll like buy more than one. We’ll buy more than one thing, like a bunch of stuff.

Nicole: So when you share food, will you pass around something like a burrito for everyone to take bites from?

Tim: No. It’ll be like those chicken poppers or chips....If we buy a burrito it’s for like one person.

I should point out that Tim is the only male informant I interviewed who used the word ‘share’ instead of ‘trade’ or ‘jack’ to describe food sharing behaviors among boys.

However, like other informants I interviewed, Tim made a clear distinction between the types of foods that boys and girls share. He explained that he and his friends share chicken poppers or chips, foods which did not require ‘mouth contact.’

In contrast to the perception that girls shared food at least partially as a means for watching what they ate, the only reason informants cited for why guys shared food was economic. For example, during an all male focus group, I asked the boys why they ‘trade’ food and Ricky responded, “Like some days someone won’t have no money and they’ll (gesturing toward his fellow focus group participants) buy something. And sometimes our friends will lend us money and we’ll buy something and then just pick off each others’ food.” Similarly, Tim told me that he and his friends share food because “Like not everyone always has money. Like one of my friends has a job so he’s always got money so sometimes he buys lunch.” This was a common explanation provided by informants to explain why boys ‘traded’ food.

‘Guilt Talk’

In addition to sharing food with each other as a strategy for watching what they ate, girls also expressed guilt as a means for negotiating their consumption of junk food with their desire to embody moral subject positions. In Chapter 6, I illustrated how discourses of responsibility enabled the adolescents in my study to highlight the role of individuals in managing their own fat through diet and exercise. Through discourses of responsibility, adolescents were able to embody moral subject positions with regard to body weight. Although many of my informants struggled to ‘eat right,’ most consumed junk food daily, a behavior that threatened to align them with the overweight individuals they criticized, thereby undermining their own moral identities.

However, unlike the ‘fat people’ that informants described as not caring about their appearance or health, my informants constructed themselves as weight conscious

individuals through discourses of responsibility and verbal expressions of guilt.

Examples of 'guilt talk' included statements such as, "I shouldn't eat this because it's fattening" and "I shouldn't be eating this because it will make me fat." These types of statements were usually followed by the consumption of the food item in question. Like 'fat talk' and 'diet talk' (Nichter 2000), discourses of guilt allowed teens to demonstrate an awareness of their responsibility to maintain normal body weight. Expressions of guilt before, during, or after the consumption of junk food marked the consumption of fattening foods as a transgression outside the realm of what adolescents knew they should be eating.

In contrast to 'fat talk,' statements of guilt like the one above often did not elicit verbal responses from people. For example, during lunch one day early on in my fieldwork, I was sitting at a table with four sophomore girls, one of whom was eating a large iced fudge brownie. Sonia, the girl who ate the brownie, was average sized. After taking a couple of bites, Sonia said to no one in particular, "I shouldn't be eating this because it'll make me fat." None of her friends responded to this statement, but instead continued socializing and eating. In fact, Sonia did not appear to expect a verbal response from anyone. After making the statement, she continued to consume the remainder of the brownie. I believe that Sonia was expressing feelings of guilt because she was eating a type of food that could cause her to become fat. Sonia's statement of guilt allowed her to display responsibility for her food consumption transgression through verbal acknowledgement that what she was doing was wrong. Like 'fat talk,' such a

statement preempted possible verbal censure from others regarding her consumption of fattening food. She was essentially criticizing her behavior before anyone else could.

In addition to ‘guilt talk’ that occurred in situ, informants, most of whom were female, often told me during interviews that consuming junk food made them feel guilty. For example, a female informant named Katie explained that when she ate junk food, she felt guilty and thought, “That’s (referring to the food she is consuming) making my stomach bigger.” However, like Sonia from the example above, Katie indicated that she usually continues to eat junk food despite her feelings of guilt. Similarly, Jamie, a normal weight female informant, explained:

“Well, I eat a lot of junk food and usually feel guilty afterwards....And then like after a while I think, you know, ‘If I wouldn’t have eaten that I wouldn’t be so full’ and I think about how it’s all going to turn into fat, which isn’t really good....And like I always talk to my friends about eating healthy and we should do that and I end up doing a little bit but not as much as I wanted to.”

When I asked another female informant to describe what kinds of foods she eats on a daily basis, she began talking about junk food, saying,

“Like I’ll be craving something and sometimes I’ll be like ‘No, I’m not gonna eat it. I’m not gonna eat it.’ And I don’t eat it. And there are times when I just eat it and then after that I’m just like ‘what did I do?’ and I feel guilty afterwards.”

Clearly, these girls had internalized the connection between junk food and rising overweight and obesity rates. They understood that junk food was bad for them and that consuming too much of it would make them fat. However, rather than changing their food consumption behaviors and avoiding junk food, the adolescents in my study continued to eat the foods even though they felt guilty doing so.

As I pointed out earlier, most of the informants who talked about feeling guilty when they consumed fattening foods were girls. While the majority of girls expressed guilt over the consumption of junk food during interviews, only three out of twenty five male informants indicated that eating fattening foods made them feel guilty. In chapters 5 and 6, I showed that girls were held to a higher standard of attractiveness than boys. While boys were allowed to ‘scrub it,’ girls were expected to carefully adhere to a narrow standard of a normative feminine ideal. A girl must carefully display her thin, toned body in tight, revealing clothing so that no body fat is visible. I further illustrated in chapter 6, that a girl’s failure to adhere to this standard would likely result in being teased by her peers. While boys who failed to adhere to masculine body image norms were teased as well, as I discussed in chapter 6, they have a broader normative body image range than girls.

It makes sense that girls, who felt greater pressure to look good, would express guilt over consuming junk foods, which are linked to rising overweight and obesity rates. Just as women are expected to control their body fat, so too are they expected to control and limit the amount of food they consume. Bordo writes, “The social control of female hunger operates as a practical ‘discipline’ (to use Foucault’s term) that trains female bodies in the knowledge of their limits and possibilities. Denying oneself food becomes the central micro-practice in the education of feminine self-restraint and containment of impulse” (1993: 130). However, as I discussed earlier in this chapter, the adolescents I interviewed found it nearly impossible to resist the junk foods that surrounded them at

school. For many of the girls I talked with, their lack of “feminine self-restrain” manifested in feelings of guilt.

IX. CONCLUSIONS

In this dissertation, I explored the ways in which adolescents enacted gendered identities through body presentation, participation in physical education classes, food consumption practices, and teasing behaviors. I examined the ways in which teenagers discursively positioned themselves as normal weight and body conscious individuals through ‘othering’ discourses about fat people. My ethnography reveals a number of paradoxes that currently exist in high school environments, including:

- An academic environment that prioritizes standardized testing above physical activity despite the fact that children and teenagers are becoming obese at alarming rates.
- Schools that feed on the consumption of junk food in order to finance extra-curricular activities, including athletic programs.
- Health education curriculum that emphasizes the importance of eating healthy foods within schools that offer primarily fattening foods and limit opportunities for physical activity.
- Discourses of responsibility at the site of the body within an environment that normalizes the consumption of fattening foods.

Currently, educational institutions are setting children and adolescents up for failure with regard to making healthy lifestyle choices. While students are taught the importance of ‘eating right’ in health and PE classes, they are inundated with junk food at school.

Summary of Findings

One of the issues that I was interested in as I began this study was the extent to which body image ideologies were changing as a result of increasing obesity rates. Specifically, were young people becoming more accepting of their overweight peers? What I found was that despite Americans' ever expanding waistlines, body image ideology among these adolescents continued to dictate that bodies be thin, toned and fat-free. Boys from all social groups and ethnicities who I spoke with expressed a desire to be more muscular and have six-pack abs and the majority of girls I interviewed told me that they wanted to lose weight, have thinner thighs and have flat stomachs.

For boys and girls, preferred body shapes were unrealistic due to maturational age, lack of opportunity to exercise, and a preponderance of unhealthy foods in the school setting. Although body image ideals for boys and girls were unrealistic, boys were afforded a broader ideal body image range than girls. Heavier body weights for boys were more acceptable because boys were expected to be physically larger than girls and it was considered advantageous for boys who participated in sports, such as football and wrestling, to be large. These ideas conferred a degree of acceptability and normalcy to boys who were heavier.

My interviews revealed that there was very little flexibility with regard to girls' body image norms. Girls' body fat was more closely monitored and criticized than boys' by both male and female peers. Those girls who deviated from the thin body image ideal, in essence failing to manage their fat, suffered through teasing and gossip. The girls in my study felt pressure to "look cute constantly," expressing concern about

choosing clothing to wear to school, the clothing size they wore compared to the sizes their friends wore, and the difficulty of finding clothes that fit “just right,” meaning as tight and revealing as possible without showing any fat.

Girls engaged in elaborate beauty rituals that required hours of preparation in the mornings and continual maintenance throughout the school day. Girls’ appearance-related concerns affected their participation in co-ed PE classes as they worried about messing up their hair and makeup and about how their bodies would look while exercising. For example, one of my female informants worried that her legs ‘jiggled’ when she ran in PE and another worried that the fat on her stomach would visibly move up and down when she ran. In contrast, most of the adolescent boys at the high school wore loose-fitting clothing that easily hid their fat and the boys I interviewed described their morning rituals as effortless and carefree. Boys also felt freer to participate more actively in PE because they were not impeded by appearance-related concerns.

Not only were girls expected to take up less physical space with their bodies than boys, but they were expected to be weaker and less physically active than boys as well. The adolescents I interviewed told me that ideally girls should be smaller and less athletically adept than boys. Girls who displayed muscle tone and/or athletic skill were considered ‘manly’ and ‘butch.’ For these adolescents, muscle tone indexed strength and power, qualities that were strongly tied to normative masculine identity. Similarly, athleticism was associated with normative masculinity to the extent that girls who excelled in sports were not considered to be desirable romantic partners for the boys I interviewed. These restrictive gender norms affected girls’ participation in PE as many

girls told me that they felt self-conscious exercising in front of boys both because they felt inept and because athletic girls were labeled masculine or butch.

I found that the high school environment was fraught with difficulties for most of the teenagers in my study, male and female. Both boys and girls expressed body image concerns and worried about being teased. However, I found that overall boys had more social and physical mobility than girls. Girls were held to a harsher standard of beauty that required them to 'look cute all of the time,' a gendered imperative that was made difficult by the negative stereotypes associated with female athleticism and the prevalence of high fat foods on campus. For these teens, to be feminine was to be physically inactive, which carries both health and social consequences. Physical inactivity has been identified as one of the primary reasons for the current obesity epidemic among youth. Not only do girls who become overweight or obese risk health problems such as diabetes, high cholesterol, and hypertension, but they are also socially marginalized by their male and female peers. The findings of this dissertation clearly show that it is not just availability of opportunities for physical activity that will change adolescents' body sizes, but that considerable work needs to be done to change youth's perceptions of what are realistic and appropriate body sizes and shapes.

Adolescents emphasized the importance of individual responsibility in managing one's body fat. They enacted moral identities through discourses of responsibility that set them apart from the overweight peers they teased. Interestingly, teens who criticized fat people for eating too much junk food were themselves consuming junk food regularly on the high school campus. It was primarily through discourse as opposed to actual body

size or behavior that adolescents positioned themselves in opposition to overweight individuals. Although informants acknowledged the role of a social environment where fast food is plentiful and sedentary lifestyles are becoming the norm, most stressed individual responsibility and people's ability to control their weight through hard work and discipline. They viewed obesity as a moral identity issue, describing overweight individuals as lazy, slovenly couch potatoes.

Boys and girls of all sizes and all social groups were critical of fat people, including teens who were themselves overweight. By engaging in 'othering' discourses about overweight people, the teens in my study, regardless of their size, were able to discursively construct themselves in opposition to overweight individuals. In doing so, they negotiated a higher social rank for themselves and distanced themselves from the reality of everyday fatness. The boundaries between normal and overweight were ambiguous and had to be constantly re-negotiated, which was largely accomplished through teasing.

Girls openly discussed personal body image issues with male and female friends through 'fat talk.' However, gender norms disallowed boys to discuss body image concerns with their male friends. While 'fat talk' was a safe space for girls to vocalize body image concerns and elicit emotional support from friends, it appeared that there was no safe space for boys to talk with each other about their body image concerns. The only appropriate way for boys to engage in body image discourse with each other was to engage in gossiping and teasing behaviors about the appearance of others.

A major obstacle for adolescents in maintaining healthy bodies was the school food environment, which made a variety of junk foods widely available to students throughout the school day. The availability of junk food both in school and directly across the street at McDonald's made it virtually impossible for teenagers to make healthy food choices. The ubiquity of junk food on campus served to normalize the consumption of junk food so that adolescents no longer viewed healthier foods, such as fruit, as viable options.

Adolescents were constantly tempted by junk food as they watched their friends and classmates eat it all day during school. Girls attempted to limit their consumption of junk food by sharing food and mitigated the guilt they felt over eating junk food by announcing that they know they should not be eating it. Although many of my informants struggled to eat right, most consumed junk food daily, a behavior that threatened to align them with the overweight individuals they criticized. However, unlike the overweight people that informants described as not caring about their appearance or health, many constructed themselves as weight conscious through verbal expressions of guilt and discourses of responsibility. The school environment, which emphasized the personal management of fat while making the consumption of healthy foods virtually impossible set teens up for failure.

Policy Implications

In order for students to make healthy lifestyle choices, schools must practice what they teach, so to speak. There is an immediate need for the availability of healthy food in schools, an issue which is currently being negotiated among policymakers nationwide. A

recent Government Accountability Office report shows that nine out of ten schools nationwide offer junk food from vending machines, school stores, and food carts. While some argue that schools need to sell junk food in order to make money for extra-curricular programs, recent research challenges that line of reasoning. A 2005 study by the United States Department of Agriculture and Centers for Disease Control found that out of 17 schools that calculated revenue before and after replacing junk food with healthier options, 12 actually saw an increase in revenue, while the remaining 4 had no change in their revenue (CSPI 2005).

Lawmakers are beginning to understand the problem of childhood obesity as an issue that merits legislation. Republican Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska recently said, "We talk a lot about healthy nutrition, we teach the kids about the food pyramid, and then they go down the hallway and get the high fat, high sodium junk food available in the vending machines....We need to be consistent. People are beginning to connect the dots between rising health care costs and obesity." However, legislation banning junk food from schools faces strong opposition from the food industry and soft drink companies in particular, making its success hard-won (Burros 2006).

In 2005, Arizona passed a bill banning the sales of soft drinks and junk food in elementary and middle schools. This law takes effect in July of 2006. However, junk food and soft drink sales are still allowed on high school campuses in Arizona. In 2006, a proposed bill that would have banned soft-drink and junk-food sales on Arizona's high school campuses failed to pass. Currently, only a handful of states have banned junk food in schools (Ryman 2006).

On the national level, the *New York Times* recently reported that a bipartisan group in Congress plans to introduce a bill that would require high nutritional standards of all foods sold on school campuses. Currently, only foods sold in the cafeteria are regulated by Department of Agriculture nutritional standards. If this bill passed, it would essentially ban the sale of soft drinks and junk food on school campuses, which would force schools to offer healthier alternatives to generate revenue (Burros 2006).

In addition to offering healthy foods, schools need to be requiring more opportunities for exercise rather than cutting back on physical activity. The Institute of Medicine (IOM 2005) recommended that schools expand opportunities for physical activity through daily PE requirements, providing opportunities for students to participate in a wider variety of sports activities that include both competitive and non-competitive options, expanding after-school programs, and making school athletic facilities more widely available for use during school and non-school hours. My dissertation research suggests that girls may receive more health benefits from PE classes that separate boys and girls. Girls felt too self-conscious about their appearance and athletic abilities to actively participate in co-ed sports activities.

The Institute of Medicine reminds us that “Schools offer the opportunity for reaching large numbers of young people, during a significant part of their day, and throughout much of the year” (2005). Thus, schools have the potential to play a crucial role in actively preventing obesity among youth. However, schools must first make major changes in the foods they offer and in the amount of physical activity made available to students. Schools need to continue emphasizing the importance of making

healthy lifestyle choices through health and physical education curriculum, but they need to guide students to make the right choices by replacing junk food with healthier options and teaching students how to incorporate exercise into their daily lives.

In addition, youth need to be educated in media literacy in order to foster awareness of how powerful the media is in influencing their body image goals, ideas about gendered body image and social norms, and food consumption choices. Teens need counter media messages that emphasize health over beauty and encourage youth to broaden their ideas about what it means to be beautiful. Media literacy curriculum also needs to address obesity stigma by showing how fat people are often negatively portrayed in movies and television and emphasizing the importance of treating people of all sizes with respect.

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