Resisting Fat Talk:

Understanding Fat Talk’s Functions Will Help Us Understand Why We are “Resistant” to “Resist It”

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“Fat Talk”

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- A ritualized conversation or verbal exchange regarding weight between girls
- Embedded in our culture—especially Caucasians
- Proposed 5 Positive Functions
Fat Talk #5

Social Control

or Impression Management

- Conforming to the fat talk norm to fit in, be liked, and make a particular impression

- Signals ownership of “thin-ideal”

- Signals alignment with “fat stigma”

- Signals humility, flaws, desire to fit in, desire for reassurance

- Relationship, Social & Political ramifications
- So as not considered “stuck up” or a “bitch”
- Feminine communication
Correlates of Fat Talk

- Poor body image
- Body shame
- Eating disordered behaviors
- Cognitive distortions of body image
- Female friendship quality (co-rumination)
Short Term Gains vs. Long Term Costs

- Low self-esteem and reassurance seeking
- Short term gain, but longer term damage
- Addiction? Checking behavior in OCD?
- Does fat talk make you feel better about feeling bad about your body?
- Is it funny?

- Is “Fat Talk” Normative among College Students?
Vignette

- Four college females studying for biology exam
- Discuss resolutions to make better grades then resolutions to lose weight
- The first 3 females say negative things about their bodies
- Jenny (4th female) then responds, but how?
Outcome Response Options

- **Self-Accept**: “Guys, I’m pretty happy with my weight, I don’t think I should diet or anything.”

- **No Info/Control**: (plays with her pen and makes no comment)

- **Self-Degrade**: “Yeah, I’m pretty unhappy with my weight also, I should really go on a diet too.”
Contextual Prompts

- I would say
- Most women would say
  - Would most likely lead other **women** to like Jenny
  - Would most likely lead **men** to like Jenny
Curious Disconnects

- Know “norm” for women
- Think other women like it
- Think other women follow it
- Not their self-reported choice
- Know men won’t like it
Men’s Perception of Women’s Fat Talk
Mikell & Martz (In progress)

- “Brittany” as possible date/girlfriend.
- 2 x (Brittany “fat talks” vs. “self accepts” to women in class)
- 3 x (Brittany is described as “sexy & lean”, “sexy & averaged-sized” or “sexy & larger sized”)
- 2 x (Median split on men’s self-esteem: High vs. Low)
Brittany’s Mental Health

- Higher when Brittany “self-accepted”
- Lower when she “fat talked”
What Does Women’s Fat Talk Mean to Men?

- Are men using fat talk to judge women?
- Do women know fat talk is not attractive to men?
- Does fat talk signal emotional insecurity?
- Does fat talk signal poor sexual responsiveness?
- Could fat talk signal insecurity and possible vulnerability to casual sexual advances?
- Or could fat talk signal internalization of “thin ideal”/ fat stigma acceptance?
Testing the Norm of Fat Talk for Women of Varying Size:
What’s Weight Got to Do with It?
Bazzini, Martz, Rocheleau, & Curtin (2010)
*Body Image*

4 women studying for an exam
2 x (Jenny is Underweight vs. Overweight)
2 x (Jenny Fat Talks vs. Self Accepts)
Negative (Fat) Talk was considered more “Typical” for Jenny?

Positive Body Talk 2.74
Negative Body Talk 6.17*

Positive Body Talk was rated as more “Surprising” to students

Positive Body Talk 4.89 *
Negative Body Talk 3.53
Jenny seen as more...

friendly
confident
outgoing
mature
sophisticated
polite
responsible
assertive
interesting
more of a leader

...when she spoke positively.

Contrary to Nichter’s “stuck up” proposition or weight proposal

Overweight vs. normal weight Jenny – No differences in likeability
Social Likeability, Conformity, and Body Talk: Does Fat Talk have a Normative Rival in Female Body Image Conversations?
Tompkins, Martz, Rocheleau, & Bazzini
(2009) *Body Image*

- Used similar Jenny vignette
  - 2 x Group Talk (Fat Talk vs. Positive Talk)
  - 2 x Jenny Talk (Fat Talk vs. Positive Talk)

- Liked Jenny better for Positive vs. Fat Talk
  - Perhaps there is a norm to fat talk and self-accept!

- Thought other women would like her better when Jenny conformed to the group

- 3rd person effect
College women and personal fat talk

Asked perception of Mother and Friend’s fat talk

Got actual measure from Mother & Friend

Women’s internalization of cultural ideals and their “perceptions” predicted their fat talk

- If women around you are refraining or saying positive things, can you hear it?
- Are we “assuming” everybody is fat talking?
Clues to Resisting Fat Talk

- Finding healthier forms of intimate communication
- Women don’t like it
- Women find positive talk more attractive
- We know men don’t like it
- Perceptions > Actual fat talk
Do we have the science to plan effective interventions?

CBT to change perceptions
Educate if fat talk is “unattractive”
Create role models for positive body talk
Educate women they will be liked for positive talk
CBT & ACT to help women express/accept emotions
Gender & Racial Issues in Measurement

- **Clarke et al. 2010** *The Fat Talk Scale*
  - Good psychometrics
  - White women only

- **Royal et al. 2013** *Fat Talk Questionnaire*
  - Good psychometrics
  - White women only

- **Sladek et al. 2014** *Male Body Talk Scale*
  - Muscle & Fat Talk
  - White men only