The Strive for Thinness

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In the United States today, there seems to be a growing obsession with the ability to obtain a certain physique, especially the physical aesthetic that is considered desirable through the eyes and lenses of the media. According to Carole Counihan, "Rules about food consumption are an important means through which human beings construct reality. They are an allegory of social concerns, a way in which people give order to the physical, social, and symbolic world around them" (113). The human body is a source of capital, and it can serve to enhance one's status, social prowess, and even self-confidence and well-being. The social environment of an individual can heavily influence his/her thought processes and beliefs about what is acceptable or not, and what is ideal or flawed. The media bombards American society with images that may consciously or subconsciously leak into the minds of its viewers. As standards become locked in, generalized, and accepted, they may begin to influence the actions and behaviors of those that they encompass. These standards begin to convey a belief in self-control and individual choice as people try to uphold hierarchical social relations (Counihan 113). The pursuit of thinness has become a dangerous obsession for many Americans, and this stereotypical image that has become imbedded into the social ideals of American society has negatively affected the mental and physical health of many women, especially those that are college-aged. Many college-aged
women endeavor to achieve social, economic, and cultural capital and part of this process entails the ability to maintain a socially acceptable and desired physical image.

The conceptual beliefs and conjectures about body image fit into Pierre Bourdieu's theory of capital. For Bourdieu, the social world is filled with hierarchies that seem to be subjective, or existing in the mind and pertaining to an individual, and objective, or being the object and goal of one's actions are both an important part of the structure of society (Class Notes – Chris Wilkes). Since these hierarchies exist, it seems that many people care enough to get involved in the struggle for achievement and Bourdieu developed four concepts that help describe the social logic behind this endeavor. Habitus is the first concept that means “the durable dispositions we have inside of us which shape our actions, a product of personality and history” (Class Notes – Chris Wilkes). The second is the social field which constitutes the environment where struggles actually take place (Class Notes – Chris Wilkes). Capital is the third concept that embodies a socially valued good a person strives for, and this is often distinguished between economic, social, and cultural capital. Bourdieu believes “if we understand people's dispositions, the fields they inhabit, and the things they value, we can understand how they behave and the structures that shape them and others” (Class Notes – Chris Wilkes). Finally, practice is comprised of the actions people end up taking and what may inhibit or allow these behaviors (Class Notes – Chris Wilkes). The endeavor for thinness is part of the habitus of many young women who try to achieve through practice due to its value as capital and the meaning it has encompassed through the social field.
Many college-aged women express their individualism and independence by defining their own diet and eating habits. Good and bad foods are what a person makes them to be. "Personal expression of willpower and release of control only under certain culturally sanctioned conditions are key issues in the relationship to food and the overall ideology of life" (Counihan 118). An example of habitus can be witnessed in the behavior of a young woman’s constant scrutinization of her actions, and how those actions directly correspond to her overall body image. Some women “know eating certain foods makes them feel better, so they allow the emotionally therapeutic value of food to override the possible nutritional drawbacks of eating too much or eating the wrong things” (Counihan 120). When such conduct occurs, an individual may experience guilt or shame, and even at a high enough degree to resort to purging. Others may eat less the next day or exercise more in order to make up for the offense. A number endure the guilt and take no action at all and “some women opt out of the food game altogether by eating with abandon of getting fat. Few however, manage to maintain their pride and self-respect, so virulently enforced are the cultural codes of thinness and self-control” (Counihan 127).

An innumerable number of young women compare their physique to the images in magazines, the cinema, and the fashion runway. The ideal body type of a college-aged woman is to be extremely thin while still maintaining feminine curves, and this physique can be considered a source of capital. This flawless image is placed on a pedestal since it remains unattainable and unnatural for a majority of women. The desire to achieve such an appearance may result in the practice of food restriction, which is especially witnessed in college-aged females. “College students value the exercise of restraint in eating because it is a path to personal attractiveness,
moral superiority, high status, and dominance. Thinness is a symbol of control. Thinness is thus
a cause and effect of control both over oneself and over others” (Counihan 121). Many women
correlate food restriction with a feeling of superiority and invincibility as well as a power over
others that derives from “self-righteousness and moral rectitude” (Counihan 123). “Women’s
obsession with severe food restriction and thinness is a phenomenon associated with Western-
style bourgeois capitalist society” (Counihan 74). Such a restriction also allows for control to be
taken over an aspect of one’s life, and especially one that aids in gaining social capital and
acceptance.

Many young women struggle to obtain the ideal body image in order to gain acceptance
from their peer group and desirability of the opposite sex. “The peer culture is the most
important source of values, arbiter of behavior, and focus of interest. Ties to men are the most
important social ties for women. For college students, a clear crucial absolute determinant of
attractiveness in the peer culture is thinness” (Counihan 116). Many young women feel the need
to not only impress men, but also to stand out among other women. Social acceptance is a
desired trait as is the ability to create a romantic partnership and establish a household; both
conceptions are a source of social, economic, and cultural capital. “Contemporary Americans
tenaciously maintain gender differences and hierarchy by eating differently and appropriately for
their genders. Men are often the arbiters of women’s diets” (Counihan 124).

Women often feel greater pressure to maintain a body image and control the methods to
obtain this image than men experience. “Men gain control over women not only by making them
feel insecure about their weight and food consumption, but by having the “right” to be judges of
their weight. For men, eating can be a means of obtaining of size and power; for women it is a path to thinness and control" (Counihan 125). The struggle for thinness and an acceptable physical appearance are not just important factors for the gain of capital in terms of friendships and romantic relationships. In fact, “ranking by attractiveness and its associated constraints follow women into the classroom and is likely to follow them into the workforce. It will be difficult for women to reject the food rules of American culture until they are in a position to challenge the sex-gender hierarchy in all of its manifestations” (Counihan 128).

It is clear that numerous pressures exist in the life of a college-aged woman to obtain thinness and the ideal body image. Eating is more than just a simple act of fueling the body and maintaining nutritional health; it is a moral behavior through which people construct themselves as good or bad human beings, especially in the upper and middle classes of western society (Counihan 126). “Individual choice involves determining for themselves what foods are acceptable and consuming them or abstaining from them as they wish. Together these two ideals are part of the Euro-American cultural ideal” (Counihan 114). The prevalency of such mainstream stereotypes has affected the way that women view themselves and what they consider valuable and socially desirable traits. “Women are more likely to impose stricter standards of thinness on themselves than men do. Women are also more likely to perceive themselves as fatter than they actually are showing their internalization of an unreasonable and oppressive cultural standard” (Counihan 125).

Since thinness is a means of cultural, economic, and social capital, women will go to extreme measures in order to ensure the acquisition of such capital. Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of
capital revolving around habitus, the social field, capital, and practice helps provide a deeper understanding of why thinness has become a modern-day western-society obsession, and why women have either submitted to or rejected the demands it entails. “Human societies represent nothing so much as a fiercely competitive contest in which the ultimate prize is social status” (Class Notes – Chris Wilkes). Until popular culture lowers the capital associated with thinness, women will constantly skew the definition behind what it means to be an attractive, healthy, and happy individual. There are all shapes and sizes to beauty, but one must be able to recognize the beauty that lies within before it can radiate outward.
Works Cited

Class Notes – Chris Wilkes

Counihan, Carole. *The Anthropology of Food and Body: Gender, Meaning, and Power.*