

Talk

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"*Fy Faaaaan!*" screams Anna, using the vulgar Swedish expression for stomach-churning disgust. "Look at my upper arms! Look! Look how they wobble! It's gross!"

Anna is leaning with her back pressed against her school locker. She is wearing a sleeveless shirt, and she lifts up her bare arms for her girlfriends, who gather closer to see.

The girls glance at Anna's arms, but instead of pitying her, they respond with a chorus of their own imperfections. "Thick" thighs, "fat" bellies, "heavy" butts, "double" chins, "loose" love

handles: every one of Anna's friends has something, some shortcoming of her own, to chime in with. And as they all stand there next to Anna's locker, their voices begin to overlap and blend, turning what began as a command to look at Anna's arms into a kind of mournful madrigal of feminine defects.

As this chorus is being sung, another girl, Marlene, is walking down the hall. Everyone can see that Marlene's hair is wet. She looks clean and fresh and newly scrubbed, as if she has just stepped out of the shower. And indeed she has: as Marlene walks past the little lamenting group, she says hello to the girls and lets it drop that she has just come from the gym. There is a short moment of silence. "Wow," murmurs Julia in a jealous whisper. Mia announces that she hasn't worked out at the gym in four days. "I really get stressed about things like this," she tells everyone. "If I don't work out every second day I get anxious, 'cause I have to work out to feel good. I guess I was born fat!"

I spent the better part of a year in the company of girls like Anna and Mia and Julia, all of whom are young Swedish teenagers in their junior year in high school. I hung out with the girls in school, tagged along when they cut class, danced with them at parties, and had long conversations with them in the lunchroom, on the subway, and in their bedrooms, listening to the latest Swedish and American pop—all in an attempt to understand what it is like being a teenage girl these days in a country like Sweden, where women have more political power than anywhere else in the world.

Sweden is a country where women make up 43 percent of the national parliament (compared to a paltry 18 percent in Britain and 14 percent in the United States Congress); where the current minister of defense is a woman; where federally financed

day-care centers for children are universal; where maternity-leave benefits are the most generous in the world; where women make up a larger percentage of the labor force than any other country; and where feminist ideals play an important role in policy decisions and the day-to-day running of the country.

Yet, as it turns out, female representation in the parliament or the labor force, the gender of the minister of defense, and feminist ideas about day-care centers or maternity leave don't rate very high on the scale of what Swedish teenage girls talk about. What does capture their attention is fat. Fat is spoken about constantly. Yet, it is only ever spoken about in one way: in disgusted tones and with appalled inflections. Fat of all kinds is detested: greasy food, oily hair, a fat woman on the subway, plump thighs—all are objects of horror. But most disturbing for the girls is the idea that fat is not entirely external. On the contrary, fat is something they harbor inside their own bodies. The fat is in there somewhere, nesting, malevolent, biding its time. This evil invisible fat causes great distress. Virtually every single girl I met, no matter how svelte, no matter how popular, no matter how pretty, expressed dissatisfaction with her body.

This likely comes as no surprise. In the popular imagination, the teenage girl is someone who is almost pathologically preoccupied with her own appearance and body size. She is a victim: a deluded soul who desperately tries to embody an impossible feminine ideal. She is a sad dupe who sits for hours in front of the mirror, perhaps surrounded by a cluster of similarly duped female friends, all obsessed with the size of their waistlines and the shades of their eye shadow.

While this stereotype is obviously exaggerated, it is not entirely inaccurate. Since the 1980s, feminist scholars in Sweden,

the United States, and elsewhere have provided ample documentation of the insecurities and doubts that afflict young girls in Western societies.¹ The insecurities have a number of sources, but one that is crucial is, of course, the relentless exposure to the kind of body that one continually sees in advertisements and the mass media—a body that weighs 23 percent less than the average woman (a generation ago, the gap was only 8 percent).² Scholars have suggested that the pressure to approximate these ideal bodies leads increasing numbers of women to eating disorders or to “body distortion disorder,” a kind of psychosis that drives an individual to seek ever increasing amounts of cosmetic surgery in order to feel attractive.

All of this is deplorable, clearly. But instead of just joining in with all the commentators who bemoan the plight of unconfident, victimized women, I wonder whether there might not be a different way of looking at body images among girls. What would happen if we looked, not just at what individual girls think about their bodies, but at the way they actually talk about their bodies together with other girls? What would we see if we examined the effects of girls’ talk about fat—if we looked at what the talk about fat *does* among the girls? How does talk about fat organize and regulate social bonds and relations between girls?

Someone opens with a negative comment about her “fat” body and another answers along the same lines. This might seem like a banal, innocent interaction. But a closer inspection reveals that this kind of exchange is possible only because girls have learned when, with whom, and in what way they can discuss fat. This is not obvious or easily acquired knowledge. In fact, speaking about fat always involves skill and delicacy—a kind of balancing act.

During a lunch break, Julia, who was generally regarded as one of the prettier girls in the class, tells me and the group of girls sitting with her that she has been really naughty. “I haven’t been to the gym for at least a week,” she confesses. The other girls shake their heads and protest: “No, Julia, don’t worry,” they tell her. “You don’t have to work out: you are thin enough as you are.”

While other girls are telling Julia how thin she is, Andrea leans her head toward her friend Malena, who is sitting next to her. Sighing, Andrea says to Malena, loudly enough for everyone to hear, that the two of them are probably the only girls in the class who really do need to go the gym, since they are both a bit overweight.

Hearing this, the other girls at the lunch table immediately stop talking. They look at Andrea, expressions of undisguised disapproval on their faces. Malena pulls away from Andrea and ignores her. Even though nobody actually comes right out and says so, it is clear that Andrea has committed a big fat faux pas. Her transgression is so serious that for some time she is more or less ostracized from the inner clique of the girls’ group.

What did Andrea do wrong? We’ve already seen that girls talk about fat all the time. So what exactly was Andrea’s mistake? The indiscretion was this: to refer to yourself as fat and in need of improvement is fine. But to tell another girl that she is as fat as you is a gaffe of almost cosmic proportions.

Andrea’s blunder and the other girls’ reactions to it suggest that fat talk is more complicated than it may appear at first glance. Andrea was attempting to join in the requisite fat talk, but her attempt to forge an alliance with one of the other girls by saying that they were both in need of the gym fell flat. Andrea did not wait for Malena to begin bemoaning her own body. Instead

she jumped the gun. A girl can complain about how big *her* belly is, or how hopelessly fat *her* thighs have become. She can—indeed, she is expected to—belittle herself. And her friends can contribute to the conversation with enumerations of their own flaws. But to volunteer comments about someone else being fat—that is not friendship. It is, in fact, the opposite of friendship. It is what you say about people you hate.

In this respect, fat talk is not only talk about fat bodies. Instead, it is a way of establishing friendships with some girls and ostracizing others. Andrea missed—or maybe she just forgot—this crucial point. She was certainly not trying to hurt Malena when she commented on her friend's body. But she broke the golden rule of fat talk, which is: thou shalt not even hint that someone you like is fat, especially not if that girl is sitting right there beside you.

There is another rule of fat talk that all popular girls know. This rule is rather devious, and it has to do with one's own body size. It is this: to be able to talk successfully about your fat body, you cannot be fat yourself. Virtually none of the girls I knew who talked about fat were actually overweight. On the contrary, those who seemed most eager to speak about their fat bodies were usually the slimmest and most popular girls.

Tessa, regarded as one of the school's most attractive girls, once told me and two of her friends, "I'm really unhappy with every little bit of my body. Everything is too big." The other girls around her sighed in unison. Lisa shook her head and comforted Tessa by telling her that she was definitely not fat: "Look here instead." She pointed to her jeans. "Look at my thighs if you want to see something really fat!"

Contrast Tessa with Sofia, another girl who sometimes tried

to join in the talk about fat. Whenever Sofia expressed her unhappiness with her body size, she was met with silence. She received no encouraging comments whatsoever, and the sighs from the other girls that always followed Sofia's lamentations carried a message far different from the one conveyed by remarks evoked by Tessa's assertions of fatness. The main reason for this difference is that Sofia is indeed somewhat chubby. And this fact, in the complex social world these girls create, is reason enough for ignoring her. Even though she was not banished from the group entirely, the other girls treated Sofia as if her failed body size was contagious. They seemed afraid that their own bodies would expand if they empathized with her chubbiness.

We can see the same logic in a comment by Lina, another girl in the school. Lina once told me, in a worried whisper, that some people think she resembles a girl who is somewhat overweight. The terrible thing is, Lina confided, she had actually sat next to the fat girl on the first day of school. "It was really a mistake," she said. "I didn't know her at all. I just sat down. But since we sat together, people thought we were, like, really good friends." Lina was anxious about this because she knows that among girls, the company you keep reflects your own status and popularity. This means that being seen in the company of a fat person risks relegating you to a lower place in the social hierarchy. Lina was worried that accidentally sitting next to an unknown fat girl caused people to see a physical resemblance between them. Concerns like this make it difficult for overweight girls to make friends with anyone who is slim and popular.

Being overweight in itself does not automatically disqualify a girl from inner circles of friendship, but it does impose certain restrictions. Chief among these is this: if you are overweight,

don't talk about trying to change your body. If you plan to diet, do it in silence, and don't ask other girls for advice. Even if other, non-overweight girls exchange tips on diets or workout techniques to get rid of fat, the fat girl cannot. She is excluded from such activities. Whenever the topic comes up, overweight girls are either ignored, or dispatched with meaningful glances.

One way of interpreting this phenomenon is that fat talk constitutes what the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu has called symbolic capital.³ Symbolic capital comprises the qualities or characteristics that you have to possess in order to be acknowledged as someone worth talking to or interacting with. Generally speaking, a person who sounds like Prince Charles has more symbolic capital than someone who speaks like Joe Pesci, especially if the topic of discussion is opera, architecture, or wine. A person who knows how to use terms like *inning* or *half-back* has more symbolic capital in the context of sports than someone who doesn't know his wicket from a hole in the ground.

In the case of Swedish teenagers' fat talk, the situation is ironic: you only have the symbolic capital—the ability to talk about fat—if you don't have that which you are talking about—namely, fat. In other words, if you have real fat, you can have no symbolic fat.

But since fat talk is a vital means through which these girls bond and form friendships, and since slim girls don't talk about fat with anyone who actually is fat, overweight girls are not allowed to participate in the conversations that consolidate social relationships.

In view of this intricate social organization of fat talk, the commonplace assumptions about the exploitation of female bodies in Western cultures and the claims that most young girls feel

ashamed or dissatisfied with their bodies seem somewhat simplistic. Managing to talk about your body with the appropriate kind of discomfort may indeed express a deeply felt dissatisfaction—but it also secures you a place in a network of friends. While talk about dissatisfaction with their supposedly fat bodies may indeed to some extent be a reflection of real frustration, it is also more than that. Because the girls expect others to share similar concerns about their bodies, the experience of worrying about fat is normalized; it is something you *face* because you are a girl. Expressing dissatisfaction with one's body becomes, in this sense, an important way of performing one's identity as a girl.

One day, two representatives from Swedish Association for Sex Education (in Swedish, abbreviated as RFSU) visited the school I worked in to discuss issues about sex and relationships. (Sweden was the first country in the world to introduce mandatory sex education in schools, in 1955. Talk about sex and visits by organizations like RFSU are commonplace). To facilitate this discussion, the students were divided into two separate groups, girls in one and boys in the other. When I asked Kristina, the representative from RFSU, about this, she told me that boys are usually interested in sex, and girls more often want to discuss body image, self-confidence, and relationships.

We all formed our chairs into a circle. Kristina asked us to stand up if we agreed with the statements she was going to read aloud. Looking out over the thirteen girls in the circle, Kristina began: "Being happy with one's appearance is hard." Everyone stood up.

Kristina sighed. "I would've been happy if there had been

anyone left on a chair, but that's not common," she said. "So," she continued, resigned, "what's the thing you are most dissatisfied with?"

Julia answered without hesitating: "My body."

Caroline continued: "There are days when you are more or less happy with it. But never totally."

The other girls agreed.

At that point, however, Joanna said something unexpected.

"Don't you think," she wondered, "that the problem is that you have to always talk about how you have problems being fat? 'Cause if you didn't, people would find you cocky. So it's really easier to just go on complaining."

Joanna cut straight to the heart of my own understanding of the role of fat talk in the lives of girls. Klara once explained to me that the reason some of the girls did not like their classmate Christine is because she was too self-confident. "She seems *too* happy with the way she looks, and she doesn't complain like everybody else does," Klara told me. In other words, Christine risked becoming an object of derision solely because she did not express dissatisfaction with her body. She risked being seen as arrogant, like a boy. Boys, after all, don't have to manage fat talk, since it is socially acceptable for a boy to be cocky and self-confident. It is even expected, the same way that self-denigration is expected among girls.

What all this means is that whether or not a girl is truly dissatisfied with her body is beside the point when it comes to managing fat talk. Either way, she has to be able to talk the talk. In this respect, expressing dissatisfaction about one's own body operates as what anthropologist Mimi Nichter calls a "protective device"—a kind of verbal amulet that deflects the envious

thoughts of other people, and, simultaneously, secures your status as a normal, socially competent girl.⁴

But fat talk also highlights often overlooked aspects of the nature of victimization. In public debate and in scholarly literature, young women have been highlighted as victims of the slender, unobtainable beauty ideal, and they are said to suffer from low self-esteem, vulnerability, and eating disorders. In fact, this is a relatively recent development. Before the 1970s, scholars, journalists, social commentators, and others didn't pay much attention to girls. Popular books and films about youth culture were usually about boys and their cars and motorcycles and music. To the extent that girls figured at all in these depictions of youth culture, they were there as the tag-along partners of their much more exciting boyfriends.

In the 1980s there was a shift in the way that girls were depicted in scholarly work and popular media. They appeared rather one-dimensionally, as individuals with problems. If earlier generations of commentators were uncertain of or unconcerned with what preoccupied girls in their day-to-day lives and conversations, today everyone seems to know what girls do: they obsess, mostly about fat. This normalization of dissatisfaction seems to be one result of the victimization discourse of the 1980s and '90s. These were the years when anorexia and other eating disorders were discovered among young women and highlighted relentlessly in newspapers, television shows, schools, clinics, and so on. Although much good has undoubtedly come of all that attention, the constant alarms that females were dissatisfied with their bodies appears to have ended up conveying the impression that dissatisfaction is a normal female state. At some point, talk about fat became talk about being a girl.

Even though a lot has changed over the past fifty years, especially in a country like Sweden, social demands that women look a particular way compel females of all ages to continually think about their bodies, whether they like it or not. And since bodies can be altered—with new haircuts, different clothes, diets, aerobic classes, cosmetic surgery—if you exert control over your body and change it, *or even if you talk about it in the right way*, you may feel as though you have a certain kind of power in the world. In this respect, we might see fat talk as a way of staking a claim, of making yourself visible and legitimate, of showing people that you have independence, individuality, and style. But at the same time, fat talk ironically signals the opposite: it indicates conformity.

Fat is what deconstructivist scholars call an “absent presence”: it is present as talk only to the extent that it is doesn’t actually materialize on people’s bodies. Maintaining this balance—keeping fat both present in talk and absent on your body—makes all the difference between being seen as a successful girl or as a total social failure.

So, as a Swedish high school girl, you can and should chew the fat. But you should never, ever, swallow it.

Leaky

Don Kulick and Thaïs Machado-Borges

During the 1990s—a decade when over half the population of several countries officially became overweight, and when in the world as a whole more people became obese than malnourished—the only known group of people anywhere on earth to have grown thinner, other than famine victims, were rich Brazilian women in cities.¹

What, one might wonder, is their secret? It could be that in addition to starving themselves and paying vast amounts of money for personal trainers, plastic surgery, and liposuctions,