

‘Build Ups’ and ‘Slim Downs’: Re-shaping America, 1945–1970

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Mama won't let me diet anymore... This morning I was having my usual half grapefruit for breakfast and she made me eat a slice of whole wheat bread and a scrambled egg and a piece of bacon. That's probably at least 400 calories, maybe even five or six or seven hundred... I wonder if I could stick my finger down my throat and throw up after every meal? She says I'm going to have to start eating dinner again too, and just when I was getting down where I want to be and I've quit fighting the hunger pains.

Anon., *Go Ask Alice*

The author of *Go Ask Alice*, the anonymous diary published in 1971, is obsessed with her weight. Her journal is a recounting of not only her daily activities but also how much weight she has gained or lost. The fifteen-year-old girl avoids chocolate and French fries, and equates her new popularity at school with the ten pounds she has recently lost. When she has whittled her frame down to 115 pounds, the teen author wistfully notes her desire to lose an additional 10 pounds. ‘Mom says I don’t want to get that thin,’ she writes, ‘but she doesn’t know! I do! I do! I do!’ (Anon. 1971: 7) This seemingly typical teenage reaction is symptomatic of the heightened preoccupation with weight that affected American women of all ages in the years immediately following World War II.

At the close of World War II, female beauty ideals were in flux because American culture had reached a period of instability. Betty Friedan famously argued that, during this time, American women fell victim to a ‘feminine mystique’ that instructed them to pursue femininity and avoid conditions that threatened to strip them of it. Although the universal validity of Friedan’s claims has been challenged with regard to body image, the author-housewife was not exaggerating.¹ The post-war period saw the re-emergence of feminine ideals similar to the ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ from the mid-nineteenth century to combat paranoia that American women had become overly masculine during the war years. Found in middle-class prescriptive literature of the antebellum period, the ‘Cult of Domesticity’ or the ‘Cult of True Womanhood’ declared that to be a ‘true’ woman, one must be pious, virginal,

¹ For a reassessment of Friedan, see (under *Further Reading*) Joanne Meyerowitz (Meyerowitz 1993) and Daniel Horowitz (Horowitz 1996).

submissive, and domestic. This system of beliefs placed women in the ‘private sphere,’ or the home.² Although this was not a complete return to beauty and domestic ideals from the so-called Victorian Era, the post-war ideal certainly was focused once again on family togetherness with women at the centre of the home. Young women married earlier than their mothers had in the previous generation and gave birth to more children in rapid succession. Large numbers of women abandoned higher education or a full-time career and instead sought fulfilment through marriage, motherhood, and housework.³ In the words of one contemporary writer, ‘[t]he war was over, and [women] were supposed to sashay back to the kitchen and learn how to make green beans baked with Campbell’s cream of mushroom soup’ (Douglas 1994: 47). With memories of a devastating, economic depression and a world war casting shadows over the country, the political, economic, and social institutions endorsed this return to domesticity as patriotic and necessary.

But perhaps more interesting than the renewed emphasis on domesticity, was the focus on cosmetic standards. As scholar Barbara Coleman notes, ‘[i]n a society based on strict gender roles, women needed to look like women. They could not resemble Norman Rockwell’s *Rosie the Riveter*’ (Coleman 1995: 10). Although wartime propaganda assured the public that performing a ‘man’s job’ would not threaten American women’s femininity or sexuality, reconversion demanded that women forfeit employment to stabilise the home.⁴ Among the numerous changes expected of American women to help the country return to tranquillity after World War II came a modification in the representation of the perfect feminine figure. Americans began the full-fledged war against fat in the post-war years when the fashion industry promoted thinness as the aesthetic ideal, and the insurance and medical communities equated health with size. Thus, beginning in the 1950s, Americans, particularly women, dieted and exercised their way towards skinnier, more firm and trim figures as a consequence of a tightened relationship between fashion, foreign policy, insurance figures, and medical opinion. A new, all-consuming discourse in prescriptive literature, namely women’s magazines, demanded thinness above all. But fewer than 200 years ago, however,

² For works addressing white women’s bodies and beauty ideals in nineteenth-century America, see Joan Jacob Brumberg (Brumberg 1988) and also (under *Further Reading*) Lois Banner (Banner 1983), Frances B. Cogan, (Cogan 1980), Alison Piepmeier (Piepmeier 2004). Valerie Steele (Steele 1985), Nancy M. Theriot (Theriot 1996) and Jan Todd (Todd 1998).

³ For more on the changes women experienced prior to, during, and after World War II, see (under *Further Reading*) Karen Anderson (Anderson 1981), William Chafe (Chafe 1991), Susan M. Hartmann (Hartmann 1982), Elaine Tyler May (May 1988 and May 1994).

⁴ For more on wartime and reconversion propaganda see (under *Further Reading*) Maureen Honey (Honey 1984).

weight was not an important issue. At the turn of the twentieth century in fact, being underweight, not overweight, was the leading concern of medical doctors (Czerniawski 2007: 273).

1. A brief history of slimming in America

The first penny scale appeared in the United States in 1885. The new weighing machine showed up in chemist and grocer's shops and soon expanded to street corners, cinemas, banks, office buildings, railroad stations, and subways (Seid 1989: 90). The penny scale transformed the way Americans thought about weight. With the ability to measure one's body to the nearest pound, weight transitioned from a qualitative subject to a quantitative evaluation (Czerniawski 2007: 273). Between 1890 and 1910, middle-class America initiated the battle against body fat when several factors – changing gender roles, consumerism, economic status, medicine, modernity, and mortality – simultaneously collided (Fraser 2009: 13). America became a weight-watching culture when people increasingly believed that the body was tied to the self. Being fat or thin often had little to do with one's shape or size, but rather an assumed identity directly attached to the body. Criminologists used weight to identify character types, insurance companies and actuaries tied weight to risk and mortality, and the fashion industry used weight as a litmus test for beauty (Schwartz 1986: 9, 147). According to historian Peter N. Stearns, never before in American history was dieting so popular along with an aversion to 'obesity' (Stearns 1997: 3).

During America's transition into a quantified weight culture, women were particularly affected. Although accounts of women starving themselves can be found as far back as the Middle Ages and holy ascetics, a new kind of 'fasting girl' emerged in nineteenth century America. *Anorexia nervosa* was the result of not only a new authority given to doctors in the period, but also larger changes in bourgeois life. The self-restraint necessary to achieve this body type was a characteristic valued in antebellum society. Food refusal and its accompanying slimness were signs of social status as thin, frail women were unfit for productive work. Additionally, advice books of the era cautioned their female readers to be careful of what and how much they ate. Hunger and gluttonous eating were connected to sexuality and desire; therefore by demonstrating a modest appetite, a woman exhibited her own sexual virtue. It is clear, then, that modern *anorexia nervosa* existed well before the mass preoccupation with slimming in the twentieth century (Brumberg 1988: 178, 182).

2. 'Build up' diets

Fast forward to the years immediately following World War II, and the emphasis in women's magazines and health books was not on starving oneself or fad diets. Instead, prescriptive literature urged women to 'build up' their bodies to become sturdy, vigorous machines. Women's and teen magazines from 1945 to 1970 played a major role in constructing the ideal body type for the 'all-American' woman. During the 1950s, in fact, five out of six women read at least one magazine every week (Currie 1999: 23). In a culture where television was just taking root in suburban living rooms, magazines offered guidance, disseminated the news, and informed Americans how to think and feel about national and international issues. Women looked to fashion periodicals for instruction on how to be feminine and fashionable. In addition to appropriate clothes, the proper body was an essential ingredient of feminine perfection.

Although historians have been quick to note the relentless attempts to push women back into the home and back into their role as mothers and housewives, this does not acknowledge that immediately after World War II, women were still seen as needed. 'These days,' one beauty guide observed (Waddy 1944: 10), 'women need all their strength to stand up to the strenuous calls upon their system and food is the only thing to provide that strength'. This message was a continuation of wartime attitudes about the female body. 'Strictly Personal', an official U.S. War Department training film, stressed the importance of vigorous exercise, a balanced diet and the benefits of sleep to female military volunteers. The omnipresent narrator announces in the film's opening minutes, '[i]n perfect physical shape; yes, that's what it takes to do the man-sized job you've picked for yourselves when you volunteered'.⁵ Delicate waifs would not help America win the war and neither could they help restore the nation after the global conflict.

In a stark contrast to articles that appeared later in the 1960s, women's magazines in the immediate post-war years addressed the plight of underweight women. 'You don't have glamorous curves; your chest is flat; your legs are like toothpicks; your neck is scrawny', the beauty editor for *Screen Stars* described (Bennett 1951c: 63). 'You feel masculine, like a boyish figure, when you want so much to feel feminine'. Ironically, this androgynous look became fashionable and desirable in the late 1960s. But in years immediately following

⁵ For more information on this, see (under *Further Reading*) 'Strictly Personal', in *United States Army Pictorial Service, 1945, U.S. National Library of Medicine*.

World War II, women's magazines celebrated a different body type. 'A chubby, well-groomed figure is always attractive', another author advised her female readers (Daly 1946).

With the popularity of curvy silhouettes, underweight women sought ways to add extra pounds. Prescriptive literature advised housewives on the best kinds of exercise and food to help them stay energised and 'build up' their bodies. Exercise regimes focused on stretching and strengthening muscles without the use of bulky weights. Moreover, most articles highlighted exercises one could perform to strengthen muscles while simultaneously doing the daily housework (Benjamin 1945: 140). Exercise and a nutritional diet were also seen as a strategy for young women coping with the loss of a husband or boyfriend to war. The *Ladies' Home Journal* recounted the story of a recent widow whose unhappiness had shrunk her already slight figure to less than 100 pounds. Rather than allowing her GI husband's premature death to signal the end of her own life, however, she rebounded and re-built her figure (Benjamin 1945: 105).

Magazines for young girls similarly encouraged their readers to develop healthy eating and exercising habits at an early age, but *not* to actually diet. 'Don't be alarmed by those little bumps and bulges because it is much better at your age to be "round" than too "skinny",' one author encouraged (Williams-Heller 1953). *Polly Pigtales* and *Calling All Girls*, the predecessor to *Young and Modern* magazine, reminded readers that they would be growing several inches in the coming years, and that their body would grow more easily with some fat reserves. 'Doctors do not recommend dieting for your age', a journalist noted. 'In fact, if you are twelve or under, they say it is even harmful' (Furman 1963). *Calling All Girls*, created by the publishers of *Parents* magazine in the autumn of 1941, had little interest in reflecting teenage life; its goal was to encourage healthy habits and set a good example for young readers.⁶ Instead of printing page after page of diet plans, these magazines urged their readers to be physically active and to eat nutritionally balanced meals. This healthy and pro-body conscious attitude, however, vanished from women's and teen magazines in the mid- to late-1950s.

⁶ Teen culture, particularly girl culture, was certainly not new to the post-war period. See Kelly Schrum (Schrum 2004) and (under *Further Reading*) Jon Savage (Savage 2008).

3. Slimming down – ‘lazybones’ weight loss, passive exercise and diet pills

The national weight-loss campaign was originally directed at men because reports revealed they were at the highest risk of heart disease.⁷ But women, not men, became the most religious dieters. In 1954, *Reader's Digest* reported that 34 million adults considered themselves ‘too fat’ but noted that women were more eager to lose weight than men (Anon, *Reader's Digest* 1954: 34). In 1954, a Gallup poll discovered that twice as many women as men worried about their weight, and one in three women dieted compared to one in seven men. However, the motivations for female dieting had little to do with health. A 1959 Roper poll reported that 66 per cent of women dieted to ‘make their clothes fit better’ or to avoid ‘look[ing] heavy’ (Wyden 1965: 9).

The dieting industry became a viable economic giant in the mid-1950s. Between 1950 and 1955, diet soda drink sales increased by 3,000 per cent. ‘Food substitute’ products like the chalk-powder drinks Metrecal and the ‘Rockefeller Diet’ were also introduced in the 1950s. Metrecal’s earnings expanded from \$4 million in the late 1950s to \$13 million in 1960 (Seid 1989: 106). By 1959, 92 diet books were in print, and by 1961, 40 per cent of all Americans used reduced-calorie products (Stearns 1997: 109). Dieting groups and youth ‘fat camps’ became *de rigueur* in the 1950s and 1960s. One of the first national diet support groups, TOPS (Taking Off Pounds Sensibly), grew from a club of three friends in 1948 to an organisation with 2,481 branches by the early 1960s (Seid 1989: 107). Other dieting groups such as Weight Watchers immediately followed. Weight Watchers earned \$160,000 in 1964; in 1970, business had skyrocketed to earnings of over \$8 million (Stearns 1997: 109). In addition, magazine articles that had once featured strategies to ‘build up’ bodies were systematically replaced by slenderizing techniques.

‘Build-up’ diets of the late 1940s and early 1950s focused on energy, health and vigour as the goal of shaping up. American women wanted to be slim, no doubt, but what they meant by ‘slimness’ was different from what the definition became by the end of the 1960s. The most crucial difference between the immediate post-war years and the beginning of the 1960s was the dieter’s goal. In the early to mid-1950s, the ideal woman still had flesh on her bones. For example, the average contestant in the 1954 Miss America Pageant weighed 121 pounds and measured five feet, six point one inches tall — around eleven pounds less than the national average and just a little below MetLife Insurance’s ‘desirable’ height and weight

⁷ For a detailed account of the national weight loss campaign and its findings, see (under *Further Reading*) Barbara Ehrenreich (Ehrenreich 1983: 68–87).

tables (Deford 1971: 313–16, 325). The culture of slimming culminated with the androgynous high-fashion model, Twiggy, in the late 1960s. Therefore, it is more useful to see Twiggy's body type as a bookend, rather than a dramatic, overnight change in the aesthetic ideal.

In addition to having a new dieter's goal, by the mid- to late-1950s, a new attitude towards weight loss appeared in women's magazines. Prescriptive literature turned away from promoting physical exercise as a legitimate means to lose weight, in favour of easy, effortless diets and 'passive' exercise. In 1958, *Harper's Bazaar's* 'Lazybones Diet' promoted a curtailed eating regime in which dieters were urged to spend the Friday-to-Sunday period in complete idleness. The magazine promised a weight-loss of two or two-and-a-half pounds over a 'quiet summer weekend'. The diet instructed, 'sloth is mandatory' due to the limited 800 to 1,000 daily calorie regime, leaving little energy available to exercise safely (Anon. *Harper's Bazaar* 1958). Most diets reprinted in the various women's and fashion magazines were intended for women wishing to lose five to ten pounds to reach a fashionably low weight. The extreme calorie cutting such as that of the 'Lazybones Diet' was only suggested for brief spurts, a few weeks at most, with some diets then suggesting a secondary 'maintenance' diet for when the desired weight loss was achieved. But no distinctions were ever made between diets for women who desired to lose a few pounds or dieting strategies for women who wanted to shed 50 to 100 pounds. America supposedly suffered from an 'obesity epidemic', and yet the most circulated media for diet advice — women's magazines — failed to advertise the real work that losing large amounts of weight would require.

In addition to 'sloth' and 'lazybones' dieting, high-end 'reducing' salons had appeared in most major cities by the mid-1950s. Three of the most popular were Elizabeth Arden, Slenderella International, and Helen Rubinstein's salons. The selling-point for reducing salons was minimal effort on the part of the client. 'The trouble with exercise is – it's often so much trouble,' one women's magazine lamented (Anon. *Vogue* 1954). The solution was vibrating devices and roller-tables where women relaxed while the machine did all the work. Clients were promised correct posture, the elimination of saggy areas where fat can accumulate and better muscle tone. But while exercise salons emphasised the relative ease with which weight loss was achieved, this fed into the negative stereotype that 'overweight' or 'obese' people were lazy, unmotivated and inactive.

Vibrating belts, roller-tables and electrodes were not the only suspect exercise schemes to come out of the post-war period. 'Beauty experts' widely believed that by simply pounding away at inches of unwanted fat the problematic areas would flatten and become streamlined. Even rubbing fleshy areas with a rough bath towel was thought to help 'rub away the superfluous inches' (Waddy 1944: 48). Joan Bennett, an actress and beauty contributor for *Screen Stars*, encouraged her readers to roll across the floor 50 to 100 times every morning to carve away extra inches on their hips and derrières. Bennett also suggested rocking back and forth on one's buttocks while grabbing the knees to create a slimmer silhouette (Bennett 1951a). Another exercise that she called 'the thumper' consisted of lying on the floor, using one leg as a lever to raise the body, and dropping back down on fatty spots (Bennett 1952). She also recommended picking up marbles with the toes every day for twenty minutes to build up calf muscles (Bennett 1951b).

Another passive exercise strategy, 'isometrics', became popular in the early 1960s. Isometrics is any kind of exercise in which the muscles exert force against an immovable object or against themselves without movement. Like the bumping and rolling machines that preceded it, proponents of this 'scientific exercise' promised potential users that they could 'exercise without moving a muscle' (Anon. *Vogue* 1964: 120). The benefits of isometrics over isotonic exercise (physical activity), was heralded in periodicals as diverse as *Vogue* (Anon. 1964) to *Sports Illustrated* (Rogin 1961). Passive exercise appealed to American women not just because of the promise of results with little to no effort: women also avoided more traditional exercise such as active sports, jogging, or weight lifting for fear that too much action would transform their feminine bodies into bulky, masculine, and muscled figures. Because of this, post-war magazines held a tenuous position in celebrating professional and amateur female athletes.⁸

America's obsession with easy weight-loss came to an apex with a diet pill scandal in the late 1960s. Diet pills and appetite suppressants were certainly not new (Anon. *Screen Stories* 1953). What was unique in the late 1960s, however, was the mass number and types of pills being prescribed, and consequently the number of 'medical doctors' making a handsome living off the rainbow-coloured tablets. The FDA estimated that between 5,000 and 7,000 'fat doctors' treated five to ten million patients every year, sold more than two billion diet pills and achieved gross earnings close to half a billion dollars (Anon. *Life* 1968a).

⁸ For the relationship between femininity, the mass media, and female athletes see (under *Further Reading*) Susan K. Cahn (Cahn 1998).

In 1968, *Life* magazine published an exposé on the diet pill craze (Anon. 1968). The article began with the story of Cheryl Oliver, a college co-ed who worried about her weight and ultimately died from taking a lethal combination of diet pills. Commonly prescribed drugs for weight loss included amphetamines to suppress appetite, barbiturates to counter the jitters the amphetamines could cause, thyroid which increases the rate the body burns calories, the heart drug digitalis, diuretics which flush water from the body, and laxatives. Using diet pills she had received in the mail, Oliver, at age 19, went from 160 pounds to 120. The medical examiner attributed the teen's death to an excessive loss of potassium in her body and digitalis poisoning.

Following this tragic tale, *Life* sent investigative reporter Susanna McBee undercover to ten 'obesity' doctors. At the time McBee was five feet, five inches tall and weighed 125 pounds. According to Met Life's desirable weight tables from 1967, the reporter was at an ideal weight, and even a little on the skinny side of the spectrum.⁹ Of her own body she stated, 'No one has ever called me fat. A little on the hippy side perhaps. But never fat. I am a reliable size 10' (McBee 1968: 24). Over a six-week period, McBee visited a number of osteopaths and other 'fat doctors', posing as a woman who wanted to lose weight. The reporter expected to be rejected by all the health care professionals as she was neither 'overweight' nor 'obese'. To her surprise, however, all ten doctors welcomed her business and in fact congratulated her for 'catching the problem' early on. Among the doctors McBee visited, there was no consensus on diet or exercise. Moreover, she noted that the preliminary physical examinations she received ranged from exotic tests to merely a weight and measurement assessment. 'There was consensus though,' she wrote, 'on one point: pills, pills, pills' (McBee 1968: 27). Between the ten doctors she visited, McBee was prescribed 1,479 pills (McBee 1968). Even after the *Life* exposé, however, readers wrote in to the magazine with continued praise for the potentially deadly pills. One woman who had reduced her body from 198 pounds to 135 pounds wrote, 'I would rather live my present, happy, full life for half as long than to prolong a miserable, self-hating half-life of a fat woman' (Anon. 1968b). She claimed that due to her weight loss, she was now popular and had acquired a new job that doubled her income (Anon. *Life* 1968b). For women such as she, the supposed pay-off was far too great a temptation, even if her health was jeopardised.

⁹ At 5' 5", the 'desirable weight' for women 25 and over was 118–127 pounds for a 'small' frame, 124–139 pounds for a 'medium' frame, and 133–150 pounds for a 'large' frame.

The American love-affair with diet pills in the mid- to late-1960s was indicative of the overall change in exercise and diet literature. Short-cut slimming attempts were certainly not created during this period, but they did become more of a visible trend in women's magazines. By the late 1960s, even articles that had once reassured teen girls that they would grow into their bodies or that they should eat three-balanced meals a day, had all but disappeared. Studies revealed that the number of high school girls who thought they were 'too fat' had grown from 50 to 80 per cent between 1966 and 1969 (Wolf 1991: 185). Drawing on the protest vernacular of the day, *Seventeen* magazine suggested readers could hold a 'Thin-In' (Anon. *Seventeen* 1968). The event's guest list could include girls on diets ('and who isn't?' the 1968 magazine pointed out). Decorations would include large pictures of very thin models, entertainment was an exercise period and food included low-calorie snacks. Similarly in *Teen* magazine, a young girl wrote in to the periodical's beauty editor to ask advice about what style of trousers she should wear if her lower body was heavy. Instead of suggesting a flattering cut, the *Teen* editor responded: 'We suggest buying any favourite pant style — one or two sizes too small. Or spend your entire month's allowance on a pantsuit that's too small, and you'll find a new supply of willpower for diet and exercise' (Anon. *Teen* 1966: 53). While teen magazines in the 1940s and 1950s had once urged their readers to build a positive relationship with their bodies, by the 1960s they now mirrored the message of periodicals aimed at an older generation — slenderising at all costs.

4. From 'build up' to 'slim down'

So why did women obsess over their figures in post-war America? Why did the country transform from a 'build up' to a 'slim down' nation? As others have noted, starting at the turn of the twentieth century, middle-class America first became concerned with weight loss, but in the years after World War II slimming down became a national obsession.¹⁰ French designer Christian Dior's 'New Look' democratised fashion and declared that thin was 'in'. Post-war anxieties about Communism also led to concerns about weight. And at the same time, medical and insurance actuary data swayed the American population into believing that, not only was being 'overweight' unattractive, now it was deadly as well.

Fashion standards had a broader audience in post-war America. With the advent of ready-to-wear clothing, the creation of dress sizes shaped women's weight consciousness.

¹⁰ For more detailed descriptions of this, see Hillel Schwartz (Schwartz 1986), Roberta Pollack Seid (Seid 1989) and Peter N. Stearns (Stearns 1997).

Paris and New York still dominated design, but mass-produced imitations made fashionable clothes widely available by the end of World War I (Schrum 2004: 24). Although most women's clothing remained custom-made well into the 1920s, shop-bought clothes contributed to women's anxieties about the shape and size of their body. As shop-bought clothing was standardised to a specific body shape and size, if she failed to fit the pre-made patterns, a woman perceived there was something wrong with her figure. As standardised ready-to-wear clothing became more available and accepted in the post-war years, women now had time and money to keep up with the latest fashion trends.

Christian Dior's 'New Look' demanded slenderness above all. Although the silhouette featured high-rounded breasts and full hips, these were features that could be simulated with rubber or foam padding. A tiny hand-span waist, however, could not be faked, even with the help of girdles and corsets. Dior noted that for a woman to wear his design, she must have an 'épée silhouette' — be as slender as a fencing blade (Anon. *Newsweek* 1956). Moreover, clothing shops stocked smaller sizes. Thus, in order to be truly stylish, the average woman had no choice but to slim down. Men's clothiers, however, continued to sell the same sizes as they had for the previous twenty years (Anon. *Newsweek* 1956).

In addition to changing fashion trends, dieting and exercise gained new importance in the 1950s and 1960s over fears that Americans were growing bodily and mentally 'soft', and could therefore be more easily influenced by Communist propaganda. 'We've been called "soft" and our children have been described as physically unfit, inferior in strength and stamina to children of other countries,' the *Ladies' Home Journal* warned, 'Our technology has created a physical void' (Deutsch and Deutsch 1963). In a post-war era defined by excess and mass consumption, middle-class America needed to exhibit restraint not of consumption of products, but bodily restraint from food and drink.

Finally, and more damaging, dieting gained momentum and credence in the post-war period due to the widely-publicised belief that fat was literally killing America. The health industry, led by Louis I. Dublin of the MetLife Insurance Company, launched an all-out campaign against 'obesity' and 'overweight'. Dublin, long-time actuary for MetLife, spoke at an American Medical Association symposium in 1951 on what he saw as a direct correlation between fat and mortality. 'Overweight' individuals purportedly died 282 per cent faster than 'normal' people (Anon. *Newsweek* 1956). The medical profession had always considered 'obesity' to be unhealthy, but they generally situated their definition of too much fat at the far end of the weight spectrum. Dublin redefined 'overweight' as ten per cent above actuary

table ideals and ‘obese’ as 20 to 30 per cent above it. In doing so, the influential insurance company statistician catapulted, overnight, ‘average’ Americans into the category of ‘overweight’ (Seid 1989: 118).

But insurance companies could not have created this fear of fat without the support of the medical community. And unique to this period, doctors were more trusted as experts than ever before. The problem, however, was that these ‘experts’ relied on Dublin’s data. In their own reports, medical doctors and scientists continually referred to the MetLife studies as if they were authoritative versions of the ‘truth’, rather than looking for different sources upon which to base findings. The scientists and doctors agreed — being overweight shortened one’s life and weight loss lengthened it. Due to the fear of Communism and its link with the growing ‘obesity myth’, the federal government funded several studies. In 1961 the U.S. Public Health Service conducted its own height-weight studies, and in 1969 the White House held a special conference on Food, Nutrition, and Health (Seid 1989:120–23, 141). The Government’s attention to weight and health fed the ever-growing panic that the country was suffering from an ‘obesity’ epidemic far worse than that which Dublin had earlier suggested. Dublin’s reports ultimately decreed, however, that no one was ever *too* thin.

5. Conclusion

Just as the ideal body shape transitioned from a woman with curves to an androgynous silhouette in the post-war years, the strategies to obtain the model figure changed as well. Guide books and women’s magazines encouraged moderate physical activity and a nutritionally balanced diet in the years immediately following World War II to create energised, ‘built up’ women, ready to guide the nation into peacetime. By the mid-1950s, however, advice columns tilted towards weight-loss and slenderising tactics. ‘Easy’ weight-loss schemes such as crash diets, diet pills and passive exercise salons appealed to a post-war American population rapidly becoming accustomed to instant gratification and immediate results. Promises of effortless weight-loss not only sold these products but also perpetuated the damaging myth that fat people are lazy. ‘Overweight’ and ‘obese’ women were not only seen as unattractive: in a country whose historical foundations praised a solid work ethic, indolence was not a desirable trait.

Agencies like the Centres for Disease Control (CDC) regularly publish reports revealing how Americans are significantly fatter today than they were in decades past. One recent study revealed that the average American woman has grown an inch since 1960 but now weighs 24

pounds more than her 1960s counterpart (Ogden, Fryar, Carroll and Flegal 2004: 1–18). While data such as this is used to convince Americans to stop eating fast food and to exercise more regularly, what is more significant is that, while the average American becomes heavier, the average fashion model becomes slimmer. In 1947, the average model stood five feet, four inches tall and weighed 125 pounds. In 1975, she had grown to five feet, seven inches and weighed only 118 pounds. Today, the typical fashion model weighs 117 pounds and stands five feet, eleven inches. Most models are skinnier than 98 per cent of American women.¹¹ Not only is the average American woman becoming fatter but the gap between ideals and reality is also widening. This does little to motivate the typical woman to cut back on calories and take the stairs instead of the elevator. Although the average American has changed in size since the 1960s, one thing remains a constant — the desire for immediate results with little to no effort. The growing gap urges women to crash diet and creates negative body esteem.

The desire to be ‘ten pounds thinner’ is certainly not going away anytime soon, but we need to be conscious of why we feel the need to diet and vigorously exercise. Why do we aspire to look like the celebrities on the cover of glossy magazines? Why are super-thin fashion models more popular and better paid than ‘plus-size’ models? More than two-thirds of women between the ages of 18 and 25 reportedly would rather be ‘mean’ or ‘stupid’ than fat, and over 50 per cent in that age group claim they would rather be ‘hit by a truck’ than be fat (Rhode 2009: 1040). Statistics such as these are altogether disturbing. The quality and worth of a woman should not be predicated on her jean size. Celebrating good health and longevity should become priorities rather than mimicking a too-thin, socially constructed aesthetic.

Joan Jacobs Brumberg’s *The Body Project: An Intimate History of American Girls* nostalgically laments, ‘In the twentieth century, the body has become the central personal project of American girls. This priority makes girls today different from their Victorian counterparts [...]; before the twentieth century, girls simply did not organize their thinking about themselves around their bodies’ (Brumberg 1997: 97). It is not the purpose of this essay to be nostalgic about the 1950s — a time when women were encouraged to have more meat on their bones. Women were still pressured about idyllic shapes; it was just a different kind of ideal from that which women desire today. Instead, what I hope this history provides its

¹¹ For more information on eating disorders and how this pertains to models and public celebrity figures, see (under *Further Reading*) National Eating Disorders Association.

reader with is the call for self-reflection. A look back to a not-so-distant past reveals an American history where slenderness has been *en vogue* for only a short span of time. Throughout the country's history, a variety of body shapes were deemed beautiful. Only with the widespread nature of mass media and the democratisation of fashion did a more psychologically coercive and monolithic ideal of feminine perfection rule. By misguidedly equating health with weight and size, Americans have embraced the 'thin ideal'.

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