



## *To Be or Not to Be...Thin*

### **Sociological Reflections on the Price I Paid to Fit In**

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**Abstract:** A self-study of adolescence using various literature on the subject, notably by Côté and Allahar (1994), Bensman and Rosenberg (1979), Lesko (2001), Muuss (1996), and Willis (1998), among others. Parents, school administration, employers and any other type of powerful figures in a teenagers life completely underestimate what adolescents are made of and what they are capable of. The need to constantly micro-manage and intervene creates this conflict between becoming a responsible adult and staying in a juvenile place. The mixed messages sent out by adults are one that not only confuses, but disrespects adolescents as a whole. As a teenager I felt there was always this cloud hanging over my head that the adults and authoritative figures in my life were constantly trying to manipulate and form me into something other than who I actually was. The need to turn teenagers into mini-adults while still going through the development process is something that creates this constant tension and resentment towards authority. In turn, this process of trying to create responsible, upstanding, elite citizens turns teenagers off to the idea of growing up fast and in a way that the adults in their lives want them to.

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I refused to enter high school chubby. I was bound and determined to sashay through the double doors of my new school as a whole new girl. Long gone were the days of the overweight, freckly-faced, dirty blonde haired little girl. Say hello to the thin, bottle blonde, tanned "hip chick." I was going to make a statement; I was going to catch some serious attention.

That is exactly what I did. I decided at the conclusion of eighth grade that I was tired of being the "biggest" friend in my group, insecure and shy, without self-confidence, I was done with being forgotten by both the boys and the popular girls. I was going to transform myself into someone

else. I began to work out like a crazed maniac and eat like the bona fide bird princess. So began the journey of my fixation with perfection and the need to be seen as thin and beautiful.

I spent my summer before my freshman year in a literal competition with myself. I was focused on losing as much weight as I could before the first day of school. I convinced myself that the way I could get a boyfriend and be accepted by the popular girls was by being skinny and pretty. The issue was black and white. If I lost weight, I would pivot myself into popularity and desirability. All the magazines I read and all the shows I watched conveyed

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the same idealistic approach as what I had noticed in school. I was going to make it happen, I was going to make what I saw on the television and read in magazines come to life.

Côté and Allahar believe that teen magazines, labeled as teenzines, “contribute to an indoctrination into the cult of femininity that has been taken hold of during this century, partly as a result of advertisers” (Côté and Allahar 91). The advertising through magazines and television create and portray a standard of beauty that young girls watch and want to mimic. Donald Davis notes: “television female’s existence still seems to be largely a function of her youth and beauty. Women still tend to play roles in which they are more ornamental...than functional” (Côté and Allahar 92). I found this comparison, between women being ornamental rather than functional, to be particularly striking. That is how I wanted to be. I wanted to have control over what I looked like to garner attention and praise. I was wrapped up with being told I was pretty and less concerned with people really getting to know me. The idea of being accepted and attractive was more appealing than showing my insecurities.

My insecurities and low self-esteem are exactly what advertising in the mass media pray on. Teenagers, as a demographic, are a perfect target to lure into the money-hungry, capitalistic economy of the United States. The images of women on television and in magazines are overtly sexual in nature, with the perfect hair, perfect body, and clothes. These images are what sell the high fashion clothes, accessories and make-up to young girls. These images, however, also sell thinness. The bombardment of rail thin models, actresses and singers creates a standard of perceived beauty that is manipulated and reproduced for adolescent teens to imagine themselves achieving. This dangerous standard set by the media through advertising, music and television programming geared to teenagers who are simulta-

neously going through the most dramatic, influential and important years of growing up and developing creates an overwhelming amount of conflicting images and ideas.

In the documentary, *Merchants of Cool*, the idea that companies are specifically targeting the adolescent age demographic to sell and intrigue them into buying products that emulate what they see on television and what they read in magazines, is a giant and booming business. Companies are using consultants to find out what teenagers want to see and buy. However, these companies are gearing their products to adolescents who want to be part of something bigger than just the product. To feel a part of a specific “in” crowd, teens are coaxed into buying products paraded around every media outlet for teenagers to see and read. The crafty marketing tools used promote an artificial “cool” which adolescents try to attain through material and physical products. Teenage girls at a critical and impressionable age are swept up by what they see and read, wanting to imitate what is shown on the television and other media outlets. As a result they put themselves at risk to reach an almost unattainable goal.

“Supporters, promoters, and packagers of chronological culture,” Bensman and Rosenberg write, “need not belong to the same age group as those who perform, consume, listen or watch. In this sense, age-graded culture is, so to speak, for the people (at whom it is aimed) but not by the people or of the people” (89). Bensman and Rosenberg point to the fact that adolescents as consumers are buying into and trying to copy false advertisement by companies who try and pursue the impressionable teenager. I fell victim to the pop culture that was inundating clothing stores, movies, magazines, music and television. In every mass media medium there are women portrayed in a light that is representing only a minute portion of the actual American public. Bensman and Rosenberg recognize this, and their argument highlights the fact that

the point of advertising is to popularize what mainstream teenagers idolize, but is virtually impossible to achieve.

Erik Erikson's idea of adolescent moratorium speaks to this time in a youth's life. The idea of a suspension in time can create an ebb and flow that is full of confusion. Although for some youth, this period can prove to be successful, in my particular case, this time only left me a shell of my true self. I was on the outside, put together and what everyone wanted. However, I was fixated on my body and perfecting it because I was insecure with my own intelligence and where I actually fit in. Nancy Lesko calls attention to "the difficulties of actively mastering one's environment and securing identity when youth are simultaneously contained within an expectant mode" (Lesko 123). The idea that teenagers are expected to mature but stay adolescents creates a push and pull dynamic that creates an added confusion and difficulty to being a teenager and navigating oneself through high school. Riding the high school wave of dances, parties and football games and then be expected to achieve high grades and strive for college acceptances are complicated and difficult to manage for even the highest achievers.

During this period I felt like the only constant aspect of my life I could manage was my weight. I had complete control. Diet and exercise was something I felt I was good at. No one could tell me I was doing it wrong or to change it to be more accepted. I was able to push myself and see positive results through working out. I wanted to feel good about something, anything. School was always so difficult that I was not able to use my academics to make me feel good about myself. I needed to feel validated and confident about something. My appearance, my diet, my exercise program was all mine. It was the one constant in the flurry of craziness.

Lesko writes about a girl named Renee who began to *manage herself* in high school

(Lesko 125). Renee's story is similar to my own. She *managed herself* "in line with how others responded to her" (Lesko 125). The push to be so many different things and well-rounded is planted into adolescent's heads during high school, "it is what colleges want to see." The pressure to succeed becomes overwhelming. Similar to Renee, I, like probably millions of other young girls, bent to the influence of school, media, peers, parents, and every other overbearing outlet. It is important to touch upon each of these outlets, in accordance with being a teenager. Media has previously been touched upon as a major force behind proliferating body image and adolescent girls as consumers of material goods. So, I will now explore the other factors.

Peers and school are other media through which adolescents are judged and where I personally feel I learned behaviors that impacted the idea of myself and who I was. Although I had a large group of friends in high school, I always felt like I did not fit in. I grew up in a small town where everyone knew everyone and the cliques were formed early on in elementary school and lasted until we graduated. Although there were tight-knit groups, members from different groups did mingle with one another if they were on the same sports team or in band together. I never played sports or was not musically inclined. This made it harder for me to branch out from my group. However, I really did not have to. I began to notice that with my newfound skinniness, kids came to me. Boys that did not even know I existed the year before and the popular girls even took a shining to me. I was aware of why all these new people were talking to me. They did not really care about what I had to say, they just were accepting me because of the way I looked.

The new relationships I was building made me feel the most confident I had ever felt. I played up being nice and dumb. It was what all my "new friends" responded to. According to Rolf E. Muuss, reflecting

on The Laurel School Study (1986-1990) carried out in and reported by Brown and Gilligan,

...adolescent girls struggle with their desire to have authentic relationships in which they can express themselves freely and their fear that a free expression of feelings and thoughts will jeopardize and endanger their relationships with their peers as well as with the adults in their lives...This conflict creates the "unauthentic" voice of adolescence. (Muuss 206)

I had no authentic voice. I was what everyone else wanted me to be. I enjoyed the attention I received and the confidence that I was building up. However, it was at the cost of denying who I really was. What started off as an innocent way to gain popularity and a boyfriend soon morphed into something that began to get harder to keep up. I began to be the quintessential "ornament" rather than "functional." My authenticity as a strong, intelligent, caring woman was hidden behind the tan, the skin and bones and make-up.

The gender bias in high school persuades girls to pursue getting boys' attention through looking attractive, playing down their intelligence and playing up the mild mannered, docile personality. Boys and girls at a young age, through school, family dynamics, toys and television are systematically separated by gender, boys taking the lead, dominant role and girls, taking on the secondary position. According to Côté and Allaha,

The lack of full gender equality and desegregation can be explained in part by the gender intensification process that occurs during adolescence and youth. During this period, schools and the mass media furnish young people

with attitudinal and behavioral "scripts" based on the ideology of gender. (85)

The idea of little boys and girls' being separated and identified by their gender rather than personality, and likes or dislikes, is a practice that pigeon-holes kids before they are allowed to make up their own minds on who they are. Personally, I can see the effects of how this gender bias played a role in my attitude of adolescent boys and myself. I was always taught to be on my best behavior, be patient, kind and wait my turn. When I started elementary school and I was diagnosed with my learning disability I immediately became shy and uncomfortable speaking out in class. I was quiet and never spoke out of turn. My self-confidence was barely existent and this carried with me through high school. I used my body and looks to gain self-esteem and confidence. This false sense of pride only hurt me and limited my efforts at finding out who I truly was and at developing my authentic voice. The sense of having no control over anything and always falling second fiddle to the boys and eventually the young men I was surrounded by in school did not even register. "That was just the way it was."

I grew up in a home where my mother was a homemaker, my father worked, my brother was loud, outlandish and funny. I was quiet, obedient and cute. Muuss, again reflecting on the findings reported by Gilligan and Brown on The Laurel School Study, writes,

Some girls model themselves on the image of the "perfect, nice girl" who does not want to hurt anyone or appear defiant. Many adolescent girls lose their sense of who they are, how they feel and what they know. (Muuss 207)

The gender roles were identified for me at a very early age. As Gilligan writes, I did

not have a voice or a clue on how to project anything other than "sweet, nice and cute." These learned behaviors were something that I was not aware of. I just accepted what I saw and did not question anything. My home life was full of images that segregated male and female values and acceptable modes of behavior. My mother's presence was the main fixture in the household because my father's job required him to work long hours. We were never quite sure when he would be coming home or having to work for a few days in a row. When he was home, he would be sleeping (in which case, my brother and I would have to be quiet), or paying the bills. We would have to leave him be or he would be out in the yard completing yard work with my brother. I stayed in the house, with my mother, I learned to fold laundry and make family dinners. "Weak families produce neither a collective nor a personal superego and are not likely to foster a secure sense of self," Bensman and Rosenberg write (94). Although I do not believe that my family was necessarily weak in unity and love, I do believe that the family unit was weak in that the males and females did not share equally in doing household duties and in power. These lessons that I learned early on were the basis of how I viewed men and women. I had to obey and tip-toe around my dad when he was around. It was not even on a regular basis where he would pull in the driveway every night at six o'clock. My mom headed the household; however, I still viewed my father as being the one in control and being in charge when he was home. The mixed messages I received while growing up taught me my supposed place and gender role within the home.

Through the years of elementary school and middle school I was obedient and wanted to be accepted by my peers. I was quiet to keep people from making fun of me due to my learning disability and my weight. During middle school, the time where boys and girls began to talk to each other, I decided that boys responded to

girls in a positive way when they were pretty or thin. When puberty hit, everything changed for me. I realized that I needed to physically change my appearance to fill in the void of feeling stupid and dumb. I wanted to be accepted and liked for something. I was like a "person with a relatively weak ego and a tenuous sense of identity, because he or she must now synthesize conflicting information and execute behaviors in ambiguous and often hostile situations" (Côté and Allahaar 81). "At this stage of the life cycle," Côté and Allahaar note, "certain influences will shape and fundamentally change the young person's belief system and life-styles" (81).

Since I was already insecure and with low self-esteem because of my intelligence, puberty did not help. The obvious thing for me to do was to cater and change myself to gain attention and confidence through another outlet other than schoolwork and good grades. As Côté and Allahaar state, certain influences will shape and change a person's belief system. That is exactly what happened in my situation. Before puberty, I was concerned with keeping up my grades in order to be on an even playing field with my peers. After puberty, I wanted to be attractive, accepted by my peers because of the way I looked and the personality I projected. My personal goal switched from attaining perfect grades to being popular and more attractive to boys. Although I still maintained grades that were considered average, as to pacify my parents, I excelled at working out religiously in order to maintain my low weight, and my low carb, low fat, low calorie, and low everything diet. My priority was keeping up the exterior of me, what everyone else could see, not what was going on with me on the inside.

Keeping up with every twist and turn during the four years of high school was a monumental task. Attending classes—college looming overhead and the general stress of friends, gossip, and a part time job—was rather stressful. Côté and Allahaar



note how “The average person looks upon adolescence as a natural and necessary stage of development and feels that this period is the time of one’s life when one is carefree and has no responsibilities” (107). This could not be further from the truth in my case. The teenage years are full of confusion regarding almost everything. There is a constant tugging of sorts to be one type of person one minute and something new the next minute. The battle to find out who you are as an individual is extremely hard to do when there are forces that surround you in all different types of authoritative forms. Adolescence was a time for me that felt like a perpetual struggle to compete, adhere, sustain and outdo everyone that I was in school, worked, or lived with. High School, as a probationary period in my life felt like I was constantly struggling to fit into someone else’s ideal mode of who they wanted me to be. Adolescents, Lesko writes, “are expected to measure up to finely tuned assessments of productivity, learning, morality, and achievement while remaining in a social position that is dependent and watched over not only by adults but also their age peers. Their dependence communicates their inequality, and their “becoming” status appears to legitimate it” (129).

The tug of war that was a part of my high school career created this personal tension and stress within myself. I was wrapped up with trying to keep up my grades for my parents and school counselors so I could get into college, worked at my part time job for minimum wage so I could have my own money to spend, and kept up the job of presenting myself to my peers as if I had everything always together. The continual juggling act of measuring up to everyone else’s expectations drove me deeper into using the gym and diet as a way to control myself. This period in my life was about what I could do to make everyone else happy and satisfied. I was on probation to show that I was able to produce and flex my independent muscle, but

just as quickly, to retract and fall back into being an adolescent who needed direction, rules, regulations and due dates.

The hypocrisy of being a teenager is that adults are constantly trying to make teenagers more responsible, while at the same time hold them to adolescent regulations and curfews. While I was in high school I worked at a gym. Consider that. Although I was given a free membership, the wage was at the federal minimum. I only got two raises and they were for a whopping quarter. I worked there for six years. While in high school I remember thinking how I resented my parents for even making me get a job in the first place. I began babysitting in the sixth grade and was perfectly content with continuing doing that. However, my parents told me that I needed a job so I could pay for all the extra material things I wanted and more importantly, it would show me responsibility and it would look good on my college applications. I was only fifteen!

The rush into paid work is something every adolescent feels at that age, and in my particular case, I was not too fond of having to do it. I relented and felt this tug to work hard and do my best, with little recognition, with the exception that it would look good for college and it would miraculously make me more responsible. “Young people,” Côté and Allahar argue, “lack power, rights and legitimacy, which means they are disenfranchised. At the same time, however, they are crucial to the economic system because they constitute a source of cheap labor, as well as a massive consumer market” (109). The idea that adolescents are thrown into the work force, usually by their parents to produce goods for low wages highlights the crucial role they play in the American economy. However, the idea that teenagers are paid little, usually made to work harder than adult employees, completing tasks that the older employees would never dare to do, proves the marginalization teenagers face in the work place.

Although adolescents make up a massive section of the current work force, their labor and dedication to the job is met with little reward. Susan Willis writes,

The atomization of the teen workforce is a consequence of expanded part-time and service-sector employment coupled with diminished job security. Teens cope by inventing individual solutions to their job situations and collective solutions to their culture. (356)

She points to the fact that adolescent employees understand their place in the job market. While working at my part-time job during high school I worked hard and did what I was told. However, I did not over-extend myself. I knew I could quit and move to any other place I wanted. I did not take it seriously. Working for me was to satisfy my parents' idea of what I should be doing with my time after school, not to satisfy me. I realized I was not going to work at a gym for the rest of my life. Therefore, I did not look at my employment as something I should be proud of. It was demeaning to be paid \$7.75 an hour to do the grunt work. Adolescents that are in these positions understand their place in the "system." As I understood what I was actually contributing to, by working for a corporation for a small wage and little recognition, I learned quickly how to play the system.

Parents, school administration, employers and any other type of powerful figures in a teenagers life completely underestimate what adolescents are made of and what they are capable of. The need to constantly micro-manage and intervene creates this conflict between becoming a responsible adult and staying in a juvenile place. The mixed messages sent out by adults are one that not only confuses, but disrespects adolescents as a whole. As a teenager I felt there was always this cloud hanging over my head that the adults and

authoritative figures in my life were constantly trying to manipulate and form me into something other than who I actually was. The need to turn teenagers into mini-adults while still going through the development process is something that creates this constant tension and resentment towards authority. In turn, this process of trying to create responsible, upstanding, elite citizens turns teenagers off to the idea of growing up fast and in a way that the adults in their lives want them to.

Ellen Corrigan (2004/5) is right to point out that

High school is a pivotal time in teens' lives, as it is the time they begin to form their identities outside of their families. They often look to images in the media in order to find out how teenagers in high school are supposed to act, and thus begin to engage in those activities. Alcohol, partying, gossip and keeping up with the trends become the pinnacle of high school life, because those are the issues that the media depicts as "normal" teenage concerns. (141)

As I entered high school I also wanted all the same things the media portrays high school to be. I wanted to be the pinnacle high school girl. However, in the process of working through all four years of high school I realized one major and fundamental thing: I was living up to everyone else's standard. I was trying to be everything for everyone else and losing myself and who I truly was in the process. I am thankful that I was able to drop the facade as I went off to college. I gained some weight, stopped with wearing the excessive make-up and toned down the overall dumb blonde stereotype. I found myself when I was by myself—out on my own, having to rely on myself and who I was and who I wanted to become.

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## Films:

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