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“Say That To The Anorexic Girl”: Eating Disorders and America’s Next Top Model

Adrienne Curry, Yoanna House, Eva Pigford, Naima Mora, Nicole Linkletter, Danielle Evans, Caridee English, Jaslene Gonzalez, and Saleisha Stowers. What do all nine girls have in common? All of them have won a season of *America’s Next Top Model*, and all of them wear a dress size three or smaller. In this day and age where reality television stars become heroes to children, stick-thin women should be one of the last types of heroes our society should want our children glorifying. Television shows such as *America’s Next Top Model* (ANTM) exalt girls who depict an unrealistic body ideal. Tyra Banks, although adamant about preventing eating disorders not only on her daytime talk show but also on ANTM itself, has huge contradictions between her words and her actions. *America’s Next Top Model* harms the youth of America because it encourages the thin ideal and helps to internalize it in young girls, by granting the ‘Top Model’ position to dangerously thin women. The contradictions between what is said and done are another problem, because it seems that Tyra Banks is sending a good message, while she is really just ruining the perspectives of young teen American girls. Even though Banks preaches against eating disorders, her actions as the host of ANTM and the problems she allows girls to live with on the show send the message that it is okay to be dangerously skinny.

In order to understand how ANTM is harmful, a short definition of eating disorders needs to be put into place. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-IV) is a manual used by psychologists to classify psychological

disorders (Weiten, Wayne). According to the DSM-IV, “eating disorders may be classified in one of three categories: anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and eating disorder not otherwise specified, which includes the provisional diagnostic category of binge-eating disorder,” (Wonderlich, Stephen pg. 167). Each eating disorder has specific characteristics that need to be met in order for a patient to be diagnosed with an eating disorder. In order to be diagnosed with anorexia, or as Walter Vandereycken describes it, “self-starvation”, one must exhibit a fear of gaining weight, have a distorted body image, have a body weight of 15% below the normal average, and, if female, experience amenorrhea, which is the lack of menstruation (Vandereycken, Walter pg. 1-2). Bulimia nervosa is an eating disorder characterized by “binge eating and compensatory behaviors (e.g., vomiting, fasting) that occur an average of twice per week for three months and self-concept dominated by shape and weight,” (Wonderlich, Stephen pg. 168).

The third category addressed by the DSM-IV is the ‘catch-all’ category, which is used to diagnose an eating disorder even if the above criteria are not met. If a woman only induces vomiting once a week she still has a problem. If a woman will binge only and feel guilty afterwards for consuming so much (binge-eating disorder) she still has a problem, even though she did not purge. The ‘not otherwise specified’ category is helpful, because it allows for even small disturbances in eating patterns to be considered disorders. Because these small disturbances can then be considered disorders, they will be able to be medically treated.

While watching the seasons of ANTM, the viewer can see characteristics of all three categories of eating disorders from the DSM-IV being displayed in the contestants. Besides the obvious observation of the extremely skinny contestants that dominate the

show, there are many girls throughout the different cycles that displayed many of characteristics of eating disorders. In Cycle 1, one of the contestants, Elyse Sewell, raised questions in the viewer's and the other contestant's minds when she began to show signs of anorexia nervosa (ANTM Cycle 1, Wikipedia). Sewell, a 5'8" and 114lb. 23 year old (Elyse Sewell, Wikipedia), was rarely shown eating any food. The other girls became concerned and began to bring up the possibility of an eating disorder more and more. Adrienne Curry, another contestant in Cycle 1, swore she heard Sewell throwing up in the bathroom. The cameramen rarely showed Sewell eating, and she was never shown present at meals when all of the other contestants were there. Sewell was also shown many times, in episode 5 in particular, in a bra or sports bra to show the viewers exactly how thin she really was, (The Girl Who Everyone Thinks is Killing Herself). Even though Sewell did not vocalize a distorted body image, her minimal consumption of food raised uncertainty concerning her well-being.

Two seasons later on Cycle 3, another disorder was focused on. Contestant Cassie Grisham showed all the signs of bulimia nervosa. The possibility of an eating disorder was first mentioned on the third episode of the season, yet Grisham continued to compete for another five episodes until she was eliminated (ANTM Cycle 3, Wikipedia). She showed a huge obsession with what she ate, and was never shown eating as much or often as the other contestants. She expressed concern with her body, and mentioned how she felt the need to be skinny in order to be a model. During the photo shoot for episode 3, Grisham confided in a fellow contestant, Amanda Swafford, and confessed that she was bulimic. However, as soon as the word spread throughout the other contestants, Grisham began to deny her struggle, and told the other contestants she was no longer

inducing vomiting. However, some of the girls noticed the long amount of time Grisham spent in the bathroom, and commented on the smell of vomit strongly present in the bathroom when she left it (The Girl Who Everyone Thinks Is a Backstabber). Regardless of whether or not Grisham threw up after every meal, she still felt purging was a way to achieve her perfect body ideal, which is a large warning sign when it comes to eating disorders.

Just like the DSM-IV, there are eating disorders present on the show that do not fit all of the characteristics of the major two categories (anorexia and bulimia). One contestant in particular experiences great anxiety with her weight and fears her larger body will cost her the competition. Anchal Joseph struggled with her weight on the show, particularly when she was stressed. Joseph reported that she felt stressed when she saw her body, but then ate because she was experiencing stress. Joseph expressed anxiety when it came to food, and felt guilty when she ate more than the other contestants. She articulated a strong resentment towards food and blamed it for her problems. The longer she stayed in the competition, the more anxiety Joseph began to feel towards her body, and she began to lose all confidence in herself, (The Girl Who Graduates). Joseph continued on in the competition until the eighth episode, where she was eliminated for her lack of self-confidence, (ANTM Cycle 7, Wikipedia). Even though she was not abusing laxatives, throwing up, or starving herself, viewers still saw a girl who hated everything about herself and blamed it on food.

Contradictions between Banks' words and her actions also send a terrible message to young viewers. One of the most obvious contradictions is Banks' stance on eating disorders. Banks mentions in almost every season how important the issue of

eating disorders is to her and how she wants to prevent them from happening. At dinner with the five final contestants in Cycle 2, Banks stated, “The eating disorder thing is very sensitive to me,” (The Girl With The Signature Walk). One would assume Banks’ strong feelings regarding eating disorders would push her to do everything in her power to make sure any of the constants struggling with one would get help. Even though eating disorders are discussed often on the show, Banks rarely addresses it with the contestant one-on-one. For example, when rumors that Elyse Sewell (Cycle 1) was anorexic, the word got back to Banks at a dinner with all of the contestants and the judging panel. The group mentioned it, and Banks addressed the whole group and asked when Sewell had eaten last, but she was never shown talking face-to-face with Sewell about the rumor (The Girl Who Everyone Thinks is Killing Herself). In Cycle 2, contestant Yoanna House disappeared to the bathroom after a dinner with Banks and the final four contestants. One of the other contestants, Camille McDonald, mentioned that House disappeared to the bathroom often, implying that House may be purging after meals. Banks asked the other contestants if they thought House had an eating disorder, but never brought the issue up with House. She told the other girls to watch her and report any huge problems (The Girl With the Signature Walk). In the current cycle that is airing right now, contestant Allison Kuehn felt attacked by a fellow contestant, Fatima Siad, when Siad mentioned that Kuehn was bigger than her. Kuehn became upset, ran out of the room, and screamed back, “Say that to the anorexic girl,” (Top Model Makeovers). Kuehn then discussed her struggle with anorexia as a young girl and how she still obsesses over her weight. Banks never spoke to Kuehn about it, and Kuehn was sent home later that episode (Top Model Makeovers). The accusation of an eating disorder is a

huge deal in itself, and the fact that Banks would not sit down and have a serious conversation with a girl who might be suffering from one sends the message that it is not that big of a deal after all.

There was one instance where Banks took an assertive step towards helping an ailing contestant. In the case of Cassie Grisham, the girl who admitted to having an eating disorder, Banks did speak to her along with two of Banks friends. Banks discussed Grisham's anxiety with food and her obsession with her body while in the same room with a nutritionist and a plus-sized model. The threesome offered Grisham counseling, but she refused and said that she would not change, ([The Girl Who Mutilated The Precious Brownies](#)). Even though counseling was offered, Grisham's continued participation in the competition with an untreated eating disorder sends a terrible message. Grisham was eliminated the next episode, but the message was still clear: even if you have an eating disorder you are still allowed to compete. You are still allowed to advance. You are still beautiful. When young viewers see this message, they will begin to view eating disorders as a minor inconvenience rather than a huge, life-altering problem.

Aside from her obvious lack of interest when it comes to eating disorders, Banks displays another contradiction harming young viewers. Banks preaches, especially on her daytime talk show, *The Tyra Banks Show*, about how women should feel comfortable with their bodies, even if they are bigger than the average sized person. Plus-sized models are allowed to compete on the show, and many of them have had great responses from the judges and fans alike, one of the most popular being Toccara Jones of Cycle 3 (ANTM Cycle 3, Wikipedia). Banks is a huge fan of the full-figured models, and

supports them as much as she can. For example, in Cycle 1, Janice Dickinson insults one of the contestants, Robin Manning, by saying, “She’s huge! She’s not going to be a top model...” Banks attacks Dickinson back by accusing, “I think you guys [the panel of judges] are the problem with America. You are the problem of why women are leaning over their toilets this very moment after they’ve eaten...The full figured market is changing,” (The Girl Who Everyone Thinks Is Killing Herself). The market must not be changing all that much though, because none of the plus-sized models on the show have come close to winning the competition. The closest any of the plus-sized girls have come to winning has been Whitney Thompson from the current Cycle 10, who is now in the top three (ANTM Cycle 10, Wikipedia). Banks urges girls to be comfortable in their own skin and love their bodies, but her consistent choice of skinny winners sends the message that you should love your body *if* it is thin.

A third contradiction present in this show is the difference between what is encouraged and what is actually said when it comes to the contestant’s opinions. Banks constantly encourages the contestants to express who they are and to show their personality. However, when it comes time for the girls to speak up for themselves, their voices are strangely absent. On ANTM most of the contestants are modeling for the first time. They are there to win a competition, so instead of standing up for what they actually believe, they try to impress the judges and impress Banks in the hopes that they will come out on top. And when contestants do stand up for themselves, they have to pay the consequence. For example, there have been two separate occasions in the history of ANTM where contestants have refused to participate in a nude photo shoot for moral reasons. In Cycle 1, Robin Manning and Shannon Stewart refused to participate in the

nude shoot, and Robin was sent home because of it (The Girls Get Really Naked). The next season on Cycle 2, contestant Anna Bradfield refused to take part in the first nude photo shoot, and was sent home as well (ANTM Cycle 2, Wikipedia). Even though this may seem like just a small issue in the show, it sends out a very detrimental message to young girls. Because the contestants are passive and allow themselves to be critiqued harshly and not stand up for themselves, it sends the illusion that the panel of judges is right about everything. If young girls begin to believe in everything that the panel has to say, there is nothing to stop them from adopting the panel's views of what is beautiful. And, up to this point, the panel's view of beautiful is also unhealthy.

The presence of eating disorders and unspoken contradictions are not the only harmful elements of the show. Banks' motherly persona also causes problems for the contestants as well as the viewers. Whether she is popping in for late night chats, showing up at dinner, or personally educating the girls on modeling contracts, Banks displays a type of maternal nature with the girls, and it seems as if she really cares for their well being. For example, on an episode in Cycle 1, Banks surprised the girls at their apartment to have a talk about the stresses of the competition. One of the contestants, Robin Manning, commented on Banks' comfy sweat clothes, saying, "Miss Tyra...is more like a girlfriend," (The Girl Who Everyone Thinks Is Killing Herself). Manning's feelings show the connection the contestants have with Banks. Even though Banks is the head judge, she also plays the role of the friend, comforter, and mother.

The aspect of Banks' maternal nature could create negative issues, even though it is helpful to the contestants during the show. A study conducted by Emma R. Sands and Jane Wardle found that, "...the interactions of girls with significant others (i.e., mother

and friends) are likely to cause them to attach more personal importance to achieve the thin-ideal compared with images of women with no personal significance,” (Sands, Emma R. pg. 202). People enjoy and connect with Banks because of her kind, maternal nature, leading to a more personal attachment than with someone like Janice Dickinson, the cold-hearted and rude host of another reality television modeling show, *The Janice Dickinson Modeling Agency*. Janice Dickinson is the kind of woman that people love to hate, because she is, overall, a rude, sarcastic, hurtful person. On the other hand, Banks is sweet and caring, which will cause younger viewers to take the message she is sending more seriously.

Because of the clear representation of eating disorders on the show and the huge contradictions between Banks’ words and actions, young viewers will begin to see the contestants on the show and strive for the unrealistic body type that is glorified. This show is harmful because it clearly encourages the thin ideal internalization, even if it does not encourage it directly. “Thin-ideal internalization refers to the extent to which an individual cognitively accepts the thin societal standard of attractiveness as her own personal standard and engages in behaviors designed to help herself meet that standard.” (Thompson, J.K. pg. 181) What this means is that when girls or women view images that depict thin as the ideal, they begin to internalize that idea, and strive for it in the future. If the thin ideal is adopted, it can begin to cause sufficient harm to the girl or woman who believes in it. A study conducted by Helga Dittmar and Sarah Howard set out to find if the thin-ideal internalization had any type of affect on a woman’s anxiety level. Dittmar and Howard found that the “...average thin-ideal internalization leads to significantly greater body-focused anxiety after viewing thin-models...This detrimental

effect then increases in strength with stronger internalization,” (Dittmar pg. 788). So the stronger the internalization is, the more anxiety one will experience, and the more likely one will be to act to reverse that anxiety and change their appearance. ANTM is encouraging the thin-ideal internalization by depicting the best model in America as an extremely thin, tall woman. The longer this show is on the air, and the more times one views it, the stronger one’s skewed beliefs and anxiety will become regarding one’s own body image. The more anxiety one will experience, the more likely a woman is to take drastic measures, such as self-starvation or vomiting, in order to reverse their anxiety.

Even though there are a bunch of terrible shows polluting the television channels, ANTM is one of the worst. It not only promotes the internalization of the thin ideal but also sends the message that it is okay to have eating disorders as long as they are not completely controlling your life. Even though Banks preaches for good health and high self-esteem, her actions regarding judging and coaching the contestants do not match up with her sermon. The passiveness of the contestants, the unrealistic body ideals, and the untreated eating disorders that run rampant through the show are all causing harm to young teen American girls. Instead of teaching young girls how to apply make-up, dress appropriately for certain occasions, and walk the runway, it is teaching them how to sit down, shut up, and lose weight.

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