Introduction

Obesity and overeating have joined sex as central issues in the lives of many women today. In the United States, 50% of women are estimated to be overweight. Every women's magazine has a diet column. Diet doctors and clinics flourish. The names of diet foods are now part of our general vocabulary. Physical fitness and beauty are every woman's goals. While this preoccupation with fat and food has become so common that we tend to take it for granted, being fat, feeling fat and the compulsion to overeat are, in fact, serious and painful experiences for the women involved.

Being fat isolates and invalidates a woman. Almost inevitably, the explanations offered for fatness point a finger at the failure of women themselves to control their weight, control their appetites and control their impulses. Women suffering from the problem of compulsive eating endure a double anguish: feeling out of step with the rest of society, and believing that it is all their own fault.

The number of women who have problems with weight and compulsive eating is large and growing. Owing to the emotional distress involved and the fact that the many varied solutions offered to women in the past have not worked, a new psychotherapy to deal with compulsive eating has had to evolve within the context of the movement for women's liberation. This new psychotherapy represents a feminist rethinking of traditional psychoanalysis.

A psychoanalytic approach has much to offer towards a solution to compulsive eating problems. It provides ways for exploring the roots of such problems in early experiences. It shows us how we develop our adult personalities, most

importantly our sexual identity – how a female baby becomes a girl and then a woman, and how a male baby becomes a boy and then a man. Psychoanalytic insight helps us to understand what getting fat and overeating mean to individual women – by explaining their conscious or unconscious acts.

An approach based exclusively on classical psychoanalysis, without a feminist perspective is, however, inadequate. Since the Second World War, psychiatry has, by and large, told unhappy women that their discontent represents an inability to resolve the 'Oedipal constellation'. Female fatness has been diagnosed as an obsessive-compulsive symptom related to separation-individuation, narcissism and insufficient ego development.[1] Being overweight is seen as a deviance and anti-men. Overeating and obesity have been reduced to character defects, rather than perceived as the expression of painful and conflicting experiences. Furthermore, rather than attempting to uncover and confront women's bad feelings about their bodies or towards food, professionals concerned themselves with the problem of how to get the women thin. So, after the psychiatrists, analysts and clinical psychologists proved unsuccessful, experimental workers looked for biological and even genetic reasons for obesity. None of these approaches has had convincing, lasting results. None of them has addressed the central issues of compulsive eating which are rooted in the social inequality of women.

A feminist perspective to the problem of women's compulsive eating is essential if we are to move on from the ineffective blame-the-victim approach[2] and the unsatisfactory adjustment model of treatment. While psychoanalysis gives us useful tools to discover the deepest sources of emotional distress, feminism insists that those painful personal experiences derive from the social context into which female babies are born, and within which they develop to become adult

women. The fact that compulsive eating is over-whelmingly a woman's problem suggests that it has something to do with the experience of being female in our society. Feminism argues that being fat represents an attempt to break free of society's sex stereotypes. Getting fat can thus be understood as a definite and purposeful act; it is a directed, conscious or unconscious, challenge to sex-role stereotyping and culturally defined experience of womanhood.

Fat is a social disease, and fat is a feminist issue. Fat is *not* about lack of self-control or lack of will power. Fat *is* about protection, sex, nurturance, strength, boundaries, mothering, substance, assertion and rage. It is a response to the inequality of the sexes. Fat expresses experiences of women today in ways that are seldom examined and even more seldom treated. While becoming fat does not alter the roots of sexual oppression, an examination of the underlying causes or unconscious motivation that lead women to compulsive eating suggests new treatment possibilities. Unlike most weight-reducing schemes, our new therapeutic approach does not reinforce the oppressive social roles that lead women into compulsive eating in the first place. What is it about the social position of women that leads them to respond to it by getting fat?

The current ideological justification for inequality of the sexes has been built on the concept of the innate differences between women and men. Women alone can give birth to and breast-feed their infants and, as a result, a primary dependency relationship develops between mother and child. While this biological capacity is the only known genetic difference between men and women,[3] it is used as the basis on which to divide unequally women and men's labour, power, roles and expectations. The division of labour has become institutionalised. Woman's capacity to reproduce

and provide nourishment has relegated her to the care and socialisation of children.

The relegation of women to the social roles of wife and mother has several significant consequences that contribute to the problem of fat. First, in order to become a wife and mother, a woman has to have a man. Getting a man is presented as an almost unattainable and yet essential goal. To get a man, a woman has to learn to regard herself as an item, a commodity, a sex object. Much of her experience and identity depends on how she and others see her. As John Berger says in *Ways of Seeing:*

> Men *act* and women *appear*. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at. This determines not only most relations between men and women, but also the relation of women to themselves.[4]

This emphasis on presentation as the central aspect of a woman's existence makes her extremely self-conscious. It demands that she occupy herself with a self-image that others will find pleasing and attractive – an image that will immediately convey what kind of woman she is. She must observe and evaluate herself, scrutinising every detail of herself as though she were an outside judge. She attempts to make herself in the image of womanhood presented by billboards, newspapers, magazines and television. The media present women either in a sexual context or within the family, reflecting a woman's two prescribed roles, first as a sex object, and then as a mother. She is brought up to marry by 'catching' a man with her good looks and pleasing manner. To do this she must look appealing, earthy, sensual, sexual, virginal, innocent, reliable, daring, mysterious, coquettish and thin. In other words, she offers her self-image on the marriage marketplace.

As a married woman, her sexuality will be sanctioned and her economic needs will be looked after. She will have achieved the first step of womanhood.

Since women are taught to see themselves from the outside as candidates for men, they become prey to the huge fashion and diet industries that first set up the ideal images and then exhort women to meet them. The message is loud and clear – the woman's body is not her own. The woman's body is not satisfactory as it is. It must be thin, free of 'unwanted hair,' deodorised, perfumed and clothed. It must conform to an ideal physical type. Family and school socialisation teaches girls to groom themselves properly. Furthermore, the job is never-ending, for the image changes from year to year. In the early 1960s, the only way to feel acceptable was to be skinny and flat chested with long straight hair. The first of these was achieved by near starvation, the second, by binding one's breasts with an ace bandage and the third, by ironing one's hair. Then in the early 1970s, the look was curly hair and full breasts. Just as styles in clothes change seasonally, so women's bodies are expected to change to fit these fashions. Long and skinny one year, petite and demure the next, women are continually manipulated by images of proper womanhood, which are extremely powerful because they are presented as the only reality. To ignore them means to risk being an outcast. Women are urged to conform, to help out the economy by continuous consumption of goods and clothing that are quickly made unwearable by the next season's fashion styles in clothes and body shapes. In the background, a ten billion dollar industry waits to remould bodies to the latest fashion. In this way, women are caught in an attempt to conform to a standard that is *externally* defined and constantly changing. But these models of femininity are experienced by women as unreal, frightening

and unattainable. They produce a picture that is far removed from the reality of women's day-to-day lives.

The one constant in these images is that a woman must be thin. For many women, compulsive eating and being fat have become one way to avoid being marketed or seen as the ideal woman: 'My fat says "screw you" to all who want me to be the perfect mom, sweetheart, maid and whore. Take me for who *I* am, not for who I'm supposed to be. If you are really interested in *me*, you can wade through the layers and find out who I am.' In this way, fat expresses a rebellion against the powerlessness of the woman, against the pressure to look and act in a certain way and against being evaluated on her ability to create an image of herself.

Becoming fat is, thus, a woman's response to the first step in the process of fulfilling a prescribed social role which requires her to shape herself to an externally imposed image in order to catch a man. But a second stage in this process takes place after she achieves that goal, after she has become a wife and mother.

For a mother, everyone else's needs come first. Mothers are the unpaid managers of small, essential, complex and demanding organisations. They may not control the financial arrangements of this minicorporation or the major decisions on location or capital expenditure, but they do generally control the day-to-day operations. For her keep, the mother works an estimated ten hours a day (eighteen, if she has a second job outside the home) making sure that the food is purchased and prepared, the children's clothes, toys and books are in place, and that the father's effects are at the ready. She makes the house habitable, clean and comfy; she does the social secretarial work of arranging for the family to spend time with relatives and friends; she provides a baby-sitting and chauffeur-escort service for her children.

As babies and children, we are all cared for. As adults, however, women are expected to feed and clean not only their babies but also their husbands, and only then, themselves.

In this role women experience particular pressure over food and eating. After the birth of each baby, breasts or bottle becomes a major issue. The mother is often made to feel insecure about her adequacy to perform her fundamental job. In the hospital the baby is weighed after each feed to see if the mother's breasts have enough milk. Pediatricians and baby-care books bombard the new mother with authoritative but conflicting advice about, for example, scheduled versus demand feeding, composition of the formula or the introduction of solid foods. As her children grow older, a woman continues to be reminded that her feeding skills are inadequate. To the tune of billions of dollars a year, the food industry counsels her on how, when and what she should feed her charges. The advertisements cajole her into providing nutritious breakfasts, munchy snacks, and wholesome dinners. Media preoccupation with good housekeeping and, particularly, with good food and good feeding, serves as a yardstick by which to measure the mother's ever-failing performance. This preoccupation colonises food preparation so that the housewife is presented with a list of 'do's' and 'don'ts' so contradictory that it is a wonder that anything gets produced in the kitchen at all. It is not surprising that a woman quickly learns not to trust her own impulses, either in feeding her family or in listening to her own needs when she feeds herself.

During the period in her life which is devoted to child rearing, the woman is constantly making sure that others' lives run smoothly. She does this without thinking seriously that she is working at a full-time job. Her own experience of everyday life is as midwife to others' activities. While

she is preparing her children to become future workers, and enabling her husband to be a more 'effective' producer, her role is to produce and reproduce workers. In this capacity she is constantly giving out without receiving the credit that would validate her social worth.

In a capitalist society everyone is defined by their job. A higher status is given to business*men*, academics and professionals than to production and service workers. Women's work in the home falls into the service and production category. Although often described as menial, deemed creative, dismissed as easy, or revered as god-given, women's work is seen as existing outside the production process and therefore devalued. Women as a group are allowed less expression than the men in their social class. However oppressed men are by a class society, they hold more power than women. Every man has to watch out for his boss. Every woman has to watch out lest her man not approve. The standards and views of the day are male. Women are seen as different from normal people (who are men), they are seen as 'other'.[5] They are not accepted as equal human beings with men. Their full identity is not supported by the society in which they grow up. This leads to confusion for women. Women are trapped in the role of an alien, yet delegated responsibility for making sure that others' lives are productive.

Since women are not accepted as equal human beings but are nevertheless expected to devote enormous energy to the lives of others, the distinctions between their own lives and the lives of those close to them may become blurred. Merging with others, feeding others, not knowing how to make space for themselves are frequent themes for women. Mothers are constantly giving out and feeding the world; everyone else's needs are primary. That they feel confusion about their own bodily needs is not surprising

and there may be few ways of noting their personal concerns. A form of giving to and replenishing oneself is through food. 'I eat a lot because I'm always stoking myself up for the day's encounters. I look after my family, my mother and any number of people who pass in and out of my day. I feel empty with all this giving so I eat to fill up the spaces and give me sustenance to go on giving to the world.' The resulting fat has the function of making the space for which women crave. It is an attempt to answer the question, 'If I am constantly giving myself to everyone, where do I begin and end?' We want to look and be substantial. We want to be bigger than society will let us. We want to take up as much space as the other sex. 'If I get bigger like a man then maybe I'll get taken seriously as is a man.'

What happens to the woman who does not fit the social role? Although the image of ideal sexual object and all-competent mother is socially pervasive, it is not only limiting and unattainable, but it also fails to correspond to the reality of many, many women's lives today. Most women today do still marry and have children. But many also continue to work outside the home after marriage, either to meet economic needs or in an attempt to break the limits of their social role. Women continually juggle with the many different aspects of their personalities which are developed and expressed at great cost against this unfriendly background. In this context, just as many women first become fat in an attempt to avoid being made into sexual objects at the beginning of their adult lives, so many women remain fat as a way of neutralising their sexual identity in the eyes of others who are important to them as their life progresses. In this way, they can hope to be taken seriously in their working lives outside the home. It is unusual for women to be accepted for their competence in this sphere.

When they lose weight, that is, begin to look like a perfect female, they find themselves being treated frivolously by their male colleagues. When women are thin, they *are* treated frivolously: thin-sexy-incompetent worker. But if a woman loses weight, she herself may not yet be able to separate thinness from the packaged sexuality around her which simultaneously defines her as incompetent. It is difficult to conform to one image that society would have you fit (thin) without also being the other image (sexy female). 'When I'm fat, I feel I can hold my own. Whenever I get thin I feel I'm being treated like a little doll who doesn't know which end is up.'

We have seen how fat is a symbolic rejection of the limitations of women's role, an adaptation that many women use in the burdensome attempt to pursue their individual lives within the proscriptions of their social function. But in order to understand more about the way that overweight and, in particular, overeating, function in the lives of individual women, we must examine the process by which they are initially taught their social role. It is a complex and ironic process, for women are prepared for this life of inequality by other women who themselves suffer its limitations – their mothers. The feminist perspective reveals that compulsive eating is, in fact, an expression of the complex relationships between mothers and daughters.

If a woman's social role is to become a mother, nurturing – feeding the family in the widest possible sense – is the mother's central job. By and large, it is only within the family that a woman has any social power. Her competence as a mother and her ability to be an emotional support for her family defines her and provides her with a recognised context within which to exist. For a mother, a crucial part of the maternal role is to help her daughter, as her

mother did before her, to make a smooth transition into the female social role. From her mother, the young girl learns who she herself is and can be. The mother provides her with a model of feminine behaviour, and directs the daughter's behaviour in particular ways.

But the world the mother must present to her daughter is one of unequal relationships, between parent and child, authority and powerlessness, man and woman. The child is exposed to the world of power relationships by a unit that itself produces and reproduces perhaps the most fundamental of these inequalities. Within the family, an inferior sense of self is instilled into little girls.[6] While it is obvious that the growing-up process for girls and boys is vastly different, what may be less apparent is that to prepare her daughter for a life of inequality, the mother tries to hold back her child's desires to be a powerful, autonomous, self-directed, energetic and productive human being. From an early age, the young girl is encouraged to accept this rupture in her development and is guided to cope with this loss by putting her energy into taking care of others. Her own needs for emotional support and growth will be satisfied if she can convert them into giving to others.

Meanwhile, little boys are taught to accept emotional support without learning how to give this kind of nurturing and loving in return. Therefore, when a young woman finally achieves the social reward of marriage, she finds that it rarely provides either the nuture she still needs, or an opportunity for independence and self-development. To be a woman is to live with the tension of giving and not getting; and the mother and daughter involved in the process leading to this conclusion are inevitably bound up in ambivalence, difficulty and conflict.

If we look at it from the mother's point of view, the

process of leading her daughter to adult womanhood is ambivalent for several reasons. The first is the question of independence. The mother, who has been prepared for a life of giving, finds her feeding, nurturing and child-rearing capacity – so integral to her success in her social role – satisfied. She needs to be needed and has indeed fulfilled herself as a 'good mother' by attentively feeding her child. Thus, mothers do and do not want their daughters to leave them. They do because the maternal role also requires them to prepare their daughters for eventual independence: to fail at this is to fail at motherhood. On the other hand, to succeed at this signals the end of motherhood. We have seen that of the limited roles that have been available to women in this century, motherhood is the only one in which women have legitimate power. Therefore, their personal success at being mothers results in their loss of power. Their personal success is a dead end; it does not lead on to the creation of a new, equally powerful role.

The mother's ambivalence is, however, even more painful in that mothers do and do not want their daughters to be like them. For a daughter to be like her mother is a way, at least partially, to validate the mother's life. But, the mother's life remains an invalidated life and the daughter's act of reproducing her mother's lifestyle can be no more than a perpetuation of powerlessness. In her love for her daughter, the mother must inevitably want a different life for her.

Nevertheless, mothers may feel ambivalent about the changing opportunities available to their daughters which were not available to them. They may be jealous of these opportunities, and fearful of their daughters' welfare in a world they know to be hostile to women, at the same time as they acquire some indirect satisfaction at their daughters'

ambition and success. While a mother must be a mother, a daughter can be ambitious and engaged in the world.

Let us now look at these conflicts from the daughter's point of view. Daughters do and do not want to leave their mothers. For a daughter to leave is for her to become independent, part of the world, to signal her emergence as a female adult. However, this autonomy itself causes problems. As we have seen, independence in the world is not yet an option for female adults. Daughters feel ambivalent about their opportunities in the world; they are ill-prepared to take them up, as they have learned both from the culture at large and from their own mothers.

Daughters identify with the powerlessness of their mothers as women in a patriarchal society. They have been brought up to be like their mothers. But daughters both do and do not want to be like their mothers. While they identify with their mothers as women, as givers, as caretakers, they may nevertheless desire a different experience of womanhood. In leaving, in moving outside the prescribed female role, the daughter may feel she is betraying her mother or is showing her up by doing 'better'. She may also feel nervous about being on shaky, untested ground. Furthermore, if a daughter identifies with her mother's powerlessness, she may see her role as that of taking care of her mother – to provide her mother with the love, care and interest she never received. She becomes her mother's mother? Leaving becomes even more of a betrayal.

How do these ambivalences and conflicts in the mother-daughter relationship come to express themselves in fat, food and feeding? How is each adult woman who suffers from compulsive eating expressing what happened to her with her mother. It is obvious that feeding plays a crucial part in the relationship of mother and child,

whatever the child's sex. Within the whole spectrum of nurturing activities expected of mothers, physical feeding is the most fundamental – indeed, instinctive. A mother's breasts provide food for her children, virtually without any conscious act on her own part, whereas all other nurturing activities, including the vital provision of emotional support, must be learned.

Because of her ambivalence towards her daughter, a mother's willingness to provide her with sensitive nurturing, both physically and emotionally, can be undermined. Both female and male babies experience their first love relationships with the mother, but early on the mother must withhold a certain degree of support and sustenance from her daughter, in order to teach her the ways of womanhood. This has specific consequences. In *Little Girls*,[7] Elena Gianini Belotti cites a study of mothers' attitudes and actions when feeding their babies. In a sample of babies of both sexes, 99% of boys were breast-fed, while only 66% of girls were. Girls were weaned significantly earlier than boys and spent 50% less time feeding (in the case of breast- and bottle-feeds this meant much smaller feeds than the boys'). Thus, daughters are often fed less well, less attentively and less sensitively than they need. Inappropriate and insensitive physical feeding is subsequently paralleled unconsciously by inadequate emotional feeding.

While unconsciously the mother may not be nurturing her daughter well, she gives up feeding her daughter only reluctantly. In the absence of an alternative role, the distinction between herself and her child now outside the womb may become blurred. The mother may see her child as a product, a possession or an extension of herself. Thus, the mother has an interest in retaining control over how much,

what, when and how her child eats. She needs to encourage this initial dependency for her own social survival.

There may be great ambivalence about feeding and nurturing. A mother must make sure her daughter is not overfed in case she becomes greedy and overweight – a terrible fate for a girl. She must make sure the child looks healthy – this is normally associated with a certain roundness – and she needs the child to depend on her; for who else is she, if she is not seen as mother? Yet she may also dislike this dependency, which ties her down, drains her and prevents her from directing her energies elsewhere. Finally, she must prepare her daughter to become the future nurturer and feeder of someone else – her daughter's future child, lover, husband or parents. She must teach her daughter to be concerned with feeding and nourishing others at the cost of not fully developing herself.

Meanwhile, on the daughter's side, as she develops from child to woman, the daughter's feeding of herself can become a symbolic response to both the physical and emotional deprivation she suffered as a child, an expression of her fraught intimacy with her mother. As the child gets more adept, she begins to feed herself and select her own foods, producing a developing sense of independence of the mother. But this break causes conflict for the daughter. On the one hand, the daughter wants to move away and learn to take care of herself; on the other hand, this ability to nurture herself suggests a rejection of the mother. This rejection takes on a deep significance because of the social limitation of the woman's role in patriarchal society. If the mother is not needed as mother, who will she be? The daughter feels guilty about destroying her mother's only role. As she seeks emotional sustenance through other social relationships,

the adult daughter may continue to suffer deprivation, as her own partner has, very often, not learned to give. She turns to eating in the search for love, comfort, warmth and support – for that indefinable something that seems never to be there.

Compulsive eating becomes a way of expressing either side of this conflict. In overfeeding herself, the daughter may be trying to reject her mother's role while at the same time reproaching the mother for inadequate nurturing; or she may be attempting to retain a sense of identity with her mother. Popular culture abounds with evidence of the symbolic value that food and fat hold between mothers and daughters. In *Lady Oracle*,[8] for example, Margaret Atwood shows how the daughter's fat becomes a weapon in her battle with her mother. When her mother gives Joan a clothing allowance as an incentive to reduce, Joan deliberately buys clothes that flaunt her size and finally, with the purchase of a lime-green carcoat, succeeds in reducing her mother to tears:

> My mother had never cried where I could see her and I was dismayed, but elated too at this evidence of my power, my only power. I had defeated her; I wouldn't ever let her make me over in her image, thin and beautiful.

Similarly, in the movie, *Summer Wishes, Winter Dreams*, when the mother criticises her daughter's size, the latter blasts back that her fat is her own, that it is something for which she alone is responsible, that it is something her mother cannot take away too.

Women engaged in exploring their compulsive eating in relation to their mothers have come to the following varied realisations:

My fat says to my mother: 'I'm substantial. I can protect myself. I can go out into the world.'

My fat says to my mother: 'Look at me. I'm a mess; I don't know how to take care of myself. You can still be my mother.'

My fat says to my mother: 'I'm going out in the world. I can't take you with me but I can take a part of you that's connected to me. My body is from yours. My fat is connected to you. This way I can still have you with me.'

My fat says to my mother: 'I'm leaving you but I still need you. My fat lets you know I'm not really able to take care of myself.'

For the compulsive eater, fat has much symbolic meaning which makes sense within a feminist context. Fat is a response to the many oppressive manifestations of a sexist culture. Fat is a way of saying 'no' to powerlessness and self-denial, to a limiting sexual expression which demands that females look and act a certain way, and to an image of womanhood that defines a specific social role. Fat offends Western ideals of female beauty and, as such, every 'overweight' woman creates a crack in the popular culture's ability to make us mere products. Fat also expresses the tension in the mother-daughter relationship, the relationship which has been allocated the feminisation of the female. This relationship is bound to be difficult in a patriarchal society because it demands that the already oppressed mothers become the teachers, preparers and enforcers of the oppression that society will visit on their daughters.

While fat serves the symbolic function of rejecting the way by which society distorts women and their relationships

with others, particularly in the critical relationship between mothers and daughters, getting fat remains an unhappy and unsatisfactory attempt to resolve these conflicts. It is a painful price to pay, whether a woman is trying to conform to society's expectations or attempting to forge a new identity.

When something is 'amiss' in this way, we can expect a psychological imbalance and reaction. Few things could be more 'amiss' than the attempt of a patriarchal culture to inhibit a young girl's desires to be creative and expressive, to push her almost exclusively into restrictive gender-linked activities, thoughts and feelings. A woman's psychological development is structured in such a way as to prepare her for a life of inequality, but this straitjacket is not accepted lightly and invariably causes a 'reaction'. Psychological disturbance often distorts a person's physiological capacity: ability to eat, sleep, talk or enjoy sexual activity. I suggest that one of the reasons we find so many women suffering from eating disorders is because the social relationship between feeder and fed, between mother and daughter, fraught as it is with ambivalence and hostility, becomes a suitable mechanism for distortion and rebellion.

An examination of the symbolic meanings of fat provides insight into individual woman's experience in patriarchal culture. Fat is an adaptation to the oppression of women and, as such, it may be an unsatisfying personal solution and an ineffectual political attack. It is to this problem that our compulsive eating therapy speaks, and it is within a feminist context that this is developed in the following chapters.

CHAPTER ONE

What is Fat About for the Compulsive Eater?

Many people who are compulsive eaters underestimate the connection between their eating and body size. The compulsive eater often experiences her eating as chaotic, out of control, self-destructive and an example of her lack of will power. At the same time, however, she may say that really she just likes to eat a lot and is too greedy for her own good and that if it were not for the pounds and inches all this eating put on, she would be quite content. Some women say that if only there was a magic pill that allowed them to eat and eat incessantly while remaining at their ideal size, they would be quite happy. Indeed, women have had bypass surgery to achieve this state. So it is clear that people do see a connection between overeating and obesity and they attempt, through various deprivation schemes, to keep their overeating to a minimum so that they are not too fat.

What is crucial about this connection from the point of view of breaking the cycle of compulsive eating/dieting, however, is something often overlooked or misunderstood, both by compulsive eaters themselves and by those who try to help them. This is the idea that compulsive eating is linked to a desire to get fat. Now this point is not very