Body image and weight control are embedded in discourses that convey dominant ideals about appropriate gender, race, and class behavior. Despite research on the effectiveness of popular weight loss programs such as the Atkins diet and Weight Watchers program, little is known about how programs like Weight Watchers have developed over time as those ideals have changed. This paper fills the need for scholarship on the changes in the diet program since its founding by looking at Weight Watchers cookbooks. The program started out as a group of American women who came together to converse about dieting and exercise methods and was later founded as Weight Watchers in 1963 by Jean Nidetch. The basic goal of the program has remained the same: Weight Watchers strives to offer weight reduction services through providing support groups that discuss exercise and nutrition. Today, it has also expanded to include products such as cookbooks, magazines, and food to its followers. Weight Watchers has long stood by its “eat what you want” philosophy, while remembering to eat the right food choice in the correct portion. In this essay, I will examine the marketing strategy, layout, and recipe revisions from the *Weight Watchers Program Cookbook* (1973), *Weight Watchers Meals in Minutes Cookbook* (1989), and the *Weight Watchers New Complete Cookbook* (2011) to demonstrate how the diet program has reflected gender, class, and race ideology over the last 40 years.

Founder Jean Nidetch started Weight Watchers in 1963 when she, “began inviting friends into her Queens home once a week, to discuss how best to lose weight” (WeightWatchers.com). The program quickly developed around the idea that friends may come together to lose weight, swap recipes, and support each other on the weight loss journey. Though today, there are, “millions of women and men around the world who use
the products and services of Weight Watchers to lose unwanted pounds” (WeightWatchers.com). Weight Watchers began exclusively as the company was created by a white, middle class woman. Currently, Weight Watchers International holds total assets at $1.09 billion and is available in 30 different countries, yet Weight Watchers success did come overnight (Colbert). The Weight Watchers empire provides both food products that are packaged with perfect portions, as well as program cookbooks that offer both advice and recipes to participants (Nidetch, 9). This expansion of services proved not only profitable, but helpful for participants who struggled to find suitable meal choices in the supermarket and food substitutes. Weight Watchers expansion from its limited participant pool at its founding to an open program inviting diversity and males is understood through the changing nature of the period and the revisions made to the cookbooks.

The first cookbook I am examining in this essay is the 1973 Weight Watchers® Program Cookbook. The first edition of this cookbook was published previously in 1972, and was the first revision of the original cookbook published in 1966. The cookbook suggests with its inclusion of male, female, and youth portions, that women and their families were the major audience of the program. Even though Weight Watchers was founded by a female and included solely female participants at its inception, the 1973 cookbook takes a more realistic approach in its design by including a meal plan for men and youth. The recipes also include a portion size based section on the sex and age of the participant. For example, the cookbook gives a menu plan for males, females, and youth. Within the menu plan, differences in the serving size of foods such as fruit and meat are prominent for the three groups. Rebecca Swenson argues in her article, “Domestic Divo?
Televised Treatments of Masculinity, Femininity and Food” that “cooking culture has made gender a natural and normal part of discourse about the kitchen” (Swenson, 39). With the kitchen as a typically female gendered space, women are often viewed as responsible for that domain. Because women were the primary household cooks, it is assumed that males and youth were not seeking out the Weight Watchers program for their own dieting purposes. However, men ate according to the Weight Watchers meal plan because the wife was a participant of the program and in charge of constructing family meals. Though women were less domestic in the 1970s than in the previous eras, women were still in charge of the tidiness of the home and family meals. According to Amy Bentley, “full time homemaking or more traditional (lower-paying) occupations” became the female ideal post WWII (Bentley, “Islands of Serenity”, 188). She notes that those who embodied this, “did so happily, but others felt the pain of ‘the problem that has no name,’ as Betty Friedan described middle class white woman’s sense of malaise, leading eventually to the woman’s movement of the sixties and seventies” (Bentley, “Islands of Serenity,” 188). Weight Watchers incorporates this ideal of the female homemaker through constructing a cookbook that includes a dining plan, which females can follow for themselves, their husbands, and children.

The 1973 cookbook embodies the 70s thin body ideal as the image of the new dieting family. In the 1973 cookbook, Nidetch is hopeful that the success of those on the program will enlighten others to join the weight loss journey. She concludes, “through the Weight Watchers Program so many fat, unhappy people have been born again into thin, happy people. Maybe this time, it will happen to you... or to someone you love” (Nidetch, 10). Nidetch hoped that the Weight Watchers philosophy would be shared among the
friends and family of the participants. Nietch said this in keeping with the American impression of body image at the time, which was emphasized through images that women should have trim bodies. In the study, *No Longer Just a Pretty Face: Fashion Magazines’ Depictions of Ideal Female Beauty from 1959 to 1999*, women involved in the Miss America Pageant and Playboy magazine centerfolds became “increasingly thinner from 1959 to 1978 (Garner et al., 1980)” (Sypeck, 343). This trend towards slimmer bodies for the whole family may have repopularized the notion of family home cooking, but it also reinforces the gender stereotypes found in cooking culture.

Gender stereotypes found in cooking are often centered around the consumption of certain foods as well as specific portions. Females are often associated with delicate foods, such as sweet fruits, while men tend to stray away from fruit to uphold their masculinity and avoid the female connotation that comes with fruit. Food historian Amy Bentley adds that, “because of dieting’s largely female aura, traditional diet foods such as vegetables, fruit, fish, and low-fat salad dressings—and salads in general—have long been regarded as female foods, while meat has been squarely in the masculine category” (Bentley, “The Other Atkins Revolution,” 39). However, the Weight Watchers The Meal Plan outlines that females should consume 3 fruits a day, while encouraging that males and youth eat 5 fruits a day. This is especially interesting to note, because often females are associated with delicate foods, such as sweet fruits, while men stray away from fruit to uphold their masculinity. This cookbook suggests males eat 5 fruits a day because it follows the ideal that males have larger bodies and greater food intake needs. This cookbook does not suggest that males who eat more fruit will become more feminine, because males they were still viewed as dominant, or the foremost providers for the family in the 1970s even though women
participated in the “rising labor force” (Freeman, 729). The cookbook suggests that the youth consume the same amount of fruit as men, because of the importance that they receive the natural nutrients of fruit versus consuming sugary, processed foods.

The 1973 Weight Watchers® Program Cookbook features a regimented Menu Plan and suggests to readers that they keep to the “quantities and weights specified and at the meals named” while also “keeping a daily food record” (Nidetch, 13). Additionally, dietetic products are not allowed, with the exception of “artificial sweeteners, and carbonated beverages” (Nidetch, 13). This exemption points towards the program’s health conscious approach. The Menu Plan promotes “unlimited and moderate amounts” of category 3A vegetables, while noting that it is not important whether they be fresh, frozen, or canned (Nidetch, 13). With this rule, women could spend less time grocery shopping and in the kitchen because they were “allowed” to cut corners, for example one could stock up on frozen broccoli. This is an important note for the female audience of this cookbook because most women in the decade were busy actively applying for college, jobs, and positions; they were fighting to achieve “increased social and political freedom” along with equal job opportunity (Freeman, 729).

The cookbook assumes that the reader is female because in the Meats and Poultry chapter it states, “With our ‘legalized’ international recipes and your slim new figure, you’ll be an elegant hostess in more ways than one” (Nidetch, 164). This comment confirms that the female’s place is in the kitchen, studying recipes, cooking, and being a hostess. This notion is sustained in the actual lives of many women in the 1970s that were held back by household duties. The cookbook is a reflection of American society in the 1970s because it follows the gendered ideal that a female is responsible for cooking. The cookbook is also
enlightening for females in the 70s because it was written by a female who developed her own dieting program. Nidetch's cookbook may follow traditional ideals, yet in its nature is revolutionary for women because it represents the ability for a woman to take control of her body. The female is empowered through her choice to diet and to write a book, yet she is tied to the custom that she is responsible for her family's meals. Women were gaining momentum in the 70s by attending college and working, yet were unable to exercise their full opportunities and rights (Freeman, 734). The cookbook continues to follow the ideal that women are delicate beings when it advises that the female hostess will have to "restrain" herself and follow the guidelines for meat consumption.

The 1973 cookbook distributes gender roles by separating males and females through portion control. Generally, fish is to be consumed 5 times a week while meat and poultry are to be consumed "no more or no less" than 3 times a week. For all participants, 4oz of meat for lunch are key. At dinner, for women and youth 6oz is suggested and for males, 8oz is suggested. In the Meal Plan, Liver has its own category and is recommended to eat at least once a week. This suggestion to participants to consume liver demonstrates the improved research on the health benefits of foods in the cookbook. The division in the amount of food being served to males and youth versus females shows the shift to a more formulaic meal plan, similar to the concept of the “ordered meal” as argued by Amy Bentley. The “ordered meal” refers to the Western modeled meal plan of “A+2B,” higher status foods such as meat and vegetables which call for a “stable household” to “orchestrate the meal” such as this Weight Watchers meal plan that encourages its female readers to divide portions by age and sex (Bentley, “Islands of Serenity,” 182).
The Meal Plan continues to outline the various types and amounts of vegetables that should be consumed in a given day. The cookbook categorizes the vegetables. The 3A vegetables are different from the 3B because they are more water-based plants. The 3A vegetables are to be eaten as much as wanted while the 3B vegetables are to be eaten in a specific amount for correct nutrition, about 4 cups raw. Category 3A includes celery, lettuce, and parsley. The 3B vegetables include bean sprouts, broccoli, eggplant, and spinach. Vegetables from the “limited” #4 category include “more dark green, deep yellow, and red” vegetables, as well vegetables best steamed, such as okra, brussels sprouts, and peas. This method of categorizing foods into specific groups may not have been easy to follow for a participant. This method requires the participant to have the time to consciously read, understand, and follow the plan. In that sense, the cookbook targets white upper and middle class female dieters and ostracizes those who do not have the time to read and categorize foods because they work back-to-back jobs. This cookbook highlights just a small portion of the “racial, class, cultural, political and sexual tensions” that were abundant in the 1970s, especially over issues such as women’s rights and African Americans rights (Freeman, 736).

The layout of the 1973 cookbook dedicates a chapter to each category of food: Bread and Cereal, Cheese, Eggs, Fish and Shellfish, Fruit, Liver, Meats and Poultry, Milk, Sauces and Dressings, and Vegetables. This presents a fair layout of the text, yet leaves much to be desired for one who organizes the day around meal times, versus what type of food she eats.

Weight Watchers Meals in Minutes Cookbook, published in 1989 follows a similar layout to that of the 1973 Weight Watchers® Program Cookbook. In the 1980s, women
began to further enter professional careers, while continuing to have children and remaining the main homemaker in the family. A September 1986 article titled, “Women in the Work Force,” was published in *The Atlantic* and recorded recent trends of women in the workplace and in college. The author noted that, “As of 1984—the most recent year for which detailed figures are available—only 37 percent of all women between the ages of twenty and sixty-four and 41 percent of all women between the ages of twenty-five and forty-four held fulltime year-round jobs (including teaching jobs)” (Guilder, 1). Additionally, he researched that, “half of all 1985 College graduates were women” (Guilder, 1). It is no surprise that Weight Watchers chose to design a cookbook that would allow these busy women remain health conscious through simple recipes. In the introduction, Weight Watchers tells an anecdote that suggests that this cookbook is geared towards alluring busy moms in need of quick, delicious, and weight-loss oriented recipes for the whole family.

The *Weight Watchers New Complete Cookbook* (2011) boasts Weight Watchers success as “the world’s leading provider of weight management services” (Weight Watchers International, “New Complete Cookbook,” vii). This cookbook offers over 500 recipes following the newest program update, the *PointsPlus* program. This 2011 cookbook’s introduction references the science and research behind its weight loss program. The cookbook highlights the main elements of Weight Watcher’s program: first to produce weight loss of an average of two pounds a week, secondly to suggest foods low in calories but full of nutrients, thirdly to develop a fitness plan, and fourth, to maintain weight loss (Weight Watchers International, “New Complete Cookbook,” vii). This program description is more thorough than the previous cookbooks’ descriptions. The emphasis on
science and research suggests that Weight Watchers has taken a role in disseminating the new information to its user. This commitment to updates shows that Weight Watchers cares about the lifestyle of its participant and not just the body. These new changes also reflect the nature of people’s lives in the twenty-teens.

The busy and technologically savvy users can utilize the PointsPlus system online and to better understand the Weight loss calculations, The PointsPlus system gives the participant a daily Target, which is calculated on protein, fiber, fat, and carbohydrate content. The participant then must count “the PointsPlus values of the food he or she eats and does not exceed his or her daily PointsPlus Target” (Weight Watchers International, “New Complete Cookbook,” viii). This program is successful because participants are encouraged to keep track of their points, attend meetings, and incorporate physical activity.

The layout of the Weight Watchers New Complete Cookbook (2011) is significantly different from its predecessors. This cookbook is set up by meals, for example, breakfasts, light meals, salads, sides, main dishes, poultry, breads, and cakes. This cookbook also includes a new chapter titled, “New Basics” featuring a kitchen tool guide, as well as new recipes. This perhaps indicates that less people know how to cook today than in 1973. Today, people have moved towards convenience meals and pre-packaged products. This new logical layout also allows for those whose second language is English to follow along.

Instead of the 2011 cookbook noting microwavable dishes and low budget dishes, it marks each recipe with a skill level, basic, intermediate, or advanced. The icon used to show this is a cooking pot and ranges from 1-3 pots based on the level. This current day cookbook offers the same recipes as previous cookbooks. This speaks to the versatility of the Weight Watchers program and its push towards including more people. The recipes are
also of a higher quality; they are gourmet, healthy and contribute to dishes one would see at a fine dining restaurant.

In the 2000s and 2010s, Weight Watchers expanded its program to include more ethnicities through its diverse recipes, as well to follow the needs of those on a low budget. In a journal article in, *Prevention*, nutritionists studied 35 individuals and concluded that Weight Watchers was the best weight loss program for those on a budget because it demonstrated at 29% decrease in the weekly cost of groceries for participants ("Weight Loss on a Budget"). Weekly food costs for the participants averaged $35.29 before going on the program and as a participant weekly food bills averaged $25.01. The study also included the Atkins and Slim Fast diet programs, which demonstrated an increase in the weekly cost of food ("Weight Loss on a Budget"). This program encompasses people of different ethnicities, yet it still targets wealthy individuals. For example, having a gym membership is very costly and requires free time away from work. In addition, having the time to attend weekly meetings is also a luxury that not all can afford. Overall, dieting programs remain exclusive to well-off middle and upper class individuals.

However, Amanda Gengler's research in, “Slim Your Body, Not Your Wallet,” estimates that if a person chooses Weight Watchers, the price for six months is about $240 for the Meetings plan (food not included), and the estimated price per pound lost is $97 (Gengler, 1). Gengler's research proves that Weight Watchers is still a cheaper dieting program than both Jenny Craig and hiring a personal dietician (Gengler, 1). These statistics exemplify Weight Watchers’ conscious effort to make their program accessible to all classes.

The *Weight Watchers New Complete Cookbook* (2011) purposefully includes males in its *PointsPlus* diet program. The cookbook very clearly states, “the food he or she eats,” and
“his or her daily PointsPlus” (Weight Watchers International, “New Complete Cookbook,” vii). According to Amy Bentley, typically “men are attracted to these high-protein, low carbohydrate diets,” such as the Atkins diet (Bentley, “The Other Atkins Revolution,” 39). The Weight Watchers program is not marketed as this kind of diet, but follows this structure through assigning fewer points to foods that are a better source of energy, such as vegetables and proteins versus fats. Bentley argues that, “for many men dieting clearly has become a pleasurable topic of conversation” (Bentley, “The Other Atkins Revolution,” 39). Weight Watchers has opened up its program to men by ensuring a gender-neutral tone and protein recipes in its 2011 cookbook.

This now gender inclusive program has also expanded its ethnic participation through the addition of popularly adapted world recipes. However, highly traditional foods remain unexplored by Weight Watchers. Some of the new recipes include: Spicy Tomato Sauce, Smokey Barbeque Sauce, Basil Pesto, Mango and Black Bean Salsa, Teriyaki Marinade, Tandoori Yogurt Marinade, Cajun Dry Rub, Jamaican Jerk Paste, and Classic Vinaigrette. These recipes offer a global taste of many countries in a health conscious way and provides more variety in Meal Plans, attracting diverse participants.

Additionally Weight Watchers goes vegetarian-friendly in 2011, introducing a host of recipes that can be enjoyed vegetarian. The Vegetarian Times writes that, “If you are on a vegetarian regimen, finding a weight-control program can be more than challenging” but that, “Weight Watchers, because of its emphasis on a varied diet that concentrates on calories, fat and fiber, is completely adaptable to the vegetarian lifestyle. All foods are allowed, as long as the dieter stays within his or her point range for the day” (“Weight Watchers Goes Veg”). The PointsPlus program also encourages participants to stock up on
fruits and vegetables by counting them as zero points in one’s meal plan ("Weight Watchers Point System Enters a New Age"). An article in Environmental Nutrition notes that, “their POINTS® program has been updated to PointsPlus, which takes into account research on protein, fiber, and satiety, and shifts away from processed foods to more whole, natural foods” ("Weight Watchers Point System Enters a New Age"). Dieting has now become a normalized activity for nearly all middle class Americans through expanding its program to include Vegetarians, yet for those unable to get access to or afford organic foods, the program cuts out lower classes ability to participate in the diet.

Dieting has taken America by storm. Amy Bentley notes that, “the latest survey estimates twenty-four million Americans are on some form of low-carb diet, with another thirty to forty million contemplating doing the same” (Bentley, “The Other Atkins Revolution,” 34). With this outstanding trend towards dieting in the 21st century, programs such as Weight Watchers have raced to design the best diet program out there. Over the years, the Weight Watchers Cookbooks have gone from highly gendered, racially and economically exclusive texts, to gender ambiguous, multicultural, inclusive texts. The first cookbook from 1973 clearly labeled male and female roles through portion size suggestions. This cookbook included youth in their program to help the female with her own diet as well as the family’s diet. Changes in the 1989 cookbook focused on the women’s place in the kitchen while striving to make her life less complicated by offering quick meals, the use of time saving appliances, and cost effective recipes. The 2011 cookbook offered a non-gendered participant, and incorporated a good use of international recipes, which appealed to a wider pool of people because of the diverse food recipes available. It also suggests that more participants are single or that people in a family are
responsible for making their own foods (no longer the woman's duty). This change reflects the nation's individual who are perhaps more busy and harder-working.

Considering all of the changes made throughout these texts, the Weight Watchers philosophy and Meal Plan has remained the same, albeit a few technical adjustments for nutrition. But when looking at the marketing strategy, and layout and recipe revisions, the diet program has changed to become mutually inclusive. The *Weight Watchers Program Cookbook (1973)* and the *Weight Watchers New Complete Cookbook (2011)* effectively reflect the gender, class and ethnic ideology of history's past 40 years. In today's advertisements, “both the increasingly thin images and the striking increase in full-body portrayals suggest an increase in the value placed by American society on a thin ideal for women, a change that is concurrent with the increase in disturbed eating patterns among American women” (Sypeck, 342). While dieting advertisements are still targeted at women, health consciousness has increased in both males and females through diet programs. Perhaps Jean Nidetch's vision that people will be “born again into thin, happy people” will see adverse effects in the years to come (Nidetch, 10).
Bibliography

Primary Sources


Secondary Sources


