

**EXPLORING WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE OF SELF AND BODY
IN CHRONIC WEIGHT-LOSS DIETING**

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By

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This research project explored women's experience of selfhood and embodiment in relation to chronic weight-loss dieting. *Method:* The project included two phenomenological studies. Study One explored the meanings of self and body in relation to weight-loss dieting across the narrative accounts of six women (age 20-55) seeking to change their body weight/shape. Study Two explored the lived experience of self and body over time with weight-loss dieting through the in-depth study of a single case. A young woman (age 25) offers an exceptionally rich narrative account of struggling to overcome body-image issues and establish a healthy sense of embodied self over her journey from girlhood to womanhood. Both studies utilized multiple in-depth interviews and participant-generated photographs to produce detailed narratives. Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to analyze the textual and visual data as integrated, along with a mode of embodied interpretation. *Results:* The thematic findings from these studies illuminate the complex relation between body and self in women's lived experience. Women's meaningful endeavor to positively (re)inhabit the body and (re)construct a healthy sense of wholeness, self-worth, self-acceptance, empowerment, and resilience in their embodied selves is examined in the context of weight stigma and sociocultural pressure toward thinness. The participants regard themselves as active agents in the process of re-storying their lived experience of embodiment and selfhood as well as weight-loss. Their narratives interpret a recovery of positivity by shifting away from notions of restrictive dieting into a discourse of healthy lifestyle and self-care. *Conclusions:* The present research opens up the "mess" that is women's lived experience of chronic dieting; it sheds light on the complexity and scope of women's understandings of embodiment and selfhood in relation to existing sociocultural systems of meaning about thinness versus fatness, weight-loss, and self-improvement. Approaching the research questions from an integrative theoretical framework and as an embodied researcher enabled me to give voice to women's stories of strength, coherence, and growth amidst struggle, ambiguity, untidy and unfinished meanings about the body-self. The powerful union of verbal and visual description, and dual vantage points of shared and idiographic also aided in conveying a deeply nuanced sense of women's lived experiences. Findings are discussed in relation existing research and theory on the development of healthy embodiment, personal growth and resilience, as well as implications for health-promotion discourse.

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DEDICATION

To my amazing family of cheerleaders. Thank you for your immense love and support along this difficult journey. I could not have made it without you.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Body weight and shape carry substantial meaning for women in Western society. Words like “fat”, “overweight”, “thin”, and “slender” are more than simple physical descriptions or categories; these words are imbued with social meaning and represent ways of bodily being in the world. For an overwhelming number of women, the dichotomy of “fat” and “thin” becomes an institutionalized way to define, measure, and evaluate the body and, in concert, the self (Bordo, 2003; Lupton, 2013; Murray, 2016). Not surprisingly, feeling too fat and pursuing thinness via self-surveillance and body management practices, including chronic dieting, has come to occupy many women’s lives. The pursuit of weight-loss can stimulate imaginations and aspirations of taking on a “new” persona, shifting into another version or way of experiencing oneself, of becoming or feeling somehow “different” in your own skin. These transformations of meaning are viewed as possible through the achievement of that thinner form (Blood, 2005; Bordo, 2003; Fox, 2017; Ogden, 2018; Orbach, 1998/2016).

This present research investigated women’s experiences of chronic dieting with an interest in uncovering meaning about the self, embodiment and personal transformation as lived, alongside and in relation to a woman’s efforts to transform her physical body. Researchers and health care providers are called to pay increased attention to the words that are used to talk about body weight, given the ways in which weight stigma unquestioningly pervades language in Western society. In the present work, I have tried to uphold the standard of non-stigmatizing, person-first language (Kyle & Puhl, 2014; Puhl, 2020; Puhl et al., 2013), question harmful discursive frames, and remain faithful to the weight-related language used by participants in my description and interpretation of their stories.

1.1 Research Purpose and Significance

The overarching purpose of this project was twofold. First, the research aimed to explore the lived experiences of women engaged with chronic weight-loss dieting to gain insight into the ways that concepts of the body and the self may be related and interwoven. Second, the research aimed to explore the meaning of weight-loss dieting for women related to the experience of establishing and embodying a sense of self or selfhood. I wanted to illuminate the dieting experience in a new way that would uncover meaning about the sense of self and embodiment that may exist therein, looking deeper than the explicit focus on body image, body composition, and weight loss.

There seems to be little agreement in the qualitative literature about the meaning of terms like self and identity, with these terms often being used synonymously and intermingled (Smith & Sparkes, 2008a). However, for this dissertation, the language of “self” and “selfhood” are primary. The term *self* is used to mean the total person; it refers to one’s essential being, to all the qualities and values that constitute who you are as a person or an individual, and to self-body unity. The self is also conceptualized as the object of awareness, introspection or reflexivity. The term *selfhood* refers to the condition of having and experiencing a sense of self (Collins, 2020). Furthermore, although I may use phrases such as “the body” and “the self”, I ask the reader to remain aware of the intersectionality of these concepts in experience, as encapsulated by notions of embodiment and embodied subjectivity. I have also employed such phrases as “body-self” and “embodied self” to express this understanding in short-form.

This project consisted of two related studies, which utilized interviews and participant-generated photographs to explore the phenomenon in complementary ways. The following series of research questions were posed:

- (1) How do women who are engaged in chronic weight-loss dieting view themselves? What do they feel is central to their sense of self and embodiment? What aspirations to they hold for the self in the future?
- (2) What meaning does bodily-appearance and the act of weight-loss dieting hold for these women in (re)defining and (re)constructing a sense of self or selfhood?;
- (3) Does the meaning of dieting change or unfold over time and life experience? How has their sense of self and embodiment developed and/or evolved across a life history of dieting?;
- (4) Do they identify with notions of self-transformation, reconstruction, or re-creation of self in terms of weight-loss dieting experiences? If so, how is this thinking expressed within their narratives?

The framework of Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis outlined by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) was selected to address these research questions. The writings of van Manen (1997/2016) on Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Todres and Galvin (2008) on Embodied Interpretation were also influential to the present analytic approach. Finally, the layered analysis approach of Oliffe, Bottorf, Kelly, and Halpin (2008), recommended for working with combined interview and photographic data, was consulted to adapt the IPA approach. By prioritizing the

participant perspective in understanding the phenomenon of interest, phenomenological research, by nature, fosters a capacity for openness to be taken in new, unexpected directions with the findings. In the present research, focusing in-depth on the shared and unique experiences of a small number of women in Study One as well as a single, rich and compelling case in Study Two, made it possible to capture a dynamic and nuanced picture of weight-loss dieting and its ties to notions, perceptions, and feelings about the self and body.

In addition to phenomenology, the present research draws theoretically upon positive psychology and feminist constructionist perspectives. The positive psychology lens had the particular benefit of broadening the inquiry beyond the typical focus on the dissatisfying, debilitating, and distressing nature of women's body and dieting experiences by equally attempting to understand experiences of positive body image, self-enhancement, resilience or growth in relation to the phenomenon. At the same time, the feminist constructionist position set women's experiences in sociocultural context. It facilitated examination of ways that women's lived experience of the body, self, and weight-loss is shaped by and counters dominant notions about thinness and femininity. Moreover, from a feminist perspective, qualitative methodologies make a valuable contribution towards an important gap in the research on dieting and embodiment – the woman's voice. The extant literature on body image, weight-loss dieting, and disordered eating among women is predominated by quantitative methodologies. The present research prioritized women's own voices and experiences to elucidate the meaning of weight-loss dieting. Taken together, this framework provided a unique position from which to look anew upon women's experiences of self and embodiment in weight-loss dieting and contribute to the growing body of related qualitative studies in the area.

1.2 Motivation for the Present Research

Understanding my position in relation to the phenomenon of weight-loss dieting is important in as much as it helps to describe the central motivation for this research project and sheds light on the phenomenon from my point of view. In qualitative research, the researcher's own experiences, inclinations, and perceptions cannot be easily separated from the inquiry, making it all the more important to be self-reflective and transparent about one's position and assumptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Laverly, 2003). My research interest on the topic of women's experiences of self and weight-loss parallels a personal and clinical interest in women's mental health issues. As both a woman and clinician, I come to this research with sensitivity and

empathy for women's complex experiences of embodiment and the broader impact that a woman's relationship with her body can have in the context of her everyday life. From my embodied position as a woman, I have evaluated and attempted to change my own physical appearance in relation to Western female body ideals and notions of femininity. I know how my own bodily way of being-in-the-world, the relationship between my body and self, has been reshaped and reconstructed from adolescence to adulthood. For instance, I recall how the body took on new meaning for me during the years that I trained in dance as a youth. In dance, I observed and gained a felt sense of the contradictions or tensions of female embodiment, such as the body as object versus embodied subject, as dissatisfying and frustrating while also capable and empowering. Although I have never been significantly overweight or felt personally mistreated because of my body shape/size, I know what it is to experience body image concern, cast negative comments upon my body, and I have dieted.

I have also occupied another relevant insider position as a "fellow woman", standing on the outside yet intimately "let in" on experiences of the multifaceted nature of embodiment among significant women in my life. My mother, as long as I have known her, has identified her weight as a "struggle" but this has not defined her. She has always appeared to me as a woman strong in her sense of self, as knowing who she is, what truly matters, what she values most, and having an amazing capacity to be confident and even fierce when she needed to be. I saw her this way regardless of insecurity she may have felt about her shape or size in the context of weight prejudice. As a role model, my mother tried to teach me that how you feel about and carry yourself in the world matters as much, if not more, than how you look. My maternal grandmother was likewise a strong woman and feminist in her own right, while also being a dedicated Weight Watchers attendee and someone who often talked about her "diet" or how "the diet starts Monday". I have vivid memories of her telling Grandpa to get out of the driver seat so she could drive, encouraging other women in her rural community to be independent, and wearing bold shades of red. My mother fondly shares stories about Grandma out in the grain fields with the men, coveralls donned atop her dress. I have been fortunate to have both a mother and father who told me not only that I was beautiful on the outside, but also on the inside. I believe that having healthy supports and strong female role models instilled confidence in who I was and who I was becoming and inoculated against pressures towards constricted and glorified feminine ideals. However, I know that not everyone is fortunate to come from families or

circumstances that foster the building blocks for a healthy self, a facet of the human condition that I regard to be central to mental health and well-being.

As a graduate student, reflecting on this collection of experiences led me to wonder if women's engagement with weight-loss dieting in the pursuit of thinness is about more than transforming the physical body. For women, does weight-loss dieting also involve a journey to negotiate and (re)construct a sense of self in relation to the body? Does weight-loss dieting offer the possibility of self-transformation for women and, if so, what meanings or notions about the self are tied up in women's dieting experiences? These questions about the broader or deeper meaning, intention, or purpose behind the pursuit of weight-loss reverberated as I immersed myself in relevant research and theory in the process of developing my research questions and approach. The work of contemporary feminist writers on the social construction of femininity and idealization of thinness resonated with my worldview and personal experiences. I was also attracted to the philosophy of positive psychology out of a desire to respect the full experience of the phenomenon of weight-loss dieting for women, in all its nuances. Thus, my positions as a woman, clinician who works with women, and embodied researcher promoted an interest in illuminating the phenomenon of weight-loss dieting and its relation to the self through the voices of women.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE & THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this chapter, I discuss the idealization of thinness and sociocultural context of dieting and body modification practice in Western society to illuminate the psychological importance of these issues for women. Feminist theory is explored to elucidate the socially constructed nature of femininity and thinness, and also to explicate a connection between the concepts of body and self with respect to women's embodiment. I introduce the narrative framework for the self, underpinning the present research. Relevant findings on the self and self-transformation in relation to body work are reviewed. Finally, a critique of the extant literature from feminist constructionist and positive psychology perspectives is presented and advanced as a rationale for the present research project.

2.1 The Idealization of Thinness in Western Society

There are incredible pressures on people, especially women, to strive towards the thin body ideal promoted by social media, particularly the fashion, diet, and fitness industries. In Western society, thinness is regarded as culturally synonymous with happiness, social acceptance, success, beauty, and good health, and is juxtaposed by the highly stigmatized cultural view of overweight or fatness. Fatness is seen to represent negative personal characteristics of laziness, lack of willpower, failure, and being out of control, and is viewed as physically unattractive, undesirable, and unhealthy (Ellison, 2020; Grogan, 2017; Lupton, 2013; Murray, 2016; Ogden, 2018). Not surprisingly, research suggests that nonconformity to the thin body ideal, especially the extreme departure of obesity, is likely to be met with prejudice, social criticism, and a variety of negative social consequences throughout the lifespan (Grogan, 2017; Lupton, 2013; Pearl & Puhl, 2018). Moreover, it is generally accepted that the social pressure to conform to the prevailing thin ideal is greater for women than for men and that, likewise, nonconformity to this ideal presents greater negative social consequences for women in various contexts (e.g., employment, relationships, health care) and implications for how women feel about themselves (Bordo, 2003; Ellison, 2020; Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Green, 2018; Orbach, 1993/2018).

“Discourse” is a concept frequently employed within feminist research on women's bodies, body ideals, thinness and fatness, to analyze both the discursive and power dimensions of these categories. According to Lupton (2013) the concept of discourse is broadly understood as:

Defined and coherent ways of representing and discussing people, events or things, as expressed in a range of forums, from everyday talk to the popular media and the internet to expert talk and texts. Discourses are contextual, embedded in particular historical, political and cultural settings. Discourses reflect both common understandings and perpetuate them, contributing to ways of thinking about, living and treating our bodies” (p. 8).

Lupton discussed how the meaning of thinness and fatness is dynamic and shifting, contingent upon sociocultural context and discourses as well as embodied subjectivity. While the Body Mass Index (BMI) as a standard measure used to clinically label people as “overweight” or “obese” is very precise, understandings of weight are varied and relative. For example, a woman who is not clinically “overweight” by the standard of BMI may consider herself to be “fat” because she can no longer fit into her clothes. As another example, a woman who has been overweight all her life may not identify herself as “fat” or describe her body as such, despite societal and medical standards that say otherwise.

Bordo (2003) discussed the historical traces of the current idealization of thinness and social derogation of fatness in Western society. She showed how excess flesh came to be linked with low morality, personal inadequacy or lack of willpower when affluent peoples began using forms of dieting to foster a certain kind of inner self or self-image. For example, in the late Victorian era, those who could afford to eat well began to systematically deny themselves food in pursuit of an aesthetic ideal. Similarly, the Aristocratic Greek culture used food regulation as a path to self-mastery and moderation. While dieting in contemporary society has become a project with an explicit focus on transforming the physical body, specifically by eradicating excess fat, these associations about personal character and beauty have continued and, without question, impact women’s decisions to engage and persist in weight-loss dieting. In Western society, the size and shape of the body has come to represent the inner state of the self, as a symbol of personal order or disorder (Bordo, 2003; Lupton, 2013; Murray, 2016).

A key factor in the current ideal of thinness is that the body is kept under control, not only in terms of body weight but in maintaining a physique that is shaped, worked out, and firm. As Bordo (2003) stated, “the ideal here is of a body that is absolutely tight, contained, ‘bolted down’, firm: in other words, a body that is protected against eruption from within, whose internal processes are under control” (p. 190). Lupton (2013) also discussed the societal ideal of the

“tightly controlled, hard, impermeable body” (p. 105). Both of these authors link the thin, feminine body with the muscular, hard body in that both ideals require eradication of excess flesh and emphasize firmness. The pressure to have a thin, toned body remains intense in Western society despite the emerging cultural discourses which suggest that a variety of body shapes is a positive thing, that people should accept their body as it is, and that maintaining a healthy lifestyle and healthy weight are more important than being thin (Bacon, 2010; Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Kater, 2012; Murray, 2016). For women, having a body that is not quintessentially “thin” is only acceptable if it is toned and, even on extremely thin bodies, areas that are “soft” or “jiggly” are unacceptable by current standards. However, most people do not have slim, toned bodies naturally, so they need to be ever vigilant about exercise and diet in order to conform to these ideals (Bordo, 2003; Grogan, 2017).

Moreover, an implicit and potentially damaging message promoted within the anti-fat attitudes of Western society is that the thin ideal can be achieved by anyone who is willing to work hard enough for it. This message is in keeping with the Western ideology of personal responsibility for life outcomes including health. Despite growing evidence of the contribution of genetic and social determinants to weight, people still tend to hold the individual to blame for having a weight problem. Being overweight is perceived to violate ideals of self-control and self-discipline, caused by factors within personal control (e.g., overeating, lack of exercise) and thus fixable via personal willpower and self-improvement efforts (Bacon, 2010; Grogan, 2017; Lupton, 2013; Murray, 2016; Orbach, 2009).

2.2 Weight as a “Women’s Issue”

The term *body image* refers to an individual’s appraisal of and feelings about their body and its functionality (Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002). In the context of the thin ideal, the experience of body image dissatisfaction has been termed a “normative discontent” among women in Western society (Rodin et al., 1985). This terminology suggests that feeling negatively about one’s body has become widespread, the “norm” rather than the exception for women. Studies have shown that, irrespective of age, women generally experience greater dissatisfaction with their bodies than men (Green, 2018; Polivy & Herman, 2007; Slof-Op 't Landt et al., 2017; Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002). Women consistently report an ideal weight or size that is much thinner than their perceived size, suggesting that most women would choose to be thinner than they currently are. Most women also report specific repulsion at certain areas of their bodies, typically the stomach,

hips, thighs, and buttocks, and tend to overestimate the size of key areas of their body (Grogan, 2017; Murray, 2016). Body dissatisfaction, in turn, motivates behavioural efforts to lose weight or modify physical appearance. Consequently, women are more likely than men to engage in chronic dieting, use drastic measures to change their bodies (e.g., diet pills, cosmetic surgery) and develop eating disorders (Levine & Piran, 2004; Polivy & Herman, 2007; Raffoul & Hammond, 2018; Raffoul et al, 2018).

For many women, body image concerns begin early and continue throughout the lifespan. Among children as young as age 8, girls have been found to have significantly more eating-related concerns, higher body dissatisfaction, and a larger discrepancy between their ideal and current body shape than boys. Body image concerns become increasingly common for girls during adolescence, which researchers have argued is due, at least in part, to the weight gain associated with puberty. Adolescent girls often respond to these concerns by dieting. Data suggest that four in five adolescent girls will diet at least once in their teenage years and, even though most are not overweight, as many as two-thirds of teenage girls are dieting at a given time (Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002). A longitudinal study found that 57 percent of girls were dieting in Grade 9 and 80 percent of these same girls (who were dieting at baseline) were dieting two years later (Raffoul et al., 2018). The pervasiveness of body image concerns among female university students has been well-documented. A survey of female students aged 18 to 35 years found that dieting was practiced by 42 percent to lose weight and 32 percent to avoid weight gain, despite the fact that 78 percent reported a BMI in the healthy range (Fayet et al., 2012).

Research has suggested that women are likely to experience body image concerns throughout adulthood, though the nature and intensity of concerns may shift across different life stages or events. For instance, Tiggemann and Lynch (2001) found little variation in body dissatisfaction ratings across a sample of women ranging from 20 to 84 years of age; however, older women reported larger ideal body sizes and less body monitoring, appearance-related anxiety, and weight-loss dieting than younger women in their sample. The authors concluded that while body dissatisfaction remains relatively stable, its negative psychological impact may decrease with age. Qualitative studies have offered support for the enduring negative influence of weight stigma and thin-ideal internalization on women's experiences of their bodies across the lifespan (Pila et al., 2017; Rice, 2007). Some qualitative data suggest that women may develop increased aptitude to reject pressures towards thinness and conceive new meanings about their

bodies and embodiment in older age (Hurd, 2000; Ogle & Damnhorst, 2005; Piran, 2016a), although prevalence data have indicated that body image disturbance and disordered eating may be increasing among older women, as a product of the globalized diet culture (Samuels et al., 2019).

There is a striking difference in the relative importance of body weight in women's versus men's lives. While many overweight men claim not to think of their bodies as fat, women frequently consider their bodies to be fat even if they are only mildly overweight or one part of their body seems too large. Research suggests that many girls and women whose weights fall in the normal-weight and even underweight range, according to BMI, perceive their bodies as fat (Fayet et al, 2012; Raffoul et al, 2018). Qualitative studies have shown that women have a very distinct sense of how their bodies should look and of the particular parts of their bodies that need modification to attain this image of perfection (Fahs & Swank, 2017; Paquette & Raine, 2004). Grogan (2017) described how women's discourse about dieting often contains themes of continuous awareness and vigilance about body size and tendencies to objectify the body. In her interviews with women aged 18 to 63 years, Grogan observed how they readily identified what was "wrong" with their bodies yet often had a hard time identifying any parts that were acceptable or likeable. When asked to imagine putting on even a small amount of weight (7 lbs.), many of these women said that this weight gain would make them "feel fat" and want to hide away from others or avoid social activities. The significant social effect of a relatively small increase in weight illustrates the perceived importance of body weight in women's interpersonal lives. Studies have shown that fear of weight gain is more prevalent for women than men across the lifespan (Slof-Op 't Landt et al., 2017).

Accordingly, researchers have argued that the social derogation of fatness and its equation with lack of self-control and inferiority is not applied equally to both sexes in Western society (e.g., Bordo, 2003; Green, 2018, Orbach, 1993/2018). Murray (2016) asserted that "living 'fat' and female in contemporary Western culture is difficult: we are socialized to be ashamed of our bodies, and to engage in endless processes to alter them, to improve them, to normalize them" (p. 5). Compared to men, research suggests that women are permitted less deviation from the thin ideal, are evaluated and evaluate themselves more based on their physical appearance, and experience harsher weight prejudice (Fikkan & Rothblum, 2012; Grogan, 2017; Smith, 2012). For instance, studies of eating stereotypes have found that women who eat small

amounts of food are perceived to be more feminine (Vartanian et al., 2007) and thinner than women who eat large amounts (Vartanian et al., 2008). Many women set unrealistic goals for the way their bodies should look and spend a significant amount of time worrying about, scrutinizing, and attempting to change their bodies. Many women are likewise concerned with what and how much they eat. Yet, only a minority of women will “naturally” achieve the extreme thin ideal (Blood, 2005; Bordo, 2003). As such, it is not surprising that body weight/shape concerns have been linked to greater self-consciousness and lower self-esteem among women (Grogan, 2017; Sarfan et al., 2019; Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002).

Studies of the historical portrayal of the female body in Western media have shown that models became increasingly thinner between the 1960s and 1990s. Although the definition of the thin ideal has become thinner, the average weight among women has actually increased (Ellison, 2020; Grogan, 2017). Furthermore, the digital modification of images in magazines today means that women are being educated to shift their perceptions of what a normal woman’s body looks like even further beyond reality and to see their own bodies as deficient in comparison to an unrealistic, slimmed, and smoothed ideal (Bordo, 2003; Orbach, 2009). In this context, is it really that surprising that so many women feel dissatisfied and even guilty or ashamed about how their bodies look? Despite changes in the feminine ideal historically, one constant is that women have always been encouraged to alter their body shape and size to comply with the current trends. This has meant tolerating pain and discomfort in pursuit of the ideal at times, seen most clearly with the practices of foot binding or corseting. However, it has been argued that practices of strict dieting and cosmetic surgery are the modern-day equivalent, designed to achieve the thin body shape currently idealized in Western culture (Choi, 2005; Grogan, 2017; Ogden, 2018).

The underlying message dictated by social pressures for women to pursue thinness by dieting or other forms of body work is that the female body is deficient, in need of reshaping and improvement. The woman whose body fails to conform to the thin ideal is implicitly told that she is somehow defective, she does not “fit” and, since her body size and shape is under her control, she has “let herself go” and needs to “take control” of her life and “improving” herself. The language of fat as a “choice” and personal failing is apparent within the discourse of the diet, fitness, and beauty industries (Blood, 2005; Bordo, 2003; Lupton, 2013; Murray, 2016). In addition, Choi (2005) described that to perfect the female body it is fragmented into “problem areas” that, oddly enough, happen to biologically distinguish women from men and so should be

considered feminine. Women are biologically predisposed to store more fat in certain areas of the body including the breast, hip, thigh, and stomach and the optimum female reproductive function requires sufficient levels of body fat. Yet, women are consistently told (and tell themselves) that these areas are problematic. This notion of “problem areas” is perpetuated by the diet, fitness, and cosmetic surgery industries in both the language used to describe women’s bodies and the promotion of strategies designed to “target” these areas (Choi, 2005; Orbach, 2009; Murray, 2016). This situation raises women’s consciousness about the ways their bodies are read as problematic and hence may create a “problem” that they did not previously recognize.

The literature has also drawn attention to ways that women in Western culture must contend with shifting meanings on the body over the life course. For instance, older women’s experiences of embodiment are impacted by compounding discourses of youthfulness and thinness. Hurd (2000) explored the embodied experiences of women aged 61 to 92. Interview findings revealed that while wrinkles and sagging were aspects of the aging body that women felt dissatisfied with, these changes were met with a sense of acceptance, regarded as an inevitable, natural part of the aging process. In contrast, weight gain was experienced as a continued source of self-criticism and -monitoring for the participants into older age, regarded more as a matter of personal choice and responsibility to control. As another example, Johnson, Burrows, and Williamson’s (2004) exploration of the meaning of bodily changes for first-time pregnant women revealed the complexities of embodiment, related to the construction of pregnancy as a legitimized transgression from the thin ideal. Pregnancy seemed to offer some protection against body image concerns, in that the women described a relaxing of their need to be watchful about weight and eating habits as well as lessening of the usual social pressure to conform to beauty ideals. Yet, the first-time mothers related experiences of ambivalent feelings and difficulty navigating outside perceptions of their changing body in pregnancy, including their physical attractiveness and reasonableness of their weight gain, and actively resisting implications of their body being “fat”. Regarding the postpartum body, talk of getting “back to normal” and feelings of pressure to do so quickly were commonly expressed among the women. These examples highlight the need to consider how key life events or developmental junctures in women’s lives involving marked changes in bodily appearance, such as puberty, pregnancy, and menopause, add to the complexity and fluctuation of body image and its trajectory in women’s

lives (Grogan, 2017; Liechty & Yarnal, 2010; Ogle & Damhorst, 2004; Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002).

The traditional research focus on women's body dissatisfaction and its negative sequelae renders body image as relatively static, reified and simplistic. However, in actuality, body image is conceived as multidimensional, developmental, and fluctuating in relation to women's lived experience. Thus, to say that women show stable body dissatisfaction obscures the dynamic and agentic aspect of women's engagement with the body and paints an incomplete picture, to say the least (Gleeson & Frith, 2006; Paquette & Raine, 2004, Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Paquette and Raine (2004) interviewed 44 women (age 21-61) to explore how the social, interpersonal, and personal contexts of their lives influenced body image experience. Findings demonstrated that, in addition to the well-documented influence of media messages, women's attitudes about their bodies were shaped by social relationships with romantic partners, other women, and health professionals as well as their own tendencies to be self-critical or self-confident. The authors drew two conclusions: (1) that body image appears to be embedded in women's experiences and in their perceptions thereof, and (2) that body image varies as women encounter or create new experiences in their present and re-interpret their past experiences.

In the twenty-first century, research has called for more comprehensive exploration of the body image concept that specifically considers experiences of positive body image. This call is founded in positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000), which focuses on the study of conditions and processes that contribute to optimal functioning and flourishing. Positive psychology's aim is not the denial of distressing, debilitating, or negative aspects of life, nor to see them through "rose-colored glasses". The perspective fully acknowledges the existence of human suffering and dysfunction but argues that research has too often focused on pathology at the expense of understanding the other side of human experience – human strengths, capacities and resiliencies (Hefferon & Boniwell, 2011). In the field of body image, proponents of positive psychology have underscored the need to focus not only on alleviating body image distress but also uncovering facets of body image and embodiment that are protective and optimize well-being (Halliwell, 2015; Hefferon, 2015; Webb et al., 2015). Insights from studies of positive body image to date have demonstrated it as a distinct construct from negative body image that is, likewise, multidimensional, holistic, and stable yet malleable (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

Investigations of positive body image have started to shed light on ways that women adaptively cope with body image concerns and show resiliency to cultural pressures to be thin. For instance, Paquette and Raine (2004) found that, while some women's narratives focused on body dissatisfaction, other women related an acceptance of their bodies, brought about through a process of critical reflection about how their personal and sociocultural contexts influenced them and developing a sense of empowerment to resist pressures to be thin. Several studies have suggested that, in reconciling different feelings about their ageing bodies, older women may choose to prioritize health over beauty, focus on body functionality over appearance, and emphasize internal aspects of personhood in evaluating themselves and their bodies (Hurd, 2000; Hurd Clarke, 2001; Liechty & Yarnali, 2010; Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). Research has also shown that women of various ages actively negotiate their body image in strategically dressing to hide "problem areas", accentuate assets, and present a positive self-image (Frith & Gleeson, 2008; Guy & Banim, 2005). Additionally, a growing body of research has elucidated the presence of healthy, protective attitudes toward the body that are more holistic, including body appreciation and body self-compassion (Berry et al., 2010; Halliwell, 2013; Liss & Erchull, 2015; Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010). The development of these positive attitudes is associated with reduced risk of body image and eating concerns in community populations (Kelly et al., 2016; Schoenefeld & Webb, 2013). Self-compassion has also been successfully applied to eating disorder treatment (Kelly et al., 2014). Positive body image findings illustrative of the shift towards a dynamic and nuanced understanding of women's embodiment that is needed to break open conventional, restrictive feminine ideals and combat systemic pressures of the diet, fitness, and beauty industries.

2.3 The Dieting Industry

The message that achieving a thin and shaped body is a matter of conscious choice and control is promoted by the dieting industry. This industry is considered to be one of the most powerful social forces in the promotion of thinness. There are a plethora of weight-loss products on the market including self-help books, diet plans, magazines, exercise regimes and diet foods, all making the same claim to "shed those extra pounds" and get you "the body you always wanted". The dieting industry can be seen as selling "thin" like a commodity to a public that "feels fat" and thereby capitalizing upon people's tendencies to be dissatisfied with their bodies and desire to be thinner, particularly that of women (Grogan, 2017; Ogden, 2018). The

prevalence of obesity in Western society is a matter of growing public health concern; although, debate remains about how to conceptualize health risk and best approach the issue of obesity in health contexts (Aphramor, 2005; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011, 2014; Lupton, 2013).

Research places the emergence of the dieting industry in the 1960s, when women were encouraged by the fashion scene of the time to release their bodies and to rely on the natural control or support of the body. Women were no longer socially required to control their flesh with the use of bras or corsets. However, with this new freedom came the message that women should have no flesh to control or support in the first place. Ogden (2018) wrote, “women could go bra-less as long as their breasts revealed only a restrained life of their own, and corsets were out, as long as what was left behind did not need a corset” (p. 2). In order to conform to this radical change, women had to change their bodies. This imperative created a market for the dieting industry to thrive.

It has been argued that the success of the dieting industry in part stems from the fact that it creates the problem of body dissatisfaction and then offers a glorified solution. Ogden (1992) stated that “by creating a market for itself it ensures that women will continue to feel fat and will continue to support the dieting industry” (p. 48). The rise of the dieting industry has altered contemporary thought about body size such that overweight is not only considered unattractive, but also a signal of having poor control and deeper psychological problems. The dieting industry not only promotes beliefs about the social acceptability and desirability weight-control, but also advances that, for women especially, thinness is about “being in control” and “having it together”. In this way, the concept of thinness has been transformed to include the total person (Blood, 2005; Bordo, 2003; Fox, 2017; Ogden, 2018; Orbach, 1998/2016).

The Canadian Women’s Health Network (2013) reported that 80 to 90 percent of women and girls were unhappy with their physical appearance. This dissatisfaction with one’s body can lead to serious health problems including starting to diet at a young age, negative self-image and depression, eating disorders, and unnecessary cosmetic surgery among healthy women with normal body shapes. For many women who feel that their bodies are somehow defective and have struggled in one way or another with their weight or shape, dieting offers a way to solve these problems and the promise of attaining the ideal thin feminine physique. Statistics indicate that the number of women who have dieted at some point in their lives is as high as 90 percent

(Grogan, 2017) and that today anywhere from 35 to 60 percent of women are chronically dieting (Polivy & Herman, 2007).

The term *dieting* in its essence suggests eating less than one usually would and imposing some level of control over one's eating for the purpose of weight loss. However, dieting encompasses a range of different behaviours and approaches to achieving this end. Santos and colleagues (2017) conducted an international meta-analysis of epidemiological studies to explore the many different ways that adults try to lose weight and maintain weight-loss. A total of 70 percent of their sample dieted to lose weight at some point in their life and 42 percent had engaged in weight-loss dieting in the past year. Results identified 37 different weight-loss strategies, the most common of which was eating more fruits and vegetables, selecting food more consciously, and self-weighing. The most prevalent motives for weight-control, exercise and diet behaviours in this sample were greater well-being, improved health and prevention of illness, and enhanced physical fitness and appearance.

In most cases, being “on a diet” refers to moderate approaches that combine a low-fat diet, portion control and increased exercise or to the use of structured dietary programs, which exclude whole food groups (e.g., carbohydrates or fats), emphasize counting calories or points systems, or focus on adhering to a set meal plan (Grogan, 2017; Ogden, 2018). It has also been suggested that, for many dieters, being “on a diet” can be largely a state of mind in which the person chronically thinks about trying to lose weight and counts calories but does not necessarily eat less than a non-dieter (Ogden, 2018; Timko et al., 2006). However, some dieters do employ extreme strategies to achieve weight-loss, including smoking to suppress appetite, self-induced vomiting and laxatives, excessive exercise, the use of diet pills, exclusive use of meal-replacement drinks, and fad diets that drastically limit calories. Such strategies are potentially injurious to health and unlikely to work in the long-term (Ogden, 2018). It is also worth noting that normal dieting is a frequent precursor to more severe weight-control efforts and eating disorders, although the majority of dieters do not progress to full-syndrome eating disorders (Polivy & Herman, 2002a).

Although the research on chronic dieting has focused more on body image concerns and eating behaviour, exercise is commonly endorsed as a weight-loss strategy. Among university students (age 18-55), findings suggest that men use exercise more than women in trying to lose weight and that women seeking weight-loss do not rely upon exercise as much as women who

are seeking to maintain their weight (Timko et al., 2006). In a community-based survey of adults (age 24-54), men and women reported equal use of exercise in their weight-loss attempts, although a higher proportion of women also reported reduced caloric intake (Bish et al., 2005). Additional research has explored the impact of motives to exercise. Vartanian, Wharton, and Green (2012) found that non-dieters were more motivated to exercise and lose weight for health reasons than appearance reasons, while chronic dieters equally endorsed appearance and health motives. This study also found that appearance-based motives for exercise and weight-loss were associated with increased body image concern. Health motives, on the other hand, correlated with decreased body image concern. Benau, Plumhooff, and Timko (2019) found that undergraduate women engaged in weight-loss dieting were more likely to exercise for extrinsic and aesthetic reasons. In contrast, women dieting for weight-maintenance were more likely to exercise for intrinsic motives (e.g., health benefits, social engagement). These dieting groups did not differ in their level of exercise participation. However, adopting weight-loss as the focus was associated with more unhealthy patterns of dieting and exercising. In addition to the risk of disordered eating, Benau and colleagues suggested that embracing the goals and motivations of weight-loss dieting may contribute to reduced exercise engagement over the long-term.

There has been much debate about the long-term efficacy of dieting. Proponents argue that dieting leads to lasting weight-loss, which generally improves health. However, research has shown that most diets do not achieve more than short-term success when it comes to weight-loss (Aphramor, 2005; Bacon, 2010; Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Freedhoff, 2014). In general, research has found that dieting results in weight-loss that is maintained in the long-term for only around five percent of dieters. This means that the remaining 95 percent of dieters are likely to experience failure in their dieting efforts either due to a lack of short-term weight loss or weight regains in the long run. The tendency to regain weight within a five-year period following successful dieting is a well-established finding in the medical and psychological literature (Aphramor, 2005; Freedhoff, 2014; Grogan, 2017; Rothblum, 2018). Additionally, when weight is regained, any improvements felt in terms of body image and body satisfaction typically diminish (Bacon, 2010; Ogden, 2018). Over the long-term, some chronic dieters actually end up weighing more than they did when dieting first started (Aphramor, 2005; Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Pietilainen et al., 2012).

When assessing the effectiveness of dieting behaviour, it is important to distinguish between those individuals in the normal-weight range who are dieting with the goal of reaching an aesthetic ideal and those individuals whose are dieting to address risks that weight poses for their physical health. Individuals who are affected by obesity are likely to be better supported, both clinically and socially, in their dieting efforts, and diets that work for these individuals will not necessarily be appropriate or efficacious for those with body weights in the normal range (Grogan, 2017). Furthermore, weight-control efforts may be motivated desire to avoid weight gain rather than lose weight (Timko et al., 2006; Vartanian et al., 2012). Hence, using weight-loss as a measurement of dieting efficacy fails to capture the total picture of what constitutes dieting motivation and markers of success.

Research suggests that men tend to have more success at both losing weight and maintaining weight losses compared to women. Disparities in weight-loss success between the sexes have been explained by biological differences in metabolic rate and percentage of muscle versus fat as well as gender differences in how dieting is typically approached. Women often report dieting at lower weights than men and are more likely to diet for aesthetic reasons. By contrast, men are more likely to cite health as their major motivator to lose weight (Ogden, 2018). Women are also more likely to engage in a pattern of chronic dieting, trying to lose weight throughout their lives, whereas men are more likely to make single dieting attempts. Paradoxically, data suggest that the fewer dieting attempts made, the more likely one is to lose weight. This is because chronic dieting tends produce a cyclical pattern of weight loss and regain, which makes it more difficult to lose weight in the future due to metabolic changes. Additionally, the experience of dieting repeatedly without success or only to regain weight contributes to feelings of failure that are detrimental to well-being and self-confidence. This possibility has important implications for the odds of successful dieting in the future, as believing in one's potential and ability to achieve weight-loss goals in dieting has been shown to predict actual weight-loss (Bacon, 2010; Grogan, 2017; Ogden, 2018).

2.4 The Anti-dieting Movement & Health at Every Size

The anti-dieting movement has sought to publicize information about the physiology of fat, ineffectiveness of dieting, and risk of weight cycling, and encourage a closer reading of promotional messaging among consumers. A commonly held belief, which is promoted by the dieting industry, is that health is automatically improved with weight-loss and attaining a body

weight within a stipulated “healthy” and “normal” range. Conversely, weight gain or having a body that weighs more than the stipulated maximum (e.g., BMI) is assumed to automatically create health problems. However, this basic assumption about weight as a stand-in for health has been repeatedly challenged (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Hunger et al., 2020; Tylka et al., 2014). As mentioned, it is common to see dieters initially succeed in their pursuit of weight-loss but, after coming off the diet, regain the weight back over the long-term. This problem can lead to repeated or chronic dieting efforts, each associated with periods of weight loss followed by regain. This phenomenon has been termed weight cycling, colloquially known as “yo-yo dieting”. Research suggests that this pattern occurs because the body interprets dieting like a period of starvation and slows the metabolic rate to use calories more efficiently. When dieters come off the diet, the body takes it as a signal to store extra fat that can be used in the next famine. With the body efficiently storing calories, dieters start to gain weight back and some dieters may gain more weight than they initially lost. The dieter eventually seeks to lose the regained weight by going on another diet, and the cycle begins again. In this way, weight cycling and its repercussions on the body’s internal weight-regulation system can lead to chronic weight gain over time (Bacon, 2010; Bacon & Aphramor, 2017). Additionally, studies suggest that weight cycling can create stress on other body systems that contributes to such issues as hypertension, insulin resistance, and inflammation (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011, 2014).

Nonetheless, it is often assumed that diets do not work effectively due to some fault of the dieter. The dieting industry tells us that dieters who fail to lose weight are weak-willed and simply not sticking to the diet. This oversimplification disregards the known contributions of genetics to weight status and the metabolic effects of dieting. It also shows a lack of understanding for the processes that constitute diet-breaking. Research has demonstrated that cognitive and emotional changes occur during dieting that actually undermine the dieter’s attempts to eat less and contribute to overeating (Bacon, 2010; Buchanen & Sheffield, 2017; Polivy & Herman, 2017). The typical dieting pattern observed by researchers consists of easier conformity with the diet and greater weight-loss in the early stages, but then less dietary compliance and slower weight loss over the long run. The restriction and deprivation involved in dieting tends to give food an exaggerated importance and encourage preoccupation with eating, such that over time bouts of overeating become as much a part of the diet as restriction (Buchanen & Sheffield, 2017; Ogden, 1992, 2018; Polivy & Herman, 2002b).

Complex and contradictory meanings permeate women's relationship with food and dietary restraint. Interestingly, research has demonstrated that dieting increases the likelihood of both perceived and actual loss of control over eating. A well-documented behaviour shown by dieters, termed the "what-the-hell-effect" (Polivy & Herman, 1985), is that following a perceived transgression of the diet, such as eating a forbidden food, the dieter abandons any further attempt to maintain control and overeats. Studies of eating self-regulation have consistently found that chronic dieters pay more attention and are more responsive to food- and diet-related cues than non-dieters. Chronic dieters are more likely to respond to attractive food by increased eating than non-dieters. When a food is labelled as "healthy", dieters are likely to eat more of it whereas diet-related cues encourage them to curtail their eating, counteracting the effects of even "tempting" food stimuli (Polivy & Herman, 2017). Dieting research has consistently shown that foods regarded as "forbidden" or outside the limits of the diet appear increasingly attractive and pleasurable when they are denied yet induce guilt and shame when eaten. Notions of "limits", "denial", and "transgression" surrounding food choices and eating behaviour reflect a discourse of morality that pervades societal conceptions of self-control and body weight (Bacon, 2010; Mycroft, 2008; Ogden, 2018). Moreover, while trying to diet, individuals are confronted with various social and emotional meanings about food, which inevitably influence how and what they eat; for example, constructions of food as "good" or "bad", masculine or feminine, comfort, reward, "enjoyment" and "celebratory" must be navigated with respect to food choices in everyday life (Lupton, 2013; Ogden, 2018).

While the original motivation to diet is complex, the main goal for women is often to feel better about themselves, more attractive, and more in control by losing weight. Dieters often report feeling positive and motivated at the outset of a diet and it is rewarding when they first start to lose weight; however, somewhere along the line, the original positive goal to improve one's body image and self-esteem can get lost or forgotten and success becomes defined by what the scales say (Ogden, 2018). Offering insight into how weight-preoccupation operates in commercial weight-loss programs, Ogden (1992) wrote:

Weight watching and slimming clubs rely on and create this obsession with weight....Dieters are lined up and weighed in front of strangers and congratulated if their weight has gone down. They are not congratulated if they are feeling good about

themselves, even though this was a major original motivating factor for their attempts at dieting (p. 64).

With weight preoccupation, focus shifts to achieving a defined ideal or goal weight as opposed to a body weight that supports feeling good about oneself and the broader determinants to health. Paradoxically, evidence suggests that weight preoccupation can actually undermine attempts at weight-loss (Freedhoff & Sharma, 2010; Ogden, 2018, Tylka et al, 2014). Weight preoccupation leads to relying on the scale for reinforcement and recognition of one's dieting efforts; yet, in dieters' experience, weight changes often seem erratic and unfair. Feeling disheartened and dissatisfied with unrewarded effort can reduce the determination to stick to the diet and therefore contribute to diet-breaking (Bacon, 2010; Ogden, 2018; Polivy & Herman, 2017).

In the context of weight regain, Ogden (2018) described how people sometimes report feeling worse than before they lost the weight, due to seeing themselves as having “failed” or letting themselves down. Paquette and Raine (2004) found many women felt disappointed in themselves and engaged in critical, negative self-talk for not reaching a goal weight or for lacking willpower in dieting. Some women even talked about punishing themselves for failure through tangible actions, such as not buying clothes. In considering how the marketing of diets tends to emphasize willpower as all that is needed to lose weight, it is not surprising that women would feel this way (Grogan, 2017). Green, Larkin, and Smith (2009) conducted interviews with 10 dieters (age 30-59; 80% women) regarding their experiences of failure and dissatisfaction in trying to lose weight. Participants described how the effortful self-monitoring of going into “diet mode” created a sense of divide or “internal battle” between sides of themselves as they struggled to stick to their diets. This “battle” felt aversive and exhausting and it was often a “losing battle”. Participants' accounts of diet failure drew upon a number of explanations, including personal weakness (e.g., losing control), competing priorities (e.g., lack of time, having to put others first), and a view of eating as emotional coping or a means of social interaction. Participants also drew upon the notion of multiple selves or fluctuating states of self in conceptualizing dissonant beliefs and motives about eating as well as context-dependent changes in eating behaviour. Facets of the self that contributed to diet failure, like viewing themselves as “food addicts”, were tied to self-conscious emotions, a sense of “otherness” and being “wayward”.

Buchanan and Sheffield (2017) used focus groups to explore the experience of diet failure in a sample of 22 dieters (age 18-49; 60% women). Their findings elucidated how dieters experienced conflicting messages about eating and weight-loss as a barrier to their success, leading to confusion and ambivalence about their weight-loss approach and lower self-efficacy. For example, individuals described how the message that food was necessary to “enjoy life” conflicted with messages to “control” eating in order to lose weight. Such conflicts manifested in their personal struggles to develop a healthy relation to food and regulate eating behaviour. Struggles with food preoccupation, periods of disinhibited eating and all-or-nothing thinking all factored into these participants’ accounts of diet failure. Buchanan and Sheffield described how many participants went to great lengths to avoid food both physically and mentally; nonetheless, when diet-breaking occurred, it was interpreted as further indication of their “problem with food” and reinforced the perceived need to avoid it. Participants described self-evaluation as contingent upon their ability to adhere to dieting and attributed hardship in other areas of life (e.g., romantic relationships, thwarted career aspirations, reduced athletic performance) to their failure to lose weight. These qualitative studies lend insight into diet failure as a complex and ongoing experience for dieters, who try to make sense of the struggle in relation to dominant and conflicting societal discourses.

Given the preponderance of findings on the negative psychological and physical consequences of dieting, it has been suggested that dieting may present more of a health risk than being overweight. However, questions about what constitutes “overweight” and what degree of overweight presents a health risk have persisted and make it difficult to evaluate the current literature. While it is generally accepted that morbid obesity correlates with severe health problems, it remains controversial as to whether mild to moderate overweight has negative health implications that warrant intervention and, as mentioned, whether weight-loss should really even be the chief focus of health interventions (Aphramor, 2005; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Grogan, 2017; Tylka et al., 2014). Alternatively, it has been argued that following a healthy eating pattern to keep the metabolism at a constant rate, even if it means stabilizing at a higher weight, is healthier than losing and regaining weight both in terms of physical and psychological outcomes (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Freedhoff & Sharma, 2010).

Putterman and Linden (2004) asserted that not all behaviour labeled as “dieting” is equally harmful; the motivating force, specifically the thinness factor, may be a more important

determinant of harm than dietary restriction itself. Their study found that women who were motivated to diet out of concern for health reported less negative sequelae than women who were motivated to change appearance. Women who were dieting for appearance reasons also tended to be younger, report higher levels of body dissatisfaction and disinhibited eating, lower self-esteem, and were more likely to use drastic weight-loss strategies than those dieting to improve health. The risk-to-benefit analysis with respect to the decision to diet should be assessed separately for individuals of different weights and with different health risks, and ultimately this decision should be based on likely health outcomes rather than aesthetic ideals. However, given the current idealization of thinness, this is easier said than done. Data consistently indicate that it is not just women with overweight bodies who are trying to lose weight, but also many women with body weights in the “normal” range (Polivy & Herman, 2007; Polivy et al., 2014; Slof-Op 't Landt et al., 2017).

The benefit versus harm of the customary weight-focused conceptualization of obesity and its treatment has been seriously debated in the 2000s, inciting the development of non-dieting and weight-inclusive approaches to health promotion (Bacon, 2010; Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Tylka et al., 2014). The interdisciplinary movement of Health At Every Size (HAES) has become a widespread alternative to the conventional “weight-normative” approach. HAES rejects the use of weight, size, or BMI as a proxy for health and the myth that weight is a result of personal choice and control, independent of genetic and environmental factors. The movement challenges commonly held assumptions about fatness and weight-loss using scientific evidence. It advocates for the general public and health care practitioners to shift their thinking on the problem of excess weight and solutions that follow. HAES essentially shifts the paradigm from weight-management to health-promotion, setting the primary objective as supporting improved health behaviour for people of all sizes without using weight as a mediator. The basic principles of the HAES framework promote: (1) body acceptance, as opposed to weight loss or maintenance; (2) intuitive eating via reliance on internal regulatory processes of hunger and satiety as opposed to mentally-imposed dietary restriction; (3) active embodiment, building enjoyable physical activity and movement into daily life as opposed to structured exercise regimes; (4) health enhancement, seeking to equalize access to information and services, and support personal practices that improve well-being; and (5) respectful care, acknowledging biases, working to end weight discrimination and a providing services in a way that considers

inequities with regard to socioeconomic status, race, gender, sexual orientation, age and other identities that impact weight stigma (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Bombak et al., 2019; Tylka et al., 2014).

HAES proponents regard the traditional weight-based approach to overweight and obesity as both ineffective and harmful. They have noted how the dieting industry provides false hope to individuals seeking to lose weight and yet blames the individual for “failing” to achieve the same. Furthermore, they have cautioned that the traditional weight-focus in community and health-care contexts, even when well-intentioned, can reinforce discriminatory and prejudicial beliefs about people with overweight bodies (Aphramor, 2005; Bombak et al., 2019; Hunger et al., 2020). Weight-inclusive approaches assert that the focus of health initiatives and practitioners should be the development of a healthy lifestyle for all, with holistic measures of success (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Freedhoff & Sharma, 2010; Kater, 2012; Tylka et al., 2014). Research has offered support for the efficacy of this paradigm shift, suggesting that behaviour change, regardless of weight-loss outcome, is the most essential component to health improvement and that being compassionate towards oneself has health benefits. It has also been argued that a HAES-based approach better supports maintenance of long-term behaviour change than dieting-based interventions (Bacon et al., 2005; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Hunger et al., 2020; Penney & Kirk, 2015; Tylka et al., 2014).

While it is beneficial to encourage individuals to engage in healthier behaviour and self-care, it is also necessary to acknowledge the social and structural change that is needed to improve health equality. HAES recognizes that individuals’ struggles with food and weight are often broader than mere nutritional information can address; trying to assist individuals with these issues entails a compassionate, truly holistic approach that considers the social, emotional, spiritual and psychological aspects of food (Aphramor, 2005; Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Bombak et al., 2019; Tylka et al., 2014). HAES principles intersect with critical feminist perspectives (e.g., Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Murray, 2016) on the social derogation of fatness and ways that weight stigma translates into issues of social inequity and injustice. The field of fat studies (also known as critical weight studies) involves scholars and health professionals who are invested in critically analyzing and challenging taken-for-granted societal and medical discourse about body weight. Fat studies regard weight, like height, as a human characteristic that varies throughout the population and advocate for equality with respect to body size/weight. Fat

activism represents a powerful counterforce to the dieting industry, seeking to make fat oppression visible and contest prevailing negative meanings about the fat body via discourses of empowerment (e.g., fat acceptance, fat pride, and “coming out” as fat) and inclusivity of all bodies (e.g., size acceptance, body positivity, intersectionality). While not all scholars in the field of fat studies identify as activists, there is considerable crossover in ideology and intention (Ellison, 2020; Lupton, 2013; Rothblum, 2011).

Given increased public knowledge about the failure rates, myths and risks of dieting, it is important to question why weight-loss dieting continues to have such enduring cultural resonance, particularly for women. In spite of miserable past dieting experiences and the negative impact of diet failure on their body image, self-esteem and well-being, many women continue to diet repeatedly throughout their lives (Heyes, 2006; Pila et al., 2017; Polivy & Herman, 2002b). An important consideration is that women are making the decision to diet in an atmosphere of contradictory messages about their bodies and dieting itself. For instance, even though the practice of digitally-altering images and the potential dangers of dieting to achieve unrealistic images of female bodies are commonly acknowledged within contemporary media, the same sources nonetheless continue to elaborate and enforce body image dissatisfaction with a constant stream of information about the “perfect” body, its value in western society, and how to achieve it (Blood, 2005; Markula, 2001). Content analysis has shown that even women’s health and fitness magazines present mixed messages about body image and dieting; images of thin, hard bodies and articles about the latest diet or exercise regime are printed alongside editorials devoted to counseling women about body image concerns and encouraging self-acceptance (Aubrey, 2010; Markula, 2001). As such, it has been argued that health and fitness magazines fail to accurately frame health per se, offering little more than a repackaging of the stereotypical thin ideal seen in fashion magazines and conflating “healthy” with being thin (Conlin & Bissell, 2014). Some feminist scholars have argued that such contradictory discourse places women in a discursive double-bind of being told that they should discipline and improve their bodies by dieting and, at the same time, criticized for dieting and not accepting their bodies as they are (Blood, 2005; Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Murray, 2016).

Furthermore, the continued debate between weight-focused and weight-inclusive approaches in healthcare conveys contradictory messages to the public. The “obesity epidemic” continues to be a prevailing frame in healthcare, typically paired with a view of personal

responsibility for weight (Frederick et al., 2019; Rothblum, 2018). Bacon (2010) argued that, beyond a public health issue, this frame has shaped weight-control into a moral imperative:

Dieting has become such a major force in our cultural landscape that most people view weight control as the normal, right thing to do. While exercising may not be as common, we are all certainly aware that we should exercise and feel the guilt of not doing enough (p. xxiii).

Frederick and colleagues (2020) examined the impact of exposure to competing media frames of fatness, one that reflects HAES principles and another that emphasized the health risk, controllability, and a stigmatized view of higher weight. Across a series of studies, they consistently found that, compared to the HAES frame, those exposed to the anti-fat frame had higher beliefs that fat is unhealthy, more prejudicial attitudes toward people who are overweight and less acceptance for body-size diversity, as well as higher intentions to diet if they gained weight. Thus, while public counter-messages advocating HAES, the dangers of chronic “yo-yo dieting”, and body positivity are increasing, exposure to messages that idealize thin feminine bodies and promote weight-loss dieting as a means of achieving this ideal remain commonplace, woven into the fabric of Western culture (Bacon, 2010; Frederick et al., 2020; Hunger et al., 2020; Rothblum, 2018).

It is likely that the value and meaning wrapped up in weight and appearance for women may persuade them to diet despite the strong counter messages and the understanding of potential risks to health. However, to say that women who engage in dieting (or other body modification practices) are simply “cultural dopes”, giving into the pressure of the thin ideal, disregards the complexity of embodied experience. Many researchers have argued that although women in Western culture are aware that the extreme thin ideal is not attainable, it does not prevent them from feeling guilt, shame, or disgust with their own body and, in this regard, dieting perhaps represents the possibility of change and feeling better about oneself (Blood, 2005; Bordo, 2003; Davis, 1995, 2009; Ogden, 2018). Fox (2017) asserted that giving up on dieting and embracing body acceptance asks women to go against the dominant narrative espoused by dieting culture, which is easier said than done. It is clear that dieting is a complex and multifaceted issue for women. Understanding why so many women engage in a practice that can be distressing must take women’s experiences as the starting point. We must consider that

women's decisions to diet are self-motivated and made in the wider context of social meanings about thinness and femininity.

2.5 Cultural Trends in Body Work

The shift in ideals towards a body that is not only thin, but also looks worked out, firm and well-toned (Bordo, 2003; Lupton, 2013) has meant that, in addition to diet, an emphasis on fitness has permeated Western notions of body modification and management. However, the messages that women receive about fitness can also be problematic, carrying negative meaning as well as messages to inspire healthy eating and exercise behaviour. The social media trend of “fitspiration” positions itself as a healthy alternative to “thinspiration”, coining the popular expression that “strong is the new skinny”. In contrast to thinspiration images of emaciated women and text promoting weight loss, fitspiration media intend to motivate individuals to pursue a healthier lifestyle, fitness and empowerment. While this sounds good in principle, concerns have been raised that the health aim of fitspiration is undermined by a lack of clear distinction from its dysfunctional counterpart; that is, content analyses have shown that the majority of fitspiration images represent a single body type of thin and toned, place greater emphasis on appearance than health, and contain many objectifying elements (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). While fitspiration often reflects a positive and motivational tone, the images and text encourage self-objectification and, at times, promote extreme exercise behaviours (Tiggeman & Zaccardo, 2016). Further, fitspiration perpetuates the rhetoric that weight is a matter of personal control, inspires viewers to distance themselves from their bodies (e.g., persevere through pain) in pursuit of fitness goals, and idealizes notions of the mind disciplining, pushing, or conquering the body (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018). So, even media designed to promote the strong and healthy body over the thin ideal can be seen as inaccurately conflating fitness with thinness and stigmatizing heavier bodies (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2018; Simpson & Mazzeo, 2017; Tiggeman & Zaccardo, 2016).

There is considerable potential for a woman's participation in exercise to be influenced by the pressure toward thinness in Western culture. Choi (2005) argued that the construction of exercise as a “beauty project” may lead women to hold unrealistic expectations and to quit exercising when these are not realized, thereby preventing its beneficial effects. Research has found that significantly more women than men report weight control and physical appearance as their primary reasons for exercising (Choi, 2005; Grogan, 2017). Additoinally, appearance-based

motives for weight-loss and exercise have been found to mediate the relationship between internalization of body ideals and body image concerns (Vartanian et al., 2012). Weight stigma has been linked to impaired exercise self-efficacy and reduced participation in physical activity (Greenleaf et al., 2014; Meadows & Bombak, 2019). Research has also shown that women who do not conform to the thin ideal may feel alienated or discouraged from taking part in organized sports, certain forms of exercise (e.g., swimming) or competitive sport because they do not have the “right” kind of body to fit in (Inderstrod-Stepehns & Achary, 2018; Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). Yet, in spite of pressures toward thinness and barriers associated with weight stigma, research has shown that women experience positive changes in body image and self-concept associated with exercise (Berry et al., 2010; Choi, 2005; Grogan, 2017). Overall, these findings highlight the importance of promoting exercise to women as a way to improve overall physical and psychological health, as opposed to a way of losing weight or improving physique.

Along with increased emphasis on fitness, there has been a significant uptake of cosmetic surgery services over the 1990s and 2000s. Cosmetic procedures have become more normalized and accessible to women as a way to change the shape and size of their bodies, with the most frequently requested operations being liposuction and breast augmentation (Grogan, 2017; Heyes & Jones, 2009). Bordo (2003) commented that this cultural trend has changed societal expectations about how women’s bodies should look as they age and has reduced the range of body types and shapes considered acceptable. Darling-Wolf (2000) argued that cosmetic surgeons and popular media about cosmetic surgery (e.g., the reality television makeover) promote the notion that the female body is inherently flawed and in need of reshaping or reconstruction. She described how there has been a shift in emphasis from adornment or enhancement of the female body via fashion to actual surgical reshaping of the female body. Orbach (2009) added that the modern age of social media creates more intense pressure for conformity and encourages self-objectification, in response to which individuals often find themselves failing. Cosmetic surgery is no longer represented as a possibility for Hollywood celebrities and the occasional wealthy person who is troubled by a particular body part, as it once was; the phenomenon has become a product sold to women as empowering them to be “free” and “all they want to be” (Orbach, 2009). While women do experience improvements in body- and self-image after undergoing cosmetic surgery (e.g., Davis, 1995, 2009), surgical outcomes are

not consistently positive and the perceived benefits are not always sustained long-term (Heyes, 2007; Heyes & Jones, 2009).

In the context of rising concern about obesity, weight loss surgery (WLS), such as gastric bypass or gastric banding, has also increased in popularity. Interestingly, over 80 percent of WLS recipients are women, even though obesity rates are considered to be equal across the sexes (Temple et al., 2015; Young et al., 2016). Research has shown that WLS is effective in helping people to achieve and sustain clinically significant weight reduction (Chang et al., 2014), which is associated with psychological outcomes of improved self-esteem, reduced food preoccupation, and feeling more in control of eating behaviour (Ogden et al., 2011; Ogden, 2018). However, as with cosmetic surgery, the research on WLS outcomes is mixed. Some individuals do not lose as much weight as expected or experience weight regain even after undergoing such invasive medical procedures. Although most individuals experience dramatic weight-loss initially following WLS, many regain weight within two to five years and some require revisional surgical procedures (Groven & Glenn, 2016; Shimizu et al., 2013). The short- and long-term complications (e.g., gastrointestinal effects, malnutrition, managing excess skin) of adjusting to life after surgery impact health-related quality of life and psychosocial functioning. In addition, some level of dieting is still required after surgery for long-term weight maintenance, as people cannot rely solely upon the limits to food intake imposed by surgery (Groven et al., 2013; Ogden et al., 2011; Ogden, 2018).

To this point, I have situated women's experience of body image concerns and the psychological impact thereof in the sociocultural context of overweight stigma, idealization of thinness as well as the prevailing message of body modification as a solution to discontent, offered by the dieting, fitness and beauty industries. To further understand why body image concerns are ubiquitous for women, I turn to the writings of contemporary feminist scholars on the social construction of femininity.

2.6 Social Construction of Femininity

Feminist theory emphasizes the social context in which women's discontent with their bodies arises, as opposed to individual pathology, and how women's bodies are subject to critical evaluation (by themselves and others) to the extent that they differ from the prevailing thin ideal (Bordo, 2003; Ogden, 2018; Murray, 2016). Many feminist scholars (e.g., Bartky, 1990/2015; Bordo, 2003) have suggested that a "beauty system" of unrealistic ideals serves to keep women

in a subordinate position by ensuring that women channel their energies into vigilance over their bodies and practices intended to perfect their bodies. In Western culture, Orbach (1998/2016) argued that women are taught to view their bodies as commodities from a very early age; “the receptivity that women show (across class, ethnicity, and through the generations) to the idea that their bodies are like gardens – areas for constant improvement and re-sculpting – is rooted in the recognition of their bodies as commodities” (p. 17). She described how women’s bodies are objectified to sell products within the consumerism of Western society and that this creates body image problems for women. According to objectification theory (Frederickson & Roberts, 1997), women’s bodies are socially constructed as objects to be gazed upon and evaluated. From an early age, women learn to practice self-surveillance, watching and judging their bodies against the prevailing ideal like an outside observer, so as to gain social approval. This routine monitoring of the body leads to feelings of body dissatisfaction and shame. Studies have demonstrated that internalization of the “objectified gaze” is related to higher body shame, chronic dieting, and disordered eating symptoms among young adult women (Piran & Cormier, 2005; Vartanian & Dey, 2013).

Bordo (2003) argued that preoccupation with fat, dieting, and thinness is normative among women in Western culture. She suggested that women are inundated with clear messages that excess fat, constructed as “bumps” and “bulges”, is an enemy that must be “attacked”, “eradicated”, or “burned”. Bordo’s account of the thin ideal equates bodily perfection with moral perfection within modern society; that is, she described a body ideal that is not just slender, but is also toned, contained, and under control. This ideal is constructed as possible for any woman to attain by dieting and exercise, given sufficient self-discipline. Bordo introduced the notion of “plastic bodies”, referring to the fantasy promoted within popular discourse that the body is infinitely malleable and perfectible. This fantasy operates in relation to all forms of body work, including management of one’s looks with cosmetics and fashion as well as practices of dieting, exercise, and cosmetic surgery. However unattainable the body ideal may be, Bordo suggested that we are constantly told by the diet and fitness industries that we can “choose” our own bodies; with the right amount of exercise and proper diet you can have the “perfect” body you desire. Feminists have argued that this rhetoric reinforces the view that willpower is all that is needed to achieve the thin ideal and normalizes the pursuit of thinness for women (Bordo, 2003; Murray, 2016). Murray (2016) explained how the notion of choice regarding body modification

is illusory in that it assumes the ability to transcend our “rootedness in the world” (p. 179). Feminists have also asserted that the notion of “plastic bodies” is reinforced by trends towards cosmetic surgery as the new way to “accessorize” the body and in the explosion of surgical techniques to reshape the female body (Bordo, 2003; Orbach, 2009).

Bordo (2003) placed women’s preoccupation with thinness into the context of Western culture to understand why women are especially vulnerable to pressure towards the thin ideal. With this contextualized view, she expressed pessimism about women’s ability to resist and counteract such pressure. Her argument was that women cannot help but take part in body modification practices because they are embedded in a culture in which thinness is associated with positive social meaning and reward. Other feminists have argued that women are not simply passive victims but should also be understood as agents, actively and knowingly engaging in practices that could be understood as oppressive. This discussion is underpinned by the theory of Foucault (1979) that individual self-surveillance and self-correction to prevailing social norms is used as an effective way to control behaviour and to ensure that individuals live out dominant social ideas. Bordo (2003) related this Foucauldian position to practices of body modification or management in which women’s bodies serve as a locus of control. Beauty ideals set up standards against which women judge, discipline and correct their behaviour and appearance and thus act as a normalizing force. Through daily practices of self-surveillance and self-discipline the body becomes “docile” and subject to external regulation. Bordo stated that a preoccupation with fat, diet and thinness may function as “one of the most powerful normalizing strategies of our century, ensuring the production of self-monitoring and self-disciplining ‘docile bodies’ sensitive to any departure from social norms, and habituated to self-improvement and transformation in the service of these norms” (p. 186).

In addition to watchfulness and self-discipline over their own bodies, the women interviewed by Paquette and Raine (2004) told of many instances of social control among women in the form of policing and self-surveillance accompanied by rewards and reprimands. They reported that women often make comments about other women’s body weight and appearance, such as “you’re looking fat”, “have you lost weight?” or “you look cute in that outfit”. Although the women often reinterpreted these comments in a positive framework, as supportive and caring, the authors suggested that these comments could also be interpreted as a form of social control and means of transmitting sociocultural norms about thinness:

Among themselves, women transmit, amplify, and reinforce sociocultural messages regarding their bodies....By surveying and policing each other's weight and through rewards and sanctions they give one another, women perpetuate social norms of thinness. These monitoring processes are pervasive and strongly influential because they are seen as, and meant to be, gestures of caring, friendship and sisterhood" (pp. 1052-1053).

Negative talk about body weight, size, or shape, known as "fat talk", has also been highlighted as a ritualized, unhealthy form of conversation that commonly occurs among women around their own and other's weight, shape, diet or exercise habits (Arroyo & Harwood, 2014; Webb et al., 2016; Shannon & Mills, 2015). In a sample of college women representing diverse weights, Webb, Fiery, and Jafari (2016) found that internalized body shame contributed to the co-occurrence of anti-fat attitudes (e.g., dislike, fear of fat, willpower beliefs) and engaging in fat talk with their female peers. They discussed how possessing prejudicial attitudes toward fatness prompts devaluing others with larger bodies as well as processes of social comparison and self-scrutiny that relate to body shame. Moreover, Webb and colleagues concluded that the adverse effects of weight stigma not only have intrapersonal effects, but also infiltrate the interpersonal realm for women.

Paquette and Raine (2004) discussed the common practice of "collective dieting" as the most powerful example of policing and surveillance described by the women in their study. This practice is generally perceived as a supportive way for women to come together in effort to reach common weight-loss goals; however, it can also represent a way of socially monitoring and competing with one another to obtain social approval. According to Paquette and Raine, the fact that this type of social control is viewed as such a "normal" and "natural" part of social interaction among women is precisely what makes it so powerful. It is taken for granted that compliments and "supportive" or "constructive" criticism about women's bodies actually serve to reproduce oppressive social norms. The normative practice of fat talk has been similarly described (Arroyo & Harwood, 2014; Webb et al., 2016).

Smith (1990/2002) cast women in an active role in interpreting cultural messages and in learning to "do femininity". For instance, one of the sources of learning the skill of "being feminine" is to read appropriate materials such as women's magazines that teach women how to be more attractive. Smith described how women's magazine articles assume agency in their readers and educate women about femininity by presenting a specific ideal, namely the "perfect"

model body. Magazines then proceed to tell women what they need to do in the way of diet, exercise, and beauty regimes to attain that ideal. Smith argued that this promotion of dissatisfaction leads to women's active engagement in body work and beauty practices to rectify their perceived deficiencies in pursuit of the ideal feminine form. In doing so, women objectify their own bodies and continually endeavor to learn and enact practices that will bring them closer to this goal, thereby "doing femininity" in an active way.

Bartky (1990/2015) also argued that women actively engage with representations of the female body. She argued that the "fashion-beauty complex" upholds an outward agenda of seeking to provide opportunities for women to indulge and pamper themselves, but covertly depreciates women's bodies with unceasing messages that women fail to measure up to the current beauty ideals. According to Bartky, the features of women's bodies are objectified by this industry, such that women are made to feel estranged from their bodies:

We are presented everywhere with images of perfect female beauty – at the drugstore cosmetics display, the supermarket magazine counter, on television. These images remind us constantly that we fail to measure up. Whose nose is the right shape, after all, whose hips are not too wide – or too narrow? The female body is revealed as a task, an object in need of transformation...the fashion-beauty complex produces in women an estrangement from her bodily being: on the one hand, she is it and is scarcely allowed to be anything else; on the other hand, she must exist perpetually at a distance from her physical self, fixed at this distance in a permanent posture of disapproval (p. 40).

Bartky suggested that the satisfaction women report in body maintenance practices stems from the fact that the fashion-beauty complex creates "false needs" for women; the fashion-beauty complex stands to benefit by indoctrinating women in these needs, as it also controls the conditions through which these needs can be satisfied. Bartky further argued that the self-absorbed pleasures promoted by the fashion-beauty complex actually stand in the way of women taking authentic enjoyment in their bodies. She outlined the need for a new aesthetic of the female body that allows for an expansion of the narrow limits in which beauty is currently defined and is controlled by women. This ideal should celebrate diversity and allow women to have fun in body display and ornamentation. Bartky argued that this could be an ideal that actually makes women feel better about themselves as opposed to breeding body insecurity.

Wolf (1991/2002) argued that Western media set up women in competition with one another in terms of their bodies, which is harmful. Research has demonstrated that women often explicitly compare their bodies against the bodies of other women, including models, friends, and family members, only to perceive their bodies as wanting (Grogan, 2017). Wolf (1991/2002) argued that competition among women on the basis of their bodies is very much encouraged by the beauty industry. She stated that women need to resist these pressures and instead strive to support each other's body types and beauty choices as a way to build-up body satisfaction. Similar to Bartky (1990/2015), Wolf advocated that women must reject ideals of beauty promoted by self-interested institutions in favor of women-oriented ideals of beauty. These beauty ideals would allow women to view variations in body size or shape as acceptable and feel free to experiment and play with images of the body instead of trying to conform to impossible ideals promoted by industries vested in maintaining the status quo.

Throughout my discussion of the sociocultural context of thinness and feminist views on the like, there has been an implicit sub-text about the interconnection and intimacy between women's feelings about their bodies and selves. With the meaning ascribed to thinness versus fatness, "flaws" observed about the body are essentially equated with the self. In the next section, I explicate the body-self connection from a feminist standpoint and explore the complications presented by socially constructed ideals for women's embodiment and subjectivity.

2.7 Women's Experience of Embodiment: Body & Self Entwined

Merleau-Ponty (1994) asserted that "the body is the vehicle of being in the world" (p. 82). The corporeal body provides a means of communication and a way of comprehending the world, including self, other, and activities of life. This is the essence of *embodiment*. Merleau-Ponty highlighted the distinction between the subjective body as lived and experienced, and the objective body as observed. This dualism reveals a fundamental ambiguity about the body; that is, while the lived body is most intimately "mine" or "me", it is also an object to others. From a feminist standpoint, *subjectivity* centers on how a woman (the "subject") experiences and perceives herself in relation to her body, activities, projects, social roles and relations, and contexts. *Embodied subjectivity* considers the union of body-self in relation to such facets of lived experience (Blood, 2005).

Researchers have argued that women are so frequently judged on appearance, encouraged to see their own bodies as objects, and to keep their bodies under watch and control that it leads

to disruption and estrangement from the body or, in other words, to disembodiment (Bartky, 1990/2015; Murray, 2016; Orbach, 1998/2016; Piran, 2016b). Orbach (1998/2016) described how a woman can become alienated from her body as it is made into an object, an instrument or commodity that she can and must use in her personal pursuit to find happiness, social approval, and belonging. Orbach argued that women come to see themselves with a critical eye, as always in need of improving or in danger of not fitting in. Murray (2016) described how the “fat” body is a site where multiple discourses intersect, including those that constitute femininity and beauty, health and pathology, morality and anxiety about food, and self-improvement as a societal imperative:

These discourses serve to (re)produce popular anxieties about, and rejection of, the “fat” female body. The “fat” body is maddening: it will not fit, and yet the disciplinary imperative of pathological discourses constantly reign the “fat” body in, and scrutinize its being-in-the-world. (p. 5).

Accordingly, for women, bodies are not so much seen as the place they live but reconstructed as a part of the self that must be watched and controlled. The scope of women’s bodily experience and expression is limited by the pressure to look a certain way (Blood, 2005; Coffey, 2013; Murray, 2016; Orbach, 1998/2016).

Physical attractiveness plays a central role in determining women’s self-identities. Compared to men, evidence suggests that body image figures more prominently into women’s feelings of self-esteem, self-worth, and personal adequacy (Smith, 2012; Striegel-Moore & Franko, 2002). Women often identify more strongly with their bodies, experiencing the body as inseparable from the self (Kling et al., 2018). Self-conscious emotions, including shame, guilt, and pride, are frequently cited in accounts of women’s discontent with their bodies and embodied subjectivity. In the last decade, research has highlighted the specific significance of body-related shame in women’s experience of embodied subjectivity (Duarte et al., 2014; Giada et al., 2018; Pila et al., 2015, 2017; Woodward et al., 2019). Body shame entails experiencing one’s physical body as unattractive and undesirable, and as a basis of the shamed self (Gilbert, 2002). Whereas guilt involves negative feelings about what one has done or not done, shame is characterized by feeling bad about who one is (Lewis, 1971). In the context of weight-gain, for example, a dieter may experience the self and body, not simply their behaviour, as faulty and this leads to feelings of worthlessness and ineffectiveness (e.g., “I gained weight because *I am* an

undisciplined person”; Tracy & Robbins, 2004). Research has found that body shame mediates the relationship between weight-status and self-esteem (Pila et al., 2015) and better predicts disordered eating pathology than general shame (Giada et al., 2018). Another layer of discontent is that women may feel ashamed about their body-shame, especially given the emergence of counter-discourses that women should be accepting of their bodies and stop dieting (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Blood, 2005; Murray, 2016).

Within cultural messages, feminist scholars (e.g., Orbach, 1998/2016; Fox, 2017) have argued that thinness is offered to women as a solution to complex problems. Successful women who “have it together” are always presented as thin and ideas about thinness become insinuated into women’s sense of themselves, part of the way the self should be. Body weight/shape is overvalued for women as key to attractiveness, success, and good health. Thus, it is argued that women’s engagement in body modification practices such as dieting and cosmetic surgery represents not only desire to change the corporeal body, but also to change or improve aspects of the self which are symbolically attached to diet, weight, or shape within social discourse (Blood, 2005; Bordo, 2003; Fox, 2017; Granberg, 2006; Orbach, 2009). Orbach (2009) discussed how women’s sense of their bodies has become increasingly unstable and erratic in contemporary Western culture, which has contributed to rising body shame. She argued that sociocultural discourse propagates an unhealthy preoccupation with the body and body transformation, which renders the body as a site of making rather than living; that is, the body psychologically and culturally becomes the object of the self.

Feminist writers, like Blood (2005), have argued that to improve women’s body- and self-image there needs to be a shift in women’s embodiment “away from viewing their body as an object that can be molded and shaped...towards experiencing their bodies as lived in” (p. 125). Blood described how women’s fantasies about what they will be like when they are thin often reveal aspects of themselves that they feel unable or uncomfortable to express at their current body size or, in other words, the ways that they view their bodies as holding them back from achieving the “true self” or “real me”. Blood stated that “the old adage, ‘within every fat person is a thin person waiting to get out’, typifies this thinking and is particularly compelling for women who, understandably, wish to conform to the cultural ideal of beauty” (p. 127). However, she argued that when a woman starts to experience her body as lived in, rather than

splitting off the body as a “flawed” aspect of the self, she can begin to have a more holistic view of the self.

In theorizing about women’s embodiment, researchers have sought to move beyond the dualistic view of the self as subject versus the body as object. Reischer and Koo (2004) argued that while the body serves as a powerful symbolic medium, as has been shown in the ways that women’s bodies reflect social constructions of femininity, the body is also envisioned as an active agent in the social world. This argument is made on the grounds that the self is ultimately an *embodied self*:

To say that the body is an “agent” or “subject” is not to assert that subjectivity is a feature of the body per se, but rather that bodies, because they are constitutive of subjectivity and also mediate the relationship between person and world, necessarily participate in the agency of the person (p. 307).

Reischer and Koo stated that, in its merging of symbolic and agentic capacities, the body may be understood as the key site for both the construction and performance of femininity. Budgeon (2003) argued that in order to understand the ways that women actively live out and negotiate their embodied selves we need a concept of the body as agent. She said that understanding the body as an object and the body as a symbol is insufficient in that it misses some essential quality of women’s embodiment; “understanding the choices women make in ‘doing’ embodied identity requires a move beyond reductionist accounts, away from questions about what women’s bodies mean to questions about what women’s bodies can do” (p. 52). This understanding of the body as agent echoes the arguments of feminist scholars, such as Smith (1990/2002) and Bartky (1990/2015), about women engaging with representations of the female body in an active way and “doing femininity”.

Budgeon (2003) described how the advent of surgical body modification (e.g., weight-loss surgery, cosmetic procedures) over and above diet and exercise regimes has contributed to understandings of the body as “project”, increasingly characterized by indeterminacy and choice. It follows that understandings of self can be freed from bodily determination or transformed through these embodied practices. This understanding demarcates bodies as increasingly central to selfhood. The body is not only a site for the reproduction and representation of dominant values and conceptions of beauty, but it is also a site for resistance to and self-transformation in relation to these systems of meaning (Budgeon, 2003; Coffey, 2013; Reischer & Koo, 2004).

There has been debate among feminist writers about the issue of agency with respect to women's decisions to undergo cosmetic surgery procedures. Davis (1995, 2009) has taken the position that women are active and knowledgeable agents who have made a free and informed choice to have surgery, although these "choices" are made in the context of a culturally-limited definition of beauty. She based her argument in her own interview work with women who have undergone cosmetic surgery. The women Davis interviewed reported that they had experienced the decision to have cosmetic surgery as a way of taking control in their lives and as something they had decided upon for themselves after weighing the risks and possible benefits of surgery. The women recalled long histories of suffering with bodies that they experienced as unacceptable, different or abnormal. Davis argued that cosmetic surgery is chiefly about women wanting to be normal rather than wanting to be beautiful. She spoke of cosmetic surgery as a way to resolve a woman's feeling of being "trapped in a body that does not fit her sense of who she is" (1995, p. 163) and "reinstate a damaged sense of self and become who they really are or should have been" (1995, p. 169), seeing surgery as a way to renegotiate identity through the body. In this regard, Davis's argument can be seen as similar to arguments made about gender reassignment surgery among individuals who identify as transgender.

Other feminist writers have contested Davis's (1995, 2009) position in stating that although women may think they are making a free and informed choice, they do not have the freedom to make a truly genuine choice because the cultural pressures for women's bodies to be shaped in a certain way are so densely institutionalized and embedded with the social context in which women live. The argument follows that by undergoing cosmetic surgery women are really just conforming to traditional ideas about how their bodies should look (Bordo, 2003; Heyes, 2007; Morgan, 1991, 2009). Bordo (2009) also emphasized that "defects" or "imperfections" in the body are not only corrected, but also created by the cosmetic surgery industry.

Davis (1995, 2009) actively rejected the idea that women who opt for cosmetic procedures are passive "cultural dopes", regarding this view to be an overly deterministic take on social action. Instead, Davis advanced that women see through the conditions of oppression even as they comply with them. She argued that women's choices to pursue cosmetic surgery need to be understood within a framework that sees women's bodies as commodities. Rather than view cosmetic surgery as self-inflicted obedient submission to the "beauty system", Davis suggested that we try to understand cosmetic surgery more broadly as a dilemma for women in that it is

both desirable and problematic. Davis (2009) emphasized that agency is often conflated with discourses of “choice” or “freedom”; however, agency does not represent “free choice”:

Individual agency is always situated in relations of power, which provide the conditions of enablement and constraint under which all social action takes place. There is no “free space” where individuals exercise “choice” in any absolute sense of the word. “Choices” are always messy affairs, rarely undertaken with perfect knowledge of circumstances, let alone certain or predictable outcomes (p. 39).

Agency is invariably tied but not entirely reducible to sociocultural context. Agency is a complex and layered mix of intention, practical knowledge, and unconscious meanings and motives (Davis, 2009). According to Davis (2009), positioning women as “competent actors”, with intimate knowledge of dominant discourses and practices of femininity, permits understanding of why “cosmetic surgery could be an action of choice, solution and problem, empowering and disempowering, all at once” (p. 40). A similar argument can be applied to woman’s decisions to persist at trying to lose weight throughout their lives.

In her analysis, Davis (1995, 2009) emphasized that women’s agency must be central to any account of the relation between the self and the decision to re-shape the body. She stated that denial of women’s agency in this decision would mean that “cosmetic surgery becomes a strangely disembodied phenomenon, devoid of women’s experiences, feelings, and practical activities with regard to their bodies” (1995, p. 57). Body work is significant to the ways that the body and self are experienced and “worked on” in Western society (Blood, 2005; Coffey, 2013; Orbach, 2009). Moving beyond surface appearance is important to illuminate the complexity of women’s lived experience of body work as transforming the way the body is lived, not just how it looks (Bartky, 1990/2015; Budgeon, 2003; Coffey, 2013; Davis, 1995, 2009; Throsby, 2008). According to Budgeon (2003), “bodies then can be thought not as *objects*, upon which culture writes meanings, but as *events* that are continually in the process of becoming – as multiplicities that are never just found but are made and remade” (p. 50). Coffey (2013) likewise used the term “becoming” in her discussion of the body as process or event, as experienced, affected and affecting, dynamic and unfolding.

Del Busso and Reavey (2013) used life history interviews and pre-existing photographs to explore embodied experience amongst a diverse sample of women aged 21 to 35. In their analysis, the authors contrasted women’s narratives of the body as surface and the embodied self

in movement. Regarding the former, women described their bodies as fragmented off, not treated as part of the embodied self, and regarded as “surface” in relation to standards of femininity within social and public space. Women related a loss of self “blurred into the expectations and evaluations of their bodies” (p. 55) and limited capacity to embody agency with surface-level objectification. The disempowerment felt in relation to body as surface was set against a counter-narrative of themselves as embodied, active agents within recollections of non-sexualizing physical movement. Herein embodiment was experienced as pleasurable and celebratory of their physical capabilities. Del Busso and Reavey remarked that these findings point to contradictions felt at the level of embodied experience through which the sense of self and agency can either be denied or realized. They account how fragmentation of women’s selfhood or personhood precludes a sense of being-in-the-world as a unified whole: “such processes of fragmentation can lead to a struggle for women to experience themselves as the rightful occupier of their bodies, or as embodied persons with access to modes of being which offer the embodiment of agency” (p. 47). Other research on women’s embodied experience within everyday living, such as the experience of having breasts (Millsted & Frith, 2003) or being pregnant (Johnson et al., 2004), has similarly revealed ways that gender imposes expectations and restrictions on embodiment, which women need to negotiate. As Coffey (2013) stated, “the body is neither a blank and passive canvas upon which social structures impose themselves, nor does it operate as a ‘free agent’, unaffected by social structure and discourses, particularly gender” (p. 3). It is important to acknowledge the interplay between embodied agency and intersubjectivity.

Having established the body as an intimate part of self and being an embodied subject, the next section presents the narrative framework for understanding the self and self-transformation that informs the present research.

2.8 The Self & Narrative

In the social sciences, lived experience is recognized as storied, meaning that it bears a narrative structure or configuration, and researchers have turned to examine ways that the self is narratively constructed. Crossley (2000a) explained, “individuals understand themselves through the medium of language, through talking and writing, and it is through these processes that individuals are constantly engaged in the process of creating themselves” (p. 10). Crossley (2000a; b) introduced a narrative psychological approach to understanding the self that is broadly

social constructionist, with an infusion of phenomenology. This amalgam perspective, which underpinned my understanding of the self, is laid out in detail throughout this section.

As with body weight/shape and embodiment, the present research equally appreciates the way in which women's experiences of self and selfhood are inextricably bound to sociocultural discourse. From a social constructionist perspective, the self is understood as constituted through language practices that are used to make sense of oneself, others, and events, within the ongoing interactional and interpretative context of everyday life (Crossley, 2000a). This conception challenges realist assumptions, which regard concepts like the self or body-image as entities that can be discovered and described much the same as an object in the physical world (Gleeson & Frith, 2006). Although Crossley (2000a, b) classified her narrative theory of self as broadly social constructionist, she contended that the downfall of a strictly social constructionist perspective is that it often overplays the disordered, variable, chaotic, and flux-like nature of self-experiences. In so doing, Crossley stated that social constructionism produces a characterization of the self that unfortunately "loses the subject", failing to sufficiently capture the felt sense of unity and integrity of selfhood that people often experience. Del Busso and Reavey (2013) similarly argued that tendencies to present the body as merely surface for discursive inscription fails to account for and elucidate lived experience. This challenge has been conceived in the literature as a dilemmatic space between two poles: privileging interiority, the realm of one's "personal" and "real" experience of self, versus externality, the shaping of the self by social, relational and discursive structures. And, resolution of this tension comes down to the degree of emphasis that a researcher gives to one side or the other or, to put it differently, how "thick" or "thin" the active engagement or agentic contribution of the individual is described to be in the self-construction process (Bamberg, 2010; Smith & Sparkes, 2008b).

Freeman (1999) viewed the self as constructed using "tools" or "materials" sourced from relational, cultural, and historical context; however, he argued that by privileging this externality over the interiority, we fail to capture the active engagement of the person in the process of self-construction. Freeman conceived of the self-configuration act in poetic terms, as "imaginative labor" looking to give form and meaning to experience. Like Crossley, Freeman recognized the constitutive role of language, culture, and social relations in the formation of selfhood, but regards the word "construction" to imply "a building process, an act of labor, design, and transformation" (p. 106) on part of the individual. Accordingly, Crossley argued that bringing a

phenomenological perspective to our understanding the self is important to retain the subjectivity and personal experience of selfhood, alongside an appreciation of externally structuring forces. This is a position that some (e.g., Smith and Sparkes, 2008b) have termed (neo)realist. The need to reconcile lived experience and social construction in such a way will be discussed further in subsequent sections of this chapter and Chapter 3.

In addition to language, a narrative theory of self requires understanding the indissoluble link between temporality and selfhood. Humans are naturally interpretative. We actively reflect upon and try to make sense of what is happening “inside” and around us, and draw connections between events and self (Crossley, 2000a; Pasupathi et al., 2007). Crossley (2000a, b) observed that time provides an “order of meaning” to activity and experience in this respect. Researchers studying the narrative quality of selfhood have noted that there is typically a past-present-future configuration to how we understand ourselves (Crossley, 2000a, McAdams, 2008). The need for self-understanding in the contemporary world often turns us toward our past, specifically memories thereof, and we try to attach meaning to experiences (Crossley, 2000a). Crossley described how, at the level of tacit experience, we are constantly “projecting backwards and forwards in a manner that maintains a sense of coherence, unity, meaningfulness and identity” (Crossley, 2000b, p. 542). This phenomenological quality of unity, coherence, and consistency across time is characteristic of the contemporary internalized concept of self (Crossley, 2000a; McAdams, 2008; Smith & Sparkes, 2008b).

McAdams (2008) proposed a life-story model of self-identity. Adopting a narrative perspective, he referred to identity or selfhood as “an individual’s internalized, evolving, and integrative story of the self” (p. 242). McAdams’ model outlined how stories: (1) serve an integrative function in life, (2) are told within intra- and interpersonal context, (3) change over time, and (4) exist as “cultural texts”, reflecting the culture and times within which they are created and told. McAdams utilized the classical distinction between the two forms of self that were made famous by James (1890), namely the subjective sense of “I” (self-as-subject) and objective sense of “Me” (self-as-object). The continuity of the self is represented by “I”, which materializes as a sense of personal identity and a “sense of sameness” through time and the feeling of having an existence apart from others. “Me” describes the self-as-known and includes all that a person has synthesized and appropriated as one’s own. According to McAdams (2008),

the self may be construed as a “reflexive arrangement” of the experiencing “I” and constructed “me”, evolving and expanding over the life course.

McAdams (2008) argued that, although selves may consist of many different elements and contradictions, a fundamental aspect of selfhood is integrating, unifying, and synthesizing. He captured this as follows:

People’s stories about themselves may bring together different self-ascribed tendencies, roles, goals and remembered events into a synchronic pattern that expresses how the individual person who seems to encompass so many different things in a complex social world is, at the same time, one (complex and even contradictory) thing (p. 244).

A narrative understanding of self provides synchronic integration, gathering together at one point in time, and diachronic integration, accounting for personal development across time (McAdams, 2008). Self as narrative serves to integrate and/or reconcile the recalled and reconstructed past, the experienced present, and imagined future in a meaningful way. This is an especially salient challenge in the context of an ever-changing world (McAdams, 2008) and in considering the disruptive, destabilizing experience of adversity or trauma (Crossley, 2000a; b). Like a story that is in the process of being written, we may conceive of selfhood as bearing a similar fluid quality – as known and established, yet ongoing or unfolding. As a kind of long-term project, selfhood is experienced as been, being and becoming.

But, how do we figure out what kind of self to be or become? What story do we want to tell about ourselves? As McAdams (2008) framed it, some stories are better than others. Stories can be construed from a moral standpoint, as “good” or “bad”, the evaluation of which reflects values and norms of the context in which the storyteller and listeners are situated. Crossley (2000a) referred to the work of Taylor (1989) to explore how development of the self is intrinsically connected to notions of morality. Taylor posited that to answer the basic question of “who am I?”, we need to understand how we relate to “the good”, to orient ourselves in a moral space towards what is considered good, worthwhile and meaningful in life. He used the phrase “the good” to capture the connection between our sense of self and morality. One of our aspirations as persons, according to Taylor, is to experience our self as connected to notions of “the good”:

We are selves only in that certain issues matter for us. What I am as a self, my identity, is essentially defined by the way things have significance for me. To ask what I am in abstraction from self-interpretation makes no sense (p. 34).

Understandings of “the good” are developed and expressed within the sociocultural milieu, most often through language and symbolic systems, and “have the capacity to confer meaning and substance on people’s lives, to subtly influence their progression and orientation towards a particular ‘good’” (Taylor, 1989, p. 97)

Taylor (1989) contended that the “inwardness” and reflexivity characteristic of modern conceptions about the self takes on two forms: self-control and self-exploration. The idea that we can exert control over ourselves, that is our thoughts, feelings and bodies, is taken for granted. It represents modern ideals of responsible agency and accountability. If called upon, it follows, that we can “disengage” from desires, inclinations, or tendencies in pursuit of the “higher good”. This belief became influential during the Enlightenment period, with philosophers promoting the ideal of individuals as capable of making and remaking themselves through disciplined action. This connects to Foucault’s (1979) theory on self-discipline discussed earlier. Taylor (1989), explained that self-exploration, on the other hand, encourages the need to “search for ourselves”; rather than disengage from our bodies, thoughts, feelings, or desires, and objectify them to attain self-control, the self-explorative stance calls us to introspect in order to establish our sense of self. The value of self-exploration and the “inner voice” was popularized in the Romantic period, partly in reaction to the ideal of the self-controlled, rational and disciplined way of being espoused by Enlightenment thinkers. Inner feelings and sentiments began to define “the good”, instead of objective or external consequences, and it became a moral imperative to live “true” to oneself. Both of these discourses can be seen to operate, albeit sometimes in contradiction, in considering the notions of self and body that have been discussed herein related to embodiment and weight-loss for women.

Further to this point, the larger sociocultural setting holds expectations about what makes a healthy, desirable self and a viable, fit narrative (McLean et al., 2007). Pasupathi, Mansour, and Brubaker (2007) explained that, in making self-event connections, an individual negotiates their subjective experience within a set of cultural frames that are available for their appropriation. These frames will vary across and within cultural contexts and may offer contradictory possibilities from which to make sense of experiences. One’s choice of frame may

alter across time. Consequently, in narrating the self “people may resist, adopt, and adapt the prevailing assumptions of their cultures” (p. 102). However, Pasupathi and colleagues add that frames are not equally available for appropriation by all, considering, for example, the influence of gender socialization on self-narration.

The understanding of the self as multidimensional or multifaceted is common in qualitative research (Smith & Sparkes, 2008), but the issue of navigating constancy and change represents another dilemmatic space in theorizing self-construction. We may once again conceive of this dilemma as a dynamic between two poles, situated and continuously in flux. Research in the domain of self-identity faces the task of tying together these contradictions, towards understanding the narrating subject as neither locked in stability nor adrift and fragmented amid constant change, neither confined by nor immutable to sociocultural discourse, but rather as multiple, contradictory, able to respond and adapt to challenge, and open to change (Bamberg, 2010; Crossley, 2000a).

Crossley (2000a) argued that, despite the growing complexity and multiplicity of values, ideals, and ways of life to which we are exposed in contemporary Western society, the self remains characterized more by order and coherence (than disorder and conflict) at the level of lived experience. The sense of coherence to self-experience has a taken-for-granted, “unseen” quality. Likewise, the normal temporal orientation of self-experience, the quality of reflecting back and projecting forward, is not something of which we are consciously aware in the active experiencing of daily life. However, when a “disruption”, “breakdown”, or “breach” occurs in one’s personal narrative, this phenomenological sense of connection and coherence to self and time that was once implicit to daily life becomes readily apparent in its absence. Equally, van Manen (1998) observed the body-self connection as existing in a state of “unaware awareness” or “near self-forgetfulness”, as we go about life with much more awareness of our purposes, projects, and relations than our corporeality; but, when faced with a disruption or trauma, such as illness, we can no longer live in this state of passed-over relation to the body.

In the context of trauma or adversity, Crossley (2000a) contended that the use of storytelling or narrative becomes important in a different way, as a way of adapting. When people talk about the experience of chronic or serious illness, for example, they often report feeling as though their self and world have been “shaken”; that is, their underlying conceptions are shocked out of routine complacency and their sense of life’s meaning and selfhood are

described as changed. Adaptation requires a process of narrative configuration, rebuilding or re-storying through which it is possible to reestablish a sense of meaning, order, and connection in the life of the individual (Crossley, 2000b). Moreover, as the inextricable link between the body and self comes to the foreground of experience in the context of bodily distress and illness, storytelling is used to (re)construct embodied subjectivity and the body itself (Heavey, 2015). Phenomenological studies of how people cope with physical illness, injury and pain (Gelech & Desjardins, 2010; Hefferon, et al., 2010; Lau & van Niekerk, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2007) as well as mental illness and addiction (Smith & Rhodes, 2014; Shinebourne & Smith, 2009) have illuminated the lived experience of narrative disruption and reconfiguration as leading to understandings of the body-self as changed or transformed.

Other research programs have echoed Crossley's perspective, theorizing that a narrative process of rendering discontinuity into continuity is involved in reconciling emotionally difficult or personally challenging experiences with one's sense of self (e.g., Pals, 2006; Pasupathi et al., 2007). McLean, Pasupathi, and Pals (2007) presented a process model of self-development that outlines how storytelling is core to both stability and change in the self. Their model focused on the construction of "situated stories", which serve to make connections between experiences and selves. The enduring conceptions, features, and themes held about oneself are inevitably brought into the event and situations encountered in life, and consequently influence the way a given experienced is storied and constructed. This narrative process serves to both maintain and develop the self. According to McLean and colleagues, narratives must evolve to accommodate new experiences and reconcile contradictory experiences. Accordingly, situated stories may function to express an event or experience as being highly self-relevant, as reinforcing existing self-views, or as having changed the self in some way.

Pals (2006) examined how mid-life adults narrate and integrate emotionally difficult or adverse experiences into their evolving life story. Whilst affirming how such experiences challenged the coherence and meaning of self, Pals also revealed the potential of self-challenging experiences to act as "narrative catalysts" for positive self-transformation. Specifically, qualitative analysis of participants' stories elucidated a two-stage narrative process of resolving emotionally difficult or adverse experiences as: (1) developing a narrative that acknowledges the negative emotional impact of the experience and explores this meaning, and then (2) constructing a resolved, positive ending that involved themes of self-growth or positive transformation.

Quantitative analysis showed that the average level of self-growth participants interpreted in connection to negative emotional experiences was predictive of well-being, whereas the average emotional valence of events in the life story was unrelated. Further, individuals whose narratives displayed this exploratory processing and coherent positive resolution continued to score higher on measures of well-being and physical health nine years later, compared to individuals who narrated their experiences in other ways. Pals concluded that experiencing adversity may provide “an opportunity to reconstruct oneself in an improved, healthier, transformed manner that opens up new possibility for the quality, meaning, and trajectory of one’s life” (p. 102).

Selfhood is understood in terms of narrative connections, drawn across critical points, high and low points, turning points or transitions in the broader story of self-development, and in terms of how the narrator interprets these experiences as affecting and shaping the self over time (Crossley, 2000a; McAdams, 2008; Pals, 2006). Moreover, as Pals (2006) observed, the positive impact of a transformative experience in the present can only be fully understood in terms of its close relation with the past negative experience that led to it. In this way, we see how the meaning of a single experience is held in juxtaposition to other experiences and to the broader whole of the narrative self.

In much the same way that the self here-and-now is regarded in comparison to the past, individuals may juxtapose the present-self with possibilities for their future-self. Whereas memories are used to interpret the past, the material used to construct the future self comes in the form of life goals, aspirations, desires, and plans. James (1890) conceived of a divided self, as experienced when comparing the current self against a desired self. Similarly, Markus and Nurius (1986) introduced the notion of “possible selves”, referring to images of desirable selves that one would like to be as well as undesired selves that one is fearful of becoming. These notions, which clearly illustrate the self as multifaceted, assist with comprehending how image(s) of the future self may function as an interpretative and evaluative context from which to view the current self and motivate individual behaviour towards actualization. The conception of future self also underpins an ideology or orientation to life in which developing, growing or personal challenge is in itself valued (Bauer et al., 2008). Considering positive change or transformation in this way recalls understandings from humanistic psychology, such as Maslow’s (1968) self-actualizing person, motivated to achieve personal growth and realize their full potential, and Rogers’s (1963) fully functioning person, striving to live connected to and gain deeper

understanding of oneself, be mentally flexible, and ever-evolving. Thus, in addition to conceptualizing self-development from past to present, narrative is also useful to the construction of self as sought, imagined, or anticipated in the future.

The narrative conceptualization that I have outlined in this section depicts the dynamic and continually evolving character of the self as well as the experiential duality of self as intimately known yet fluid and transmutable, with possibility to adapt through changing circumstance and challenge. In the next section, I contextualize understandings of the self and self-transformation within the relevant literature on weight-loss dieting and body work.

2.9 Linking Weight-Loss Dieting to the Self & Self-Transformation

A number of researchers have theorized that disordered eating and weight-control practices arise in an attempt to cope with “identity impairments” or “deficits” and associated feelings of ineffectiveness, distress, low self-esteem, or shame. These perspectives suggest that women engage in chronic dieting or disordered eating behaviours not simply as a means of regulating body weight/shape but also as a way to inform or manage the difficult task of developing one’s sense of self. That is, women are said to turn to the body as a source of self-definition or proxy for the self (e.g. Polivy & Herman, 2007; Vartanian, 2009). Striegel-Moore (1993) proposed that girls and women focus on the body and the pursuit of thinness and beauty as a strategy for self-affirmation. This early perspective considered the fact that adolescence, a period characterized by identity development, is a particularly sensitive time for the development of eating disorders. For girls who are vulnerable, owing to an unstable sense of self, self-consciousness, and/or low self-esteem, Striegel-Moore argued that a focus on physical appearance may provide a tangible means of constructing self-image. Within this frame, dieting and weight concerns offer a sense of purpose and function as a way to cope with challenges to self-development that arise in puberty and navigating ideals of femininity. Early perspectives on binge eating considered its role in emotional- and self-regulation. Escape theory (Heatherton & Baumeister, 1991) proposed that binge eating functions to escape from aversive self-awareness, such as feelings of inadequacy, body anxiety or shame. Likewise, the masking hypothesis (Polivy & Herman, 1999) posited that chronic dieters purposefully use bouts of overeating as a way to avoid unpleasant emotions. Dieters are said to attribute negative affect to the overeating, which is a more specific and controllable factor, instead of the real and often more threatening causes such as uncertainty about the self or perceived shortcomings. These early perspectives

have a continued presence in the field today and have likened the patterns of disinhibited and “emotional eating”, often discussed in relation to chronic dieting, to the self-regulation struggles of addiction (Evers et al., 2009; Gordon et al., 2018).

Research in the twenty-first century has continued to link the body and self in theorizing the etiology of disordered eating behaviour. Stein and Corte (2003) advocated a shift from body image to self-concept impairments in conceptualizing the causative factors of eating disorders. Specifically, they contended that impairments in the self-schemas that comprise self-concept create a vulnerability to body image disturbances which, in turn, motivates disordered eating attitudes and behaviours. Their research, within an eating disorder population (Stein & Corte, 2007) and community-based sample (Stein & Corte, 2008), found that the presence of fewer positive and more negative self-schemas was predictive of eating disorder symptomatology. Additionally, Stein and Corte (2007) found that the self-schema of “fat” mediated the relationship between overall self-concept and eating disordered symptomatology.

Other researchers have also proposed that self-identity deficits are core to the development and maintenance of restrictive eating and weight-control behaviour (Amianto et al., 2016; Polivy & Herman, 2002a, Stein & Corte, 2007; Vartanian, 2009; Vartanian et al., 2018). A substantial number of studies have associated low self-esteem and self-efficacy, appearance contingent self-worth, and self-objectification with eating disorder pathology (Bardone-cone et al., 2020). Researchers have repeatedly asserted that patients with eating disorders exhibit a more “precarious” sense of self, associated with higher levels of “identity confusion” and instability in how they view themselves compared to normative samples (Stein & Corte, 2007; Verschueren et al., 2016; Wheeler et al., 2001). Regarding chronic dieting, specifically, Polivy and Herman (2007) suggested that the relationship between women’s body-image and self-image reveals a tendency for women to equate the body and self. They proposed that choosing to become a chronic dieter not only provides a means of emotional regulation but is also a way to regulate self-image when central aspects of selfhood feel threatened. Based upon this argument, dieting may be seen as a strategy for improving an uncertain or somewhat compromised sense of self. Polivy and Herman described how women and girls may turn to dieting and become preoccupied with weight in an effort to rebuild their sense of self. They stated that for adolescent girls, in particular, who are struggling to define themselves and find social acceptance, weight-control may appear to be a socially acceptable and permissible solution. In a large community sample of

women aged 18 to 62 years, Woodward, McIlwain and Mond (2019) found that tendencies to displace negative feelings about the self onto the body were associated with increases in depressive and eating disorder symptomatology. These researchers specifically considered the role of internalized shame and body shame. Woodward and colleagues discussed how their findings lent support to the dual function of avoiding aversive feelings of shame and attempting to enhance self-worth in focusing on the body.

The identity disruption model of body dissatisfaction, developed by Vartanian and colleagues (2018), advanced that negative early life experiences can disrupt healthy self-development, thereby increasing vulnerability to sociocultural risk factors (e.g., internalizing dominant ideals of beauty, appearance-based social comparisons); such risk factors, in the absence of a healthy and stable self-concept, subsequently lead individuals to seek external sources to help define the self. Investigations of this model within community adult samples have shown that lower self-concept clarity is associated with internalization of sociocultural standards (e.g., thin ideal) as personally meaningful beliefs and, in turn, increased feelings of body dissatisfaction, tendencies to make social appearance comparisons, and propensity to engaging in disordered eating and exercise behaviours (Vartanian, 2009; Vartanian et al, 2016, 2018; Vartanian & Hayward, 2020). Amianto and colleagues (2016) discussed how individuals suffering from anorexia have difficulties integrating their internal experiences within a meaningful, temporally coherent narrative of self-identity, which contributes to personal instability. Their work draws upon knowledge of dissociative tendencies that lead patients with anorexia to objectify and detach from the body (e.g., Fitzsimmons-Craft et al., 2011). All of these perspectives offer variations on a theme, namely the link between body image disturbance and disorder of the self, suggesting that the relative prevalence of dieting and disordered eating among women may reflect an overemphasis on the body in their definitions of self.

Like individuals with eating disorders, chronic dieters have been ascribed as having more “precarious” or “disturbed” identities than non-dieters. Evidence suggests that women dieters place more emphasis on dieting, weight, and shape in defining themselves than non-dieters. For instance, as with eating disorders, individuals who are chronically dieting have a tendency to evaluate their own self-worth on the basis of weight and shape (Blechert et al., 2010; McFarlane et al., 2001). Dieters are also more likely than non-dieters to express negative beliefs and attitudes about fatness, and internalize these beliefs as their own personal values (Vartanian et

al., 2005). In a study of female undergraduate students, Wheeler (2004) found that chronic dieters considered diet- and weight-related goals to be more central to their sense of personal identity than non-dieters. These goals were seen as more important, self-defining, and self-determined than similar goals for non-dieters. Moreover, the stronger the connection between women's diet- and weight- related goals and their self-definition the higher the "identity confusion" they displayed. Consistent with other studies of eating self-regulation, Wheeler found that challenging chronic dieters' identities by having them consider how their behaviour has been inconsistent with weight-loss goals, led them to subsequently eat more than non-dieters. However, if after this identity threat, dieters were provided an opportunity to reaffirm their weight-loss goals, they did not subsequently overeat. Sarfan and colleagues (2019) examined whether priming adult dieters to think about their diet would predict increased body-image concerns, and, in turn, poorer self-esteem. Interestingly, they found support for this model among female dieters. Among male dieters, however, being primed to think about dieting predicted higher self-esteem, which led to lower body concern. The authors discussed how this pattern of results across gender could be an artifact of sample size, as males constituted a smaller proportion of their sample, or suggest gendered patterns of relating to the body and self in dieting.

Taken together, the research on both restrictive and disordered eating appears to suggest that for some women dieting is not only something that they do, but also an important aspect of how they see themselves and their bodies, how they relate to food, and how they cope with perceived self-deficits. Given that weight-loss dieting is often unsuccessful and repeated dieting may increase weight as often as it reduces it, research has cautioned that using body weight to define the self or determine self-worth is a maladaptive strategy for most women. Polivy and Herman (2007) suggested that chronic dieters' sense of self is often tied into their dieting and, in particular, their degree of success at reshaping the body. However, if being a successful dieter becomes a self-defining feature, this means that, in the absence of dieting success, dieters may feel dysphoric and self-rejecting. Studies have found that when dieters are actively losing weight, at least in the initial stage of the diet, they report feeling better about themselves but begin to feel worse about themselves when they stop losing weight or start to regain the lost weight (Grogan, 2017; Ogden, 2018; Polivy & Herman, 2002b). Research has also shown that dieters' expectations of how much weight they can and should lose tend to be inflated (Polivy &

Herman, 2002b), making it all the more likely that they will fail to achieve their weight-loss goals and feel worse about themselves as a result. For chronic dieters then, having your sense of who you are and your worth attached to dieting means that mood, well-being, and self-image are precariously tied to increases and decreases in weight.

Research has demonstrated that individuals who are chronically dieting are more likely to underreport their weight and do so to a greater extent than non-dieters. Irrespective of dieting status, individuals who are overweight also tend to underreport their weight more frequently (Polivy et al., 2014). Such findings have been discussed in relation to the well-documented negative psychological and social impact of weight stigma. Along with poor body image and disordered eating, the internalization of weight stigma has been linked to increased public self-consciousness, anticipated rejection and devaluation (e.g., Blodorn et al., 2016), increased rates of depression and anxiety, higher severity of obesity, and reduced self-efficacy to engage in health-promoting behaviours (e.g., Hunger et al., 2015; Pearl & Puhl, 2018). Additionally, researchers have questioned whether the underreporting of weight represents an actual perceptual bias, a self-enhancement strategy to convey a more socially acceptable impression, or a self-protective strategy that allows individuals to feel better about themselves. The literature provides the most compelling evidence for the self-protective function (Polivy et al., 2014). Chronic dieters do not demonstrate a bias that prevents them from realizing their actual weight (e.g., Vartanian et al., 2004) and, in fact, tend to weigh themselves more often than others as part of “watching” their weight. And, while the processes of self-presentation and self-protection are highly entangled, chronic dieters interestingly tend to underreport their weight more in private conditions than when the report will be made public. Polivy and colleagues (2014) interpreted that a self-protective mechanism allows chronic dieters to engage in a kind of fantasy state, imagining themselves as thinner than they really are, which may alleviate body image concern and/or subvert threat to self-esteem even if only temporarily.

Chronic dieters report stronger beliefs in the benefits of thinness than non-dieters. They tend to maintain unrealistically positive expectancies of rewards and overgeneralized beliefs about self-improvement associated with weight-loss (Boivin et al., 2005; Granberg, 2006; Trottier et al., 2005). Heyes (2006) denoted how there is a rational component to maintaining such beliefs:

The social rewards that accrue to being slim are very real, and it takes a tough mind to reconcile itself to the knowledge that this ideal is unattainable and bad for women when so much points in the other direction (p. 137).

However, when thinness is actually achieved and maintained by the small few, the weight loss itself may produce results that fall short of dieters' inflated or idealized expectations. Granberg (2006) conducted interviews with 46 men and women (age 27-79) who had managed to maintain moderate to significant weight losses (ranging from 30 to 100 lbs.) over a period of three months or more. This study was based on Markus and Nurius' (1986) theory of possible selves. The possible selves that motivated and sustained the dieting behaviour of these participants reflected widespread beliefs about the changes that thinness would bring about in their life. Weight loss was expected to enhance personal and social identity, to make them more attractive, popular, charismatic, and self-secure. Granberg (2006) found that many possible selves associated with weight-loss were not fulfilled among these successful dieters or at least not to the extent idealized. The gap between the possible self that participants sought through dieting and the actual self that emerged after weight loss had to be negotiated before they could consider their weight loss as successful.

According to Polivy and Herman's (2002b) "false hope syndrome", unrealistic expectations about one's ability to change their behaviour and the desirable rewards that will follow from this self-change induce individuals to undertake self-change pursuits, such as dieting, in which success is difficult at best, if not impossible. Failures at self-change attempts are then interpreted in such a way that the failure is seen as far from inevitable; people convince themselves that success is possible with a few adjustments. For example, Polivy and Herman described how the common attribution that insufficient effort is responsible for diet failure, fostered through dieting discourse, leaves the dieter with the opportunity to redeem themselves by trying harder or being more persistent in the next dieting attempt. Effort is an internal, unstable characteristic and is therefore correctable. Alternatively, dieters may attribute their failure to lose weight to an external and changeable factor, for instance citing the particular diet plan or program as ineffective. This interpretation leaves open the possibility of future success with a new and better diet and encourages the likelihood of future dieting attempts. Moreover, Polivy and Herman surmised that, even when dieters acknowledge task difficulty, the rewards of

thinness may be so attractive that the continual pursuit of weight-loss is deemed worthwhile and prior failure is insufficient to deter repeated dieting attempts.

Glenn (2012) explored the phenomenon of waiting on weight-loss across the narrative accounts of 4 women and a series of online blogs written by individuals who were trying to lose weight. Her phenomenological analysis offered insight into women's experience of "sizing up" the self, objectifying the body and perceiving weight as demanding attention, and felt sense of their bigger body as uninhabitable and "not-me". This corporeal sense of otherness, as narrated, depicts the body as not representative of the self as known, yet conferring a painful sense of responsibility for being as is. Glenn's participants narrated a mixed sense of uncertainty and anticipation about achieving weight-loss, a watchful and impatient sense of time moving too slowly to "get there", and struggled with trying to reconcile oneself with the current body along the way. The women's accounts also spoke of waiting for something more than a lower number on the scale or smaller dress size, for the "shinier" and more fulfilled life envisioned possible via weight-loss compared to their present. Glenn argued that a desire to feel "normal" and at ease in the body drives weight-loss practices more than anything, with these feelings being more central than the actual weight change itself.

The assumptions on which the dieting enterprise is built, such as the notion that one's body can be reshaped at will and the expectation that dieting holds the promise for not only weight-loss but broader personal transformation, may encourage dieters to set unrealistic goals and to fantasize about what life would be like if only they were thin (Blood, 2005). Grogan (2017) stated that the dieting industry promotes these kinds of associations using "images of self-confident-looking, thin models, and the rhetoric of a 'new you' after the commercially available diet has helped the dieter to lose weight" (p. 60). Fox (2017) described how a rhetoric of "change your body, change your life" dominates dieting cultural and narratives of weight-loss. This rhetoric has also been documented by research studies on televisual constructions of body- and self-transformation (Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007; Heyes, 2007; Rodan, 2010).

Given the prevailing meanings of thinness in Western culture, Blood (2005) claimed that we should not be surprised about how many women believe their lives will be better if only they were thin and perceive thinness as a panacea for everything from relationship problems to financial difficulties. Nor is it surprising, she argued, that many women are reluctant to give up on the hope that losing 10 pounds, for example, is all that stands in the way of happiness.

Research has shown that dieting efforts are often motivated by widespread beliefs that weight loss will lead to dramatic personal transformation. Thinness is equated with success, femininity, attractiveness, and being in control of one's self and life. The ability to imagine oneself as "thin" or "not fat" and anticipate the benefits that might ensue can both motivate and sustain dieting behaviour and contributes to repeat dieting attempts (Fox, 2017; Glenn, 2012; Granberg, 2006, 2011; Polivy & Herman, 2002b).

Research using the possible selves framework has illuminated that the fear of fatness has very real consequences for women's self-concept, drive for thinness, and motivation to diet. Investigations into the salience of young women's expectancies of achieving a "thin self" or "fat self" have found that the feared fat self is a stronger predictor of body image concern and motivation to diet than the hoped-for thin self (Dalley, 2016; Dalley et al., 2013). Fahs and Swank (2017) conducted interviews with a culturally diverse sample of 20 women (aged 18-31) to explore their subjective feelings about hypothetically gaining 100 pounds. Applying a phenomenological and feminist perspective, Fahs and Swank identified themes of: weight blame, anger and disgust toward the imagined fat self; fear of physical limitations; fear of social derogation; and severe distress that life would be "over". Fahs and Swank discussed how fat shame pervaded the women's narratives and the marked intensity of many emotional reactions to the question (e.g., shrieking in disgust or laughing uncontrollably) revealed dread, terror, and loss at imagining life as a person who is fat. According to the authors, participants' notions of fat embodiment were hyperbolic and extreme compared to the reality of living in a fat body, which they interpreted as projections of deep-seated fear about taking on stigma of fatness. The abjection of being fat inspired some women to consider the necessity of eating disorders to remedy their bodies. Participants who feared weight gain to the point of thinking that "life would be over" expressed how they might be "forced to leave town", would "rather die", and may even contemplate suicide because life would not be worth living as a "fat person". The fact that fat embodiment was this scary to women is important for researchers, particularly in the field of fat studies, to further understand if they are to support women in the deconstruction of the thin ideal and weight stigma.

Fox (2017) discussed how the notorious before-and-after presentation of weight-loss are impossible to avoid. In combination with evocative taglines like "become the new you" or "reveal your true self", such self-transformational portrayals of weight-loss success bend time in

a manner that glorifies the future at the expense of the past and present. Fox argued that presenting weight-loss as a way to “perfect” one’s life is representative of the wider progress-driven temporality of Western culture. The internalization of such narratives adds to women’s difficulty of giving up on dieting and its promise. According to Fox, as much as fat studies scholars and fat activists have worked to deconstruct damaging discourse in order to diminish its influence on dieters, it has been an uphill battle. The sociocultural embeddedness of life- and identity-changing narratives contributes to women’s ambivalent relation to dieting as they try to resist the larger self-transformation discourse, even after discovering (and even embracing) counter-messages of fat acceptance and body positivity. Fox articulately conveyed a felt sense of being caught in-between resisting and continuing to live surrounded by discursive representations of dieting that “have the ability to hold us hostage to a future that will never materialize while simultaneously making other ways of experiencing time unthinkable” (p. 2). It is not that imagining a different life or personal change is necessarily a problem; however, as Fox suggested, it is problematic when this vision of the future self becomes increasingly idealized and predominates one’s present. Dieters may come to experience themselves as ever-reaching toward this envisioned state of being – the “after” self – and losing weight can become the be-all and end-all focus of dieters’ present lives/selves. This account of temporality has been written about as a “liminal present”.

Like discourses of self-discipline and self-improvement, Heyes (2006) contended that a discourse of self-care is built into weight-loss dieting:

I want to approach weight-loss dieting not only as a quest the ideal body, but also as a *process* of working on the self, marketed with particular resonance and sold to women, that cleverly deploys the discourse of self-care feminists have long-encouraged (p. 126).

She suggested that meanings about caring for and working on the self are necessary to consider in order to grasp the powerful appeal and enduring cultural resonance of weight-loss dieting. Turning to Foucault’s (1988) later writings on technologies of the self, Heyes (2006) explained how, paradoxically, engaging in a normalized disciplinary practice, such as weight-loss dieting, can enable acquisition of certain new skills and capacities:

On the one hand, deliberately losing weight by controlling diet involves the self-construction of a docile body through attention to the minutest detail. On the other hand, becoming aware of exactly how and what one eats and drinks, realizing that changing old

patterns can have embodied effects or setting a goal and moving toward it, are all enabling acts of self-transformation. This component of dieting in part explains its popularity and function, and why simply purveying information about the invidiousness of dieting without offering substitute activities to fill the same needs is bound to fail as a feminist activity (p. 128).

According to Heyes, the dieting industry, especially commercial weight-loss programs, appropriates and exploits the language self-care for gain. She advanced that the power of self-care discourse may help explain why women continue at a self-disciplinary practice that so often fails at its ostensible aim. Such consideration is pertinent to the aim of the present research to uncover a full account of how weight-loss dieting functions in women's lives and selves.

Examining narratives of possible selves provides insight into the idealization and stigmatized of certain body types as a taken-for-granted aspect of experience, which can stimulate efforts to avoid or create a particular "kind" of self through body work. Another qualitative study by Granberg (2011) illuminated weight-loss as motivated by desire to experience a positive sense of self. Granberg interviewed 41 weight-loss organization attendees (age 27-79; 76% women) who had sustained weight-loss for at least three months to explore their recollections of felt stigma and the experience of shedding a "stigmatized identity" in association with weight-loss. Interestingly, participants reported that body size had become less relevant in their self-definition with losing weight, moving to the background or periphery in no longer being such a conscious aspect of daily life. Reconciling their inner sense of self and post-weight loss body, however, was considered a longer process, with the eventual endpoint to internalize a stable concept of self as "not fat" and "normal" both in the eyes of others and self-experience. A significant part of this process involved coming to terms with discrepancies between their "ideal" body and the size/weight that they could reasonably maintain. Participants described having to adjust their body standards to a size that felt good, but was possible for them to sustain without great struggle. Granberg stated that participants whose accounts suggested the most complete stigma exit were able to shift away from an "ideal" body in their self-evaluation.

Studies have indicated that even successful dieters remain susceptible to "residual stigma" if their weight-loss was achieved by a less effortful means. For instance, Stambush, Hill-Mercer, and Mattingly (2016) presented a sample of undergraduate students with three fictional weight-loss conditions in which a woman was described as having lost 25 pounds either through

diet and exercise, the use of diet pills, or no specific method (control). Participants gave less favorable attribution ratings on such characteristics as physical attractiveness, likeability, healthiness, or laziness, to name a few, when the woman had lost weight via diet pills as opposed to diet and exercise. The persistence of stigmatized perceptions after weight-loss may have implications for how individuals navigate their changed body and embodied subjectivity. Granberg (2011) argued that successful weight-loss is only one step toward escaping weight stigma and that, ultimately, it is necessary for social feedback changes to occur. When an individual begins to lose weight, others often respond with compliments or other positive feedback. This feedback can sustain stigma in that, while the interaction is positive in nature, it nonetheless evokes the “fat self”. The point at which such feedback dissipates may actually be the more pivotal step in exiting weight stigma.

In the field of health psychology, qualitative research on the experience of sustained weight-loss has uncovered notions of rebirth, reinvention, and liberation about the self. Ogden and Hills (2008) conducted qualitative interviews with 24 individuals (age 25-58; 70% women) who had successfully maintained weight-loss for three years. These individuals demarcated a narrative shift toward a new healthier self with sustained weight-loss. Interviewees described reaching a critical, turning point in life related to health, relationships, or salient milestones, which precipitated behaviour change. The process of change was conceptualized as “reinvention” in which their old behaviour was disrupted, creating opportunity to build a new sense of self, with healthier behaviour at the core, and take up new roles associated with a healthier lifestyle.

Epiphaniou and Ogden (2010) conducted interviews with 10 women (age 26-58) who maintained a 10 percent reduction in their weight for a year or more. This study focused on exploring women’s perceptions of self at their heaviest versus their current reduced weight. Participant’s storied a healthy shift of self from restriction to liberation concomitant with weight-loss. The restricted self was highly influenced by internalized weight stigma, leading to avoidance of social interaction, a chiefly weight-centered view of self, and cycles of dietary restriction to dysregulation. In contrast, at a lower weight, the newfound liberated self was characterized by greater normality and acceptance, a broader and more positive self-view, flexible eating habits, being less socially reserved, openness to new experiences, as well as improved confidence and efficacy about skills or tasks. Epiphaniou and Ogden examined how

this reinvention process related to the alleviated impact of stigma on women's sense of self. During prior weight-loss attempts, the women in this study identified beliefs that they could resume usual behaviour upon reaching their goal weight. But, in the present experience, they realized that permanent change was necessary to sustain the aforementioned benefits. Among these women, the sheer positivity of their new sense of self provided ample motivation to maintain their weight-loss.

Ideas about positive self-transformation are complexly woven into the dieting narrative, as Fox (2017) contended, and reproduced in participants' accounts of weight-loss success, yet research has shown that the vast majority of dieters are not successful. One wonders, then, what is the lived experience of chronically dieting without success or, alternatively, relinquishing dieting in favor of size acceptance? Research has suggested that, in actuality, there is much fluidity and ambivalence between these positions. Donaghue and Clemitshaw's (2012) analysis of postings made by female participants in an online fat acceptance blog demonstrated the benefits of being fat-accepting, including greater self-acceptance, emancipating oneself from dieting, and focusing on pursuits unrelated to weight or appearance; however, their analysis also revealed the complexity and ambivalence of resisting powerful meanings and realities about thinness in the wider sociocultural context. Many posters related a path to size acceptance that began with understanding that "diets don't work". Dieting was recounted as a miserable experience that disrupted and usurped posters' lives and, ultimately did not lead to happiness, even for those who were "successful" at it. Yet, blog posters also described dieting as an ongoing "temptation" in the context of thin idealization and the reality of thin privilege. Trying to reconcile a fat-accepting mindset with the strong appeal of the thin ideal was hard. For many members of this online community, instability and dissonance were as much a part of fat acceptance as empowerment. For example, some posters felt that their sense of intelligence and feminist commitment was at odds with personal desire to be thinner. Donaghue and Clemitshaw asserted that, at the level of lived experience, relinquishing weight-loss as a goal entails giving up more than a specific aesthetic ideal. Their findings highlight the enormity and ubiquity of social pressure for thinness as well as the intersubjective nature of self-identity.

Several feminist scholars (e.g., Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Fox, 2017) have highlighted the need for compassion about women's ambivalence and

struggle to give up on dieting and the idea of being/becoming thin. Murray (2016) has questioned assertions that cultivating a fat-accepting identity is a matter of personal “choice”.

Is a declaration of one’s “fatness” about *recognising* a body in order to set it aside as an obstacle to the realisation of an “essential” self that dwells within the body, and exists separate from it, thus privileging the mind over the body? (p. 175)

According to Murray, the assertion that size or fat acceptance is an exercise of changing one’s mind about the body, of “overcoming” the body and choosing to love oneself in spite of your body, is oversimplified; in reality, to actualize this inner self is always inflected with ambiguity. It is unrealistic to simply forbid the influence of thin idealization on one’s embodied subjectivity as a person who is overweight. Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty’s (1994) concepts of being-in-the-world, Murray (2016) argued that the mind-body dualism required here is ontologically impossible; as subjects, we are always embodied and never truly “free” of the influence of others. Regarding the latter, Murray stated that as much as an individual who is overweight may work hard to think of their body in positive ways, others’ responses and reactions to fatness are a challenge and indeed shape how people who are overweight think about their bodies/selves. As Murray explained, “we do not exist in a vacuum, but always in an interworld of meaning and lived experience, which necessarily bounds the kinds of reinvention we may aspire to institute” (p. 151). In addition, Murray raised how the experience of “being fat” teaches a person to dissociate from the body, particularly in response to repeat encounters with weight stigma. In making this point, she highlighted the contradiction in trying to value a self apart from body size/weight yet live in and ascribe positive meanings to the “fat body” itself. In her critique, Murray called for understanding and acceptance of the dynamic, unfinished and diverse nature of selfhood and embodiment.

Bombak and Monaghan (2017) illuminated the varied, ambivalent and complex nature of fat embodiment over time amongst 13 women (age 30-50 years) who self-identified as “obese” in a Canadian context. The explicit lens of embodied change (or lack thereof) and different weight trajectories was brought to their analysis. Most of the women in their study hoped to permanently lose unwanted weight but felt ambivalent or skeptical about the likelihood of realizing this goal. Only two participants had lost a significant amount of weight and been able to maintain it. Bombak and Monaghan explored the patterns of weight-related talk expressed by their participants using a typology of narratives characterized by: (1) hope, seeking to lose and/or

maintain weight-loss for the prospect of a thin(ner) body and the “good life”; (2) disordered eating distress, resisting weight-loss based upon experiences of harm and poor health that came from dietary restriction; and (3) weight cycling and stagnation, feeling stalled by unsuccessful attempts at dieting and chronic weight fluctuations. This typology was not mutually exclusive. In truth, women shifted or felt ambiguously in-between these orientations over their histories. Bombak and Monaghan discussed how the hope of weight-loss and self-improvement became a means for women to build positive meaning and possibility for their embodied selves, following a history of life disrupted by weight concern. For instance, many hopefully spoke of eased problems that they attributed to weight, including both physical illness (e.g., mobility concerns) and social ills (e.g., limited socialization, absence of romance). Narratives of hope were juxtaposed by the negativity of past weight-loss struggles and broader stigma associated with being and living as a person who is obese, which sometimes made production of hope challenging. Three women in the study reported that past weight-loss efforts had triggered eating disorders. Their histories of distress and health risk in trying to lose weight sensitized them to the dangers of re-engaging in dieting and underpinned their present efforts to be more body-accepting and align themselves with HAES-based ideology. Women whose narratives expressed stagnation unfortunately struggled with feeling they were to blame for their weight problems and insufficient motivation, which were exacerbated by weight stigma and a sense of lacking support with weight-loss.

Finally, as weight loss surgery (WLS) has become a more significant part of landscape of body modification, a growing body of research has sought to explore patients post-WLS experiences of self and bodily change. Throsby (2008) explored conceptions of self-transformation among 35 adults (29 women, 6 men) who had undergone gastric bypass surgery for weight-loss. For these individuals, undergoing surgery was considered proactive action, a transition out of passivity, that marked the beginning of the “new me”, the self as regaining control in relation to struggles with body size. Weight-loss surgery was viewed as a “tool” to be utilized in support of progress in their weight-loss journeys. The “new me” was understood as an ongoing project to be upheld following surgery. There are notable similarities here to the narrative accounts of cosmetic surgery patients explored by Davis (1995, 2009). Throsby (2008) highlighted the operation of parallel discourses about conformity versus resistance and listening to the body versus controlling or containing the body within participant’s narrative accounts.

Weight-loss surgery, while an extraordinary measure, was constructed as enabling the individual to work at finding normalcy and stability, to reconstitute the self in this regard. Further, the “new me” was regarded as the “real me”, revealing a conception of the overweight body as discordant with the true or authentic self, of self and body as misaligned.

Throsby explored how this discourse of restoring the “real me” is “highly contingent and slippery” (p. 119). In considering that the meaning of weight-loss is so imbedded in prescriptive ideologies of bodily surveillance and discipline, successful weight-loss outside the conventional frame of diet and exercise assumes risk of the authenticity about this “new (real) me” being delegitimized. Indeed, research demonstrates that WLS patients have to contend with public views of surgery as “cheating” or the “easy way out”. Patients often respond to pejorative messages of low effort by reframing, emphasizing surgery as supporting them to do the hard work of practicing self-control, restraint or discipline like any other “normal” person (Ogden et al., 2011; Throsby, 2008; Trainer et al, 2017). The “slippery”, contingent foundation of the post-WLS self also introduces question about the impact of (potential) weight regain for the “new (real) me”.

As part of a larger study exploring long-term experiences of WLS, Groven and Glenn (2016) explored the accounts of three middle-aged women who regained weight after undergoing WLS. All three women made the decision to undergo WLS after long histories of unsuccessful weight-loss dieting. Amidst weight-related illness, pain and disability, WLS felt like their only choice. The women characterized their first 2 years post-surgery as a “honeymoon period” in which they experienced dramatic weight-loss and any post-surgical complications or challenges that arose were temporary and manageable. However, in the years that followed, their stories underwent a major downward turn. Rapid weight loss was replaced by stagnation, then by regain and associated feelings of disappointment, fear, frustration and shame. In contrast to the supportive care received pre-surgery, two of the three women felt completely unaided and even judged when they reached out for support from their health care team with weight regain. The reality of life post-WLS was not better and easier. It was difficult to lose and maintain weight amidst post-WLS challenges, such as increased surgical side effects (e.g., dumping syndrome) that made their bodies feel unpredictable and other psychological complications (e.g., not qualifying for skin removal surgery, inability to work, relationship strain). While surgery had targeted their bodies, these women described how the “mind” was neglected; accordingly,

problems that contributed to weight concerns prior to surgery, like emotional eating, ultimately resurfaced and made weight-management more difficult. Groven and Glenn highlighted the paradox of seeking a “normal” body/weight and, in turn, “normal” relation to the world via WLS, only to lose the normalcy of their pre-surgical lives.

In the context of WLS, research suggests that the experience of weight regain can be easily silenced, buried underneath the prevailing story of success. Groven and Braithwaite (2015) examined how private WLS advertising draws heavily upon the “happily-ever-after” fairytale trope, strengthened by striking before and after images of their surgical patients. Such portrayals paint a glorified picture that neglects the known risks and complications of WLS. Groven and Glenn (2016) discussed how the popular success narrative of WLS contributes to patients’ reluctance to reveal unsuccessful experiences and, accordingly, open themselves to suffering. Nonetheless, this situation leaves the popular distorted narrative unchallenged. Furthermore, that medical narratives, on the one hand, portray WLS as a uniquely effective intervention for obesity and, on the other hand, a mere “tool” that is effective given that patients adhere to and engage in the “work” required to be successful long-term only propagates a frame of fatness as the consequence of personal failure (Groven et al., 2013; Groven & Braithwaite, 2016; Trainer et al., 2017). Thus, the messaging that surrounds WLS in Western culture is problematic in ways similar to that of dieting, concerning notions of conformity, self-discipline, willpower, personal failure and glorified outcomes (Glenn et al., 2013; Groven & Braithwaite, 2016; Groven & Glenn, 2016; Groven et al., 2014) as well as gendered constructions of WLS as a feminine surgery (Newhook et al., 2015).

The final section of this chapter outlines a critique of the literature to date, according to feminist constructionist and positive psychology perspectives, in order to situate and provide a rationale for the contribution of the present research.

2.10 Criticisms from Feminist Constructionist & Positive Psychology Perspectives

Proponents of feminist and social constructionist perspectives have criticized the extant research on women’s body image and body management practices for being too pathology-driven and based in positivist assumptions and methodologies, which are ineffective for capturing the lived experience of women. The dominant discourse of body image dissatisfaction and disturbance, and its focus on quantifying women’s “negative” body-related attitudes and “disordered” eating and weight-control behaviour, reflects a one-dimensional and overly narrow

view of women's embodiment and engagement in body work (Blood, 2005; Cash & Pruzinsky, 2002; Smolak & Cash, 2011; Halliwell, 2015; Murray, 2016; Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015). Moreover, the descriptions of self-body connection given by past quantitative research have often equally employed pathologized language, as with suggesting that women's vulnerability to dieting and eating disorders resides within their "disturbed", "impaired" and "precarious" sense of self. Blood (2005) argued that positivist research methods that "focus on quantifying women's bodies/subjectivities at the expense of their lived experience" (p. 36) reproduce the "objectified gaze" towards women's bodies, and produce only a "partial" account of the role of body work in women's lives. The woman's voice and active role in negotiating the interplay between embodied experience, the sense of self, and display becomes obscured in this research context. Further, if body image concerns are individualized (assumed to exist in the individual), the ways that women's experiences of body and self are embedded and mediated by the sociocultural context becomes downplayed and the complexities of agency in women's subjective experience are overlooked (Blood, 2005; Gleeson & Frith, 2006; Murray, 2016).

Feminist scholars have developed alternative epistemologies and approaches to doing research on women's issues, premised on seeking to respect, understand, and empower women. Campbell and Wasco (2000) explained that "feminist epistemologies accept women's stories of their lives as legitimate sources of knowledge, and feminist methodologies embody an ethic of caring through the process of sharing those stories" (p. 778). Devault (1990) argued that conventional quantitative methods can distort and silence women's voice by attempting to quantify or translate their experiences into pre-determined categories. This critique certainly applies regarding the historical pathology-focus. Qualitative approaches, on the other hand, are better suited to capturing the meaning or significance of women's stories about their bodies and selves. Feminist critiques are less focused on methodological techniques per se, but instead draw attention to how methods are enacted. Familiar methods of data generation, like interviewing, are undertaken in a manner consistent with feminist ideology including concerted efforts to minimize hierarchical researcher-participant relationships and attune to the emotionality of women's lived experiences. The advantage of this altered approach is increased trust and mutuality which may enhance the quality of data (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Devault, 1990).

Social constructionism offers several sharp contrasts to positivism. It assumes the existence of multiple realities and that knowledge or meaning is constructed within a social,

relational, and historical context (Creswell, 2013; Haverkamp & Young, 2007). Research from a social constructionist approach is concerned with developing an understanding of individuals' experience as they engage with the world around them (Creswell, 1998). An understanding of meanings as varied and multiple “[leads] the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than narrow the meanings into a few categories or ideas. The goal of research, then, is to rely as much as possible on the participants' views of the situation” (Creswell, 2013, pp. 24-25). Subjectivity is valued and researchers consider how their own values, personal beliefs, and characteristics influence the process of data generation and analysis, regarding meaning as co-constructed through the researcher-participant interaction (Haverkamp & Young, 2007).

Researchers in the field of body image have called for qualitative research guided by feminist and social constructionist views to more fully explore the “feminine” voice on body work practices such as dieting (Blood, 2005; Gleeson & Frith, 2006). A feminist constructionist approach to understanding women's dissatisfaction with their bodies suggests that social pressures to strive towards the thin ideal encourage objectification of the body and disproportionate allocation of energies to body management and modification. In the context of Western culture, women often receive contradictory messages (e.g., self-discipline vs. self-acceptance) about their bodies, which mediate self-understandings and experiences of embodiment and shape women's decisions to engage in restrictive body practices (Blood, 2005; Bordo, 2003; Gleeson & Frith, 2006). It is argued that practices of body work like dieting exemplify how women come to regulate and discipline their own bodies in relation to dominant social norms of femininity. Yet, women are also understood as active agents who participate, perpetuate, and reify sociocultural standards through their active involvement in the process of “doing femininity” (Blood, 2005; Bordo, 2003; Bartky, 1990/2015; Murray, 2016) and knowingly participating in body-management practices (Davis, 1995, 2009). A positive way forward has been indicated by feminist scholars (e.g., Bartky, 1990/2015; Wolf, 1991/2002) who suggest promoting the development of a new aesthetic ideal of the female body that would extend the limits of acceptable weight/shape and shift away from a conception of women's bodies as objects to be gazed upon and re-shaped in favor of an empowered notion of embodiment.

Public health movements like Health At Every Size (HAES) appear consistent with this sentiment, advocating for greater body acceptance, reduced stigmatization of overweight, and a

more embodied, empowered way of living as ingredients to health (Bacon, 2010; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Tylka et al., 2014). Yet, HAES is not without its critic or internal fractiousness, related to the view that it may invariably reproduce an individualist model of behaviour change and discourse of personal responsibility for health at the expense of fully attending to broader the social determinants, discursive contexts, and inequities that individuals contend with in navigating “health” (Bomback et al., 2019; Lupton, 2013). Bomback and colleagues (2019) stated that:

By failing to challenge this tendency to foreground lifestyles, body mass and implied notions of personal culpability, public health approaches could themselves be regarded as stigmatizing and largely remain unable to capture the complex relationalities within which embodied health practices and knowledge about these take place (p. 101).

Notwithstanding this critique, the HAES frame has made inroads in terms of research and policy and illuminating counter-discourse on weight and health. There still remains a paucity of research on the impact of HAES and size acceptance perspectives in terms of lived experience (Bombak et al., 2019). Most of the literature in this area has focused on individuals’ experience of the online size-acceptance community (e.g., Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012) or presented autobiographical discussions of ambivalence between personal desire for weight-loss and a critical view of weight-centerism (e.g., Heyes, 2006; Longhurst, 2012). There is also a need for further research that considers biographical time and developmental trajectory with respect to women’s understandings of embodiment, weight (loss), and health (Bombak & Monaghan, 2017; Piran, 2016b).

In the twenty-first century, research has broadened the scope of inquiry into positive body image and qualitative work has shed light on the entwined nature of self and body in the context of body modification. Emerging research on selfhood and self-transformation in weight-loss, in particular, has considered the ways in which social discourse shapes the meaning and motivation for dieting, but overemphasis of this perspective sometimes comes at the expense of nuanced subjectivity (Crossley, 2000a; Del Busso & Reavey, 2013). Returning to the issue of agency, for example, in the absence of a balanced perspective, researchers may neglect ways that women actively resist and are resilient to constraints on their embodiment (Del Busso & Reavey, 2013; Hefferon, 2015; Hefferon et al., 2010) or fail to consider ways women’s attempts to change their weight, shape, or appearance may be understood in a context of self-improvement, as both

desirable and problematic (Davis, 1995, 2009; Heyes, 2006). Del Busso and Reavey (2013) cautioned that, while clearly informative in comprehending the sociocultural discourses surrounding women's bodies/subjectivities, the feminist constructionist view may not fully account for women's lived experience of self and body. Not all women relate to, embrace, or accept sociocultural constructions of femininity in the same way. As Del Busso and Reavey (2013) stated, "individual women may have a complex and contradictory set of practices that both pull towards and away from the treatment of their body as a surface. It is this fluidity and movement of positions that interests us the most" (p. 49). Accordingly, researchers are called to prioritize women's voices as a source of knowledge in order to better comprehend the fullness and complexity of women's sense of self and embodiment as both lived experience and social construction (Cosgrove, 2000; Crossley, 2000a; Del Busso & Reavey, 2013).

2.11 The Present Research

In response to this call, the present research explored the entwined nature of body-self and broad meaning of weight-loss dieting for women's embodiment and selfhood. The theoretical position of this research project was adopted in response to criticisms of existing research. Feminist theory and phenomenology emphasize women's embodied subjectivity. The tenets of positive psychology support deconstruction of conceptions of dieting or dieters that are overly restricted or negative. Positive psychology and some feminist accounts also regard women as agentic in seeking weight-loss, not simply "cultural dopes" or passive victims of the thin ideal and constructions of femininity. Heyes (2006) specifically advanced that women may approach and experience weight-loss dieting as enabling or positively transforming the self. This argument has remained largely theoretical, drawing upon Weight Watchers written materials and testimonials. It has not been empirically queried with women dieters. Accordingly, the present research gives balanced consideration to the negative and positive sides of women's experience of weight-loss dieting. The theory of self as narratively constructed and re-storied in relation to experience also adds fresh perspective. To my knowledge, neither positive psychology nor a narrative conception of self has been applied to the investigation of women's weight-loss dieting experience. Narrative understandings of self-identity have been applied to investigations of bodily crisis (e.g., Heavey, 2015) and eating disorder treatment and recovery (e.g., Conti, 2018). Positive psychology theory has been drawn upon to understand adaptive means of coping with illness (e.g., Hefferon, et al., 2010) and in the development of non-dieting approaches to obesity

intervention (e.g., Golstein, 2018). The present project united these theoretical frames with a feminist perspective in studying women's *lived experiences* of chronic dieting. In sum, the present research builds upon existing qualitative studies on the embodied self in body work by taking a unique, integrative theoretical framework and uniting interview and photographic data. Enhancing our knowledge about the enabling or adaptive facets of weight-loss dieting as well as the strengths and resiliencies of women who pursue it has value within health promotion. Such information may be capitalized upon to shift the discourse on women's bodies and weight (loss) in a positive, health-enhancing direction.

CHAPTER 3: EPISTEMOLOGY & METHODOLOGY

In this chapter, I outline the tenets and aims of the interpretative phenomenological framework that grounded the present project and present an argument for bringing together an understanding of meaning as lived experience and social construction within my theoretical framework. I outline my approach to participant recruitment and the inclusion criteria for the project. As interview and photo-elicitation methods were used in both studies, I review the relevant background theory on these data generation approaches in a single section. The specific details regarding participants, methodological design and procedures for Study One and Study Two are then discussed separately. A common strategy of phenomenological analysis was applied in both studies. To avoid repetition, I review my process of data analysis in an integrated section, pinpointing the differences in my steps of phenomenological analysis across a set of cases (Study One) and an idiographic case study (Study Two). Finally, I outline the criteria by which the present project sought to ensure quality and trustworthy research.

3.1 Phenomenological Framework

Qualitative inquiry is a multimethod and interpretative approach “to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them” (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 3). Emphasis is placed on understanding the world as it is lived by the participant and enabling participants to describe their experiences in their own words as opposed to the demonstration of an objective truth (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Smith & Osborn, 2003). The qualitative researcher then acts as an interpreter of individual experience, translating the meaning contained within and across participants’ accounts (Patton, 2015). By emphasizing the subjectivity of experience and meaning, qualitative research invites complexity and context into the research endeavor (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative researchers “aim not to limit a phenomenon, make it neat, tidy, and comfortable, but to break it open, unfasten, or interrupt it so that a description of the phenomenon, in all of its contradictions, messiness, and depth is (re)presented” (Mayan, 2009, p. 11). This qualitative project was guided by the perspective of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis that was developed by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) and van Manen’s (1997/2016) writings on Hermeneutic Phenomenology.

3.1.1 Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

The aim of phenomenology is to conduct a detailed exploration of participants’ everyday lived experience of a social or human phenomenon and the meaning that it holds for them. Smith

and colleagues (2009) outlined two major theoretical axes of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), namely phenomenology and hermeneutics. IPA is phenomenological in its concern with the participant's lifeworld. IPA attempts to get as close as possible to the participant's lived experience and to understand what it is like from the participant's point of view. However, experience is elusive and can never be accessed directly or completely. The researcher gains access to the participant's lifeworld through narrative, but also views narrative accounts in relation to their own experiential knowledge. Thus, IPA recognizes that the researcher necessarily plays an active role in making sense of the participant's accounts of personal experience and is therefore strongly connected to the interpretative or hermeneutic tradition (Larkin et al., 2006; Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). Smith and colleagues (2009) explained that a two-stage interpretation, or "double hermeneutic", is always involved in IPA research; the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant, who is making sense of his or her experience. According to van Manen (2011), the tension between *phenomenology*, which seeks to be descriptive and let the phenomenon speak for itself, and *hermeneutics*, concerned with interpretation and explication of meaning, can be reconciled if we consider that the phenomenological "facts" of lived experience are always experienced with meaning (i.e., hermeneutically). As such, lived experience needs to be captured in language, which is inherently interpretive.

IPA research combines two hermeneutic positions, a hermeneutics of empathy and a hermeneutics of questioning. On one hand, the IPA researcher wants to adopt that "insider" perspective to understand what it is like from the perspective of the participant. On the other hand, the IPA researcher also wants to "stand alongside" the participant to ask critical questions of and wonder about the participant's narrative account. At this point, the analysis becomes more reliant on the interpretative work of the researcher, but still remains grounded in the participant's narrative (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2009). Smith and colleagues (2009) have used the ordinary word "understanding" to help capture both of these aspects of interpretation: "we are attempting to understand, both in the sense of 'trying to see what it is like for someone'; and in the sense of 'analyzing, illuminating and making sense of something'"(p. 36). Developing both these aspects in one's analysis will bring about a richer account of meaning overall and do greater justice to the individuality of each participant (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

A third major influence on IPA is idiography, which is concerned with the particular. The idiographic commitment of IPA is evident in its focus on a detailed examination of particular instances of lived experience. IPA seeks to understand what the experience of a particular phenomenon is like for a particular participant and grasp the meaning of the experience for that participant. IPA also considers that experience is uniquely embodied and situated in the context of the participant's personal and social world (Smith et al., 2009). Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006) stated the importance of not only the phenomenological requirement of IPA to "give voice", but also the interpretative requirement to contextualize and "make sense of" from a psychological perspective by positioning the personal accounts of participants in relation to the wider sociocultural and theoretical context.

IPA researchers are especially concerned with circumstances where everyday lived experience takes on a special significance, meaning, or value for people or in the person's life (Smith et al., 2009). As with other variations of hermeneutic phenomenology, it becomes possible to illuminate details and seemingly trivial aspects of everyday experience that may be taken for granted or viewed as common sense. The focus is toward uncovering and reexamining new or forgotten meanings of everyday experiences (Lavery, 2003; van Manen, 1997/2016). According to van Manen (1997/2016), a good phenomenological description will re-awaken the reader to the lived quality and deeper significance of an experience; it will allow the reader to grasp the nature and significance of the experience in hitherto unseen way. As we research the meaning of lived experience, we begin to more fully understand what it means to be in the world as human beings and take into consideration the social, cultural, and historical traditions that have given meaning to our ways of being.

The qualitative approach of phenomenology was well-suited to exploring women's lived experience and meaning of self and embodiment in relation to weight-loss dieting. Within much of the extant literature discussed in the previous chapter, weight-loss dieting emerges as a taken-for-granted aspect of women's everyday experience in that it is regarded as common and part of women's "normative discontent" with their bodies (Rodin et al., 1985). In taking a phenomenological approach, this project sought to illuminate hidden or neglected meanings and deepen our understanding of the significance of the phenomenon of weight-loss dieting for women's lives and felt sense of self and body. The tenets of phenomenology are consistent with and complementary to a feminist constructionist perspective that prioritizes a woman's own

authentic voice in the construction of meaning and appreciates the socially-situated nature of women's lived experiences of body and self (e.g., Blood, 2005; Cosgrove, 2000). The tenets of phenomenology also echo the non-pathologizing stance of both feminist (e.g., Bordo, 2003; Devault, 1990) and positive psychology perspectives (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

3.1.2 Lifeworld Existentials

Considering phenomenology as the study of the participant's lifeworld, van Manen (1997/2016) introduced the concept of lifeworld existentials to be used as a heuristic guide in the process of thematic reflection. The four fundamental existential dimensions of the lifeworld van Manen describes are corporeality, temporality, spatiality, and sociality. These represent elemental underpinnings of everyday lived experience, usually pre-reflective and taken for granted. The lifeworld existentials are interdependent concepts, with overlapping and interpenetrating meaning, but for pragmatic purposes we can consider them individually. *Lived body* or corporeality refers to the fact that we are always bodily in the world, and thus our physical body or bodily presence informs and is part of experience. *Lived time* is our temporal way of being in the world; all experience is lived through and time is experienced subjectively in its passing and in the felt sense of past, present, and future. An occasional instance is bound with the whole of one's history or narrative flow of events, rather than considered in isolation, as we construe and make sense of it. *Lived space* relates to how we subjectively experience the dimensions of our world and landscape in terms of felt space. *Lived relation* describes how we experience and relate to others in the interpersonal space that we share with them. According to van Manen (1997/2016), we understand ourselves as having an embodied presence, a biography behind us and unfolding future ahead, and as existing in relation to the important people, places, and things of our world.

Ashworth (2016) expanded on the notion of the lifeworld existentials, termed lifeworld "fractions" in his writings, to include lived selfhood, project, and discourse. *Lived selfhood* refers to our interests, cares or concerns, choices, foci or priorities, our sense of agency, our actions and the effects of our actions, and to our feeling of presence and voice in the situation. These aspects create a sense of coherence. We see ourselves laid out and reflected in this manner within the experienced lifeworld. As Ashworth (2016) expressed:

Selfhood is a continual background meaning of my thoughts, feelings, and behaviour. If I am to describe myself, then, I do not "look inside". It is my experiential world that speaks

of me. We find our-selves in the subjective world to which our thought and activity is directed. Experience is embedded in a world which already speaks of the individual perspective of the experiencer (p. 25).

Our relations with others in the lifeworld have a strong impact on selfhood, in terms of how we feel affirmed or undermined. *Lived project* refers to the objectives, activities, events, and entities of our lifeworld that we are committed to and regard as central, as well as our ability to carry them out. Project in this sense refers to purpose. Lastly, *lived discourse* reflects the discursive function of language, how words, terms, and other sociocultural forms of language are employed in the lifeworld to describe and shape human experience. Although discourse is regarded as very powerful factor in the lifeworld, Ashworth (2016) explained that “phenomenological psychology retains emphatically the place of the conscious agent, and this agent is intentionally related to the lifeworld of experience, rather than a world of constructed discourse” (p. 29). Phenomenology considers how personal narrative is inevitably constrained by shared social and cultural discourse but regards this as only a partial account. Experiential narratives speak about life and are part of it; as we put words to the events of the lifeworld, we imbue these events with meaning and an ongoing significance as part our of personal narrative (Ashworth, 2016; van Manen, 1997/2016).

The lifeworld existentials are used as a heuristic, encouraging the researcher to interrogate the experiential phenomenon with reference to these elements (van Manen, 1990/2016). Women’s lived experience of weight-loss dieting was revealed and understood more fully by considering the lifeworld existentials in the present analysis. The concept of lived body is particularly relevant to the experience of weight-loss dieting, as captured in the earlier discussion of the concept of embodiment, and the concept of lived selfhood is key to the research questions posed. As mentioned above, although we may consider the lifeworld existentials individually for investigative purposes, to aid in analytic exploration, they are considered interwoven and interactive in actuality.

3.2 The Construction of Meaningful Reality

The interpretive paradigm respects the subjective nature of reality and regards meaningful reality as constructed out of being-in-the-world. Crotty (1998) defined *constructionism* as “the view that all knowledge, and therefore all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world, and developed and transmitted within an essentially social context” (p.

42). Meaning does not exist in the object or objective world, simply waiting to be discovered. The world and its objects, though filled with potential meaning, only become meaningful when met by the conscious subject. And, it is chiefly language that functions to actively shape and mold reality, as human beings engage with the world they are interpreting (Crotty, 1998).

Whilst meaning is not 'objective', it cannot be regarded as simply 'subjective' either. To advocate that meaning is in every respect 'subjective' is to say that meaning is created and then imposed on reality, which is at odds with the existential view of humans as being-in-the-world and phenomenological understanding of intentionality. As described by Crotty (1998), "consciousness is directed towards the object; the object is shaped by consciousness" (p. 44). The term *intentionality* describes the essential interaction between consciousness and phenomenon; it has to do with referentiality, relatedness or directedness (Crotty, 1998; Larkin et al., 2006).

Social constructionism is simultaneously realist and relativist. In the words of Crotty (1998), "to say that meaningful reality is socially constructed is not to say that it is not real" (p. 63). Reality should not be understood in the idealistic or positivist sense, as primarily mental or "out there" in a material sense. Social constructionism is not that restrictive. Social constructionism considers lived experience and sense-making as at once individual and shaped by culture. We are born into a system of pre-existing knowledge and meaning and so, as we engage in the world, we inevitably see, feel, and understand things through inherited cultural lenses (Crotty, 1998).

Larkin and colleagues (2006) referenced the notion of "person-in-context" to elucidate this essential relation between subject and object:

We are a fundamental part of a meaningful world (and hence we can only be properly understood as a function of our various involvements with that world), and the meaningful world is also a fundamental part of us (such that it can only be properly disclosed and understood as a function of our involvements with it) (p. 106).

We tend to view our personal sense-making as a kind of 'truth'; however, Crotty (1998) made the argument that in actuality "what is said to be 'the way things are' is just 'the sense we make of them'. Once this standpoint is embraced, we will obviously hold our understandings much more lightly and tentatively and far less dogmatically, seeing them as historically and culturally effected interpretations rather than eternal truths of some kind" (p. 64). Additionally,

Crotty (1998) observed how levels of interpretation become built upon another in our sociocultural context, not unlike sedimentation in the formation of rock, which can serve as a barrier between us and immediate experience. This process can unthinkingly reify existing meaning systems or prevailing understandings, and so it becomes a more deliberate task to invite a critical lens upon inherited understandings.

Setting aside the idealistic or positivist notions of reality, the phenomenological call “back to the things themselves” is an imperative for research into human phenomena to appreciate the fundamentally experiential nature of reality (Cosgrove, 2000; Crotty, 1998; Finlay, 2009). Awareness of the restrictiveness of current cultural understandings drives phenomenology’s endeavor to return to pre-reflective understanding and to illuminate the taken for granted, to engage with phenomena in our world and make sense of them directly and immediately. Feminist theory similarly invites a critical stance regarding issues of gender relations and norms, and ideals of beauty and femininity.

3.2.1 Reconciling Lived Experience & Social Construction

Appreciating that meaning-making is always situated or context-bound, as Crotty (1998) has argued, frames an understanding of women’s experience of embodiment and selfhood as simultaneously lived experience and social construction. Cosgrove (2000) argued the need for a “rapprochement” between phenomenology and social constructionism perspectives in developing a research strategy that can adequately attend to the complexity of such gendered experiences. In particular, Cosgrove (2000) discussed the strengths and pitfalls of phenomenology and social constructionism in her own study of women’s experience of emotional distress within a feminist framework. The points Cosgrove raised are nonetheless apt to consider here in relation to the present research on women’s experience of embodiment and selfhood in weight-loss dieting.

According to Cosgrove (2000), a major strength of the phenomenological approach is to illuminate a rich and complex picture of an individual’s lived experience, and privilege personal agency. However, Cosgrove noted that phenomenology’s focus on identifying the essential structure of an experience can preclude interrogating or situating meaning structures within the sociocultural milieu. We may uncritically accept the narrative account as “revealing” implicit meaning. The social constructionist approach is helpful to consider the power of discourse as shaping and constituting experience; attending to the function and meaning of language in context offers the opportunity to deconstruct oppressive discourses and illuminate fragmented or

marginalized ones. However, social constructionism falters in its ability to comprehend how we experience a felt sense of coherence and constancy of ourselves. Also, it does not fully address the issue of agency, especially in relation to how and why individuals are able to resist restrictive discourses (Cosgrove, 2000).

While some tensions may remain, bringing together phenomenological and social constructionism perspectives does offer a framework to generate more meaningful understanding of the phenomenon at hand. It is a framework that can deconstruct overly restrictive and unhelpful stories told about women's bodies and selves, and help us to tell a different or at least more multifaceted story, without essentializing or universalizing (Cosgrove, 2000). Del Busso and Reavey (2013) echoed this sentiment in drawing on feminist, social constructionist, and phenomenological perspectives to frame their study of women's embodiment:

The material body (as lived experience) is acknowledged as a formative aspect of people's subjectivity and sense of self. What this means is that experience is always treated as more than 'discourse' alone, and is situated in embodied and spatialized settings, rather than just discursive exchanges. Thus, the material and discursive is never separate, and in everyday experience, they are in a constant process of producing embodied subjectivities, in dynamic relation with the world and others (p. 50).

Likewise, Crossley (2000b) identified the need for "a theoretical and methodological approach which appreciates the linguistic and discursive structuring of 'self' and 'experience' but also maintains a sense of the essentially personal, coherent and 'real' nature of individual subjectivity" (p. 530). The present theoretical and epistemological framework positioned this project to explore women's lived experiences of bodies/selves and weight-loss dieting while bearing in mind the ways that the same are constituted by sociocultural discourse.

3.3 Research Questions

The present project consisted of two related studies that examined the following series of research questions:

- (1) How do women who are engaged in chronic weight-loss dieting view themselves? What do they feel is central to their sense of self and embodiment? What aspirations to they hold for the self in the future?
- (2) What meaning does bodily-appearance and the act of weight-loss dieting hold for these women in (re)defining and (re)constructing a sense of self or selfhood?

(3) Does the meaning of dieting change or unfold over time and life experience? How has their sense of self and embodiment developed and/or evolved across a life history of dieting?

(4) Do they identify with notions of self-transformation, reconstruction, or re-creation of self in terms of weight-loss dieting experiences? If so, how is this thinking expressed within their narratives?

3.4 Participant Selection & Recruitment

A single recruitment phase was used to identify participants for Study One and Study Two. Participants were recruited via poster advertising in the community beginning in September 2011. Locations were targeted in the community where women engaged in weight-loss dieting may be expected to frequent, such as fitness gyms or centers, health food stores or weight-loss organizations, as well as more common settings like grocery stores, salons, and community centers. The language used on the poster was important in capturing the attention of women who met the inclusion criteria and creating a positive atmosphere even in the invitation to participate (see Appendix A). A total of 24 women responded to my recruitment advertising. I contacted the first nine volunteers by phone to introduce myself, review the inclusion criteria, purpose and procedures of Study One, and address any questions. All of these individuals confirmed interest in participating and arrangements were made for the first interview. This recruitment effort generated a waitlist of ten women who were interested in being contacted to participate in Study Two. I likewise phoned these individuals to introduce myself, review the inclusion criteria, and provide more information about the second study. All of these individuals agreed to be contacted when Study Two commenced. Any remaining volunteers were informed that recruitment for the project was closed.

3.4.1 Sampling Strategy

In phenomenological research it is essential to sample individuals who have experienced the phenomenon of interest and, hence, can provide a comprehensive and detailed description of their lived experience. Achieving this aim requires purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015; Morrow, 2005). As Patton (2015) described, “the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting information-rich cases for studying in depth” (p. 264). Patton suggested that information-rich cases are those from which the researcher can gain the most in-depth knowledge and insights into the phenomenon under study and enlighten the research question. There are several different strategies for purposefully selecting information-rich cases. Intensity sampling and criterion

sampling were used in this project. *Intensity sampling* involves selecting information-rich cases that show the phenomenon intensely, but not extremely as with unusual or deviant cases (Patton, 2015). *Criterion sampling* aims to review and study cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance (e.g., people who have experienced a particular phenomenon, age, demographics) based upon the questions or objectives guiding the research (Patton, 2015; Morrow, 2005). In this way, criterion sampling is also useful for assuring the quality of cases studied (Creswell, 2013).

The criterion of saturation is often used to determine sufficiency of data in qualitative research. Saturation means that sampling continues until reaching a point of redundancy in the data (Morrow, 2005, 2007). However, Morrow (2007) acknowledged that true redundancy can never be achieved in qualitative research because the uniqueness of each participant's experience will always add richness and complexity to one's findings. Nevertheless, Morrow stated that it is reasonable to assume redundancy in a practical sense when analytic categories or themes "account for all of the data that have been gathered and illustrate the complexity of the phenomenon of interest" (p. 217). Deciding on the specific number of participants for this project was guided by deliberate reflection on the research questions and objectives (Patton, 2015; Wertz, 2005). Achieving sufficient richness of data was the most pertinent criterion for determining sample size (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith, 2004).

3.4.2 Inclusion Criteria

Women were invited to participate who were (a) over the age of 18, (b) identified themselves as currently engaged in dieting for the purpose of losing weight (by watching what they eat, restricting food choices, frequent weighing and body monitoring, and/or exercise), (c) identified themselves as constantly watching their body weight and/or shape and making multiple or continuous efforts at dieting to achieve weight-loss with or without success throughout their lives, (d) did not have an active eating disorder diagnosis, and (e) were willing to describe their personal experiences with weight-loss dieting and discuss their meaning in relation to notions self and self-transformation. A broad age range was chosen because the existing research on body image and dieting has often focused exclusively on adolescent and young adult women or specifically targeted older women. Yet, dieting is a sociocultural phenomenon relevant to women across the age span. Studying a broad age range allowed for

consideration of both the commonality and diversity of dieting experiences and its meaning for the self among women in different phases of life.

For the purpose of the project, it was considered important that the women be engaged in dieting for the purpose of weight loss at the time of participation. It was assumed that the lived experience and meaning of weight-loss dieting would be most salient (both the current experience and, by association, past experiences) for those women actively involved in the phenomenon and, for that reason, this sample would provide access to a richer source of data. This criterion also meant that the women will have a similar reference point, namely the current dieting episode, from which to reflect on the totality of their experiences of self and dieting, although individual variations in the presentation of dieting are expected. Additionally, this criterion permitted a focus on how women experience the self in weight-loss dieting as it is happening and as a process over time (i.e., across multiple interviews at different time points).

Consistent with intensity sampling, the third inclusion criterion indicates an interest in identifying chronic dieters. It was important that the women be able to articulate their experiences with weight-loss dieting and the self in an information-rich manner, making it essential that the phenomenon of weight-loss dieting be of importance or have some significance in their life. For this reason, women who self-identified as chronic dieters rather than first-time dieters were recruited. Likewise, the decision to exclude women who have an active eating disorder diagnosis (e.g., binge eating disorder, anorexia nervosa) was consistent with intensity sampling. Although the women in the study may have experienced an eating disorder in the past, the focus of the present project was on women who did not actively display dieting behaviours to this extreme level. Excluding individuals suffering from eating disorders was also an important ethical consideration, as participation may have been harmful for such individuals.

The final criterion, as stated above, was a willingness to describe their personal experiences with weight-loss dieting for their lived sense of self and body. This criterion was included to ensure the sampling of information-rich cases that would enlighten the research question. More specifically, this criterion was intended to capture the participation of women who viewed dieting as having deeper personal significance, beyond the explicit goal of changing their physical appearance, and women who may have had more emotional, impactful or transformative experiences with weight-loss dieting.

3.5 Data Generation

In the present research, data generation involved a combination of multiple, in-depth interviews and photographs produced by the participants. The interviews served as the primary data source, as is typical in phenomenological approaches (Patton, 2015; Smith et al., 2009). However, the incorporation of photography added richness, breadth, and depth to the understanding of the women's narrative accounts. Multiple data sources are preferred in qualitative research to create a more naturalistic account and prevent an overly narrow perspective on the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013; van Manen, 1997/2016). The present aim was not just to ask women *about* their experiences of self and body in weight-loss dieting, but to invite them to speak more fully to their lived experience, aided by the use of images, to produce a rich and detailed account of how their experiences were felt and made sense of.

3.5.1 Interviews

The purpose of the interview in IPA is to facilitate an interaction that permits participants to share their own stories about the phenomenon under study in their own words. To develop a rich and deep narrative account, participants should be afforded the opportunity to speak freely and reflectively, develop their thoughts and express their feelings at length during the interview (Smith et al., 2009). As Smith and colleagues (2009) stated, "the participant is the experiential expert on the topic in hand and therefore they should be given much leeway in taking the interview to 'the thing itself'" (p. 58). Accordingly, the style of questioning is open and expansive, and the interviewer typically offers minimal verbal input. The interviewer's role is to guide the dialogue towards the level of concrete experience and to foster a participant account that is personal and detailed rather than generic and impersonal (van Manen, 1997/2016; Smith et al., 2009). A major imperative of the phenomenological interview is to remain 'close' to the experience as lived by being concrete (e.g., specific instance, situation, person, or event) and then exploring the whole experience in its fullness (Smith & Osborn, 2003; van Manen, 1997/2016).

A semi-structured interview format was utilized. This type of interview is well-suited to the aims of IPA as the dialogue is intended to be very open, conversational, and tailored to the participant's description. The interviewer can modify initial questions in light of participants' responses and enquire after any interesting areas or unexpected turns that may arise during the interview. This freedom and flexibility is highly valuable in phenomenological inquiry (Smith et

al., 2009). Interview guides were developed to ensure that the same basic lines of inquiry were pursued with each participant and, at the same time, allow for enough flexibility and responsiveness within individual interviews to explore, probe, and ask questions that would elucidate and illuminate the phenomenon of dieting for each of the women (Patton, 2015). Interviews began at a fairly descriptive level to help the women quickly become comfortable talking and build rapport and progressed to invite more analytical and reflective dialogue as they eased into the situation (Smith et al., 2009).

Along with an IPA framework, a feminist research ethic guided the conduct of the interviews (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Devault, 1990). According to Campbell and Wasco (2000), the overall goal of feminist research is to “capture women’s lived experiences in a respectful manner that legitimizes women’s voices as sources of knowledge. In other words, the process of research is of as much importance as the outcome” (p. 783). In listening to women’s stories, it was important to convey an attitude of caring, respect, understanding, and empowerment. It was also important to adopt and communicate a role of co-researcher or collaborator (Blood, 2005). The emotionality of the lived experiences being shared was also essential to acknowledge throughout the interviews. Moreover, feminist research emphasizes that researchers attune to their own emotions as resources for insight and share personal reflections in a professional manner within the co-created dialogue (Campbell & Wasco, 2000).

3.5.2 Photo Elicitation

While interviews are the primary means of generating data within IPA, imaginative or creative approaches may be used to augment interview data by providing another perspective or way to access the participant’s lifeworld (Smith et al., 2009). In seeking out the lived experience and meaning of a phenomenon, van Manen (1997/2016) has described how “phenomenological inquiry is not unlike an artistic endeavor, a creative attempt to somehow capture a certain phenomenon of life in a linguistic description that is both holistic and analytical, evocative and precise, unique and universal, powerful and sensitive” (p. 39). There is a broad range of modalities that constitute lived experience and critics of solely discursive research approaches in psychology have pointed to the importance of ‘visual languages’ in understanding embodied experience in particular (Burles & Thomas, 2014; Del Busso & Reavey, 2013; Gillies et al., 2005; Radley & Taylor, 2003). In this project, participant-generated photographs provided another way to explore and illuminate women’s experiences with weight-loss dieting.

Photo elicitation is an inductive approach that involves asking participants to reflect on and interpret a photograph, either their own or an image taken by the researcher, in the context of an interview. Frith and Harcourt (2007) identified the value of using the photo-elicitation method for capturing detailed accounts of experience and capturing experience over time, whilst enabling participant control and not excessively intruding into private experiences. Like the present project, Frith and Harcourt's (2007) photo-elicitation interview approach involved exploration of the participant process of representing lived experience with photographs as well as the photographs themselves. They denoted the ability to "exploit this gap between the visual and the verbal by adopting a method that combines both" (p. 1342). Images can allow a range of experiences to be variously represented in abstract, symbolic and more concrete forms, and the interview allows the teasing out of complexity. The content extracted from and projected onto photographs is often charged with psychological and emotional elements. Thus, a photographic image may evoke deeper elements of a participant's experience than written or spoken word alone and reveal aspects or details of the experience that might otherwise be overlooked or taken for granted. It is also true that a photograph can sometimes capture and provide access to meaning that words alone cannot (Balmer et al., 2015; Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Carlsson, 2001; Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Harper, 2002). Gillies and colleagues (2005) wrote:

Although a person is potentially able to talk about bodily experiences and subsequently conjure a 'representation', it has been pointed out that identification with an image can sometimes be a more powerful way of capturing emotions associated with it that can be far removed from verbal articulation. This is not to say that 'emotions' or 'embodiment' are in any way separate from socially constructed language systems, but the way in which we live feelings and experiences are not always available to verbal description (p. 201).

The use of both verbal and visual modalities in the present research facilitated understanding and the co-creation of a richer, more nuanced narrative account.

While the photo-elicitation technique is most often used for short periods of a week or two, Frith and Harcourt (2007) noted how it can be used to capture evolving experience over longer periods of time. In their photo-elicitation study with women undergoing breast cancer treatment, they found that the women used photos to tell a chronological story about their chemotherapy experience and observed how the interview was characterized by a back and forth between telling of the experience storied by the images and retrospectively remaking the

experience in looking at the images in the present. For example, they explained how some aspects of the chemotherapy experiences became observable only in looking at the photo images as a collective or in juxtaposition. This points to photographs as a resource to aid in recall and in reevaluating or re-storying meaning in retrospect, and so appreciate the temporal unfolding of lived experience (Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Papaloukas et al., 2017; Radley & Taylor, 2003). Radley and Taylor (2003) described how photos are more than material artefacts enlivened by talking about them, “people make sense with photographs – not just make sense of them” (p. 132).

However, the phrase “photo elicitation” may be regarded somewhat problematic in that it suggests that photographs can be used to elicit or draw out a response from the participant or even that some objective information may be contained in the image itself. It is important to note that in photo-elicitation research, photographs are seen as a reference point for conversation and meaningful only in the context of participant’s understanding of them, rather than independent of the narrative. The act of talking about photographs with participants is integral to giving sense to them. Further, the photo-elicitation technique is regarded as collaborative, facilitating communication, enhancing rapport and reducing the power differential in the researcher-participant relationship; the researcher becomes the listener and the participant is invited to take the leading role and make use of his or her expertise (Carlsson, 2001; Harper, 2002; Pain, 2012; Glegg, 2019). The use of visual methodologies is grounded in an understanding that images are reflections of meaning constructed by the producer and the viewer. Thus, the abstract nature of visual data is recognized, and it is important to uphold the phenomenological commitment to participants’ lived experience in the act of interpretation (Burles & Thomas, 2014; Harper, 2002).

Participants in this project elected to use their own digital cameras for the photography activities and provided digital image files to the researcher for printing in advance of follow-up interviews. The majority of participants chose to use their cellular phone cameras, which afforded the unique advantage of portability and timely access to document the moments, spaces and objects which represented meaningful experiences, called to memory from the past or felt in-the-moment, around the phenomenon.

Having outlined the theory behind the present data generation methods, in the next two sections I detail the methodological design and procedures for Study One and Study Two, respectively.

3.6 Study One Method

Study One broadly explored the meanings of self, body, and weight-loss dieting across a group of women who were actively engaged in efforts to lose weight and/or change their physique. Although body-image, weight and weight-loss behaviours may occupy a central role in the everyday lives and sense of self-in-the-world for those who are chronically trying to lose weight, Study One aimed to avoid narrow presumptions that might preclude a holistic understanding of how participants perceived, thought about, and experienced their selves and bodies. Instead, the intention of this study was to examine how women engaged in chronic dieting viewed and felt about themselves as a whole and what they regarded as salient to their conception of self and embodied subjectivity (see consent form in Appendix B).

3.6.1 Participants

Six women between the age of 29 and 55 years old participated in this study from September 2011 and January 2012. A total of nine participants were initially recruited, but three withdrew from the study after the first interview due to time constraints. The participants are characterized in detail in Chapter 4, in which I discuss the findings of Study One.

3.6.2 Design & Procedure

Data generation in Study One involved three stages. First, a semi-structured interview was conducted with each woman, comprised of explorative questions focused on understanding her lived experience in four areas: (1) general perceptions of self and what is important to her sense of selfhood; (2) the meaning that experiences with and attitudes felt toward her body and/or physical appearance had in terms of self-development or selfhood; (3) how her individual experiences with weight-loss dieting affected self-understandings, perceptions and/or feelings about herself; and (4) the possible meaning of dieting in terms of her views of future or possible self (see interview guide in Appendix D).

Second, a photo-elicitation activity enabled the women to probe into and explore their sense of self, how they view and define themselves in their worlds. The activity was introduced at the end of the initial interview and participants agreed to meet for a follow-up interview once they had finished photo-taking. This photo-elicitation activity followed the approach of Noland

(2006), who gave permission for the protocol to be used (Appendix I). Participants were asked to take 9 images that say “this is me” and 9 images that say “this is not me”. A third category of images was incorporated into the present study to specifically inquire about views of “possible selves”, aspirations and goals. For this category, participants were asked to take 9 images that say “this is me I aspire to be”. A handout with detailed activity instructions was provided (see Appendix F). Participants were invited to keep written record of their images and to incorporate previously taken photos or bring in personal writings that were reflective of their experience with weight-loss dieting.

Follow-up interviews were conducted to explore participants’ photographic images as well as their experiential process of picturing and capturing meaning. Participants were asked to lay out the photographs and narrate through them, speaking to each image in turn by explaining why it was taken and what aspect of their experience it represented. Probative or prompting questions were asked throughout when clarification was needed or to deepen the narrative, but the participant was generally encouraged to direct the conversation. After going through the photo series, participants were asked to share reflections as they looked across the collection and juxtaposed images against one another. Hodgetts Chamberlain, and Radley (2007) stated how participant-generated photographs never capture the full meaning of an experience on their own, and this is “talked into the frame” (p. 263) by participants. The interview context allowed in-depth exploration of participants’ understanding of the images and the experiences that motivated them. It also afforded extension of the discussion to their experiential process of capturing their lived experience photographically and to any images not taken or “missing” from the collection for one reason or another (e.g., moments too quick to capture, difficulty finding the right object or scene to represent). Hodgetts and colleagues (2007) argued that in addition to the photographs produced, exploring participants’ reflections on these “missing” photographs and the picturing process itself is important in order to fully utilize the method.

Both interviews were approximately one hour in length and were held either at the home of the participant or an office on the University of Saskatchewan campus, as chosen by the participant. I transcribed the audio recordings word-for-word in their entirety to produce a detailed textual account of the verbal exchange between each participant and myself. In my process of transcription, I also chose to annotate significant non-verbal utterances and

paralinguistic cues, such as pauses, inflection, intensity or volume of speech, emotional tone, behavioural gestures, or other significant happenings in the dialogue.

To protect confidentiality, participants were asked to choose pseudonyms to be used in the transcripts instead of their actual names. Attempts were also made to check understanding with the participants and obtain feedback during the interviews. Prior to releasing the data, each participant was provided with a copy of their complete transcript by e-mail and had the opportunity to change, add, or delete any information within their transcripts that they felt did not accurately represent what was said or their intended meaning. When I met with each participant to discuss the transcripts, we laid out their photographs to review them together. Participants were asked to indicate the conditions under which their photographs could be used on the transcript/data release form (see Appendix H). Five of the participants gave permission to publish the entirety of their photograph collection in the written dissertation and subsequent academic publications or presentations. One participant did not want three images that she had obtained from the internet to be used in the dissertation and so these have been left out; however, she gave permission to publish all the photographs that she had produced herself. As an added precaution, I have chosen to crop or blur images that revealed participants' faces.

3.7 Study Two Method

Study Two explored the lived experience of self and embodiment over time with weight-loss dieting using a single case-study approach. The narrative of a 25-year-old woman, Michelle, was the focus of this case study. Michelle provided a deep and nuanced account of struggling with body-image and weight beginning in childhood, with adverse experiences of bullying, and the impact of the same for her understandings of self and embodiment as she has developed. Time was conceptualized in two ways in Study Two: (1) the life story of experiences with body-image, body-self connection, and efforts to lose weight via dieting, and (2) the current period of time in which Michelle was trying to lose weight during the study.

The repetitious and cyclical nature of weight-loss dieting behaviour is well-recognized within public discourse. For instance, we see this nature captured in such colloquial expressions as “yo-yo dieting”, “I’m always on a diet”, or “the diet starts Monday”. This facet of the phenomenon of dieting is also commonly accepted within the research literature. However, research has yet to illuminate a full portrait of the role and meaning of weight-loss dieting within the landscape of women’s lives, embodiment, and narratives of self. Though the relation between

dieting and the self has been studied at static points in the dieting process (e.g., after successful weight-loss), Study Two considers the interrelationship between chronic dieting experiences and constructs of body- and self-image as a dynamic, evolving, or developmentally oriented experience.

3.7.1 Case Study

Study Two of this dissertation was originally proposed as another small-sample study (see consent form in Appendix C). Six women from the recruitment waitlist, including Michelle, participated between June 2012 and August 2012. However, the richness, depth and texture of Michelle's narrative over and above those of the other participants ultimately led to the decision that her story warranted extended treatment unto itself via a phenomenological case study. From the first interview, Michelle's case emerged as particularly compelling both for the emotional, introspective depth of her narrative and her level of engagement in the research process. Michelle expressed an eager commitment to explore the meaning of her lifetime struggles with body-image and weight-loss, which facilitated our development of a strong researcher-participant relationship. I experienced a heightened embodied presence and level of engagement during my interviews with Michelle that was reaffirmed during transcription and analysis of her narrative account. The deep idiographic study of this particular case offered a complementary viewpoint and insights to Study One. The case of Michelle is fully introduced at the outset of Chapter 5, in which the case study findings are discussed.

The decision to shift to a single-case analysis for Study Two was made in consultation with my supervisor during the analysis phase on the grounds that continuing as per our initial proposal, with thematic analysis across the set of cases, would not add substantially and may in fact lose something essential about Michelle's voice that uniquely contributed towards addressing the research questions. I began Study Two analysis with Michelle's case, given its richness; however, as analysis moved onto the second and third cases, it became clear that the degree of individual variability in the sample would present a challenge to synthesizing a meaningful, sufficiently deep thematic structure across cases. This decision to shift to a single case study was supported by literature on phenomenological research (Finlay, 2009) and the IPA method in particular (e.g., Eatough & Smith, 2006a, 2006b; Smith, 2004). Smith (2004) has advocated for the case study within IPA research, noting it as a neglected approach in psychology, in general. Smith stated that, when a researcher encounters a case that proves

especially rich and compelling, redirecting towards a detailed analysis of this single case can be fruitful. He outlined how the value of the detailed case study is twofold. The case study approach affords an in-depth understanding of the complexity of experience and meaning-making for a particular person, with sufficient space to really explore the tensions and connections across different aspects of their account. However, in delving deeper into the idiographic, the case study also offers a vantage point from which the reader may return to universal or shared aspects of experience. As Smith (2004) stated, “we are thus better positioned to think about how we and other people might deal with the particular situation being explored, how at the deepest level we share a great deal with a person whose personal circumstances in many ways seem entirely separate and different from our own” (p. 43).

3.7.2 Design & Procedure

Data generation for Study Two comprised four stages. First, a life story interview was conducted, with emphasis on exploring Michelle’s experiences with her body and physical appearance as well as her experiences with weight-loss dieting over the lifespan. This interview also focused on exploring the meaning of these experiences for her perceptions of self and personhood. The narrative interview method outlined by Flick (2009) was followed in developing the life story interview guide (see Appendix E). The interview began with a generative narrative question, as follows:

I would like you to tell me how the life story of your experiences with your body image and with dieting occurred. The best way to do this would be for you to start from childhood, with the little girl that you once were, telling me how you saw and felt about your body at that point in your life. Then continue your story forward, telling all the things that happened in your life to do with your body image and dieting one after the other until today.

Once Michelle began to tell her story, I intently focused on active listening and offering empathetic encouragement until she indicated the end of the story with a “coda” statement (e.g., “I think I’ve taken you through it all”). Follow-up questioning focused on probing life story fragments that were not clear or exhaustively detailed with additional generative narrative questions. Finally, the interview moved into a balancing phase of questioning, which aims at asking more abstract, analytical, and theoretical questions and encourages the participant to explore their story for meaning.

A second semi-structured interview was used to further explore Michelle's conceptions of self and embodiment related to specific dieting experiences. Specifically, questions focused on exploring: (1) the meaning of the current, ongoing dieting experience for perceptions of self and identity; (2) understandings of dieting as negative (distressing or debilitating) and/or positive (enriching, enhancing or affirming) in terms its influence on perceptions of self and sense of self-development over time; (3) whether she identified with notions of self-transformation, redefining and/or re-creating the self in terms of dieting experiences and, if so, the nature of this experience and the meaning of dieting with regard to notions of future or possible selves (see interview guide in Appendix E). Using both life story and semi-structured interview formats enabled me to, first, situate specific dieting experiences within her broader life context and story, to better understand how dieting had been or became a part of her life over time, and then explore the depth of these experiences with more targeted questioning.

Lastly, for the photo elicitation activity, Michelle was asked to keep a photo-diary that captured her current dieting experiences over a span of eight weeks, following our first interview. She was asked to take photos that depicted her experiences with dieting over this time, particularly those relating to how she felt about herself and her body. A written description of the activity was provided for her reference (see Appendix G) as well as a small notebook in which she journaled about her photo-taking and personal reflections. The third and final interview focused on exploring and analyzing the meaning of the photo-diary. The photographs were laid out in chronological order and the interview proceeded with Michelle leading me through the story of her images, and probative or prompting questions used only as needed. Once Michelle indicated that she was finished telling the story of her photos, follow-up questions were asked to explore the meaning of the images as a collective, juxtapose and relate images to one another, and explore her picture-taking experience (see Appendix E). This photo-diary approach was chosen to capture the meaning of the current dieting experience as it was happening and unfolding, without intrusion. During the follow-up interview, the photo-diary served as a memory aid, fostering a more detailed recount of the in-the-moment experience(s) around the image. The photo-diary also represented experience across the time with dieting, and so facilitated exploration of how Michelle made sense of meaning in looking at the images as a collective, from the here-and-now position (Radley & Taylor, 2003).

Each interview was approximately one-hour in duration and held at Michelle's home. The audio recording and transcription process as well as measures taken to anonymize and obtain consent to release the transcript data followed the same procedure as Study One. Michelle gave permission to publish all of her photographic images in the written dissertation and subsequent academic publications or presentations.

3.8 Data Analysis Strategy

Data from Study One and Study Two were analyzed using a phenomenological approach. Phenomenological analysis involves engaging in a sustained interpretative relationship with the transcripts, aiming to capture and describe in writing the content and complexity of participants' meanings of a certain experience. Analysis is an iterative and inductive process. It requires flexible thinking, creativity, and processes of reduction, expansion and revision. There is a constant shift of balance between the descriptive and the interpretative, the particular and the shared, and the part and the whole. As such, one's analysis is open to change and "fixed" only in the final write-up of the data (Smith et al., 2009).

IPA details a process of reflective engagement with the participant's narrative account. As discussed, the primary concern of IPA is the lived experience and meaning of the participant. However, this meaning is not immediately transparent and thus interpretation is required to uncover it. The end product of analysis is inevitably an account of how the researcher thinks the participant is thinking, termed the double hermeneutic, and the truth claims of an IPA analysis are always tentative. Researchers are not necessarily aware of all their preconceptions about a phenomenon in advance. For this reason, self-reflective practices and a cyclical approach to bracketing are needed to foster a capacity for openness and to prevent premature or biased interpretations (Smith et al., 2009). *Bracketing* describes the process of suspending or setting aside one's assumptions, beliefs, or biases in order to immerse oneself fully in the lived experience of the phenomenon under study, as it is recounted by the participants (Hein & Austin, 2001; Morrow, 2005). However, it is recognized that this aim is not entirely achievable or desirable in phenomenology (Finlay, 2009; Laverly, 2003; Wertz, 2005). Laverly (2003) stated that in hermeneutic interpretation:

The biases and assumptions of the researcher are not bracketed or set aside, but rather embedded and essential to interpretive process. The researcher is called, on an ongoing

basis, to give considerable thought to their own experience and to explicitly claim the ways in which their positions or experience relates to the issues being researched (p. 17).

Van Manen (2011) clarified as follows:

On the one hand this [bracketing] means that one needs to practice a critical self-awareness with respect to the assumptions that prevent one from being as open as possible to the sense and significance of the phenomenon. We need to forget as it were our vested interests and preunderstandings. . . On the other hand it means that one needs to realize that forgetting all of one's preunderstandings is not really possible and therefore these various assumptions and interests may need to be explicated so as to exorcise them in an attempt to let speak that what wishes to speak.

In IPA, the importance of the positive process of engaging with the participant and their narrative account is emphasized more than the process of bracketing per se, skillful attention to the former inevitably facilitates the latter. According to Smith and colleagues (2009), "each stage of the analysis does indeed take you further away from the participant and includes more of you. However, the 'you' is closely involved with the lived experiences of the participant – and the resulting analysis will be a product of both your collaborative efforts" (pp. 91-92). Thus, what is most important in an IPA is that the interpretation be inspired by attending to the participant's words and grounded therein as opposed to being imported from the outside.

Throughout the research process, it was important to be self-reflective to maintain awareness of the potential influence of my own biases and assumptions related to the research questions. I kept a research diary during each study to engage in reflexive writing following my interview interactions with participants and to intermittently record and reflect on my assumptions, personal experiences, and emerging insights as data generation and interpretation unfolded. These matters were also discussed and explored with my research supervisor. To enhance transparency, I have aimed to make my preunderstandings explicit in introducing my position on the research topic and writing up my analyses.

3.8.1 The Process of Analysis

The framework of Smith, Flowers, and Smith (2009) outlines the process and strategies of IPA with interview transcripts. IPA is not a prescriptive framework but given as a guide to be adapted by researchers in their own personal process of qualitative analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The IPA framework was adapted for the present research to incorporate photographic

data. The layered analysis approach (Oliffe et al., 2008) is recommended for working with participant-produced photographs and associated interview data. Layered analysis directs the researcher to prioritize the photographs in the transcript analysis process so that, as opposed to just being illustrations of the interviews, the photographic data become an integrated and expanding piece. Photographs were viewed alongside the associated transcript, which served to contextualize and clarify them. The analysis concentrated on how the images highlighted, augmented, or contrasted the meaning emerging from the text (Oliffe et al., 2008). In addition, the writings of van Manen (1997/2016) on reflective bracketing, thematic reflection, and guided existential reflection were incorporated within the present analysis.

The following subsections outline the aims and task of each stage of analysis. Analysis in Study One began with the detailed examination of the narrative account that was considered to be most detailed, complex, and engaging. The stages, outlined below, were then repeated for each subsequent case before analyzing across the six cases. Points of variance in the analysis process for Study Two, based upon the different scope and span of the data, are highlighted in the following subsections.

3.8.1.1. Reading & Re-Reading

The first stage of phenomenological analysis entails immersing oneself in the data by reading and re-reading the transcript to gain an overall grasp on the content and meaning. The audio recording is intently listened to first during the transcription process and then again alongside the initial reading of the transcript, to become intimately familiar with the narrative account and the individual participant's voice (Smith et al., 2009). During this wholistic reading stage, the researcher highlights quotes and anecdotes in the transcript that stand out as important, insightful, or illuminating. In this stage, I also reflected upon my journal writings from the interviews and made note of any initial, striking observations about the transcript as a way of bracketing. This stage of the analysis culminated with macro-thematic reflection, as suggested by van Manen (1997/2016), trying to capture the central meaning or main significance of the narrative account as a whole using one or two sententious phrases.

3.8.1.2. Initial Noting

This stage of initial noting entails a detailed, line-by-line examination of the transcript with an open and exploratory mindset. Notes are made about what is interesting or significant in the participant's narrative, with the aim to produce a comprehensive and detailed set of

annotations. As Smith and colleagues (2009) described, “it is important to engage in an analytic dialogue with each line of transcript, asking questions of what the word, phrase, sentence means to you, and attempting to check what it means for the participant” (p. 84). This practice of micro-thematic reflection serves to identify the ways that the individual participant talks about, understands, thinks, and feels about the phenomenon (Smith et al., 2009; van Manen, 1997/2016). The intent of initial noting is not to find clear answers or pin down understandings but to open up a range of provisional meanings (Smith et al., 2009).

Smith and colleagues (2009) recommended three discrete processes of exploratory commenting, each with a different focus, which should be combined on one transcript. *Descriptive comments* focus on analyzing and highlighting the transcript content including key words, phrases, or explanations used by the participant. These comments will often describe things that matter to the participants (e.g., relationships, processes, events, values) and what these things are like for them. *Linguistic comments* focus upon exploring the way in which the content and meaning were presented (e.g., pronoun use, pauses, laughter, repetition, tone, metaphor or idiomatic phrase). Language use and content are often interrelated which is worth highlighting in the initial notes. *Conceptual comments* focus on engaging with the transcript at a more interpretative level. This commentary often represents a shift away from the explicit claims of the participant to work at a more abstract level (e.g., moving the focus from the particular meanings of specific instances towards an overarching account). Conceptual annotation is likely to involve a certain element of personal reflection. It can be helpful to draw on personal experiential knowledge, perceptions, and understandings to make sense of participant’s accounts (Smith et al., 2009). Additionally, the lifeworld existentials of lived time, body, space, relation, selfhood, project, and discourse (van Manen, 1997/2016; Ashworth, 2016) were also employed as a heuristic guide for reflection to open up and explore the range of meanings, along with strategies of deconstruction and de-contextualization to interrupt narrative flow and “zero in” on a participant’s words and passages of text (Smith et al., 2009).

The participants’ photographs were viewed throughout reading and noting stages in relation to the text, given particularly close study when annotating sections text from the photo-elicitation interview. I reflected on the content, composition, use of color, intensity, mood, symbolism and composition of the photographs, as a narrative source of meaning. Consideration was given to how their images functioned to highlight or augmented the meaning within their

textual account. As the images were abstract, they were open to multiple interpretations and so the analysis of these data always remained grounded in the participants' own accounts of their pictures, in keeping with the hermeneutic basis of IPA (Kirkham et al., 2015; Oliffe et al, 2008). For Study Two, Michelle's photo-diary images were displayed in sequence as a storyboard to allow for easier and fuller study of the visual images alongside the text (Oliffe et al, 2008). Displaying the photographic data in this way stimulated more holistic observation and reflection on the photo-diary data throughout analysis.

3.8.1.3. *Developing Emergent Themes*

In the next stage of analysis, initial notes from discrete passages of transcript are transformed into *emergent themes*. Smith and colleagues (2009) explained that the major task of turning notes into themes is to produce a concise statement that communicates what was important in the various comments attached to the piece of transcript. Themes are expressed as phrases that capture and reflect the psychological essence of what was found. The expression should be abstract enough to allow theoretical connections within and across cases, taking the analysis to a higher level, while remaining grounded in the participant's actual words. At this stage, the entire transcript and accompanying notes are treated as data and no attempt is made to leave out or select particular passages for special attention. The number of emerging themes will reflect the richness of a particular passage and it may be the case that similar themes emerge as the researcher goes through the transcript. Although the primary focus is to capture what was crucial in a given piece or passage of the transcript, as per the hermeneutic circle, the researcher will be influenced by the whole transcript and what was learned through the process of initial noting (Smith et al., 2009).

3.8.1.4. *Searching for Connections Across Emergent Themes*

At this point in the analysis, a set of themes within the transcript is established. The list of emergent themes is chronological, based on the sequence in which they came up in the transcript. The goal of this stage is to establish a more analytical or theoretical ordering, to make sense of the connections between emergent themes. In IPA, strategies of abstraction, subsumption, and polarization are used to explore the organization of emergent themes. *Abstraction* involves putting like with like to develop a new cluster of related themes, termed a "super-ordinate" theme within IPA, which is given a new name. *Subsumption* functions when an emergent theme takes on a super-ordinate status; like a magnet, it helps to draw together a series of related

themes and make sense of them. *Polarization* focuses on difference instead of similarity, as the discovery of an oppositional relationship between emergent themes may itself suggest a super-ordinate theme (Smith et al., 2009). As the clustering of themes emerges, it is continuously checked in the transcript and other data sources to ensure that the analysis stays “true” to the source material. This form of analysis is a “close reading” and iterative, moving between interpretation and checking understanding (Smith et al., 2009; Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The IPA framework suggests that emergent themes be organized into a table illustrating the hierarchical thematic structure (Smith et al., 2009). I wanted to ensure that this stage of the analysis did not become too static or impose too much structure on the data that could limit the findings. Thus, in order to take the analysis to a more creative level, I employed a visual-spatial approach of concept-mapping to look for points of convergence, divergence, commonality and nuance among the emergent themes. Themes were imagined as individual moving pieces, acting like magnets in pulling towards or away from one another to form clusters. In addition to writing, colour coding was used as a visual aid to highlight and explore for patterns by which to (re)organize and fit themes together. This graphic approach was useful means of applying the above organizational strategies, which IPA suggests, to visually explore and elucidate the depth and complexity of meaning, alongside the development of written thematic descriptions. The resulting graphic representation of themes provided a gestalt or “snapshot” view of the overarching super-ordinate themes and associated subthemes within the individual case, as well as the connectivity between thematic clusters therein. Compared to the convention of tables in IPA, this concept-map approach to visualizing themes felt more fluid and dynamic, and facilitated a focus on clustering of themes, rather than hierarchical organization.

In his description of hermeneutic phenomenology, van Manen (1997/2016) outlined the need to distinguish between essential and incidental themes using a process of reflective questioning termed *free imaginative variation*. This process involves imaginatively varying or deleting themes and then asking oneself whether the phenomenon remains the same or loses its fundamental meaning. In doing so, the researcher becomes aware of the essential themes that cannot be removed or changed in order for the phenomenon to present itself as it is. Thus, in the development of the thematic structure, emergent themes were discarded if there was lack of rich evidence for them within the transcript and depending on how they fit with the overall scope of the research questions. Systematically following these stages of analysis developed the scope

needed to produce a thematic account of experience, in a single case, that was deeply descriptive, sufficiently interpretative, and respected both convergences and divergences of meaning (Smith et al., 2009, Smith, 2011; van Manen, 1997/2016).

3.8.1.5. Moving to the Next Case

In Study One, the aforementioned stages of analysis were continued with other cases. During this process, Smith and colleagues (2009) described how the researcher will inevitably be influenced by what was already found with previous cases and so this necessitates, as much as possible, bracketing the ideas emerging from the analysis of previous cases while working on the next case. In keeping with IPA's idiographic commitment, it was important do justice to the individuality of participant accounts and allow new themes to emerge from the analysis of each case. It was important to keep an open mind throughout this reflective questioning process and I maintained iterative records as analysis work progressed through individual cases and in looking for patterns across cases in Study One.

3.8.1.6. Looking for Patterns Across Cases

At this stage, the focus moves from the idiographic to consider all cases as a whole. I began this process by looking across the graphic representations of themes developed for each of the six cases, asking questions suggested by Smith et al. (2009) such as: "What connections are there across cases?", "How does a theme in one case help illuminate a different case?", and "Which themes are the most potent?" The goal of engaging with the graphic representations in this way was to shift and expand perspective by employing various strategies or angles (e.g., consider cases in order that they were analyzed, then in backwards order, and then in groups that hang together or have strong parallels). This stage required creativity and abstraction to take the analysis to a more theoretical level; for example, to recognize that themes or super-ordinate themes particular to one case may represent a higher order concept that is in fact shared by all cases, although it emerges in slightly different ways. Smith and colleagues (2009) observed that "some of the best IPA has this dual quality – pointing to ways in which participants represent unique idiosyncratic instances but also shared higher order qualities" (p. 101). While looking across the graphic representations, I recorded observations, significant ideas and questions that emerged and utilized color coding, symbols and lines to augment the graphics so as to highlight emergent patterns.

I then compiled a document containing all the thematic clusters (in text boxes) that had emerged from each case and engaged in concept mapping to develop a new clustering and facilitate, in a visual way, the reconfiguring and relabeling process of bringing the cases together. Some text boxes acted as magnets, pulling others toward them. Some stood in contrast and, in doing so, highlighted tensions and complexities in meaning around the phenomenon. Some super-ordinate themes in one case emerged as a higher order concept. And, in other ways, the analysis was taken to a higher level of abstraction to encapsulate some concepts or ideas that the cases shared. As with the initial noting process, I used heuristic strategies and guided existential reflection to facilitate my process, and continually returned to review the research questions. Themes that were not supported by all cases or appeared incidental when re-examined from this overarching standpoint were set aside. This process of exploring the connections and relationships between thematic clusters across the different cases led to a reconfiguring and relabeling of themes to form an overarching thematic structure, which captured the meaning that was essential to all cases in Study One.

3.8.1.7. Writing Up

This process of developing a thematic structure flowed naturally into the writing of a narrative account that explicated in detail the meanings of each of the super-ordinate and sub-themes that emerged across the six cases in Study One and the single-case of Study Two. The division between analysis and writing up is, to an extent, false in that one's interpretation of the themes continues to develop and expand during the writing phase. Likewise, my graphic representations also continued to develop in writing up the analyses.

When working with multiple cases, as in Study One, a certain amount of the unique or idiosyncratic quality (e.g., exact language of the participant, particulars or details of their lifeworld) of the individual graphic representations from each case may be less evident in this higher-level graphic; however, in writing, the researcher should be able to point from the overarching themes to the individual instances or depictions of said theme, using quotes and anecdotes from the transcripts and photographic data in support. IPA points to how, in this way, the writing up of themes across cases has a dual quality of holding both the higher order theme and idiosyncratic instances in view for the reader. The focus of the writing phase becomes expansive once again as each of the themes are explained, illustrated, conveying the shared meaning of the experience for participants and, at the same time, allowing the reader to follow

the distinctive voices and variations or nuances on those meanings throughout the analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003; Smith et al., 2009).

Creating a rich and vivid account involves attending not only to what the data express about the meaning of an experience but also how to best express that meaning to the reader. Van Manen (2011) discussed how the vocative power of language can be used as a tool in the process of writing up phenomenological data. The intent is to create a textual representation of the data that brings the experience into nearness and resonates with the kinds of meanings we recognize pre-reflectively or the “felt sense” of the experience. In other words, the researcher wants to take the reader beyond a primarily conceptual meaning to a felt or deeply understood meaning (van Manen, 2011). There are a number of dimensions of writing used to cement meaning more firmly into text than in ordinary expository prose, including: bringing concreteness or lived thoroughness to the text using anecdote and imagery that situates the phenomenon in the lifeworld; intensification of text, such that words take on their full value and universal meaning; letting the tone of the text speak and have a stirring effect; or when text brings about an epiphany, sparking a sudden change of perception or intuitive grasp. Often these vocative features are visible only as aspects of the text as a whole (van Manen, 2011). I aimed to bring these vocative features into the write-up of my analyses to increase the vividness of the research and as a way to honour the women’s lived experience and meaning.

3.8.2 Embodied Interpretation

To expand the level of analysis and evocativeness of my phenomenological description, I consulted writings on the process of embodied interpretation (Todres, 2007; Todres & Galvin, 2008). Todres and Galvin (2008) introduced embodied interpretation as an approach that seeks to capitalize upon the aliveness of language and make empathic use of language to facilitate deeper understanding. They advocate that words are not just tools performing a function – there is an inner dimension of language, an aesthetic quality, where words are experienced for how they “feel” that is also important in our process of understanding (Todres, 2007; Todres & Galvin, 2008). The aims of embodied interpretation are identified by Todres and Galvin (2008) as follows: (1) “to enter the experience and find our own bodily understanding of the whole and the parts of what has been understood”; and (2) “to re-emerge into language so that we can share the insights and communicate them to others, not only in faithful and rigorous ways but in evocative ways that can awaken the aliveness of the meanings for the reader” (p. 575).

The process of embodied interpretation begins on the tail of the more traditional stages of phenomenological analyses outlined above, as the researcher continues engaging with the text to develop emergent themes and synthesize a thematic structure that facilitates understanding. The focus becomes a moving back-and-forth between our embodied sense of the meanings conveyed in the text and the search for words that can evocatively communicate these meanings. The researcher slows down to be present with the narrative in an embodied way, to be attuned to their own felt sense of the meaning, dwelling and holding there so that meaning can form or crystalize more fully. And, they keep open to the creative tension between words themselves as the aliveness of what the words are about, so as to find the “right” words that work to capture the meaning (Todres, 2007; Todres & Galvin, 2008). As van Manen (1997/2016) advised, in searching for the “right” words I would often consider the base definition or root of words and made use of linguistic devices of metaphor, idiomatic phrase and imagery to explicate meaning.

This supplemental framework builds upon what van Manen (2011) has written about the characteristics of evocative text, which has potential to “speak”, “call” to or “stir: something in the reader. Likewise, embodied interpretation points to the capacity of language to stimulate not only logical understanding, but to also reveal a sense of the phenomenon as it lives. The experientially “felt sense” is regarded as a form of understanding. Todres and Galvin (2008) described how embodied interpretation endeavors to strike a balance in so far as using the power of language to “palpably point”, while also attending to the hermeneutic concern to develop thick descriptions sufficient to understand the details of the narrative account. By the researcher going through a process that enlivens the meaning for them, it is more likely that they will offer the reader an engaging and meaningful phenomenological description (Todres, 2007; Todres & Galvin, 2008).

3.9 Establishing the Quality of the Research

Ensuring research trustworthiness involves a process of continual reflection and is influenced by the overarching theoretical perspectives and phenomenological stance guiding the present research. Establishing quality in the present research focused on communicating the meaning of women’s lived experiences of self, embodiment, and weight-loss dieting in a way that exemplified authenticity and credibility, transparency, voice and reciprocity, and vividness.

3.9.1 Authenticity & Credibility

Authenticity is concerned with remaining “true” to the data, in portraying a faithful representation of the meaning and experience as lived and perceived by participants (Patton, 2015; Whitemore et al., 2001). Denzin and Lincoln (2005) cautioned that, as researchers, we need to consciously attend to how our involvement may influence the ability to speak authentically for the experience of others; here, we ask ourselves “has a representation of the subjective perspective been accurately portrayed, while also accounting for my position or perspective as the researcher?” Assuring *credibility* refers to the deliberate efforts to establish confidence and trustworthiness in the accuracy of interpretation, asking: “does the interpretation fit the data?” (Whitemore et al., 2001). In the present research, multiple strategies were used to address authenticity and credibility, including prolonged engagement and member checking with participants, co-validation and audit trails of the data with my supervisor, and a regular practice of reflexivity. The process of analysis was grounded in the participants’ narrative accounts of lived experience and the meaning of their photographs (Morrow, 2005). Using varied data generation approaches also served to enhance the trustworthiness of the present research findings (Patton, 2015).

3.9.2 Transparency

The concept of *transparency* is another criterion that is appropriate for judging trustworthiness in phenomenological research. It is recognized that researchers cannot bracket implicit assumptions and perspectives that are embedded and thus need to acknowledge and make these explicit in writing up research findings (Laverty, 2003; van Manen, 2011). Research can be judged as transparent when the researcher is honest about their position and considers how this may shape the findings. Research credibility and authenticity are enhanced by transparency (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). In the present project, I used the exercise of journaling to facilitate reflexivity, spent time discussing reflections with my research supervisor, and aimed to be open about my assumptions, perspectives, and embodied experiences in writing up. The use of more than one data source and the practice of triangulation to explore convergences, complementarities, and divergences in the data also added to transparency in the present project (Treharne & Riggs, 2014).

3.9.3 Voice & Reciprocity

Voice and reciprocity are significant criteria with which to judge research quality that are keeping with the feminist perspective of the present research. As Lincoln (1995) stated, “attention to voice – to who speaks, for whom, to whom, for what purposes – effectively creates praxis” (p. 282). Lincoln suggested that *voice*, as a hallmark of quality in interpretive research, reflects resistance to silence, disengagement and marginalization. Voice calls for “passionate participation” and text that demonstrates an active, committed researcher stance and openness to multiple voices. Examining *reciprocity* means that we are concerned with addressing issues of power in the researcher-participant relationship. It assumes that the researcher and participant come to the research as equals, each with something to give and gain. Reciprocity is demonstrated by cultivating a research environment that emphasizes equality, trust, caring, and mutuality in co-creating the research endeavor (Lincoln, 1995). These criteria are consistent with a feminist research position (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Devault, 1990), which influenced my approach to interviewing and data representation. Likewise, IPA as a methodology is committed to a view of the participant as the “experiential expert”. IPA places emphasis on the co-constructed nature of the analysis and retaining the voice of the participant’s lived experience through analysis and writing up the data (Smith et al., 2009).

3.9.4 Vividness & the Phenomenological Nod

Vividness or aliveness can be used as an evaluative measure to appraise phenomenological texts. Vivid text is characterized by thick and faithful descriptions of meaning that carry the voice of participants with artfulness and imagination (Whittemore et al., 2001). A vivid experiential description is valuable because it creates the experience of nearness or presence and stimulates the intuitive capabilities of the reader (van Manen, 2011). Van Manen (1990) referred to the “phenomenological nod” as an indicator of “good” phenomenological descriptions. The *phenomenological nod* occurs when the text resonates with the reader such that the experience is recognized as familiar and, at the same time, they are reawakened to new aspects of the experience. Todres and Galvin (2008) similarly employed the metaphor of “emotional homecoming” to describe this experiencing of a phenomenological description as deeply personal, meaningful, and authentic. As van Manen (1997/2011) eloquently stated, “a good phenomenological description is collected by lived experience and recollects lived experience – is validated by lived experience and it validates lived experience” (p. 27). I aimed

to bring vocative features into my description of the thematic findings to enhance vividness. However, for the most part, it will be left up to the reader of the text, particularly other women, to judge whether the description is evocative and the interpretation rings true.

CHAPTER 4: STUDY ONE RESULTS & DISCUSSION

4.1 Characterizing the Participants

Study One is based in the narratives of six female, Caucasian participants ranging from 29 to 55 years old. Table 4.1 provides a profile of the participant demographics. The participants represent a range of current body sizes/shapes and weight histories. Many of the women identify being overweight and struggling to lose weight as longstanding issues, beginning in childhood. Throughout their lives, the women all tried various strategies to lose weight or change their body shape, including specific diet plans or programs, exercise programs, and participating in commercial weight-loss organizations. At the time of the study, half were engaged in regular fitness activities. The others identified themselves as trying to be more physically active but limited by health issues or chronic pain. All of the women shared notable experiences of hardship related to body-image and weight as well as adversities in other contexts, including family of origin, relationships, workplace difficulties, prejudice, and personal loss. I introduce each of the participants to familiarize the reader with their individual voices.

Denise is a 36-year-old mother of a school-aged son. She relates a history of struggling with “feeling fat” and critical of her body, despite never being overweight. She has enjoyed being physically active and keeping fit from an early age, involved in synchronized swimming and modeling in her youth. Denise also has a passion for creative writing and hopes to someday be published. Denise notes tendencies to be quite perfectionistic and get “off-balance” at times in her self-improvement pursuits. She regards her “critical” relationship with her father as influential in her self-development.

At age 55, Madeline describes herself as a woman of strong religious faith. Surviving domestic abuse in her first marriage is a pivotal experience around which Madeline narratively constructs herself. Madeline identifies being overweight and “emotional eating” as longstanding issues in her life and, at present, seeks to find a more “nourishing” way of relating to and being in her body. Madeline has a deep love of nature and enjoys painting, particularly landscapes.

Gigi, at age 51, shares about growing up in a small, rural community that never felt like the right fit for her and struggling with being overweight from an early age. She longs for a less complicated life, without feeling “weighted down” and overwhelmed by her weight. Gigi relates physical health issues and depression tied to a history of being overweight. She has also

Table 4.1 Study One Participant Profiles

Pseudonym	Age	Relationship Status	Education/Occupation	Health/Activity
Denise	36	Married School-aged son	B.A. degree Human Resources Manager for Day Spa	Teenage disordered eating Running & strength-training
Madeline	55	Married 4 adult children	Post-secondary Certificates Educational Assistant	Aquacise Joint pain limits mobility Past depression
Gigi	51	Married	B.A. degree Retired, Career Counselling	Physical & mental health concerns tied to her weight Health limits physical activity
Ivana	53	Married	B.A. degree Retired, Public Speaking	Fibromyalgia Pain limits physical activity
Sally	26	Single	B.Sc. Student, Political Studies Career aspirations in public communications	Running program Biking
Sarah	29	Married	Post-secondary Certificate Administrative Assistant at Women's Fitness Gym	Training & teaching pole dancing classes

struggled with infertility and traumatic loss in her life. Enjoying time with loved ones and her dog, travelling, quilting and cooking diverse cuisines are important to her sense of self.

Ivana, age 53, voices a love of fashion and interior design, but remarks that she has always felt insecure and “held back” by her body weight/shape in following these passions. Being overweight became hard to bear for Ivana early in life, related to experiences of childhood bullying and mistreatment by peers. At this stage in her life, Ivana points to processes of self-examination, “working on myself”, and a readiness to shift the balance in putting herself first.

Sally, a 26-year-old political studies student, expresses a creative intellect, quirky sense of humor, and ideal of following the unconventional path. At the time of the study, Sally had just ended a long-term romantic relationship and was coming to terms with the meaning of this loss. Sally often feels that being overweight means having “to prove myself” and worries about overweight prejudice and gender stereotypes thwarting her career aspirations. Sally lost a large amount of weight as a teen, which she later regained. Compared to the past, she regards her current pursuit of dietary change and exercise as firmly about health and investing in herself.

Sarah is 29 years-old and works as an administrative assistant for a women’s fitness gym, wherein her discovery of pole dancing classes became a “life-changing” experience. Sarah

recounts emotional struggles with not having a “conventionally thin body”, being more the “athletic body type”; but, feels the embodied experience of pole dancing has taught her to appreciate her body, in its physical strength and capacity, and work towards becoming more “comfortable” in her body. Supporting her mother to overcome addiction and her commitment to causes of animal rights and environmentalism are defining parts of Sarah’s narrative.

4.2 Thematic Structure

Figure 4.1 provides a graphic representation of the thematic structure that developed from my phenomenological analysis of participants’ narrative accounts and photographs. It showcases five super-ordinate themes, within which are more nuanced subthemes, and positions thematic clusters in relationship to one another. This graphic is a tool to visualize the analysis as a gestalt configuration. It is intended to be viewed alongside the written description of the findings, rather than in isolation. Arrows included in the graphic do not suggest causality, but rather patterns of influence and relation that will be outlined throughout my discussion.

4.3 Experiencing the Body as an Obstacle to Self-Actualization

The first super-ordinate theme reflects the women’s experience of body weight/shape or perception thereof as an obstacle; that is, something limiting her sense of self, standing in the way of progress towards self-actualization, realizing her potential, and keeping her from achieving the kind of lived experience of selfhood she longs for. As the women spoke about this idea, their narratives showcased the existence of both external barriers (e.g. social judgment, the diet industry agenda) and internal barriers regarding ways of seeing, interpreting, and attitudes taken towards body and self at their current body weight/shape (e.g., loss of normalcy, shame, insecurity). The women are critically aware of the existence of overweight prejudice and identify a need for social change in this respect, but also recognize ways that they have personally internalized and disciplined themselves according to such messages.

It is worth noting that not all the women in the study identify as “overweight” or “fat”, but their perception and conceptualization of the body (i.e., negative body-image or “feeling fat”) seems more important to lived experience than their actual physical weight/shape. Denise, for instance, despite being quite thin and fit in appearance, describes struggling to surmount the barrier that negative body-image presents to well-being and practicing self-care. All of the participants describe longing to shed feelings of insecurity and restriction about weight and/or body image. A best, more authentic version of self is narrated as yearning to be actualized but

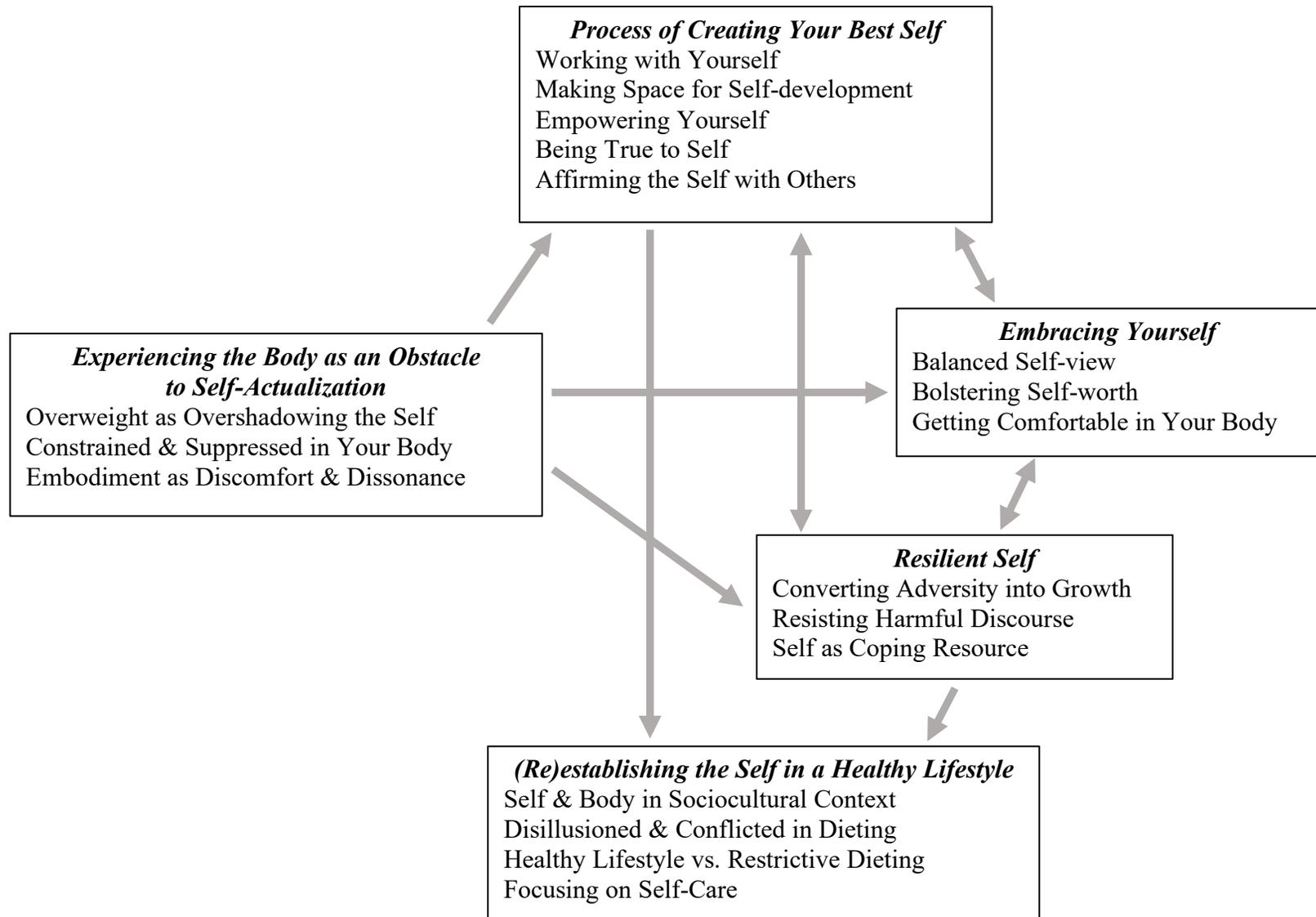


Figure 4.1 Graphic Representation of Thematic Structure for Study One

confined and obstructed by the body as it is currently experienced. This finding is consistent with prior qualitative research that has explored concepts of self and self-transformation in relation to weight-loss or other body modification practices (e.g., Davis, 1995, 2009; Epiphaniou & Ogden, 2010; Granberg, 2006; Throsby, 2008). Moreover, the body-self relation thematized in this cluster is associated with feelings of conflict, fragmentation, discontent, and disempowerment articulated within writings of feminist scholars reviewed in Chapter 2 (e.g. Blood, 2005; Bordo, 2003, Del Busso & Reavey, 2013; Murray, 2016).

While the Body as Obstacle cluster gives voice to women's important experiences of strain, feeling debilitated, and disempowered with their bodies, it also highlights their strength in endeavoring to construct and manage a positive sense of self in the body. The women narratively construct themselves as critically reflecting on sociocultural meanings surrounding the body and noting the more internal or intrapsychic barriers that are within their control, striving to gain insight, re-evaluate what matters, and gain momentum towards greater health and well-being. The obstructed self of this thematic cluster juxtaposes the active, empowered, and resilient self as moving towards positive change or self-development in other thematic clusters.

Sarah's case stands out as we consider the Body as Obstacle for how she positions herself as having progressed, compared to her past self, along an imagined trajectory towards feeling comfortable in the body (i.e., less blocked, dissatisfied or insecure). Instead of weight-loss, Sarah voices desire to reduce body fat specifically, which she regards as preventing her from showcasing the physical fitness and strength she has developed. This is not about Sarah criticizing herself, but instead taking on a healthy challenge that she values, aligned with ideals of health and self-care. Compared to self-past, Sarah identifies a healthy shift in her present self-view and voices emerging resilience to the internalization of negative connotations or meanings about the body. She credits the shift to focusing on the positives about herself and her physicality, keeping momentum towards goals, and reframing what previously felt like external criticism about her body into a personal challenge generated from within. Sarah's case is illustrative of the kind of positive movement or growth trajectory that resonated across the women's narratives. However, taking a positive psychology lens here is not to neglect the women's experience of struggle, hurt, or dissatisfaction related to their bodies. Looking at both sides of the phenomenon is important to better understand the whole. Several facets of how the

body is constructed an obstacle, impeding movement towards self-actualization, within the women's narratives are revealed in the following subthemes.

4.3.1 Overweight as Overshadowing the Self

The participants recalled times when negative feelings and perceptions of their body overshadowed and detracted from the self as a whole. In these times, negativity felt all-consuming and reduced their ability to see and value their positive qualities and strengths. There is a kind of divisive effect, with the body objectified and disembodied, that complicates the ability to take a broader view of self in the body. In Ivana's narrative, overweight is conceived as an unacceptable state of being. Being overweight meant "not belonging" or feeling "put apart" from others at an early age. Her weight, as a problematic aspect of who she is, needs to be worked on, remedied, or "cured" to achieve an image of health, normalcy, and acceptability. The words "overweight" or "fat" seem to limit or qualify Ivana as a person and her ability to showcase her skills or talents.

For years friends have been urging me to start a home design company or do styling and truly a lot of what's been holding me back is that I can't imagine bringing myself into someone's home or someone's closet and styling them or their home being overweight. I don't think that they would take me seriously. They would look at me and go "well if you can't control your weight and you don't look good, how are you supposed to make me or my home look good". That's just how I feel. Now obviously I think that way about someone else and yet if I phoned up a decorator and they came in and they were overweight I wouldn't feel that way. In fact, I would feel much more kin with them because of how I am so I don't know why I feel that way about someone else, but I just do. It's just my self-image, I guess.

The overarching sense of shame or defectiveness is painful to hear in Ivana's words; it echoes within her descriptions of there being something "wrong" with someone who regards the overweight body as beautiful, holding onto beliefs that she can only be "put together" or accomplished at her current weight/shape "for a fat person". She feels her weight qualifying self-worth, competence, and success.

Sally similarly describes her weight as overshadowing and qualifying who she is as a person, feeling seen for her physique first and foremost and that people make assumptions or judgements about her as a person based upon her body.

I have to get over that little *block* with people when I first meet them so that they can get past the fact that I am overweight and then I can start to tell them like "Hey I swim 2 or 3 times a week" or "I can do a headstand" or "I just started running". I mean people are always really surprised to hear that, "Oh

you run” <condescending tone> Like I would never introduce myself like “Hi I’m Sally. I can do a headstand” because that’s just weird, but obviously people aren’t going to see that when they first meet me.

Sally describes how she cannot be “*just* a woman” in the world but is always seen as an “*overweight* woman”. And if someone does regard her favorably, her weight inevitably enters the dialogue to qualify the positive remark; it might go something like, “Sally is a good worker but could probably lose 50 pounds”. She feels obliged to “jump out” to validate herself and “work harder to prove myself” than “normal” (not overweight) people. Socially, Sally experiences her body as a “hinderance”, putting unintended distance between her and others. Weight becomes something to move past or work around for others to comprehend the “real me”. As I listened to Sally’s description of “overweight”, the word visualized in my mind as having a very thick, enveloping quality. This attribute of her physique always overlays or rises to the forefront in lived relation. Sally grasps a loss of the unseen opportunity to, like any “normal” person, *just* be who she is, to *just* be a woman; she is always regarded as an overweight person.

Within an online fat acceptance community, Donaghue and Clemitshaw (2012) found that, in addition to routine encounters with weight stigma, women described experiences of misrecognition by others due to their weight. Akin to the present findings, women wrote about ways that fatness acted like a distorting field around them, preventing others (including those closest to them) from directly and clearly seeing the self “within”. Like Sally, these commentators related a sense of being seen through a stereotyped lens, which contributed to a sense of their selfhood being denied or overlooked by others (e.g., being fat trumped abilities or achievements) and struggles with feeling defective. Donaghue and Clemitshaw reported the sense of this “block” about the body contributed to dissonance between size acceptance and feeling continually drawn to the idea of becoming thinner. This was also captured by women’s narratives in the present project.

Ivana associates overweight with feeling abnormal and defective compared to societal standards. Not being a “normal weight” subverts living more authentically or “true” to her own self-view. And yet, ironically, having a body that approximates the thin ideal is, statistically speaking, more the exception than the rule in Western society. Ideas about not being normal or having the normal opportunity afforded to thin people highlight the functioning of prejudgment and overweight stigma both as an intrusion on the self and acting to stimulate self-discipline. Sally recognizes how she too keeps others at a distance, criticizes and undersells herself in

reaction to feeling unlikeable, self-consciousness about her body, and a history of being hurt by others.

Madeline perceives that her bigger body conceals her “true beauty” as a person in the context of normalized prejudice and narrow-mindedness about overweight people. She longs for others to truly “get to know me, who I am inside”; that is, to look past her body and be drawn to her intangible qualities, such as character, personality, strengths, values, or radiating energy.

Madeline captures this aspiration with the image a dragonfly (Figure 4.2), a creature she regards



Figure 4.2 Madeline – Me I Aspire to Be, Dragonfly

as “underrated” and stronger than it looks. The value of looking beyond surface appearance, not underestimating or undervaluing something or someone based upon first glance was communicated across the women’s narratives.

In addition to her physical form, Madeline explains how her conflicted relationship with food acts to obscure by making it harder to look positively upon herself. For example, holding onto ideas about “good” and “bad” foods and “giving in” to cravings as a personal failure of willpower has led to predominantly negative feelings about herself. In this regard, notions of morality and self-control conveyed in societal discourse around food and weight have been harmful for her. Madeline believes that she could feel more whole without so much emphasis on food in her life, envisioned as clearing the path to focus on more enriching, positive, and holistic views or simply take a different perspective than she has in the past.

Denise states that it is hard to “get past” idealized images of thinness. It is as if the fantasy of being a thinner, prettier “me” overlays and minimizes her present self-worth, even though she recognizes this as an unreasonable ideal. Previous studies have similarly documented women’s struggles with “getting caught up” in images of feminine ideals and feeling pressured to “work” on the body, in thinking “this is how I’m supposed to look” (Coffey, 2013). Denise’s perception and clarity on herself are skewed by such self-criticism, as if wearing blinders or distortion goggles. Criticism becomes all-encompassing and relentless. It reinforces a stance of measuring and evaluating the body-self. It darkens, confuses and obscures. As an illustrative

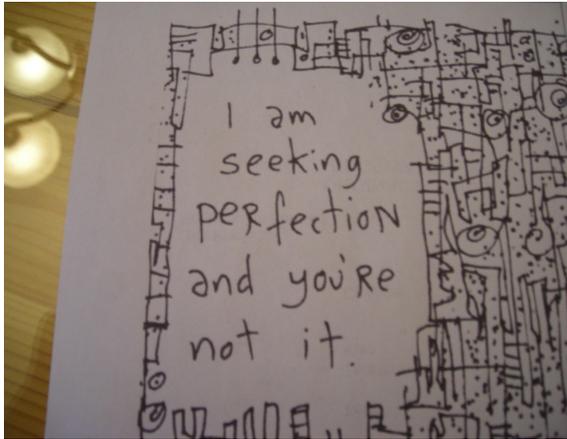


Figure 4.3 Denise – *This is Not Me, Perfection*

example, Denise shares her struggle with accepting and enjoying the embodied experience of pregnancy, instead feeling out of control, anxious, and insecure:

I had a perfect pregnancy and I hated it because I wasn't pregnant, I was fat. I couldn't get past it... and immediately – I think he was a day or two old – I'm like okay 'I don't want 2% milk; I want skim milk. I'm going to eat half the sandwich and I don't want white bread.

Denise describes an inner voice of self-criticism and derogation as pressuring her to diet. Yet getting “caught up” in this pursuit leads to losing touch with and veering off the path of being true to herself. In her ‘this is not me’ photographs (Figure 4.3), Denise represented perfectionism as a conflicted and undesirable part of herself, not reflective of how she wants to be.

Gigi describes being “overwhelmed” and “all-consumed” by her weight, especially in trying to cope with instances when having an overweight body creates hardship. For example, being “plus petite”, two specialties, acts as a kind of double barrier when shopping for clothing. Her lived experience of “no clothing that fits” and, consequently, being unable to present her best appearance contributes to feeling more fatalistic and negative towards her body. Gigi denotes obesity as a “pervasive disease” through all facets of life, akin to an infectious agent, and weight-loss as an “all-encompassing” preoccupation. Reaching and maintaining a lower weight is viewed as a stabilizing and uncomplicated way of being that has eluded her.

A normal weight, where you're not always, “Do I have nothing to wear? Does nothing fit? Can I go to this event? Will I be able to have anything to wear?”, you know like ALL OF THAT, just that whole <sigh> EVERYTHING <drops hands in lap> you're just overwhelmed by your weight <exasperated> Just to be one size, to go in your closet and have one size of clothes. People say you have so many clothes, believe me I wish I didn't. It's because I have 11 sizes in this closet.

Life choices are dictated by weight and having to struggle with her body in everyday tasks, like shopping or food choices, drains Gigi of personal resources, including time, energy, and well-being, and robs focus from simply living and enjoying life. Gigi expresses a longing to “take my life back” from this weight issue (Figure 4.4).

For Gigi, times when she experiences a feeling of lacking control over her weight are disruptive of her sense of self-authority and -efficacy. She describes these times as a “vicious circle” or “spiral”, stating that when you don’t feel “in control” over the body then you don’t feel in control of other aspects of life and self. This idea of lacking control is tied to feeling insecure

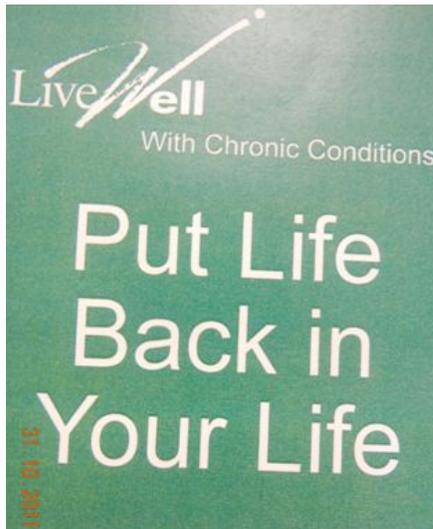


Figure 4.4 Gigi – *Me I Aspire to Be, Life Back*

and unable to self-manage her life. Gigi holds onto multiple sizes of clothes because she fears the unpredictability of weight gain, preparing for the worst. And, despair comes with lacking consistency or stability in her body, unable “to be one size” and know she has options to dress her body for her life. Gigi relates how her sense of self becomes “questionable” when it feels like she is losing grip on dealing with her weight, prompting self-doubt, loss of resolve and direction, withdrawal, and hopelessness. Gigi stories herself in a “hole” (dark and uncertain) in these times, not knowing when or how to “turn it around” and move into the “light” (optimism and vision forward). She is waiting for things to change, giving up, and resigning herself to despair, rather than empowering herself to take a step in the positive direction. Gigi expresses pessimism in statements about the inevitability of “losing control”, “waiting for the other shoe to drop”, and how she would not bet on herself to succeed at weight-loss. In these “questionable” periods, Gigi loses foothold in her healthy sense of self. Being overweight expands psychologically as an obstacle as she feels more overwhelmed, becomes pessimistic, and loses touch with inner resources. Other studies of dieters’ experiences have similarly shown how feelings about one’s body-self can become entangled with the ability to adhere to and be successful at dieting (Buchanan & Sheffield, 2017; Ogden, 2018), which is only reinforced by the emphasis on willpower and personal responsibility for weight-loss within sociocultural discourse.

The narrative of Body as Obstacle resonates with previous findings from Glenn (2012) on women’s experience of waiting on weight-loss. Glenn described how to wait on weight-loss is to “size up”, to scrutinize the body and the self and to feel “weighed-down” by a sense of abnormality and unacceptability of excess fat:

The “fat” body demands attention from us in a way that the “normal”, acceptable body does not. A person encountering excess weight might view herself in a particular way, perhaps engaging in a dialogue like this: It seems that this too-big body is somehow not mine [...] The not-my-body presents itself as excessive, as “fat”, a thing to be felt, an object to be labeled, heavy and foreign, burdensome and uncomfortable. This othering of the body might lead me to scrutinize it in the way I would any other object that I own and am considering fixing up (p. 351).

This description by Glenn reads as all-too familiar in relation to the words of Ivana, Sally, Madeline, Denise and Gigi.

Compared to the others, Sarah narrates less emotional distress and more optimism about her body; nonetheless she regards excess body fat, specifically, as an obstacle that detracts from her sense of self as seen through an external lens. Sarah describes wanting to “peel off” her fat layer to reveal the physical strength that she “knows underneath”. She wants to feel confident that others can see these gains in athleticism embodied.

Because I’ve worked out a lot more in the last few years, like by participating in classes, and the pole dancing classes are a different kind of strength that your body acquires so I know I’m a lot stronger physically than I’ve ever been. I know I’m in really good shape just the body fat is on the outside, so I still have that sort of barrier. But I know underneath, if I could just peel it off, it would be fine. I’d probably be happy with it if I could just peel it off.

It is about trying to achieve an outer image that allows others to see her optimally, in line with her increased physical strength and ability, and reveals more plainly the positive embodiment she feels from the inside. A part of Sarah still feels self-conscious and believes that others will not perceive her in the way she desires without moving closer to a prototypical athletic, toned physique. This meaning recalls the statements of Bordo (2003) and Lupton (2013) that modern society idealizes not only thinness, but the firm and toned body. Sarah disregards her own subjectivity as she assumes that others will fail to see or disbelieve the positives that she experiences in her body. A similar uncertainty about her body image was observed in Sarah’s struggle to find the words to describe her body optimistically but accurately.

I don’t know how I would describe my body because I’m not going to say “athletic” and I’m not going to say “overweight”, somewhere in the middle, just can’t find the right word..maybe “curvy”? But even then, people might picture someone bigger than what I actually am.

Enhancing her body composition and appearance is something Sarah speaks of doing for herself over the long-term to feel more at ease and content with her body on display. She hopes that enhancing her physique will silence the “critic” that creeps into her inner dialogue to nitpick at her body in public situations, such as pole dance performances or viewing photos from her beach vacation.

4.3.2 Constrained & Suppressed in Your Body

Participants described experiences of negative thoughts and feelings about their bodies contributing to a felt sense of constraint or suppression about how the self was permitted to act in the body as is. Their stories reflect both others’ and their own negative conceptions about the body-self as limiting activity, movement or personal growth. Madeline identifies being confined within certain limits or held back by her weight as well as the restrictive nature of dieting. There are times when she limits herself from enjoyable activities or experiences due to insecurity or fear of being judged for her body size.

I would like to go on a tropical holiday sometime, some year but there’s no way that I would ever do that because on a tropical holiday you go to the beach. I see all these young, perfect-figured <laughs> women or even you know the older women, they’re nice and slim and they’ve all got nice tans and good bodies and I know that’s not realistic but then you flop down this – like my body there and it’s like a whale in amongst a bunch of seals, you know, how could you not notice it.

Even though Madeline questions the realism and healthfulness of the thin ideal and speaks of the injustice of overweight prejudice, an internalized criticalness of her body is thick and causes struggle to authorize herself in her bigger body. Madeline perceives that becoming slimmer will help her confront the external limits of being overweight (e.g., clothing options, physical mobility), but equally grasps the need to confront self-imposed limits.

Ivana describes “waiting” until she is thinner or smaller to allow herself to “be me”. Her narrative elucidates how permission to act on desire and ambitions can be contingent on successful weight-loss. Thinking about this inner conflict, Ivana questions if she is psychologically or emotionally “holding on” to the weight and, accordingly, “holding herself back” from pursuing goals. Ivana describes using her weight as an “excuse” to protect herself from the inherent risk of “putting myself out there”. For example, Ivana loves shoes and states that even others recognize shoes as “my thing”; however, the wall of shoes in her closet that she photographed (Figure 4.5) represents mixed emotion.



Figure 4.5 Ivana – This is Me, Shoes

I get frustrated because I do love clothes and I do love fashion but quite often I can't get what I want because of my size, so shoes and purses don't betray you <laughs> [...] and *even with that* I find that a lot of times I feel like I don't *deserve it*. So, *I have them* and I collect them. I love them and they fit, but it's almost like I'm *waiting* for something, I'm waiting for the time that..maybe I'm smaller or what it – I don't really know what it is, that I will wear them.

Even with her shoes, where Ivana feels she has the means to “do me”, it is as if the self is paralyzed, in a holding pattern and waiting to come out until she is thin enough. Glenn (2010) illuminated waiting on weight-loss as “watching from the sidelines”, struggling to reconcile a body that does not feel representative of the

“authentic me”. Of her participants' experience, Glenn wrote:

Once I have attained my desired body, I promise many rewards for myself: lovely clothing to wear, beautiful places to visit, and relationships to ignite. Until such time, however, at least some parts of my life and my body might remain untouched, unused, uninhabited, and unlive [...] I will be authentically me. However, until such a time that my-body is found, free of all the excess weight, my life-lived will have to wait (p. 355).

This excerpt parallels Ivana's lived experience. Ivana explains how weight-loss will bring about enhanced confidence and performance, akin to the “look good, feel good, do good” adage. She believes that thinner people can “get away with” putting themselves out there more readily, with there being “less of them to notice” and without overweight stigma bearing down on them. Assuming others will react to her negatively as an overweight person, Ivana questions herself, holds in feelings, ideas, or aspirations, and essentially hides her authentic self. She pictures this experience with an image of the television on mute (Figure 4.6). Ivana describes “compensating” for her weight by putting on a “false” self, being overly pleasing and deferential. By her description, this state is uncomfortable, like trying to force yourself into clothes that do not fit. Ivana understates herself in holding back and central aspects of her self-view, such as being the “go-to girl” and “big-hearted” become restraints rather than assets.

Sally similarly describes a balancing act between presenting her-self as “true” and unhindered versus carefully managed self, which entails putting others’ needs before her own, silencing or censoring herself, and being overly self-sacrificing to make herself appear more likeable. Sally was actively reflecting on and questioning this pattern in her life in light of her



Figure 4.6 Ivana – *This is Me, Muted*

recent break-up and experiences of one-sided friendships. A tension emerges in Ivana and Sally’s narratives around this issue of distance regarding self and others. Both women in effect were trying to draw people closer by appearing pleasing and not ruffling feathers, but coming to recognize that it takes being vulnerable, risking putting yourself out there, and demonstrating self-respect (e.g., setting

boundaries) to have the kind of meaningful connections they truly want. Moreover, with being overly focused on others’ perceptions of them and putting others’ needs first, both Sally and Ivana recognize how they lose track of themselves, their own needs and goals, and feel suppressed.

In addition to being pleasing, Sally explains her view that being a dieter is a means of appealing to others. Specifically, Sally believes that projecting an image of herself as somebody who is trying to control her weight, despite her larger size, will make her more attractive.

If I choose a salad over a cheeseburger people will like me more or if I choose diet Coke over regular Coke that people will like me more and that they will think that “Hey she’s restricting herself. She’s has more *control*. She’s a HUMAN BEING” <sarcasm> and that maybe they could put two and two together and realize that by nature of the fact that I am dieter and have been almost my whole life that, despite the fact that I haven’t always been successful at it, that I am good at kind of exercising that mechanism of control and that I can save myself, you know hold back.

If people observe her engaging in diet behaviours, it might change or temper their negative prejudgment and lead people to see her as more likeable and normal. Demonstrating the restraint behaviours of dieting somehow makes being overweight more acceptable because she is exercising willpower and trying to “save” herself from overweight. Again, this reflects the idea of overweight as a perceived shortcoming that one needs to compensate for.

Sally also shares worries that being overweight may pose difficulty in achieving career aspirations. She anticipates being judged as less capable and overlooked for career opportunities because of her size. For Sally, there is a sense of her body as part of herself that needs to be dealt with or remedied to get where she wants to go career-wise. Close to graduating and entering the workforce, Sally experiences this concern as pending and weighty. Awareness of her body as potentially holding her back in an area of her life that she takes so much pride in is a painful realization and, at times, turns into self-disparaging critique about being in need of improvement.

Gigi contrasts thin others living a life of ease, simplicity, not taxing themselves and having choices against the “torment”, both physical and emotional anguish, she often feels in her body. Likened to being held hostage, Gigi cries out “I’d like to *jump* out of my body, *divorce* my body”. Dressing her body to attend a social event, for example, becomes a massive hurdle. Likewise, what should be a simple decision of whether or not to have dessert is excessively complicated in being overweight.

It would just be nice to just be able to have a piece of pie without thinking a hundred thoughts, “should I?, shouldn’t I?, can I?, can I not?”

Instead of hurdling her body over barriers and feeling fraught, Gigi longs to not just step but *jump* out of this embodied constraint altogether.

Gigi uses the ordinary experience of clothing the body to juxtapose her “torment” against a simplicity and normalcy over everyday living – to “have one size of clothes”, instead of an excess of clothes in multiple sizes, and buy “off the rack”. Past research has documented the struggles that overweight women, in particular, experience with dressing the body. Clothing is used by women to navigate embodied experience and manage societal expectations, for instance by concealing or camouflaging certain parts of the body while enhancing others (Bishop et al., 2018; Frith & Gleeson, 2008; Tiggemann & Lacey, 2009). The female body has become an important symbol in society that gives off messages about the self and, as such, women are expected to be interested in and sensitive to how they dress the body. In keeping with these findings, it is not just weight-loss itself that Gigi longs for, but more importantly the feelings and experiences she sees as precluded in her life as an overweight person. Donaghue and Clemitshaw (2012) uncovered similar meaning about the realities of thin privilege among fat acceptance bloggers. Like Gigi, these blog posters recounted everyday burdens associated with their weight and opportunities that felt out of reach or excessively complicated because they were “too fat”. Within their comments, bloggers constructed these experiences as “frequent reminders” of the

advantages afforded to thin people. Likewise, Gigi repeats how she “could do” things if she were to achieve a more “normal” and healthy weight; weight-loss is seen as creating opportunity and access to options that would ease emotional distress and support feeling more satisfied, in control and capable of nurturing herself.

I could have *a good life*, maintain a good life. I wouldn't have to turn myself into figure-8's and starve myself and *all the rest of it*.

Slimming the body is narrated as crossing a threshold of sorts into a new space of freedom and opportunity for experiences essential to health and well-being.

Other women echoed this desire to uncomplicate embodiment. Denise narrates how bodily perfectionism narrows her self-experience. Pursuing perfectionist goals and images continually leaves her feeling trapped within a “flawed” self and ever reaching towards an impossible self; she is never good enough. Denise contrasts this way of being against an experience of feeling inspired and full of possibility in moving or reaching forward to a best version of herself. Continual evaluation against unrealistic, perfectionist standards, such as the Bo Derek “perfect 10” or a Victoria Secret model, impedes her confidence and ability to be present and simply enjoy who she is here-and-now. Perfectionism also keeps Denise in a pattern of “pretending” or putting on a false self with others to appear perfect and put together. The assumption underlying this pattern is that something is wrong with just being “me”. It keeps Denise from fully accepting herself or embracing “the beauty of me”, as she says.

I think I come off as a very confident person and I think I overcompensate because *I feel that I'm not*..so maybe if I believed a little more in myself that *I am*, you know, then I wouldn't be pretending – that just *would be me*.

Letting go of perfectionist standards, or at least dialing them back to a level that works for rather than against her, would be liberating.

Sarah likewise highlights self-confidence and self-acceptance as essential. Sarah emphasizes the word “freeing” as she endeavors to move away from body image concerns, felt as a burden or weight that she no longer wants to be “concerned about it all the time” or experience as “having to” scrutinize or critically inspect the body. This angst acts as a barrier to Sarah's embodied self. The solution, Sarah explains, is learning to be more confident and at ease in her body, which she sees herself accomplishing both by optimizing her physique and working to make a positive change in how she relates to her body.

4.3.3 Embodiment as Discomfort & Dissonance

Distressing feelings about embodiment can also obstruct self-actualization. The women in this study spoke about social or public situations where the “critical gaze” of others led to anxiety about their bodies and constrained their behaviour. Sally and Ivana describe being overly conscious of their embodied presence, feeling magnified and on display in a negative way in public. Sally says that it feels uneasy to be in her body when she fears it may be drawing negative attention; this experience negatively colors thoughts and feelings towards herself.

Sometimes I just think people are looking at me in a negative way, especially eating in public. *I hate it*. And when I do eat in public, I’m usually pretty conscious of what I eat and know I can’t, you know, have a chocolate bar. I can’t eat something unhealthy because I just assume that they’re thinking, “Oh yeah there she is having a chocolate bar. We all expect that of her”. Even when I’m just walking down the street, I assume that people are looking at me and thinking something negative pertaining to my body <sad tone>.

Ivana says that it can feel as if the whole world is focused on her overweight body in a threatening way, being at-risk or vulnerable to criticism because of her body size. Accordingly, she describes being overly self-conscious and preoccupied about doing or saying the “wrong” thing. She thinks of herself as out of place among others due to her larger body size and feels intimidated to be herself, owing to fear of being “put down” or ridiculed.

Gigi describes her body as “not normal” and the “wrong BMI” and voices self-criticism about the same, calling herself a “loser” and questioning “what’s wrong with me? why can’t I get this together?”. The influence of weight-normative discourse (Bombak et al., 2019; Lupton, 2013) on Gigi’s conception of her body is notable here. There is also an incompetent and defective connotation that dwells in her words. When everyday tasks feel like an emotional battleground because of her size, Gigi feels defeated and, in these times, it is that much harder for her to resist messages of overweight stigma. As Glenn (2012) described, the “too-big body” feels uncomfortable and at-odds with self, somehow taking on an otherness, in being weighed-down by heightened awareness of the “critical gaze”. Regarding the body in illness, van Manen (1998) stated “it is exactly because a person’s well-being is disturbed that he or she can no longer live in a self-forgetful, passed-over relation to the body” (p. 6). One could equally apply this statement to the disquieting and dissonant sense of embodiment that comes with awareness of prejudicial and shaming meanings about excess fat.

In addition, the women shared experiences of dissonance brought about by conflict between the body as is and qualities, goals, or projects they desired. Ivana experiences discord between her overweight body and the envisioned physical appearance she has been “creating on the inside”.

My main motivation to diet is to get slim enough, small enough that I can walk into a store and pick out the clothes that I want to wear off the rack without having to struggle. I am, in my words, a fashionista from way back. I love clothes. I love fashion. I think I want my ashes spread on New York 5th avenue <laughter>. I don't want to be slim *for anybody*. I want to be able to just go into my closet, throw on my pair of jeans and a white blouse and a pair of boots and a nice big belt and a leather jacket and just go out the door and not have to worry. I want to be able to wear all those things that are running through my head that I know look fabulous together.



Figure 4.7 Ivana - *This is Me, Worrier*

The lived space of overweight for Ivana is boxed in, without room or space to realize her design, creativity or potential, as compared to the openness equated with thinness. Her story of “me I aspire to be” is like a picture she cannot paint, incomplete or unfinished, and her audience only gets a glimpse at what she has inside. Ivana tries to work within limitations to optimize her self-image, for example by using plus size clothing, but nonetheless feels the weight of “having to worry”, as depicted with the wooden carving (Figure 4.7) and the anecdote about her shoes (Figure 4.5). In this regard, dieting represents an effort to not only lose weight, but to

unfetter the self or, to put it differently, achieve a body that permits greater ease of self-expression.

Exploring women's dynamic process of self-presentation through clothes, Guy and Banim (2000) identified three co-existing views of self: “the woman I want to be”, “the woman I fear I could be”, and “the woman I am most of the time”. These views were reflected in how women engaged with clothes to create, reveal or conceal aspects of self. The aspirational aspect of relating to clothing to create images of “the woman I want to be” is pertinent to Ivana's story of a positive self-image being physically realized and embodied as ‘the woman I am’ through clothes that achieve the “look” she fashioned for her best self. The disconcerting sense of being

the “woman I fear I could be”, when clothing fails to achieve one’s desired self-image or unwittingly creates an unfavourable impression, emerges in Ivana’s expressed anxiety about trying to conceal “problem areas” and Gigi’s sense of constrained clothing options available to help her look her best.

Denise voices a desire to resituate embodiment in a space where her overall self-image and -worth are not dependent on feelings about her body. She conceives of a healthy body-self symbiosis as like two people living peaceably with one another and capable of resolution or at least being civil, calling a truce or agreeing to disagree, in times of conflict.

I hope that maybe someday I can have that healthy, where the outside and the inside maybe aren’t equal – well they’re not 100% friends but they have an understanding of each other where they can live happily together, where outside’s not happy and inside is so horrible, where there’s some level ground for both of them.

In Denise’s view, this kind of body-self relationship is only made possible by maintaining a healthy-positive body ideal, which holds aesthetics in balance with health, and by developing greater body-acceptance and focus on body care.

Madeline perceives that her sense of self and body have become experientially disconnected or divided over time as her body has gained weight. This is illuminated in her account of a mismatch between her inner self and bodily form:

The person I see inside is totally different to the person I see outside. Inside I think I am *quite beautiful* but outside, you know, you look at pictures of yourself and you think, “*Oh my God, how could you let yourself get that fat*”, and that’s really what I see. When I look at pictures of myself, I recognize the face but I don’t recognize the person.

Madeline values her inner self and narrates weight gain as neglecting self-care, referencing the colloquialism of “letting yourself go” in regard to attractiveness and health. While her language reflects an understanding of personal responsibility for weight gain, Madeline’s focal expression is her feelings of loss associated with no longer recognizing herself in physical form, as opposed to guilt or blame. In their own way, each of the women express desire for greater consonance or wholeness between the body and self, and the necessity for a change in embodied subjectivity to realize this desire.

Murray (2016) contended that a prevailing view in women’s accounts of embodiment, whether they identify as “fat” or not, is to regard the body as an “outer shell” or “container” that houses the self and often acts as a barrier to revealing the “inner” self in lived relation. This view

conceives a duality between body and self, which scholars have argued is ontologically impossible (Budgeon, 2003; Murray, 2016; Reischer & Koo, 2004). Drawing upon Merleau-Ponty's (1994) writings on embodiment, Murray (2016) stated: "We *are* our body. We cannot separate our subjectivity *from* our embodiment, precisely because our subjectivity is always already *embodied*" (p. 6). Dominant discourses about thinness and fatness shape women's understanding of their bodies, encourage tendencies to dissociate from, objectify and scrutinize the body, and valorize imposing the will of the "mind" to reshape the body (Bordo, 2003; Fox, 2017; Grogan, 2017; Murray, 2016; Ogden, 2018). While these messages are harmful, women cannot simply "choose" to accept the body, "freeing" themselves from the influence of sociocultural discourse. The scope of women's bodily experiences and expression is constrained by sociocultural pressures. Our being "rooted" in the world and the intersubjective nature of self-identity inevitably complicate the task of living in and loving a body that does not perfectly "fit" within dominant ideals. Moreover, the notion of having to "overcome" the body as an obstacle is at odds with seeking to embody and experience the body in positive ways (Murray, 2016).

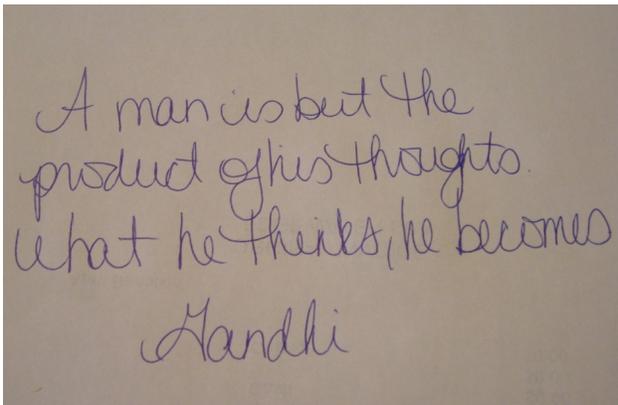


Figure 4.8 Denise – *This is Not Me, Having Confidence*

The theme of Body as Obstacle begins to capture the tensions about embodiment as lived: the uncertain, dynamic and unfinished quality of women's relations between body and self in relation to weight concerns. Without diminishing the struggle inherent to the Body as Obstacle, I have pointed to the co-occurring narrative of resilience, including

descriptions of striving to uncover and put forth a best self and hopefulness in the possibility of a future where the body-self could be enhanced. The next superordinate theme, Embracing Yourself, specifically explores the women's efforts to look upon themselves and their bodies differently and foster healthier embodiment, which supports deconstructing the body as an obstacle in ways that they can.

4.4 Embracing Yourself

The word "embrace" was chosen to represent this thematic cluster for its positive and uplifting connotation of affection, closeness, eager support and acceptance. Embracing Yourself

speaks to developing self-understanding, self-compassion and self-acceptance, becoming more comfortable with “me”, and recognizing beauty, worth, and strengths in oneself. Denise, for instance, speaks about learning to “see the beauty of me” and “work on confidence”. She pictures the words of Gandhi in her own handwriting (Figure 4.8) to show self-confidence as “not me” but “becoming me” and asks herself: “If I do not think confidently about myself, then how can I ever *feel* genuinely confident?”. Denise recalls periods of feeling tangled in the belief that physical beauty is the key to happiness. This occurred in our interview as she expressed conflicting interpretations of the famous comment by Audrey Hepburn, “I believe that happy girls are the prettiest girls”, written on the wall of the spa where she works (Figure 4.9).

The pretty girls are the happy girls, you know if I aspire to be beautiful, to be one of the pretty girls, then I would be happy – it’s like <frustrated> really I believe that happy girls are the prettiest girls, you know, the last line of one stupid quote just sticks in my head and it’s just like argh <sigh>.

Denise initially considers being pretty as leading to happiness and then, becoming frustrated, pivots to the interpretation that she aspires to adopt, namely that being happy makes someone



Figure 4.9 Denise - *Me I Aspire to Be, Beauty & Happiness Entangled*

beautiful. Other women contemplate the value of inner versus outer beauty and narrate a shift of focus towards developing happiness from within. The meaning of embodiment expressed by Embracing Yourself contrasts the Body as Obstacle, reflecting the women’s engagement in a process of (re)constructing lived relation between body and self. The narrative

reconstruction described herein is keeping with the growing corpus of research on positive body-image (e.g., Webb et al., 2015; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010) and the Health at Every Size (HAES) movement (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Tylka et al., 2014).

4.4.1 Balanced Self-view

Each of the women describe an effortful endeavor to broaden her gaze or outlook on the herself, to intentionally draw attention to their strengths and consider them in balance with perceived weaknesses. Adopting a balanced self-view is important towards appreciating and understanding the self as a whole and embracing the self in the body, regardless of its physical

shape/size or ways you may wish to change the same. Using the symbol of a hand-drawn circle (Figure 4.10), Denise contrasts the ideals of “being whole” versus “size zero” in her life. She describes trying to deemphasize the goal of having a “perfect” body, to be that “size zero”, and focus on a healthier goal of being a whole, well-rounded person. Considering the definition and

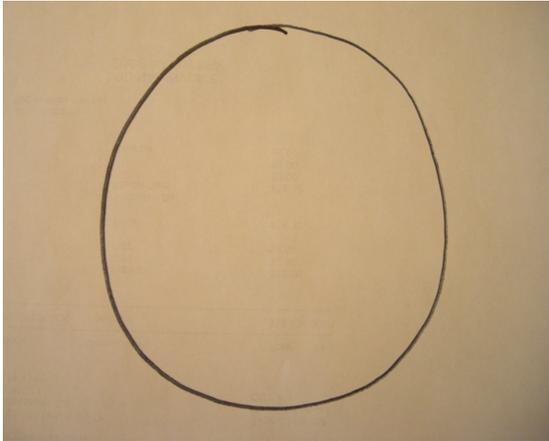


Figure 4.10 Denise - *Me I Aspire to Be, Size 0 vs. Whole*

synonyms for the word “whole”, we find the following: complete, containing all components, integrity, unified, harmonious, restored, healed, not divided or disjoined. This is the meaning Denise captures about the “whole” self. There is a fullness and prosperity to her notion of “being whole” as opposed to the notion of “size zero”, which Denise has come to associate with a felt sense of emptiness and dissatisfaction. Within the narratives, a balanced self-view is seen as developing stronger connection to the best parts of “being you”, fostering self- and body-acceptance, and a compassionate manner of working with yourself through challenge. Denise finds an inner calm and strength in taking a broad view of herself, as opposed to feeling overrun or brought down by self-criticism. She finds herself less reactive to evaluation from others and able to take a compliment from this viewpoint. Denise also connected a balanced self-view to setting healthier goals.

The women regard self-compassion as essential to building and upholding a positive relation to the self. Being self-compassionate means holding self-esteem in balance with a constructive, self-enhancing kind of criticism. In Ivana’s story, developing self-compassion means focusing on herself in the present and strengths she possesses, as opposed to ideals of who she “should” be. Embracing herself is to recognize both personal strengths and weaknesses, reconceptualizing them as “areas for improvement” rather than permanent stains. It takes self-compassion to let go of insecurity and move towards self-acceptance, confidence, and assertiveness. Ivana is on the path, trying to gain understanding of her past, of herself, and let go of what is keeping her stuck.

I hold myself back. I really do hold myself back. I judge myself so much and part of that too I think is the fear of failure, that I’m so scared of <sigh> – I’m probably using it [the weight] as an excuse in some ways. I think that I use it to

not let myself go forward, that if it's still there then that's an excuse. Well you know to go out and design something or to be something, who would want to have a creative mind that looks like me so why bother. If I did something and it didn't succeed well it's probably because of the way I look, so I'm using that too as somewhat of a deterrent to keep myself from doing it.

For Ivana, self-compassion relates to a shift from self-punitiveness to self-encouragement about weight-loss. Self-compassion and self-worth are inextricably linked in the women's narratives. Seeing yourself as worthy inevitably changes the way you relate to yourself and others. It makes the vulnerability of revealing yourself more possible and facilitates recovery if things do not go as hoped in "putting yourself out there", as Ivana says.

Several of the women talked about extending their self-view beyond the body. For instance, Ivana wants to see and reveal herself as "more than" and "not just a fat girl". This aspiration calls her to resist internalization of overweight prejudice, to stop devaluing herself, feeling insecure and imposing restraints on her self-expression because her body is "plus size". Gigi, Madeline, and Sally similarly express that a balanced self-view and practicing self-compassion means resisting negative conceptions of their body, about how it looks and what it can or cannot do, which can overrun and circumscribe selfhood. Reminiscent of the adage to "not judge a book by its cover", Sally describes looking beyond outward appearances not only with herself, but also others and the world around her. She actively draws attention to "the good" and "the beauty" in everyday things, as reflected in her "this is me" photographs (Figure 4.11).



Figure 4.11 Sally - This is Me, Seeing Beauty

Along these lines, Sarah comments that "life's too short" to remain dissatisfied. She talks about "creating the best life you can with what you *have*" through gratitude and living for the present.

Maintaining faith and optimism is important to Madeline's way of being in the world. She is motivated to realize the change she is craving. And, with this motivation, Madeline consider how a realistic view of herself serves to deconstruct unhealthy or self-destructive patterns and not stagnate. She describes reflecting on where she has come from and what she has "become", crediting herself for gains made and shows of strength. Madeline relates that faith and



Figure 4.12 Madeline - *Me I Aspire to Be, Growing & Maturing*

optimism supports embracing her assets without being blind to nor being preoccupied with areas for self-improvement, such as her bodily appearance. Madeline envisions her-self as naturally unfolding and flourishing through time and experience, not unlike a tree that peaks with age (Figure 4.12). This view represents a compassionate and optimistic experience of self-development. Like Sally, Madeline describes how beauty can be found in

something unremarkable or even “broken” in nature for “it can grow again”; desire for personal change or improvement does not minimize the good that she already possesses.

Gigi speaks of trying to “get back to an optimistic me”, to recover or reinstate this lost aspect of self. In her narrative, experiences of hardship, disappointment, and struggling against constraints of the “party line” or dominant agenda have added up to feeling pessimistic, jaded, “worn down”, and dulled. However, she tries to counter this effect and resume a position of greater positivity and efficacy. A major part of reconnecting to the “optimistic me” is how Gigi perceives her own capacity to cope. Within her photo collection, Gigi refers to the proverbial phrase “is the glass half-empty or half-full?” with images taken from both perspectives (Figure 4.13). She uses these images to make the point that we do not see ourselves and our lives in



Figure 4.13 Gigi - *This is Me, Glass Half-empty vs Me I Aspire to Be, Glass Half-full*

purely objective terms. What we see has a lot to do with how we see. Gigi describes a “glass half-empty” frame of mind as a fallback; however, she is striving to “turn myself around”, as she says, to adopt the glass half-full perspective that will be healthier and more enhancing for her. Trying to be more optimistic is part of a broader philosophy of “whole living”, as Gigi terms it, meaning to look at all aspects of what constitutes her healthy self instead of fixating on struggles with her weight. Gigi elucidates how this change of perspective is necessary to realize her best self because it impacts feelings of personal control and self-efficacy about coping with problems.

Across the women’s stories, embracing the whole self and being self-compassionate promotes being embodied. These qualities of subjectivity also facilitate contentment with one’s physical appearance and taking action to care for and enhance oneself, even when this means going against convention or re-conceptualizing common practice such as weight-loss dieting. Research has demonstrated that a holistic model of self can help individuals to filter information about the body (e.g., commentary, media ideals) in a protective manner, which promotes appreciation and acceptance of the body as well as healthy behaviours of self-care and nurturance (Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

4.4.2 Bolstering Self-worth

Within this movement to adopt a more balanced and compassionate stance on the self, the women clarified specific efforts to bolster self-worth. It is common to use terms like self-worth, self-esteem, and self-confidence interchangeably and, indeed, all three terms are represented in the women’s accounts. However, self-worth appeared most central to the women’s accounts of Embracing Yourself. To possess self-worth is to have a sense of one’s own inherent value as a person. Self-esteem focuses on what we think, feel, and/or believe about ourselves and abilities. Confidence is related to action. It is a feeling of self-assurance and self-reliance that arises from appreciation of and trust in personal ability. Comparatively, self-worth represents a deep understanding or foundational knowledge about personhood.

Denise talks of “embracing the beauty of me” by refocusing on nurturing intrinsic happiness and contentment over seeking external approval. To construct the healthier, more positive relationship with herself is likened to erecting a building with a strong foundation, as underpinning her way of being, feeling, and acting in the world. Denise believes this foundation is key to feeling more secure and stable in everyday life. She recalls a shaky sense of self-confidence that comes only in “fleeting moments” and states how she would like to get to a place

where confidence is “just part of who I am”. Though she uses the word “confidence”, Denise’s speaks more aptly to the strength or resolves that comes from a solid sense of self-worth.

Sally stories a meaningful connection between self-worth and embodying the authentic self she wants to be, particularly in her interpersonal relationships. Her narrative illuminates how feeling that you have to hide or manage parts of yourself – your feelings, thoughts, ideas, or interests – to gain other’s approval is bound to rouse self-criticism, as if those parts of you are somehow unlikable or not good enough to show. And, in a cyclical pattern, to alter or couch who you are with others, in turn, reinforces negative thoughts and feelings about the “true self”. Sally states how it feels liberating when she does not have to “try so hard” and can just be herself. Sally’s difficult break-up of a romantic relationship precipitates recognition of the need to work on valuing herself and challenging insecurities, so that she can carry herself with self-assurance.

There was kind of a shift about 3 weeks to a month ago in which I just kind of decided that okay, enough is enough, time to focus on something else I guess. Focus not on him and what he’s doing, but how about what I’m doing. I just kind of forgot about myself and oh god I hope I don’t cry <chuckles back tears>... spending so much time on wondering what was wrong with him and what he didn’t see in me <voice cracking> that I kind of forgot to look at what I see in me.

Building healthy self-worth based upon self-knowledge, rather than ideals or expectations others may have for her, is also important to Sally’s thoughts and endeavors regarding future career and family aspirations.

Highlighting personal strengths and capabilities appeared to be a significant way of bolstering self-worth. The women recounted how quick they are to identify perceived flaws or failures in contrast to the active work needed to see the positives about “being me”, their valuable qualities, strengths, and accomplishments. Ivana makes an effort to shine a light inward to uncover strengths and ambitions. In this process, she narrates a discovery of unrealized potential “inside me” that she has “not allowed” herself to reveal to the world due to insecurity. She longs to show herself in full light and put herself “out there” by pursuing passions for fashion and design. She makes statements like “don’t underestimate me” and “I have more surprises inside me than you’ve seen yet”. Though Ivana wants to remain a big-hearted, reliable, and compassionate support for others, she is no longer willing to sacrifice herself in the service

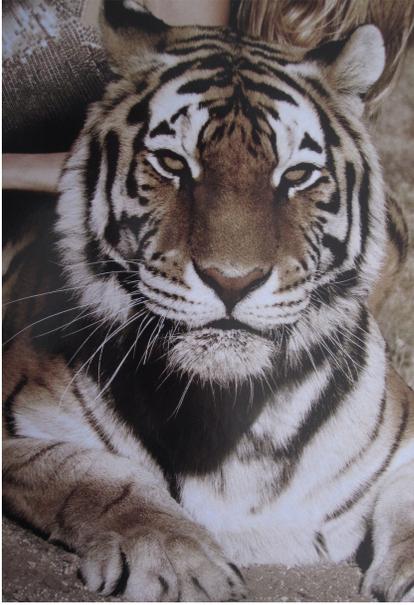


Figure 4.14 Ivana - This is Me, Inner Fierceness

of others' needs. Ivana includes a tiger in her photos (Figure 4.14) as a symbol of the inner fierceness she is becoming intimate with and the elegant, chic outer image she wants to showcase. Like a tiger, Ivana also perceives herself as having an outer image of docility such that people may not expect her to be full of "surprises" or hidden potentials, and capable of assertiveness.

People see tigers as you know kind of *sweet* and they just want to cuddle them and you know it'd be nice to have them as a pet and yet really there's a lot more going on inside than people know and I feel *that's how I am*. People don't realize what's inside. There's a lot of *ferociousness*.

Ivana believes that learning to relate to herself in a consistently self-affirming manner will enhance her ability to act on her needs and ambitions. Ivana's use of the word "surprises" in our interview contained a remarkably buoyant and spirited quality; with an excited tone and sparkle in her eyes, she expressed optimism for future growth if she keeps bolstering herself.

There is an essential resilience to healthy self-worth in Madeline's narrative. She describes how knowledge of self-worth has buttressed her through difficult times and offered



Figure 4.15 Madeline - Me I Aspire to Be, Blooming Lily

stability in relations with others who have tried to undermine her. Madeline employs several metaphors to show this robustness. She captures the "simple yet strong" stargazer lily (Figure 4.15); while not complicated or elaborate, this flower is powerful, has substance and character. It has an understated beauty that is "uniquely mine". There is similar meaning in Madeline's dragonfly photo (Figure 4.2) as well as her description a photo of a stucco wall that she

wanted to include in her collection but could not take.

It was boring <sing song tone> that's all it was, a stucco wall. But when you look at the intricacies – to me I feel *that's the way I am*. On the outside if you

just take a glance at me you'd think *'how boring'* and I think that could be said of a lot of people, but when you get to know them, get to look at the little cracks and the little swirls, you realize that there's *a whole lot more* to them.



Figure 4.16 Madeline - This is Me, Ducks Swimming Upriver

With these images, Madeline represent herself as a woman of substance and states that being overweight does not diminish her value, even if others believe it does or struggle to see past it. In this regard, she confronts weight as a barrier to the healthy self. Madeline's capacity to confront threats to self-worth was also revealed in how she

conceptualized the photo exercise. She interprets the "me I aspire to be" category in an interesting way regarding time, explaining how it represents both being and becoming. Her blending of "this is me" and "me I aspire to be" expresses a fluidity of self over time and highlights a positive experience of self-in-motion. Moreover, Madeline contrasts experiences of "dark times" with photos of progression, fortified by self-worth, like the ducks "swimming against the current but still going upriver" (Figure 4.16). Other narratives signified the value of this conception of self as a work-in-progress. For instance, both Sarah and Sally state that it is important for them to recall past instances when they outdid their own or others' expectations to motivate themselves through new challenges. In this way, instances of strength in the past can be drawn upon to bolster the self in the here-and-now.

The message that every individual is beautiful or talented in their own way is common in Western society and yet so is the harsh reality of being measured against others on various attributes, including physical appearance, talent, ability, and success. In this context, it can be hard to truly embrace yourself as you are. Many of the participants talked about appraising self-worth by their own set of standards and what matters to them in the context of intrapersonal and interpersonal relationships. Giving credence to this self-assessment over what society says we should aim to look or be like was affirming of existing and developing capacities, strengths, or talents. This was especially true in the women's stories of evaluating and trying to re-shape themselves according to the thin ideal. Previous research has shown that adopting a self-compassionate stance promotes feelings of self-worth that are not contingent upon appearance,



Figure 4.17 Sally - This is Me, Creative Thinker

narratives and photos. In describing herself, Sally emphasizes her strengths of being hard-working, intelligent, and creative. She regards her clever sense of humor, wit, and “outside-the-box” thinking style (Figure 4.17) as making her stand out in a crowd. Sally includes an image of her cat (Figure 4.18) in her “this is me” photos because she relates to his unique character. He is a polydactyl cat, a rare genetic mutation that gives him extra toes on his front paws.



Figure 4.18 Sally - This is Me, Poly the Cat

an adorable and “unique” aspect of her feline friend. She even names him “Poly” in honor of it. Sally wishes that other people would similarly appreciate her unique character.

The need to buttress one’s own viewpoint on beauty and worth echoed across the women’s narratives. Denise shares a photograph of the tattoo on her torso (Figure 4.19) that communicates this meaning.

I have a huge, big green eye with big, long lashes because that’s how I see myself. I’ve got big, green eyes and big, dark, long lashes and instead of a pupil I have a Chinese symbol for beauty. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder because no two people will ever see the same thing – what’s beautiful to one is not to another and that to me is so important.

reduces body-related shame, and supports a view of being imperfect as a condition of being human (Duarte & Pinto-Gouveia, 2017; Homan & Tylka 2015; Liss & Erchull, 2015).

The significance of learning to embrace those qualities, features, and quirks that are uniquely “me” was communicated in the women’s

It’s kind of a unique characteristic because you don’t encounter too many polydactyl cats. They’re a very rare breed of genetic mutation. I like that he’s unique. I think that’s one of the things that I like most about him, that it looks like he’s running around wearing oven mitts <chuckling>.

Though some might consider it a “defect”, Sally regards the extra digits as

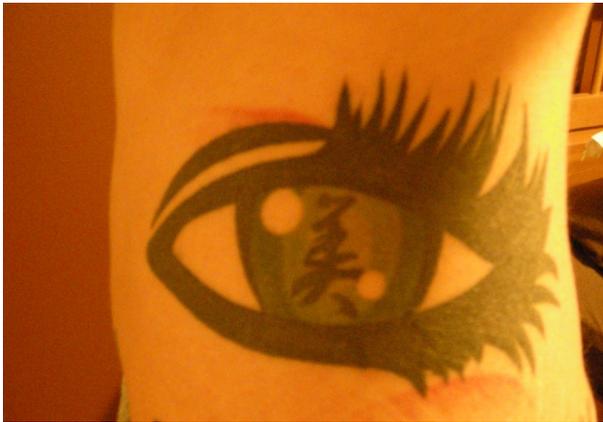


Figure 4.19 Denise - *This is Me, Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder*

open-minded, seeing things from a “writer’s eye”, pursuing creative projects, being “a romantic”, putting effort into her appearance and fitness, and being an “on-the-go” career woman as well as devoted wife, mother, and friend. Denise states how these qualities need to be tied to success and worth in her mind as much as being pretty or thin. By focusing on the whole self, Denise can feel good about various activities, roles, and talents that define and express “me”.

Regarding overweight stigma, Gigi states that although media and health-medical contexts overtly and subtly promote messages that people who are obese or overweight are “totally ugly” and “not worthwhile”, she believes “we still are okay”. In her narrative, she



Figure 4.20 Gigi - *This is Me, Gourd*

contrasts notions of permissible and acceptable versus inferior or flawed related to weight/shape. Looking at such associations, Gigi comments “it’s no wonder” that self-worth becomes wrapped up in bodily appearance. She photographs a gourd (Figure 4.20) to signify that a bigger, curvy body shape can be “intriguing” and “still very beautiful”. Using positive descriptors like “voluptuous” and “feminine” to describe the

gourd, Gigi conveys how a bigger person can draw attention and be provocative in a good way as not merely subject to the “critical gaze”. The gourd symbolizes appreciating beauty in a diverse range of bodies, which is in keeping with the HAES movement (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014;

With this choice of tattoo and bringing it into her narrative, Denise expresses her endeavor to set aside external or social pressures to prioritize her inner experience in self-evaluation. Moreover, Denise states how it is not one facet or quality but being a uniquely composed person that makes up the “me” that is special or remarkable. She shared a range of qualities and activities that she consider self-defining, including being

“voluptuous” and “feminine” to describe the

Kater, 2012). Ivana adds to this discussion with her “this is me” image (Figure 4.21), featuring the statue of a dancing female form that is prominently displayed in her living room. This statue, which Ivana lovingly refers to as “my girl”, expresses important meaning about resisting overweight prejudice to “reach” out and become who she wants to be.



Figure 4.21 Ivana - *This is Me, Dancing Girl*

My girl...she’s got the little tiny torso with the arms outstretched and the huge hips and again I felt it was like me. She’s dancing and yet the inside me is dancing. I love to dance but I’m holding myself back, so maybe that’s the one foot rooted in the statue and the other one is sort of doing the pirouette. Her arms are outstretched and she’s trying to reach, she’s bold and glossy, she’s out there but still rooted and that’s me. [...] When I first saw it, I thought “ah no it’s a fat girl” and then I looked at it I thought “No it’s not. It has much more than that”...yeah I love her.

The affection that Ivana warmly shares for her dancing girl meaningfully reflects her own need for self-love, regardless of her physical appearance. Ivana challenges herself to move beyond long held limits associated with being in a bigger body. Further, she believes that her efforts to lose weight will actually be more successful when undertaken

from this self-compassionate and empowering position. In this respect, weight-loss itself seems secondary to the development of a positive body-self relation.

4.4.3 Getting Comfortable in Your Body

Although the women in this study recognize that they alone cannot bring about radical, expedient change in the meaning ascribed to fatness and thinness in Western society, the idea of getting comfortable in the body emerges as a kind of challenging discourse and way of re-conceptualizing their own experience. The notion of getting comfortable is presented as a healthier, self-promoting alternative to discomfort and dissonance in the body. Sarah directly captioned the phrase “comfortable in your body”, illuminating its significance in the other accounts. In her view, an embodied state of comfort with/within your body is learned and developed. The word “comfort” speaks to an ease and freedom from both physical and psychological pain. Key contrasts Sarah makes to clarify this notion include: the body as subjectively enjoyed versus objectified, and as criticized versus cared for. Comfort with the body

and self are entwined; as the body becomes more acceptable and lived in, it becomes less of a barrier to feeling good about oneself in general. This understanding is consistent with the account of the body as lived in versus objectified given by feminist scholars (e.g., Blood, 2005; Del Busso & Reavey, 2013). Sarah explains that while there are aspects she desires to improve about her physique, such as reducing her percentage body fat, this position of living *in* her body, *enjoying* what it can do, and *caring* for it, permits greater contentment and empowerment.

To Sarah, being more comfortable in her body is equated with stability, more steadfast confidence, and freedom from anxiety about how her body is perceived. If she had less body fat, Sarah says, “I think I wouldn’t have to worry” about the fit of clothes, exercising, or food choices to the same degree. But then she questions the need to worry in the first place in reflecting on body image concerns as normalized, something “everyone” experiences even if



Figure 4.22 Gigi - *Me I Aspire to Be*, Size 10

they do not look big or overweight. Sarah talks about freeing her embodied self by authorizing comfort, trusting in her subjective sense of embodiment, and choosing not to evaluate or worry about her body. This sentiment was repeated in other narratives, suggesting that an actual change of physique may be less critical to getting comfortable in the body than one’s attitude.

Gigi’s account of comfort emphasizes a body that does not inhibit well-being. Her account illuminates certain realities in Western society that complicate comfort in the overweight body and how being overweight can lead to health problems for some people. She also emphasizes the health value of alleviating psychological conflict between body and self, at whatever size/shape you are. She refers to this meaning with images of the gourd (Figure 4.20) and a rack of size 10 jeans (Figure 4.22). A significant step toward reducing such conflict is to set her own parameters on what kind of body is acceptable and ideal for health. Gigi highlights Size 10 as a goal for being comfortable in *her* body, even though this size may not be adequate or acceptable by societal ideals of thinness.

I really don’t need to be a size 2. I’d be *quite happy* with being a size 10. I’d be happier than a clam with that. I think I could find a bra off a rack, I could just have a piece of pie, I could have my life back, I could be healed. I don’t care

that the media thinks I'm ugly in a size 10, I don't care that they think I'm fat in a size 10, I don't care. I could nurture myself and be quite satisfied and content in a size 10.

For Ivana, getting comfortable is to expand the boundaries of her embodied self. She pictures the caption “Embrace Your Curves” in her “me I aspire to be” photos, (Figure 4.23) to express this idea.



Figure 4.23 Ivana - Me I Aspire to Be, Embrace Curves

I could take out the “curves” and say just “embrace me”, embrace who I am and what I am and I do have qualities that I do love and I do feel are good [...] but the curves I still haven't. But wherever I may end up and I don't have a size, I don't have a weight, but a place where I feel comfortable that I am where I want to be, that I can sort of wear what I want to wear and feel comfortable in that skin, wherever that skin is...that I'm happy.

In this excerpt, Ivana describes dieting in pursuit of a body that is the “right fit” for her-self, that alleviates complexity and angst in her life, and from which she can feel confident to pursue her goals. Ivana associates this optimal body with a feeling of familiarity and consonance – as in ‘I'll know it when I get there’ – rather than defined weight or size. She shares several magazine images of “simple, classic looks” (Figure 4.24) that represent “me I aspire to be”. Beyond the clothing featured, these “looks” represent a feeling of freedom and simplicity about the embodied self that Ivana is seeking.

I'm not asking for a lot. I'm asking for a black tank top, a white shift dress, a sarong, it's simple. I mean we're not talking so skinny that you can see through her. I'm not asking for that you know...but to me that's freedom in just not having to worry, that I can just slip that on and then I can do my thing. And it's not that it's expensive. It's not that I have to shop in any place fancy. It's simple. I don't want to be cluttered with extra clothing and have to worry about it. I want it to be simple, classic and plain, that's what I want to be able to do.

Reviewing the history of plus-size fashion, Ellison (2020) asserted that clothes have never been just clothes; women of all sizes want to find clothing that reflects their personality and style. As such, the emergence of “plus-size retailing offered many women opportunity to bring their visible identity in line with their ‘true’ selves” (p. 16). Nonetheless, plus-size fashions have been



Figure 4.24 Ivana - *Me I Aspire to Be, Classic Fashion*

criticized for designing clothes to conceal the body, offering limited and outdated styles (Bishop et al., 2018), and using inferior fabrics (Ellison, 2020), all of which reinforce stigma. Fat activists have lobbied to eliminate the stigmatizing “plus-size” label altogether (Bishop et al., 2018).

The attitude of size acceptance, strongly advocated by fat activists, has been associated with positive health benefits, including increased self-esteem and helping women to break out of unhealthy cycles of dieting; however, fully embracing this attitude in the context of powerful discourse and realities about thinness is dilemmatic (Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Fox, 2017; Murray, 2016). Bishop and colleagues (2018) examined how clothing size categories function as “floating signifiers” of self-identity; they found that women’s narratives about navigating embodiment on the border between plus- and standard-size fashion were constructed around claiming access to conformity and body-acceptance. Placing Ivana’s ambivalence about fashioning and expressing herself in her body within this wider context is illuminating. Ivana experiences conflict between size acceptance and continuing to diet in pursuit of what it could mean for her to cross the boundary from “plus-size” into “standard-size”. She wants to “embrace her curves” and live comfortably within her body; but, at the same time, struggles to reconcile this attitude with pressures toward thinness, especially when her body becomes an imposition to fitting into the fashionable clothes that she so desires. Ivana’s concept of pursuing a body that is the “right fit” for her constitutes a kind of truce or compassionate middle-ground.

The sense of internal judgment and continual negative evaluation that Denise has experienced in seeking out perfectionistic ideals has similarly disrupted her embodiment. Denise

voices a desire for harmony between body-image and her sense of self, for these two concepts to come together in her mind as opposed to being in a state of tension. This is also captured by her reference to “wholeness” with her image of a hand-drawn circle (Figure 4.10). Denise equates body-self harmony to a dyad living peaceably with one another.

I hope that maybe someday I can have that healthy, where the outside and the inside maybe aren't equal – well they're not 100% friends but they have an understanding of each other where they can live happily together, where there's some level ground for both of them.

Peaceable co-existence means that the two sides can call a truce in conflict, like when Denise feels “caught” on physical features she dislikes, so that she can step back to appreciate her whole self. This relation is only possible, she says, with a healthy body ideal that supports balanced concern for aesthetics and health, body-appreciation, and body management under the condition of self-care.

Sarah and Sally talk about purposely shifting their gaze away from aspects of their bodies they feel dissatisfied with to embrace a broader, lived sense of body functioning. Instead of “getting stuck” on physical flaws or limitations, Sally tries to focus on her body's capabilities – “what it can do” – regardless of its size. This cultivates positive embodiment by counterbalancing dissatisfactions about being overweight and deconstructing stereotypes of bigger bodies as unfit, incapable, or weak.

Running over the past few weeks, that's been kind of *liberating* in an odd sense because it's “hey, I'm overweight but I can run”. People are sometimes surprised to find out that I've been doing yoga for seven years and that I can do a headstand because I'm not the girl who works at Lululemon. I'm, you know, an overweight woman who can *do a headstand* and I think that's kind of cool and so I try to look at what it *can do* instead of what it *can't do*. Sometimes I get really stuck on what it can't do, like I don't know something really vain like not wear a bikini but that's just kind of a teensy tiny part of it and it's not really worth wasting time on.

Sarah speaks passionately about ways that pole dancing has taught her to appreciate her embodied self as capable, active and strong. She captures this feeling in a photograph of herself performing the difficult “flag” pose (Figure 4.25). Sarah emphasizes how pole dancing unexpectedly “changed me” by reconnecting to her body and the freedom of embodied physical movement and expression.

Some people would think that's funny because it's like “oh pole dancing, how can that like change your life”, BUT IT DOES – it's a huge like strength component and you know the fitness aspect of it too, but *the way* it can make

some people *feel* and just kind of you know teach you how to you know *drop* all that stuff that you might be thinking about like your ego voice in your head that, as they say. And just kind of you know *embrace who you are* and what you look like, so I think that's important.



Figure 4.25 Sarah - This is Me, Pole Dancing

Sally and Sarah illuminate the meaning attuned with your body and active embodiment. Sally comes to the realization that if she does not want others to underestimate or pre-judge her based on her body, she must embrace and embolden her embodied self. She comes to this realization in the experience of running. Sarah contrasts active embodiment with the unreasonable tendency to critically dissect

or pick apart the body. Like Sally, Sarah describes seeing body fat as one aspect of her physical appearance that she wants to change, but not allowing this “flaw” to obscure her whole self. A focus on functionality seems to offer Sally and Sarah protection and hardiness to resist being narrowly defined by body dissatisfaction.

Studies have demonstrated health benefits of adopting a positive orientation to body functionality. Body functionality focuses on the “body as *process*”, encompassing what the body has capacity to do in relation to physical activity, health, internal and sensory processes, creative endeavors, self-care, and even communication. Exercising for functionality-related reasons, such as improved health, promotes greater well-being than exercising for appearance-based reasons, such as weight-loss (Alleva et al., 2015). Qualitative findings on women’s embodiment revealed contrasting experiences of the body as surface versus the moving embodied self, the latter of which was associated with greater agency (Del Busso & Reavey, 2010) In the context of exercise, qualitative findings have illuminated the experience of body-compassion related to appreciating one’s unique body and respecting its limits, taking ownership of the body by understanding its needs and caring for well-being, and focusing on the self as a point of reference instead of social comparison (Berry et al., 2010). Research has also offered support for embodying activities, such as yoga (Mahlo & Tiggemann, 2016) and belly dancing (Tiggemann

et al., 2014), in the development of positive body-image, not unlike Sally's experience with running or Sarah's account of pole dance.

Drawing a connection between comfort in the body and self-care, Madeline emphasizes nourishing a healthy body *for you*, that supports *your* well-being, setting aside external or prescribed ideals (e.g., body mass index). "Nourishment", she says, is respecting and giving her body what it really needs. Sometimes achieving this aim means exercising self-discipline, albeit from an internal impetus or locus of control; for example, exercising even when part of you feels unmotivated or choosing to eat nourishing foods first when craving less healthy alternatives because you want to care for your body. The framework of Embracing Yourself supports actions and choices to care for physical vitality and health.

The process of reconsidering "inside" and "outside" aspects of the self-illuminated herein has been discussed by previous researchers as a kind of ideological shift. Exploring the meaning of changing bodies for women at mid-life transition (age 37-47 years), Ogle and Damhorst (2005) revealed how an accretion of experiences led participants to question dominant societal ideals about the body and, in so doing, re-prioritize inner qualities and capabilities over appearance in their self-views and health over beauty in assessing their bodies. The authors denoted this ideological shift as a process of adapting societal meaning structures for personal relevance to the women's own lives and leading to greater body-acceptance and -esteem in their sample. This description resembles the meaning of Embracing Yourself. Interestingly, the participants in the present sample represent a wider age span (age 26-55 years) than Ogle and Damhorst's sample. The women in the present study also invoked a more wholistic conception of self, bringing inside and outside together or in-balance, over the strong dualistic conception that these authors described.

In my graphic representation of themes (Figure 4.1), bidirectional arrows illustrate how the meaning about Embracing Yourself flows into and out of the next two thematic clusters that I will discuss. To realize their best self, the women narrate how it is also necessary to discover and embrace their embodied selves. A healthy self-knowledge and self-worth provide a place from which to reach out and embody strengths and capacities in the world. And, acting towards their best potential reaffirms a positive sense of self. In this way, the meaning of Embracing Yourself is supportive to activities involved in Creating Your Best Self.

4.5 Process of Creating Your Best Self

This super-ordinate theme captures the positive movement of striving towards a best self that was voiced across the narratives. The women spoke of trying to optimize, enhance or

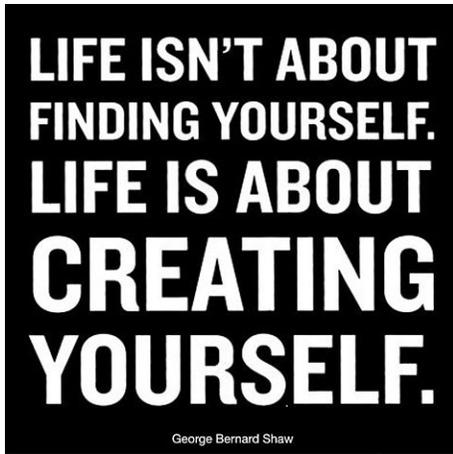


Figure 4.26 Sarah - *This is Me & Me I Aspire to Be, Creating Yourself*

improve themselves in various ways, including their physical health and/or fitness, learning to value self and body, taking better care of their needs, realizing inner potentials or aspirations, and putting their best foot forward. In this regard, the self is constructed as dynamic and developing over time and through experience. At the same time, each woman narrated a sense of unity in her knowledge of self in the here-and-now. Moreover, although the self is acknowledged as naturally developing over time, working on the self and

making the most of circumstances was also central to this cluster. The women narrative themselves as agentic in creating their best selves. I have aimed to reflect this agency in the action-based language used to describe my thematic findings.

The word “creating”, specifically chosen for this cluster, emerged first in Sarah’s narrative. To communicate her experience of self-development, Sarah photographed a quote from George Bernard Shaw (Figure 4.26). This quote represents her belief that people get what they want out of life and reach their goals by a process of active engagement, not by sitting back. Sarah talks about reflecting on values and aspirations she wants to live by and willingness to “get uncomfortable” in the spirit of seizing growth opportunities.

For so many years I think I was fairly *self-conscious* – I wasn’t outgoing, I didn’t really try many new things, but since I kind of *found it* [pole dancing] and made new friends and – you know it kind of *changed part of me* or made me kind of *find part of me* or *created a part of me* I think that kind of is significant. [...] *someone that I never had before* <chuckles> you know what I mean, like it’s part of me that I didn’t know existed before.

Her narrative, and selection of this particular quote, reminisces such mottos as “life is what you make of it” or “you are the creator of your own destiny”. Sarah finds optimism in the belief that her actions can create, bring into existence, or cause things to happen in her-self and her life. Interestingly, similar to Madeline’s approach to the photo exercise, Sarah signifies this image as

fitting both “this is me” and “me I aspire to be” groups, illustrating how she too sees the self as fluidly in progress.

Gigi identifies her-self as a “project” that she is pouring energy into, particularly to enhance her physical health and well-being. She is trying to optimize the self within her current context by carving out a lived space wherein she can feel good about herself and her best self can unfold. This process involves resiliently making her way through adversities, restrictive or prejudicial discourse, and trying to optimize her embodied self within limitations, as discussed.

The notion of gradually shaping and optimizing the self as a work-in-progress is reflected in the following imagery Madeline uses to illustrate her best self:

I guess you could say a package that is wrapped up you know not wrapped nicely – it’s not – tape isn’t neat and tidy. Something like a little kid would do in brown paper but you start taking the tape off and you realize there’s layers and layers of brown paper and tape and each one inside is done a little bit neater until you get to the very inside one and it’s a little porcelain figurine of a dancing ballerina...and you realize this little dancing ballerina is perfect...and I mean I know I’m not perfect inside or out but that’s sort of how I view it.

The dancing figurine covered by layers of paper can be interpreted as a hidden potential that Madeline recognizes within herself. Body-self relation is also of focus here. In developing her best self, Madeline endeavors to change her embodied experience through physical weight-loss and addressing psychological barriers around food and body image, both considered “layers” between her present and aspirational self.

For Ivana, working towards her best self is a process of listening and reconnecting to inner qualities and strengths, trying to gain self-understanding and, through successive attempts, put herself “out there” in a more authentic way. The authentic and enhanced sense of selfhood is



Figure 4.27 Ivana - This is Me, Onion

not endpoint, but a continual process of unfolding and (re)establishing oneself in relation to life’s happenings. In our interviews, Ivana questions herself, “Am I living out my best self or being held back by insecurity?” She uses the image of an onion (Figure 4.27) to represent gradually removing or shedding unwanted layers, such as past hurt, resentment and long-held insecurities, to

get to her “core” – to embrace her values and strengths – and then permit herself to show them. This resembles Madeline’s imagery of removing “layers” masking the true self. The concept of best self and revealing inner potentials contains optimism in the women’s stories.

Sally relates meaning about seeking personal fulfillment as she continues to explore and uncover her-self into the future. There is a burgeoning quality to how Sally speaks of her future self, as full of ambition, enterprising, and rising to challenge. The women’s narratives all exemplify the idea of bettering oneself through a process of introspection on feelings, thoughts and motivations, and how experiences have shaped them. Sally stories (re)shaping her view of self in light of relationship strains and pains, as her focus turns toward buttressing *her* voice and affirming the self that *she* wants to personify.

Finally, Denise takes up self-improvement in seeking a healthier way of relating to and embodying the self. Denise wants to see this change happen broadly in her life, in the way she applies herself to her relationships, work, creative writing, as well as her commitment to maintaining a healthy, fit body. She (re)emphasizes pursuing *her* goals to increase her contentment, satisfaction, and wholeness.

4.5.1 Working with Yourself

Five central movements about the Process of Creating Your Best Self emerged in the women’s stories, the first of which was learning to work with (rather than against) yourself. This idea centered around efforts to establish healthier patterns of self-talk and reconceptualize motives and actions towards personal change in an optimistic way. To work with yourself means actively challenging self-criticism and internalization of unhealthy messages or weight stigma that may threaten you. Equally important, working with yourself means being self-encouraging, an ally, and tuning into personal strengths in your efforts to bring the best self to light. Denise explains how she has historically tended to work against herself by listening too much to her inner voice of insecurity and criticism. Denise likens this voice to a “demon”, personified by her as an “ugly”, evil, and persistent tormentor.

Unfortunately, as much as I try to bury it, *it’s always there*. <sigh> Makes me *sad* that you know I just can’t have it go away or change it somehow, so it wasn’t *a demon*. I’m a good person, how can I have something so *ugly* – like *living and like resonating within me*.

She depicts this unwanted aspect of self with an angry, teeth-bearing wooden mask (Figure 4.28). Her imagery references the expression of “inner demons”, something personally struggled

with in the mind and tasked to “face”. Denise is aided by externalizing the critical, insecure voice she experiences from the self. She notes how this demon influences her to take on a “bad mindset



Figure 4.28 Denise - This is Me, Inner Demon

of self-derogation”, telling herself that she is not working hard enough, not perfect enough, or inferior. However, with exploring the pain and ugliness this “demon” causes her, Denise notes that she has come to realize she does not deserve it and seeks relief by striving to reconnect to knowledge of her own self-worth and self-protective instincts (e.g., compassion,

“smart” goals). There is an observable fluidity to Denise’s photo collection in that the “demon”, captured as “me”, is something Denise endeavors to diminish and move to “not me”, as with the ideal of being “perfect” (Figure 4.3).

Sarah gives a similar account of conflict between a positive and critical voice on her body: the critical voice that wants to dissect and scrutinize versus the positive voice that encourages body acceptance and appreciation. In this tension, Sarah actively tries to resist self-criticism and buttress a positive stance. For example, when her critical voice interjects during group pole dance performances, Sarah says:

That voice pops in and you are self-conscious..a little bit because part of you feels like people might be comparing you. But then that other voice comes in and is like “No, that’s not what this is about”. [The critical voice might] say something like “your stomach is too fat” or “your arms are too fat”...but then the other one would jump in and try to squash it <laughs>. They would fight. It would go back and forth.

She imagines the critical voice as a nemesis of sorts, trying to take her down into a place of feeling uncomfortable and self-conscious, where flaws seem magnified and multiplied, discouragement sets in, goals get further away, and experiences she was feeling good about are twisted. However, Sarah emphasizes how she must “let” herself go there. Body insecurity is seen to linger in the back of her mind, not always actively considered, and her lived experience depends on what dialogue she attends to or gives power to take center stage. Sarah resists self-critical thinking by going back to positive views, feelings, or experiences that remind her to

“drop” the criticism, disempower that “one little voice”, and reconnect to confidence and comfort.

The rest of me knows that I’m *not* overweight, I’m not obese, I’m not that at all and I’m *comfortable* but then there’s that other part that comes in once in a while and makes me feel uncomfortable.

It is interesting how both Denise and Sarah personify the side of themselves that becomes self-judging and critical; with this construction, they seem to gain an edge on it or drive a sufficient wedge between the two sides that affords room to nurture the healthier side. This dialogical exchange between different voices or mindsets, a “battle with myself”, has appeared in other research accounts of women’s body image and dieting experience (Deighton-Smith & Bell, 2017; Green et al., 2007; Larkin & Sullivan, 2009). Research accounts of the struggle to give up dieting in favor of size acceptance have also revealed self-dissonance. Within posts on a fat-acceptance blog, women described the urge to diet as a “temptation”, with powerfully attractive promises; despite their intimate knowledge of the pains, perils, and ultimately unsatisfying outcomes of weight-loss dieting, women continued to struggle with disliking their bodies and wanting to be thinner (Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2002). This dilemmatic account recalls comments of Denise, Sarah, and Sally about those slippery times of feeling “caught”, “stuck” or “taken in” by sociocultural ideals of beauty and associated self-critical tendencies.

As an abstract concept, exactly what this “best” version of selfhood entails or looks like may be continually evolving with personal experiences and changes of circumstance or context. However, the optimistic tone surrounding women’s stories of aspirations and self-improvement goals was present only when the women talked of the same as defined by *themselves*; optimism disappears around ideas that the women saw society or others as imposing about the ideal body or self they *should* aspire to. A sense of consonance between goals and values and motivation as self-generated – doing “for me” and not for others or despite “me” – was fundamental to feeling comfortable even as personal change, including body modification, is pursued and to persevering when it is hard. For instance, Gigi describes herself as “dedicated” to working on her weight, activated by care for and commitment to promoting her own health, and doing so with her characteristic intensity as captured in statements like “I’m on 24/7” and “there’s no coffee break in this”. She persists towards the goal, even though it feels arduous, because she truly values her health and because she is in charge of measuring success.

This subtheme also encompasses self-examination in a positive sense; that is, to examine oneself from a constructive position of helping or enhancing, as compared to the harmful and diminishing nature of self-criticism. Madeline captures self-examination as taking an honest yet balanced self-view to deconstruct and move forward from problematic situations or patterns that may be holding her back. She conveys meaning about being responsible to nourish yourself, to cultivate and seek out the substance necessary for personal growth. Madeline explains how, for her, self-enrichment is associated with a feeling of vitality, being in-motion, and meaningfully engaged with her-self; she is not just letting things happen, but reaching toward potential, actively caring for herself, developing a skill, or learning something new. By contrast, not learning or growing is equated with being comatose or unconscious.

I love learning <excited tone>. I'd hate to see the day where I come home and say "Oh, I didn't learn anything today. Was I in a coma?" you know to me learning is important.

Ivana's narrative also illustrates a positive role for self-examination as a means to take back the reins. Ivana is not where she wants to be yet and, rather than passively resign herself, she is trying to optimize her self-image and embody the self she wants to be. Ivana identifies how, like an artist or creator, she is responsible to translate her inner vision into how she lives in the world. She notes that gaining self-understanding through introspection on things past, present, and future has and will continue to help her to exercise agency and actualize towards aspirations.

Sally and Ivana, though at very different stages in life, interestingly both view themselves in the process of actualizing potential. Sally talks about her future self in an up-and-coming manner, seeing herself "on the path" towards where she wants to go. Ivana envisions her best self as coming into existence much like a story unfolds, gradually realized and becoming clearer to others, such as with her image of the onion (Figure 4.27). Both women recognize the need to allow time and compassionately work with themselves to confront tendencies to be self-censoring and overly deferential, which are inhibiting self-progress. Actualizing your best self requires both inward activity of self-discovery and outward activity of making or taking the space needed to unfold. This latter aspect will be elaborated on in the next subtheme.

The women also exemplify self-examination concerning the self they have "become", giving themselves credit for effort, improvements or change already accomplished, strengths shown and developed. Sarah incorporates achievements made into her conception of self. Regarding gains in athleticism, she states "there is muscle underneath there, like you are strong,

you can do certain things”, crediting herself for progress already made towards her goal. Positive self-development is an inevitability if you keep working at it, a matter of “when” not “if”, and more compassionately lived sense of time.

Regarding personal change, the women narratively realign themselves with concepts of optimizing, extending, and strengthening the self as opposed to the more pathologizing frame of remediating or fixing problematic features of the self. Denise contrasts the experience of self-examination and self-criticism as she examines the cost of chasing perfection. She sees how being perfect is, in reality, “ridiculous” and illusory. She reframes improvement as optimizing instead of perfecting; whereas the former conveys an openness, opportunity and exploration, the latter is associated with rigidity, trying to force herself into an impossible mold, and feeling stuck within a flawed self that she is ever-perfecting. The word “optimize” means to make the best or most of, take full advantage, and do what you can to work within limitations. It is a word befitting the atmosphere of being positively stirred, efficacious and compassionate that the women want to create around personal change.

4.5.2 Making Space for Self-development

To develop is to expand or strengthen, aid in growth of, and become more elaborate. Such descriptions of “development” suit the notion of creating your best self. However, to achieve this aim, a space that is conducive to development and supports growth is necessary. The



Figure 4.29 Sally - This is Not Me, Peacock

women’s stories elucidated the meaning of making space in terms of their social location and psychological environment. The stance of working with (rather than against) yourself is one facet of making space for self-development. Other facets include open-mindedness, optimism, healthy challenge and opportunity, redefining “different”, and expressing creativity. I convey how these facets transformed lived space to support development in contrast to a restrictive and languishing sense of lived space.

All the women highlighted open-mindedness and optimism as central to their way of being, noting the benefits of these attitudes to maintaining a balanced outlook on self, world, and others. Sally’s outlook of seeing beauty (Figure

4.11) has the effect of enriching her world, making the things and people in it more colorful and interesting. It fits with her sense of being a creative thinker and open-minded person. About herself, Sally underlines the value of being noticed or commended for reasons of substance and not because she has put herself out there in an ostentatious or fake way (Figure 4.29). At the same time, Sally understands how looking for “the good” can have the effect of minimizing the bad, which has led to some naivety on her part; for example, by giving others the benefit of the doubt only to end up hurt. Here, Sally’s story highlights the importance of a balanced view in a different way; looking for positives in others or the world is not to neglect or disregard the negatives, but to hold these in balance.

Madeline considers open-mindedness to be a character strength and wants to inspire others, by example, to be less prejudicial and more accepting of difference in society. This relates to her work as an Educational Assistant with ethnically diverse populations as well as experiences with overweight prejudice. A valuing of open-mindedness and diversity arises within other narratives, including Denise’s desire to be broadly informed about issues that matter to her or Gigi’s emphasis on seeking out diversity in her social circle, food, activities and travel. Given the resounding awareness and personal experiences of naysayers and prejudice that the



Figure 4.30 Sarah - *Me I Aspire to Be, Healthy Balance*

women shared, it is perhaps not surprising to find them collectively valuing open-mindedness and optimism. These characteristics function to expand lived space and possibility.

Upholding optimism represents a kind of antidote to critical, restrictive spaces of the past. For Gigi, trying to relate to herself more optimistically serves to open possibility and create more momentum than a “glass half-empty” space (Figure 4.13). Sarah adds that, in her experience, holding onto negativity can keep you stuck and focused on things that do not matter in the long run. She strives to be an upbeat person, friendly, easygoing, and light-hearted. Sarah also values a healthy balance (Figure 4.30) between looking to the future and enjoying the present. As an example, Sarah believes goals are a good thing, but considers how even positive goals can turn into unhealthy preoccupations.

I think that a lot of people kind of either *keep going for that goal* that they might never get to or they get to it and then they set a *new one*. They're always *going for it*, but they kind of *miss* a bunch of stuff along the way.

Lived space becomes narrowed if you never stop to smell the roses or savor accomplishment, hold onto grudges, or over-focus on dissatisfactions and flaws. Sarah makes space for herself by focusing holistically on things that matter and finding joy in daily life, seeking experiences that support feeling good, and taking healthy risks to step outside “comfort zones”.

Sally narrates how developing a healthy sense of humor has nurtured optimism. She remarks that learning to laugh and trying not to take herself or what people say to her so seriously has been an important coping mechanism.

I used to take what people said to me very seriously and I don't know if it was just from living on my own for the first time or being around a different group of people – that's kind of when I started to develop my sense of humour which I try to use to my advantage. I find that having a sense of humour now, whereas I didn't six years ago, is something beneficial for sure and is really good for helping me *deal* with really, really crappy things.

As she talks of moving on from negativity, like her painful break-up, and returning focus to her own values and aspirations, Sally's shifts from self-deprecating to buoyant humor. Sally's ability to take the positive slant and use humor to her benefit is evident in her manner of challenging stereotypes. Madeline similarly relies on her faith-spirituality to help her cope. She finds meaning in the beauty of nature, in particular, as a source and symbol of hopefulness, possibility, and gratitude. In both of these cases, a personal strength is used to affect a positive change of space and reposition the self.

Additionally, the women's stories expressed making space by challenging yourself to “get uncomfortable” and, effectively, push the spatial bounds to explore and expand the self into new activities or situations. This notion emerged most plainly within Sarah's account of stepping outside her “comfort zone” to try pole dancing (Figure 4.25). Sarah stresses being open (rather than closed-off) and having courage to be imperfect, make mistakes, or be the “newbie”. Pole dancing was something she wanted to try for a long time but refrained due to feeling inhibited. Trying required putting herself into an uncomfortable and unfamiliar situation which, in the end, opened an unforeseen experience and underdeveloped aspect of her embodied self. Self-optimization is not necessarily to create something new; it may be developing a potential or capacity that is already “inside”, but the self is disconnected from or forgotten how to “do”. This idea relates to Sally developing humor, Denise strengthening confidence, and Gigi recapturing

optimism. Following the inward illumination of Embracing Yourself, the next step on the pathway to self-actualization, as laid out within the women’s stories, is becoming activated and as Denise puts it, “let it out”.

Ivana voices this sense of extending lived space with phrases like, “putting myself out there” and “coming out of my shell”. The image of a “shell” is likened to Sarah’s concept of “comfort zone”; staying in your “shell” is comfortable in its familiarity and sense of protection, yet restrictive in its association with insecurity and inhibition. Ivana’s account speaks to not only embracing yourself but embracing the vulnerability it takes to put yourself “out there”; that is, to reveal inner qualities, strengths, or capacities in an authentic manner so that others may see you. Ivana fears vulnerability but recognizes that choosing to embrace vulnerability is necessary to realize her aspired self. As Sarah previously alluded, stepping into new territory requires room to be imperfect and being bold as opposed to timid. The notion of being bold and “out there” reminds me of how Ivana describes the outstretched, free, and capacious space about her dancing girl statue (Figure 4.21).

During our photo interview, Denise illustrates remaking psychological space as she reflects on images of Victoria Secret model, Alessandra Ambrosio (Figure 4.31), whom she regards as the epitome of a beautiful woman, from opposing positions of self-criticism and self-confidence: (1) as “not me”, Alessandra represents an impossible goal and Denise pales in



Figure 4.31 Denise - This is Not Me vs. Me I Aspire to Be, Beautiful

comparison, and (2) as “me I aspire to be”, Denise regards Alessandra as inspiring recognition and enhancement of her own beauty.

If the confidence is there then you know she [Alessandra] doesn’t have to be so much of a goal or she could still be an inspiration, you know there’s nothing wrong with somebody – you thinking that a woman’s beautiful, but that shouldn’t be what I’m attaining to be because I already am and I can see it.

Gigi illuminates the meaning of restrictive lived space in her experience of growing up in a small, rural farming community in which she felt held back and lacking in options to explore varied ideas, values, and interests to discover who she wanted to be. She captures this landscape as “not me” (Figure 4.32) and, looking at the image, recounts feeling that it did not fit her and, at times, nearly suffocated her.

This represents depression to me. It just says everything other than multiculturalism and diversity – like when people say, “I want to move to an acreage” I just *shriek inside*. I just want to cry. I just want to – *those are not me*. I just – NO. THEY WERE FORCED TO BE ME BY DEFAULT. I was sort of “how did I get there”, I didn’t have a *choice* <frustrated> so maybe that led to a lot of frustration for me as a kid. I tried to make the best of it I guess, and I tried to change things as I became an adult.



Figure 4.32 Gigi - This is Not Me, Rural Landscape

The change of context afforded in moving away to the city as a young adult was necessary to expand her sense of lived space. It gave Gigi opportunity to be exposed to varied ideas, values, and interests that shaped her appreciation for diversity in all things and parts of her-self that previously felt muted, such as her pluckiness, were more acceptable and permitted to develop in a less

restrictive environment. With this story, Gigi sheds light on how when you cannot change what is stifling you, creating your best self can mean relocating to a different environment. In addition to a psychological notion of space, the availability of growth opportunities and healthy interpersonal supports are aspects of the social infrastructure that can hinder or foster self-development. The women pointed to the importance of both past and present figures in their lives, chiefly family and friends, who helped create a safe and secure space for the self. They

also point to experiences of people and spaces that were not supportive to growth and thus staying in their “shells”, at least for a period of time, offered healthy protection.



Figure 4.33 Gigi - This is Me, Spicy

Sally and Gigi show how shifting the discourse that surrounds the self can, in itself, transform lived space. As an adult, when Gigi cannot control or change her context, she now exercises capacity to “make space” for her best self by pushing boundaries. For example, during her working years in a government agency, Gigi often recalls feeling frustrated and thwarted, but refused to simply “tow the party line” when doing so would compromise her values. Gigi conveys a similar tenacity in how she tries to optimize her physical appearance by shopping online from American retailers that offer better-fitting clothing and insisting on standing in photos because she considers it slimming. Sally has historically felt uneasy about “being different” in terms of her bigger body, but readily takes a positive slant in characterizing the originality and quirkiness of her personality, as captured with the scrabble photo (Figure 4.18). Sally says, “I like to think of myself as a colorful person” and feels an aversion to the “rut” of being like everyone else or constrained to a stereotyped self.

Sally and Gigi redefine themselves as “positively unique”, a discourse that reconstructs difference or nonconformity into a strength and creates space for self-expression. Gigi uses the image of a Tabasco bottle (Figure 4.33) to depict her “intense” and “spicy” nature. She



Figure 4.34 Gigi - This is Me, Dulie the Dog

emphasizes how she is “not monochromatic” or subdued, but someone who enjoys “taking things right to the end”, daring and flamboyant. This sense self is reflected in Gigi’s curious worldview, interpersonal style, and what stirs her interest and excitement. Like Sally’s kinship with her cat (Figure 4.18), Gigi relates to her West Highland Terrier, Dulie (Figure 4.34), who is

distinctively small for her breed. Gigi says, “dogs are like their owners” and describes her canine counterpart as feisty, spirited, social, and capable of taking on big dogs. Being “positively unique” provides a kind of niche or safe haven that preserves the value of unique capacities or characteristics and assists both women to persevere on their goals in the face of counter-messages or threats to this positive sense of self.

Creativity also emerges as a niche and key channel for self-expression. Ivana showcases her creativity in her passion for fashion and interior design. Madeline expresses herself through painting, a medium that allows her to connect with her environment, find calm, and become absorbed in thoughts, feelings, and imagination. Sarah describes how pole dancing has allowed her to be creative and experience flow in her body. She also expresses herself through advocacy for animal rights and environmentalism. Writing is a personal “outlet” for Denise and sharing her work with others is an expression of intimacy. Denise also reveals herself in her tattoos (Figure 4.19), regarded as symbolic of her capacity to be bold in expressing beliefs, values, or meaningful experiences on the canvas of her body. In various endeavors like quilting, cooking, and even her approach to travelling, Gigi showcases an innovative, bold, adventurous and gregarious spirit. With creativity, she is not limited by her body and finds a way to express her best self with others, for example by offering them a cuisine they have never tried. Sally’s creativity emerges in her optimistic outlook on the banal, which is notable even in the artistic quality of her photographs (Figure 4.11), as well as her thinking and problem-solving style (Figure 4.17), and sharp sense of humor.

The women use their various character strengths and creativity to carve out and negotiate lived space that supports well-being and personal growth. A healthy sense of self-empowerment is also captured through the women’s narratives of self-expression, taking healthy risks, employing strengths or capacity for advocacy and innovation within lived space and relation.

4.5.3 Empowering Yourself

The capacity to empower or authorize oneself to act is especially important in the face of adversity or limitations that pose a threat to self. There is a mutuality between empowerment and making space in the women’s narratives. Empowerment represents a feeling and way of being that they describe trying to cultivate regarding the embodied self. Ivana characterizes empowerment as believing in herself and having courage. These qualities support acting on healthy ambitions and desires regardless of how others may think or judge. She describes the

converse as losing heart, being afraid, intimidated, and paralyzed. Similarly, Denise describes self-confidence as leading to empowerment. For instance, in areas where Denise feels more confident, like cooking, she can free herself to experiment, stating “eh if it doesn’t turn out, there’s always take-out”. With writing, she encourages herself to just let creativity flow in the spirit of knowing she can always re-write. Denise tries to translate this capacity for empowerment into areas of struggle, recognizing that being flexible and compassionate affords more “room” psychologically and socially and supports self-efficacy.

I’d just be like “*No, you are confident. Go out and conquer the world today*”.
“You’re a smart girl, you’re a pretty girl, you’re happy”, you know, “go forth”.

Like Embracing Yourself, it is notable how Empowering Yourself can deconstruct ways that body image presents as an obstacle (e.g., body comparison or shame). Additionally, the women highlight empowerment in an emboldened sense of self, drawing out an inner courage, hutzpah, or pluckiness that promotes doing the best you can, acting instinctively, and trying to use your strengths to work within external limitations.

Ivana speaks of her wish to unfetter her-self through empowerment. Giving herself permission to let go of self-imposed constraints marks the difference between living a life of cautious adherence versus self-actualization. Within her photographs, Ivana contrasts the present



Figure 4.35 Ivana - *Me I Aspire to Be, Flowing*

self as muted (Figure 4.6) against her aspirational, empowered self, represented by the curvy feminine statue (Figure 4.21) “reaching out” and daring to dance.

Empowerment is associated with freedom of movement and capacity to boldly move into new territory, whilst remaining “rooted” or grounded in your-self. Ivana likewise uses a photograph of a faucet (Figure 4.35) to visualize her empowered self.

To start *flowing*, just let my ideas go, to let those artistic things just start coming out, to let the inside me come out and not be afraid, just to turn it on.

In positive psychology, flow is a concept that reflects the experience of being activated and fully immersed in a feeling of energized focus, involvement, and enjoyment in an activity (Hefferon, 2013). Sarah also references flow with respect to her experience of embodiment in pole dance.

Empowering the self and shedding insecurity are entwined, as Ivana expresses about her dancing girl (Figure 4.21).

She's reaching out for – she's sort of *free*. That the more that she becomes herself, the rest can just go away.

Further, regarding Ivana's collection of shoes (Figure 4.5), empowering herself means to stop looking at the collection with a feeling of wanting and waiting and to *start* wearing them. Ivana

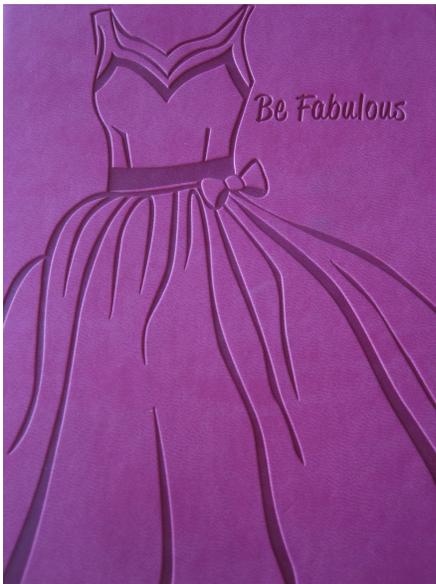


Figure 4.36 Ivana - Me I Aspire to Be, Be Fabulous

expresses this idea within her “me I aspire to be” photos of catch phrases that resonated with her. The first is an image of her journal cover in bold fuchsia, etched with design of a dress and the caption, “Be Fabulous” (Figure 4.36).

Ivana expresses how, in taking up this catch phrase, she would say to herself:

Do what you can. Lose that weight, *you know you can*. Get that artistic feeling out, whether it be designing, whether it be your art, and *do it for you* and whatever comes, comes. Don't do it for anybody else, don't do it for money, don't do it for fame. *Just be fabulous for you!* Be pink, be purple, *be colorful*. *Don't be afraid, don't hold back* <excited>.

The second image features a leather jacket with metal zippers as the backdrop for the caption “Be Bad” in bold lettering (Figure 4.37). Ivana describes how, for her, being bad means to “not be intimidated”, to go out with her girlfriends and “kick up my heels”, be a bit “naughty”, rather than being “the staid” like always. Ivana discloses a conception of transformation in her understanding of letting loose and rebelling against the

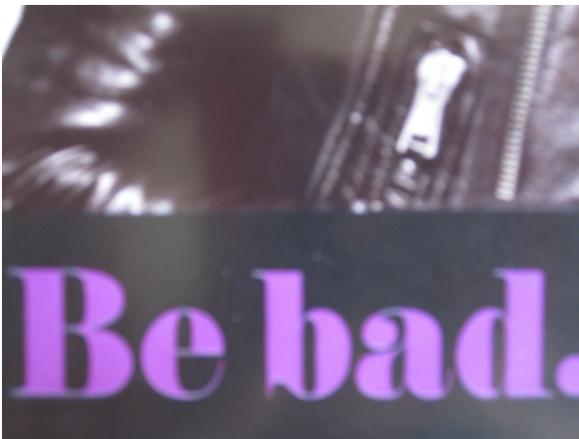


Figure 4.37 Ivana - Me I Aspire to Be, Be Bad

constrained self she has been. And, the moral connotation of good versus bad that this image brings to light is illustrative of a conflict between the self that one should, ought, or is expected to be versus the self you want to be, sought, and fulfilled. Other narrators, like Sally and Gigi, contrast the self as expected versus authentic in relation to tensions between personal and societal ideals.

Madeline also talks of authorizing herself to act on the things that matter to her regardless of her body size. She ponders whether she would feel more empowered to assert herself if she were thinner; however, waiting and holding herself back until then is not consonant-feeling and frustrates her. For example, Madeline recalls her anger in response to a group of thin women in the pool locker room behaving in a prejudicial manner towards her and other overweight women.

When I go to the pool there are some slimmer women there and I've seen the sort of snubby look they've given me and other women there who are heavier than me and I just think you know what gives you the right to do that, what gives you the right to think you're better than anybody else here because you're slimmer <angry> Maybe it would even give me the courage to say – like if I were slimmer – to say to these people well, “Why are you doing that? Why do you think you're better than they are?” whereas right now although I feel good about who I am inside I don't have the courage to go up to them and say “What was that look for?” and I'd like to, I really would.

She wants to assertively call them out but feels lacking in courage and so uncomfortably keeps silent. Her silence to this situation is at odds with her knowledge of self as intolerant of mistreatment in society and her desire to lead others to be better by her example. This anecdote stands in contrast to other aspects of Madeline's narrative that truly showcase her empowered side. Chiefly, we see how Madeline's conviction of faith and optimistic outlook support her to take a more empowered position, a capacity that was instrumental to surviving past domestic abuse. She has an experiential understanding of this capacity and, akin to Denise's account, Madeline is trying to translate this survival capacity into everyday life.

Interestingly, both Ivana and Madeline use imagery of flowers to depict “me I aspire to be” as blooming and flourishing. Both women long to reveal their best selves more audaciously;



Figure 4.38 Ivana - *Me I Aspire to Be*, *Opening Flower*

to show the self as beautiful, capable, and strong in their current bodies would enhance consonance about how they experience themselves from inside-out. For Madeline, the lily (Figure 4.15) serves as a symbol of herself blooming; she states that to embrace herself as this lily would be to step outside her comfort zone and dare to be “showy” (e.g., less conservative style of dress) and engage in activities where her body may be on display

(e.g., take that beach vacation). Ivana employs the image of a fuchsia flower (Figure 4.38) to illustrate herself similarly “opening up”, blossoming, and “being vibrant” in everyday life. There is an optimistic quality to the way they describe digging deep, recognizing they can do better by themselves and trying to get at hidden potentials or capacities. This feeling is also reflected in Madeline’s imagery of unwrapping a package to reveal a treasure within and Ivana’s use of the onion (Figure 4.27) to visualize working through layers to uncover the depth of her potential. These anecdotes equate the best self with the true or authentic self.

Moreover, the women’s stories illuminate how moments of defying others and even your own expectations about personal capability can, in fact, become self-defining. Sarah, Sally, and Gigi talk about this in particular. There is a feedback loop that manifests here, with healthy risk-taking leading to self-discovery that enhances motivation to try and persist in other endeavors. Sarah shares how undertaking pole dancing, something she thought she could never do, became an important experience of pushing past the bounds of her own limited expectations.

Like before I would have never like been caught dead like in public doing performing or anything like that, but since pole – like doing the *tricks*, like people are like “Whoa!”, so just being able to do something that a lot of people *can’t do*, it’s like something that I really like and it’s kind of like my *outlet*.



Figure 4.39 Sally - *Me I Aspire to Be, Running*

into it with a lot of self-doubt and self-deprecating thoughts, even though it was a meaningful goal; however, the running program ultimately ended up being an empowering experience.

Thinking that..I don’t know, having *not reached* certain goals before or just kind of giving up on little things in my life...sticking with that and running 5K, holy crap that was awesome <upbeat tone>. It was a really good feeling to reach that goal.

The experience of doing what she thought she could not do and realizing unseen strengths became symbolic of possibility. Sally likewise stories the value of outdoing her own expectations. Represented with her running shoes (Figure 4.39), Sally narrates how she initially struggled to believe in herself in undertaking a running program, going

Research has demonstrated that weight discrimination (and its perceived threat) can be a significant barrier to participation in physical activity. For higher-weight individuals, anti-fat attitudes impact their intentions to exercise, perceived competence and efficacy in physical activity, and the development of “active” identities (Meadows & Bombak, 2019). Higher-weight athletes, having overcome the hurdle of stigma to enter into sport, may still encounter structural stigma that produces discernable inequities within their sport communities. For example, Inderstrod-Stephens and Acharya (2018) found that overweight endurance athletes often chose to train indoors or after dark to avoid being judged, struggled to find proper-fitting athletic apparel for their sport, and felt mistreated when the finish line was dismantled before they finished their race because they were “too slow”. Given the lack of positive representations of “fat exercisers” and an excess of negative representations (Meadows & Bombak, 2019), it is not surprising that having a body outside the thin ideal would lead someone like Sally to doubt her physical capabilities.

Accomplishing a 5K run, something that Sally thought she could never do, became a self-defining moment, a symbol that she should not underestimate herself or sell herself short. Through this experience, Sally realizes the importance of relating to her embodied self in a way that is authorizing and bolstering. The experience seems to recharge her and renew feelings of self-efficacy. Denise shares a similar feeling of exhilaration about pushing aside fear and daring



Figure 4.40 Denise - This is Me, Fearless

to ride a rollercoaster with her son (Figure 4.40). She denotes her empowered self as fearless and adventuresome. She conveys the need to stay connected to this healthy self-capacity. Overcoming internalized self-doubt, whatever the source, in order to pursue one’s passion, a positive goal, or undertake a new experience is a poignant aspect of empowerment for the women in this study.

Empowerment is also revealed through innovation and creativity in the women’s stories. Gigi’s feisty spirit shines through stories of her boldness, embracing unconventionality, and finding satisfaction in coloring outside the lines, as signified with her image of the Tabasco bottle (Figure 4.33). With travelling Gigi deliberately avoids the conventional route. Instead of



Figure 4.41 Gigi - This is Me, Colourful Quilt

staying in “boring” hotels or resorts, Gigi opts for a unique location like a nunnery and if she catches sight of a tour bus, Gigi says “we go in the opposite direction”. With quilting, Gigi points out that she does not make “grandma quilts”, connoted with being standard, antiquated, and stuffy. Instead, she will “go far and wide” to gather fabrics and put together a striking quilt that says “this is me” Gigi (Figure 4.41). These anecdotes signify the importance of not mindlessly following the usual route but daring to be different. Gigi values spontaneity and being able to surprise and delight others in doing the unexpected. Sarah’s narrative illustrates how empowerment can move a person into healthy advocacy roles. On social issues that matter to

her, like animal rights and preserving the environment, Sarah tries to lead by example. Rather than be passively complacent or simply accept the status quo. Sarah goes against the grain in this manner. For example, she takes pride in being known as a “crazy cat lady” who takes in strays, illustrated with a novelty action figure in her “this is me” photos (Figure 4.42).

A resounding undercurrent to the discourse of empowerment is the centrality of “I” as the authority and director of lived experience, as in “I am in charge of me”, “I get to decide what is



Figure 4.42 Sarah - This is Me, Crazy Cat Lady

best”, and “it’s my evaluation that really counts”. Though the women do not state these exact words, the meaning resonates in their narratives of self-determination and liberating themselves from restriction. Empowerment and self-efficacy are also interwoven in the women’s narratives, with the notion of “I can” or “I am capable”. Gigi relates how a sense of self as in-control and efficacious is essential to optimal functioning, described as “the basics” or “basic part of you”. She states, specifically, how having a “handle” on her weight is important to how she feels overall. In this regard, staying close to the “optimistic me” and

empowering self-efficacy and self-determination acts to counter the Body as an Obstacle in Gigi's life.

The women's accounts reveal empowerment as fluctuating in concert with instability about how they relate to themselves (e.g., working against versus with self, neglecting versus caring for self) as well as challenging circumstances or external stressors. In times of feeling insecure and disempowered, the women talk about "putting on" a false front. They gave examples such as concealing their emotions when others have wronged them, suppressing their needs in favor of others, or remaining silent when you long to have a voice. They describe this sort of withdrawal or retraction of the self as stimulated by fear of judgment, intended to guard themselves, yet ultimately dissonant for the self, unfulfilling, and keeping them in familiar ruts or comfort zones.

4.5.4 Being True to Self

Being true to self is about personifying an image that is genuine and faithful to one's inner representation and experience of self. It means that the viewpoint you adopt on yourself, others, and life's happenings, the ideology and discourse you embrace, and the actions you take all reflect consideration of your core values, interests, and character. The women express this notion as a kind of personal commitment. Sarah expresses the meaning of living an examined life in order to embrace her core values, strengths, and aspirations and, in turn, allow her best self to shine outward. This meaning is exemplified in how Sarah considers her body, focusing on goals for muscular strength and body composition over the idea of being a specific size/weight. Setting benchmarks that are consonant with her values of health and fitness, such as reducing body fat, enhances her commitment and motivation even though the task is highly difficult. Sarah's narrative also illustrates the process of staying true to self. With age and experience, your definition of best self may change. Thus, it is important to stay attuned and be open to reassess what matters to the self.

Ivana compares experiences of dieting in a way that is true to self versus "cheating myself". The former means being accountable and honest with herself, inhabiting and being attuned to her body, and upholding her values and core motivation for weight-loss. There is a serious recognition of work it takes, needing to be "on" and give continuous effort; however, Ivana is willing to do this work "for me", in the service of bettering and caring for herself. By contrast, Ivana equates "cheating myself" in dieting with turning a blind eye to her eating

behaviour and denying internal barriers that she needs to face in order to be successful, essentially doing a disservice to herself and ultimately not giving herself what she really needs.

For Ivana, being true to self also means learning to listen to and embody what is “inside”, namely those inner qualities, talents, and strengths representative of her best self. She emphatically voices her best self as alive “in me” and “screaming, just waiting to get out”. Through these words, Ivana narrates the best self as an inner urge, calling, or impulse to be realized and taking on a vigorous quality, calling for her attention and action to outpour (Figure 4.36) or ferociously roar (Figure 4.14). In this regard, Ivana denotes introspection and self-understanding as necessary to creating your best self.

Sarah’s narrative echoes this sentiment related to having a cause and following your inner calling. From an early age, Sarah experienced a kinship-connection and deep compassion for animal suffering that called her to care for and help animals. Sarah talks of measuring herself and society by how the most vulnerable or helpless are treated. On travels abroad, Sarah encountered this baby monkey (Figure 4.43) tethered to a tree and feeling for him, without hesitation, went to offer her physical affection. She commented that afterwards her friends expressed shock that she was not afraid of the monkey biting her.

I feel like animal cruelty it’s *such a huge problem* like around the world. It’s one of those things that I wish I could change <speaking passionately> but I also feel like just me, I couldn’t make a difference..although I know you can, like even if you change the life of one animal you’ve made a difference.

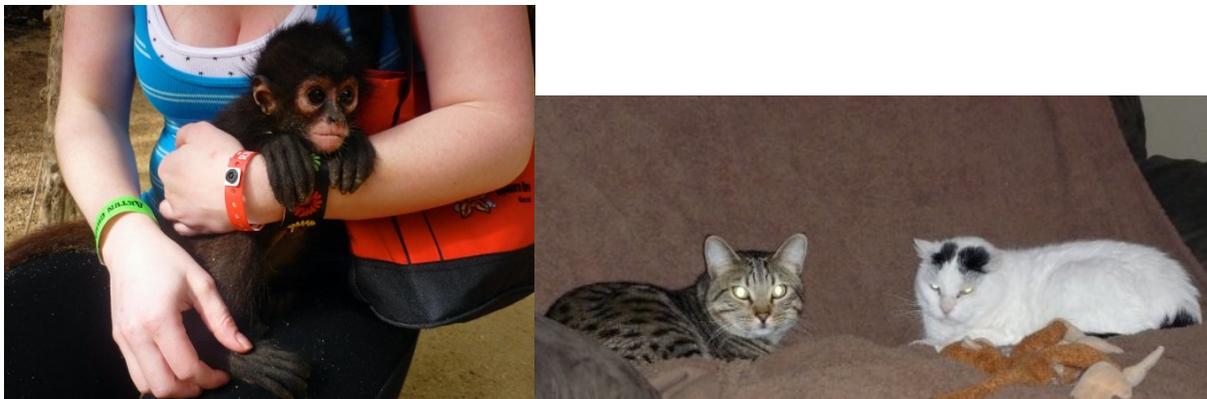


Figure 4.43 Sarah - This is Me, Caring for Animals

Having a cause or issue that she is passionate about gives meaning and purpose to Sarah’s life. There is an instinctual quality about doing what she was called to do, acting in response to an impulse or strength inside her. Following your heart in this way can mean doing things others would consider strange or annoying, but she recognizes it as self-defining and that would not be

authentically her if she acted otherwise. This includes taking in strays or adopting an older cat, Reggie, pictured on the right (Figure 4.43).

Most people would be like “How could you adopt an animal that is so old knowing that it’s going to die?” but I wanted to give him a good place.

Thus, being true entails embracing yourself as you are, not as others think you should be, and acting with vulnerability in revealing yourself.

For Madeline, embodying personal truths is fundamental in living her best self. As understood within Madeline’s narrative, personal truths are those concepts, qualities, or ideals that an individual considers to be right, worthwhile and desirable, often based on individual

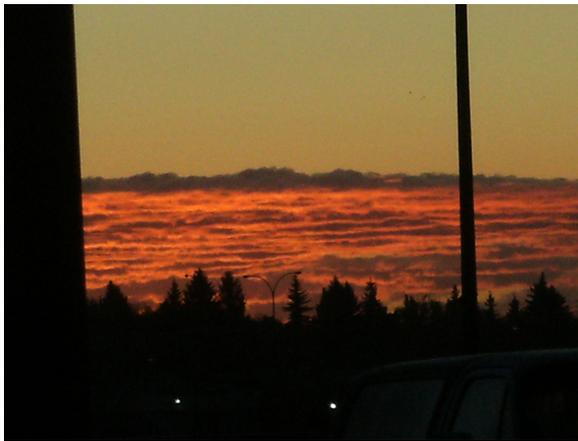


Figure 4.44 Madeline - This is Me, Sunrise

experience or insight. Upholding her faith and optimistic outlook is critical to being true to herself. These strengths are constant to Madeline’s sense of who she is and has always been. She has learned to hold them close because they have sustained her in the face of difficulty. In her photo collection, Madeline includes an image of a sunrise (Figure 4.44) and highlights the “clear sky” in communicating a remarkable self-resolve.

The clear sky above says that I do have a clear definition of who I am. The clouds almost look like they’re in layers and that’s what my life has been. It’s been layers and layers of things I’ve experienced and how I’ve grown, experiences build upon experiences and that sort of makes you who you are. At the time something is happening that is the most important because it’s right then and there. But when you get through it, there’s always a clear sky above.

The manner in which this resolute sense of self relates to Madeline’s resilience through adversity will be explored in the next thematic cluster.

Denise considers herself to be an intelligent woman and emphasizes a sense of obligation, owing it to herself, to listen to that smart, confident woman inside to achieve a healthier self, referring to this voice as “the right one”.

The rational one, the smart one, the confident one – that one needs to jump the gun first and say “NO, you go away. This is what it’s like”, you know so that the internal dialogue that I have – that I’m listening to the right one.

Even though she experiences conflict between her self-critical and logical side at times, this knowledge of herself as an intelligent woman is regarded as a personal truth that she considers in order to turn things around. It is a source of strength to counter negativity, self-critical, or oppressive demands and empower herself.

While being attuned and true to self is facilitating of self-actualization, the women's narratives also reveal that self-actualization is easier in principle than in practice. Prejudices and limitations that exist in the current sociocultural context serve to challenge being true to the self at times and can block the pathway to your best self. In the face of such inevitable challenge, being true to yourself and stepping into the kind of vulnerable space discussed above, takes courage and fortitude. Within Ivana's story, the concept of courage reemerged as meaningful regarding her struggles to be true to herself, to show the parts of her that are urging to "get out". The word courage comes from the Latin "cor", meaning heart. Interestingly, Ivana used an image of two hearts (Figure 4.45) to represent not only herself as someone with a "big heart", but how she is "still struggling with the heart" in an emotional sense. Ivana passionately expresses her longing to open up and act with her whole heart.

I could just *embrace it*. It's what's *inside me*. It's *me*...it's like I could put it in my hands and just hold it out.



Figure 4.45 Ivana - This is Me, Big Heart

Ivana experiences a "heart struggle" between the self as subdued versus courageously shown. Losing heart, as the expression goes, means losing courage and confidence, no longer believing in oneself. The image of a tiger (Figure 4.14) to represent her aspired self is illustrative of Ivana's endeavor to, like the lion in search of his heart in the Wizard of Oz tale, discover her inner capacity to be courageous. Further, Ivana conveys that seeing herself living more authentically and freely in her interpersonal world would have a positive influence on her intrapersonal experience. The connection between movements inward to embrace the self and outward to reveal the self is bidirectional, as shown with the bidirectional arrows between Embracing Yourself and Creating Your Best Self in my graphic representation (Figure 4.1).

Though Ivana talks about struggling to just be herself, to “do me” no matter how others may regard her body-self, the positive side is that she *is* indeed struggling; if we consider for a moment that the words “struggle” and “strive” are synonyms, what I intend to highlight is that the to “be me” is there. Ivana and the other women who find themselves coming up against challenge in creating their best self are not lifelessly or dispassionately giving up, but instead continuing to try. This meaning also emerges with the creative means of making space and self-expression that the women display.

4.5.5 Affirming the Self with Others

Across the narratives, the capacity to assert yourself and experience affirming others is important to attaining and maintaining a best self. Gigi describes how she finds strength in the loving encouragement of her husband and friends who “refuse to let me believe” in feelings of worthlessness or give into self-doubt. Other women talk about the grounding presence of others who help them to see themselves in the best light, such as Denise with her son or Sarah with animals. Gigi states how it is meaningful for her to be connected, experience a reciprocal loyalty and validation from friends and family who want to “be with me”, say that it “isn’t the same without me” and that she adds “spice” to their lives. Regarding weight-loss dieting, Gigi also regards support of others, for example in online communities, as helping to reduce isolation, connect with new ideas and resources, and feel less “alone” in her “battle” with weight.

Gigi presents as quite assertive in the way she boldly states her opinions and talks of putting up boundaries with negative influences to stay motivated and uphold self-worth. Although her conviction does waver at times, like when she cannot find attractive clothes that fit, Gigi tries to buttress that “glass half-full” perspective on herself and turns to supportive



Figure 4.46 Denise - *This is Me, Princess*

relationships to build herself up when down or resist overweight stigma. By contrast, the other women shared common struggles to assert themselves and feel empowered in their relationships.

Denise relates difficulty with striking a balance between needs to be taken care of versus taking care of herself in relationships. She explains that “Princess” (Figure 4.46) is a

childhood nickname she was given for demanding a lot of attention or affection from others and looking to others to do things for her. At times, Denise perceives that she flips between extremes of so-called “princess” behaviour and being “miss independent” with others. Denise also notes how her desire to be easygoing and likeable sometimes becomes inhibitory when self-assertion is needed. She describes the need to tap into an inner well of strength she already possesses to reconcile these tensions in lived relation.

I have to let it out and not be afraid to let it out, you know stop thinking so much about like what people think about me and that I’m being assertive, I’m not you know being mean or being a bitch, I’m just you know, I’m asserting *myself* as a woman and I’m *allowed to do that*.

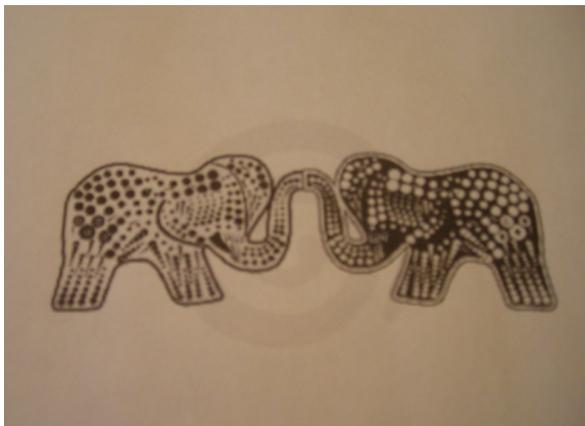


Figure 4.47 Denise - *Me I Aspire to Be, Inner Strength*

She symbolizes this strength with an image of elephants (Figure 4.47) because they are creatures valorized in Thai culture for possessing incredible strength. Denise envisions herself behaving more assertively, “taking charge”, and finding a more stable interdependence by drawing on inner strength.

Sarah also talks about wanting to uphold her sense of self with greater resolve and authorize her own voice in lived relation. While Sarah regards herself as having made significant gains in self-confidence and how she relates to her body in recent years, translating this feeling of self-empowerment to how she is within interpersonal relationships is something that she continues to work on. Like other women, Sarah shares struggles to set aside “shoulds” and not second-guess herself in relationships, noting how these tendencies just get in the way of being her authentic self. She wants to not waver so much in her opinions and just say what she “needs” to say with others.

Sally recounts how getting “caught up” in the needs of her ex-boyfriend and trying to make the relationship work led her to lose touch with the self she values. As she reaffirms her own feelings and needs following from the break-up, Sally seems to regain clarity on her-self, feel renewed, and authorize herself to make healthy changes in her environment. This shift of perspective on herself was observed in how she presented from the first to second interview. Sally talks about learning to “put herself first” in relationships and practicing better self-care in

general. In addition, Sally expresses that how she treats herself sends a positive message to others about what she deserves from them.

Madeline values being a person who is open, approachable, expressive, and counted on by others and states how feeling reciprocally supported by others to be her best self is important. She has exercised capacity to be very assertive in times when mistreatment was compromising



Figure 4.48 Madeline - Not Me, Thorny Rose Bush

her-self, as in her past abusive marriage. Even though Madeline knows she has this capacity in her, there remain times in present relationships where she feels conflicted between self-assertion and acquiescing. According to Madeline, whereas she “walked in the shadow” of her past partner, reflecting a blindness to her needs, she consciously chooses to set aside her interests at times with her husband to “save the argument”. She states that “sometimes it takes the stronger person” to do so. While Madeline wants to keep things from becoming “thorny” (Figure 4.48) and avoid the emotional upheaval of initiating conflict, she recognizes an imbalance when her needs remain in the “backseat”.

Rather than have a big argument about it I’ll just give in to [my husband], just “yes dear”. And I mean I know it would be tough being a widow but then I’d only have me to please. I know that sounds selfish but if I can’t make myself happy first then how am I able to make anyone else happy in my life.

Madeline perceives that a lack of nurturance and unconditional acceptance from her mother catalyzed her development of an unhealthy relationship with food from a young age. In the absence of support, food took on new meaning for Madeline to soothe distress and find consolation, which led to weight gain. In her present, Madeline emphasizes the positive role of her sister as “my support” in their mutual weight-loss and fitness initiative. She references “support” as meaning to bear or hold up, keep from weakening, and aid in the cause of another. Her sister is regarded as someone she can depend on and feel “in it” together with. By contrast, Madeline contemplates her husband in a saboteur role; that is, she questions if, like the diet industry, he is somehow invested in her staying overweight.

I find I can’t depend on my husband for support. I think that – in my mind I’m thinking that he’s afraid if I lose weight, I won’t be attracted to him anymore

and so he – it’s kind of a sabotage, keep me fat and keep me home <laughs> you know. But I mean I need the support. I need the emotional support *to do it*.

Ivana’s story elucidates the importance of healthy relationships to feeling healthy in herself. Through painful experiences in past relationships in which she permitted others to take advantage of her kindness, Ivana has learned that it is necessary to put herself first. She voices insight into how being overly passive and deferential, has meant her needs are unfilled. In this respect, like Denise, Ivana conveys how a person’s strengths can also be their greatest weakness and the need to use strengths to work for you, not against you. Ivana is coming to appreciate that being “go-to girl” and having a “big heart” for others, qualities that she values, does not mean having to sacrifice or neglect herself. She differentiates between what it means to be truly selfish versus act in favor of self-care in lived relation. Going forward, Ivana describes taking up a motto of “choosing with my heart”, courageously deciding to act in spirit of being true to herself and upholding self-care.

The Creating Your Best Self and Embracing Yourself clusters come together in a buffering way in the women’s narratives about resiliency. The next thematic cluster illuminates the Resilient Self, namely how the women regard themselves as drawing on personal strengths, character and values, and activating inner capacities to cope with adverse experiences that have potential to restrict or diminish their selfhood.

4.6 Resilient Self

The Resilient Self cluster showcases the women as capable of converting adversity into growth in their lives by choosing to relate to their selves-bodies positively. This process of reconstruction supports them in overcoming intrapsychic or inner obstacles within their control as well as building hardiness and making space to find healthier ways of dealing with the influence of external obstacles that surround them. Within this cluster, the self, as a narrative construct, emerges as robust, a resource to move toward and rely upon in times of difficulty, and developing-emerging through adverse circumstances.

4.6.1 Converting Adversity into Growth

Adversity can emerge in dramatic ways, as with traumatic and life-altering events from abuse to disaster to cancer, but it also reveals itself more subtly in our everyday circumstances, through daily strife and strain. Regarding their experience of their bodies and weight, the women in this study highlight everyday struggles with negative stereotypes or prejudice, moments of defeat in stepping on a scale or “giving into” craving, being unable to find clothing to fit their

body or emotional conflict in their relationships, to name a few. The women's felt sense of their bodies or weight as creating adversity and hardship in their lives rang throughout the Experiencing the Body as an Obstacle cluster. However, through other thematic clusters, I have begun to explore ways that their stories illuminate an alternative meaning, also contained in such moments, of adversity as opportunity to grow and develop, to showcase strength, character, and resilience. Many individuals consider adversity or challenge something to be avoided, to protect

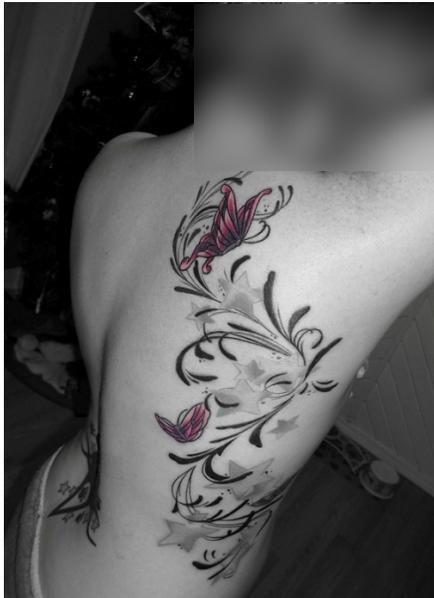


Figure 4.49 Sarah - This is Me, Butterflies

oneself from; however, the women's narratives showcase how it is the story we tell ourselves about adversity and, more specifically, about the self in adversity that defines you, that makes the difference in how adversity is interpreted or made sense of for the embodied self.

In times of adversity, the women cast themselves as actively dealing with their circumstances rather than passive victims. For example, Sarah voices the belief that she is not defined by what happens to her in life, but instead by how she copes with and reacts to her circumstances. She reflects this belief in the language she uses, talking about tough times that she “went through” and “came out of”, challenges faced, and sticking things out even when it is hard. A major struggle in her life that Sarah regards as having taught her this belief was supporting her mother through addiction and mental illness. Sarah chose to mark this experience with a tattoo of a cascade of butterflies across her back (Figure 4.49). Sarah considers this tattoo defining and shared how it continually reminds her of the inner strength that she is capable of gathering.

I feel that tattoos can kind of represent how you're feeling at a certain time in your life, like little time stamps. Well this one – it's the biggest one that I have. [...] Along the way it's developed into this caterpillar turns into the butterfly kind of thing, right. There are smaller butterflies and then it gets to the big one at the top. It's about my mom but I think it's about both of us. Like we both kind of went through it together and came out of it even, like our relationship is better than it was before.

Regarding the meaning of this tattoo, Sarah raises the analogy of metamorphosis to explain how, in her experience, adversity can transform the self into a stronger and more beautiful version.

This analogy resonates with other women’s stories of resilience, such as Denise’s account of working through adverse childhood experiences and Madeline’s tale of surviving domestic violence. In metamorphosis, the butterfly must struggle to get out of cocoon on its own to develop strong enough wings to fly. The connection between adversity and personal growth has been highlighted by research on ways that adults make meaning of and integrate adverse experiences into their self-narrative. The capacity to narratively construct adversity into growth has been shown to meaningfully contribute to recovery of a healthy sense of self and well-being following from trauma (Crossley, 2000a; Pals, 2006). My intent is not to say that adversity is necessary for development, but to point to the opportunity that lies therein, given that one seeks and is able to apply the “tools” within their grasp to convert it into a growth experience.

According to Sarah, times of adversity and hardship, like a tattoo, leave a “mark” or lasting impression on the self, especially in how it can change your outlook. She talks about



Figure 4.50 Madeline - This is Me, Rose Hips

herself, even as a young girl, envisioning a healthier life for herself related to the mistakes she saw modelled by her parents. Many people, like Sarah, choose to get tattoos to symbolize or mark certain life-changing experiences. As with earlier anecdotes about undertaking pole dancing, here Sarah talks about coming through difficult times in life with greater strength or resilience than she believed she could.

Madeline also exemplifies resiliency in the optimistic, empowering outlook she takes regarding traumatic experiences of abuse in her first marriage. This meaning is vividly captured in her photographs of nature, which meaningfully reflect her own strength and affirm her spirituality. Madeline believes that positive change or growth is possible out of trauma noting that, like her image of rose hips (Figure 4.50), there is a “healing quality” and “good” therein. Contrasting images of bending and broken trees (Figure 4.51), Madeline connotes qualities of elasticity and willpower coming together to help her survive and recover from domestic abuse.

If you bend a little bit you can get through it, but if like these ones over here <points to right image> you don’t bend, you break. That is definitely my relationship with my ex-husband. He tried and he tried to break me. The more he tried to break me, the more I bent. If he’d been able to get what he wanted I

would have been broken and probably not here alive [...] It's your choice, you can bend or you can break. A lot of people do break because they don't have the strength to bend anymore, but I think that's where you have to make the choice, before you get to that point of breaking, to get *out of that situation*. That's what I chose to do.



Figure 4.51 Madeline - *This is Me, Bending vs Not Me, Broken Trees*

Madeline resists victimized concepts of the self as “broken” or permanently weakened by trauma, instead contextualizing these “dark and stormy” times of feeling at her worst as part of developing into a healthier self in the here-and-now. Returning to the environment as an analogy, Madeline depicts how she *can* weather the “storms of life” and “come out on the other side like a rainbow” (Figure 4.52).

Adversity is revealed within Madeline’s narrative as cause for a reassessment or reweighing of one’s situation, providing a point of contrast between self-past and -present, and repositioning her perspective on self-future. Madeline states how she has a clearer, more optimistic outlook and an enhanced gratitude on account of what she has been through. She

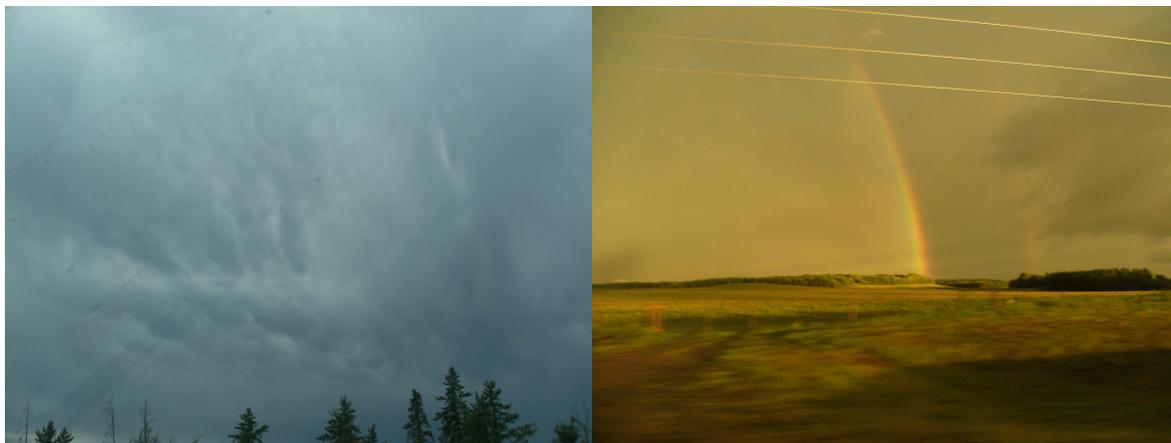


Figure 4.52 Madeline - *This is Not Me & This is Me, Weathering the Storm*

stresses that when part of you feels “broken”, lost, or dormant it does not mean that it is “dead” because, like nature, the self retains possibility for repair and renewal.

The leaves have gone, the leaves have fallen off, but the buds are there and to me that’s a promise of life to come. That’s a promise of green in the spring. We have to wait for it. Like I said, I’ve been there, I’ve had to wait for the green to come back into my life but..it’s still a promise. Hope is ‘well it could happen but maybe it won’t, but let’s keep our fingers crossed that it does’. But to me the buds are there, they will come. It’s an assurance, more than a hope.

She relates a self-assurance that she can hold on, and weather hard times until the “green” comes back into life. Surviving trauma led Madeline to reconstruct her-self with greater conviction and renew her faith in the promise of healing and/or self-renewal.

This meaning that Madeline and Sarah express about converting adversity into growth is consistent with the theory of narrative reconstruction in trauma outlined by Crossley (2000a, b). Crossley argued that a process of narrative reconstruction is necessary to rebuild the shattered and disrupted sense of self caused by trauma. This reconstruction process is accomplished by mining and narratively (re)making the meaning attached to experience to generate a renewed sense of meaning, coherence, and connection to self. Converting adversity into growth also relates to the concept of a growth mindset. Dweck (2006) proposed that the view or mindset a person tends to adopt about their own personal capacity greatly affects their actual response to challenge or adversity and their capacity to thrive. Her research identified two distinct mindsets about personal capacity: the fixed mindset in which a person believes their characteristics, qualities, or capabilities are set in stone; and the growth mindset in which a person believes that their qualities and capacities can be cultivated through effort or, in other words, that the self can change and grow from experience. Research findings suggest that these mindsets play a significant role in determining how a person leads their life, and whether a person will become who they aspire to be or achieve the things that they value. For those with a growth mindset, setback or failure is not taken as evidence of incapability or deficiency, but instead interpreted as a catalyst to spur towards potential and become a more skilled, healthier, or enhanced version of self (Dweck, 2006). The women’s stories about striving to positively embody the self and be self-promoting illuminate a growth mindset. Further, a growth mindset can be seen to facilitate mental flexibility, imagining beyond the status quo, and feeling empowered.

Each of the participants spoke about resilience as associated with being able to utilize and draw out *her* specific inner resources in difficult circumstances. Sally identified growing up with

a mentally disabled sibling and father who struggled with alcoholism as a hardship. She describes having to grow up more quickly, owing to expectations that she be more responsible than your average kid and familial pressure to guide and care for her brother. Though difficult at times, Sally believes these features of her upbringing have “shaped” her for the positive, related to her ability to see “the good” in her surroundings and others, value uniqueness, and be a hard worker. These are aspects of self that Sally considers adaptive in her present life. Likewise, Sally’s keen sense of humor, highlighted earlier as helping her to cope with and deflect negatively, is a central aspect of herself that she perceives as born out of difficulties with bullying and getting hurt in relationships. Sally tells of her choice to not “hang on” to negative experiences, like her break-up, instead trying to feel her way through and learn from it. Denise and Ivana voiced this same sentiment of learning from, accepting and moving on from past difficulties.

Gigi talks about how easy it is, in her experience, to lose touch with inner resources or character strengths in times of adversity, related to the glass half-full and half-empty images (Figure 4.13) presented above. Experiences of disappointment, loss, and hardship in her life, including struggles with her weight, infertility, and depression, as well as the loss of a nephew who was like a son to her, have at times overshadowed and “robbed” Gigi of positivity. She also relates feeling “worn down” by experiences of pressure to conform to ill-fitting environments and tow the “party line”. These descriptions illuminate periods of feeling caught in a web of despair, converse to Gigi’s narrative shift of trying to “get back to an optimistic me”. Gigi utilizes the idiomatic expression of “turn myself around” to narrate a reversal of direction, finding her way back from being lost and in despair, and setting herself on an improved path. In addition, Gigi voices that it is important to be realistic yet optimistic, to balance between being naïve or “Pollyannaish” and overly pessimistic or jaded. This perception parallels Madeline’s message about not being blindly optimistic nor dismissive of hurt and pain in her past but, “setting aside” the burden of it, trying to move forward with new understanding.

Hurd Clarke and Griffin (2008) explored the influence of trauma on women’s body image and embodied experience in later life. They interviewed 31 women (age 50-70 years) who had experienced diverse negative life events including: physical, emotional abuse, and/or sexual abuse, difficult childhoods, poverty, illness, traumatic grief, infidelity and divorce. Many women reported experiencing more than one form of trauma. Hurd Clarke and Griffin’s findings shed

light on the lingering and deep-rooted impact of trauma on women's embodied subjectivity. Though their traumatic experiences varied, there was a similar pattern in how these experiences altered ways that women perceived, felt about, related to and used their bodies. Many women linked their trauma to struggles with body image disparagement, ambivalence about being attractive, and persistent low self-esteem. In response to trauma, women also described conscious attempts to alter their bodies with weight gain, trying to hide the body in clothing, and various body work practices (e.g., dieting, cosmetic procedures). The authors explored these strategies as a means of re-asserting control, distancing from trauma and creating safety. While the women's narratives clearly revealed the lifelong impact of trauma, they equally exemplified resiliency. Hurd Clarke and Griffin's participants gave accounts of "turning points" or pivotal life events that precipitated the choice to "embrace their lives" and "make sense" of psychological repercussions via self-reflection and active personal growth. These participants showed awareness of the complex link between trauma and embodied subjectivity and were able to find the strength to seek support from external sources, such as professional therapeutic assistance, or make healthy changes to their environments. Hurd Clarke and Griffin's findings echo the women's narratives in the present study.

In overcoming adversity, the women in the present study point to the healing possibility of lived time and space to grow, understand experiences in a different way, and mend. This meaning of time and space taken in combination with capacity for self-reflection aids the present participants in (re)storying the meaning of adversity in their lives to, as Crossley (2000a) described, reintegrate and comprehend the self as healthy and whole. Denise and Ivana talk about the lessons learned from difficult experiences as something you carry forward, that can ready you, in a manner of speaking, to tackle what lies ahead. Their narratives highlight the meaning of reflecting upon things that have happened to you, doing the emotional and mental work of introspection and reconfiguring these events into a healthy sense of self. Rather than interpret the experience of being verbally abused or mistreated, for example, as indicative of what you deserve, it is validating and empowering to sow the story of how you were stronger than you thought and created something better for yourself out of it.

Gigi, Sally, and Ivana's narratives shed light on adversity as uncovering a plucky and rebellious side to the self that can be adaptive. I previously explored how Gigi and Sally embrace themselves as "positively unique", re-storying the experience of feeling different as undesirable,

related to narrow-minded views or stereotypes, into a positive way of being. This meaning exemplifies converting adversity, restriction, or perceived flaws into growth, space, and assets, respectively. Maintaining this positive sense of identity bolsters their resilience. Additionally, Sally's narrative illuminates the possibility of creating impetus out of adversity. Sally is trying to lose weight to feel healthier and better about herself and mitigate it as an obstacle that could potentially stand in the way of her aspirations.

I think I kind of have it set in the back of my mind that if I want to get to the level of success that I think is appropriate for myself that because of my body and how I think others view my body that I'm going to have to put in like a lot more work than any other "normal" person would.



Figure 4.53 Sally - *Me I Aspire to Be, Do the Unexpected*

Nonetheless, in her current position as an overweight woman, Sally demonstrates resistance to being limited by her body weight/shape. Instead of getting defeated in the face of overweight prejudice, this experience seems to incite her to challenge and push boundaries of assumptions or stereotypes being put upon her. To portray this aspect of self that she aspires to uphold, Sally photographs a plaque engraved with

the aspirational Eleanor Roosevelt quote, "Do the things you think you cannot do" (Figure 4.53).

Sometimes it is very fun to do the things you think you cannot do, and you can *surprise people* who may have *underestimated you*.

This quality of pluckiness emerges in Sally's drive to realize her career ambitions, capacity to push herself, and ways that she is putting herself out there with creativity, knowledge, and skill despite feeling a "critical gaze" upon her as an overweight woman. Sally feels satisfied and empowered from outdoing expectations and proving people wrong on stereotypes.

I feel really kind of empowered that you know I am "chubby", air-quotations "chubby", and that I can run 5K and that I can outrun the skinny girls on the treadmills at the gym. That's a really good feeling.

This sentiment about outdoing expectations emerged in Sally's experience of prejudicial assumptions regarding her physical capabilities as well as familial expectations or traditional gender roles that threatened to circumscribe her future self.



Figure 4.54 *Ivana - Me I Aspire to Be, Choose for Me*

Within Ivana’s narrative, she similarly illustrates the experience of harnessing pain as impetus for self-enhancement. Ivana talks about uncovering her courageous self as honoring her potential and enhancing herself, and as pathway of recovery from things past. Ivana recalls how she has always been the “good girl” and strived to “do everything right”, motivated by fear of disappointing others, especially her parents. She placed a high expectation upon herself as a girl and, as she strived so hard to please others, Ivana now sees, in looking back, how that led to feeling hurt and disappointed with experiences of being bullied, disregarded, or mistreated. Ivana discloses how this pattern of living in fear of

disappointing or being rejected by others has caused her to refrain from asserting herself in adulthood, instead donning a fake smile to cover her feelings and shelter herself from vulnerability as I have discussed. Like Gigi, Ivana narrates how converting adversity into growth entails re-engaging optimistically with herself, believing in herself, and demonstrating a newfound resolve to just “be fabulous” (Figure 4.36) and dare to “be bad” (Figure 4.37). Ivana symbolizes this aspiration way of being with her image of a Buddha statue holding a plaque that reads “Choose with no regret” (Figure 4.54).

I have a difficult time making the decisions because I’m afraid I’m going to make it wrong or I’m going to disappoint someone [...] But in anything, I mean that’s a simple thing, but just choose with no regret, choose because it’s right for me, and choose with my heart. And I don’t do that all the time because I worry about everybody else and I leave myself to the end.

Ivana expresses how she must refuse to be overpowered by others who would take advantage, by prejudice or naysayers, and even her own fears of judgment and insecurity; she must stop waiting on weight-loss and instead draw out that inner tiger (Figure 4.14) or dancing girl (Figure 4.21) that she recognizes inside her.

Sarah’s attitude of leading by example on social change she wants to see with environmentalism, animal rights, and healthy female body image also demonstrates this pathway of channeling dissatisfactions into aspiration and advocacy. This attitude meaningfully bolsters Sarah and contributes to her self-worth. Taking a positive psychology view, the healthy function

of rebelliousness, as a self-preserving and -promoting capacity, is observed across the women's narratives about adversity, even if only in the form of dissonance between one's self-critical or -destructive patterns and their healthier self.

4.6.2 Resisting Harmful Discourse

From the position of rebel, the women are emboldened to discover and capitalize on personal strength and resources (e.g., knowledge, values, courage, creativity) that can help them develop towards the best self. Some of the anecdotes that I have discussed in the context of Converting Adversity into Growth are also relevant here, including Sally's bent for defying expectations, Ivana's drive to be bold and "out there" regardless of her weight, and Gigi's penchant for "pushing the envelope". Other anecdotes in participants' accounts specifically highlight the value of fortifying oneself against harmful and restrictive discourse.

Denise shared about building resistance regarding adverse childhood experiences as she has become older and gained adult perspective. She shared several stories from her youth in which key figures, including her father, grandmother, and modeling coach, criticized her body and conveyed messages that she was "not good enough". For example, Denise recalls an instance of feeling how harsh her father could be and how difficult it was to satisfy his expectations:

Like when I was swimming, I won provincials one year – pretty good, I worked really hard. And the year I won provincials, I swam my solo, I came out, I gave it all I had, and I collapsed on the deck, I was just so tired. Marks came out and they weren't quite what I wanted but they were still really good, and my dad says to me, "Well you didn't try hard enough". So, my whole life Dad telling me "Well you didn't try hard enough", you know, low to mid 80's marks all through high school, that's not good enough. Even when I convocated I was on the Dean's list, well that's not good enough – well what do you want from me, what more do you want because I can't think of any other – how to please you anymore <angry tone>.

With trying so hard to win approval, Denise believes that being pretty, thin, and perfect came to symbolize "good enough" in her mind as a youth. She has continued to struggle with this belief as an adult, especially in the context of employment in the beauty industry. Denise highlights her mother as a supportive relationship that underpins her "smart voice", which she tries to draw on to counter the critical voice of her "demon" (Figure 4.28). Denise remarks that, though she cannot go back to redo the past, such as her pregnancy wherein she struggled with "feeling fat", she can use past experiences in reflection to help her change things for the better going forward.

She spoke in a determined manner about how she is “proving the critics of the past wrong” by doing well for herself now.

Referencing her abusive first marriage, Madeline similarly narrates how she “defied the season”, like the rose hips she photographed as bright amid the winter landscape (Figure 4.50):

It’s kind of what I’ve done in my life too. As you can see the leaves are still green, the berries haven’t fallen so it defies the season...things in my past I guess I have defied the experience and said “To hell with you. I’m going to be a better person anyway”.

To defy means to oppose or resist with boldness and assurance, refuse to submit, challenge or dare to do something. Madeline conveys how she does not define herself by adversity itself, but rather her will to survive it. She is actively engaged in (re)constructing the trauma narrative, liberating herself from being confined to a “victim” role and taking up a position of empowerment and efficacy. Accordingly, Madeline states her belief that recovery is self-determined in that, although she cannot change what happened, she can choose how to think about it, and this has profound impact on her capacity to heal and thrive.

You have a traumatic experience – yes, you’re injured from it, but your attitude, how you perceive it, determines how you will continue <stated strongly>. One guy’s attitude was “okay this happened, okay I’ll make the best of it” and the other one was “oh poor me, poor me, look at me, oh what am I going to do” and I would far rather be the ‘let’s heal and get over it, get on with our life’.

Gigi exemplifies resilience in her unwillingness to sit by silently regarding oppressive messages about being overweight. She narratively reconstructs the self as “not normal” or “problematic” by placing the problem within the context of societal prejudice towards overweight people. She employs political language in statements such as “not convinced with the



Figure 4.55 Gigi – *Me I Aspire to Be, Bra that Fits*

establishment” and “pessimistic view of the party line” to reveal her position of resistance and protest to dominant discourse and agendas that she considers harmful. Gigi refuses to be corralled into an unwanted position, for example, with bucking the convention of short people sitting in the front in a photograph. In fact, Gigi takes offense at this convention, viewing it as a

subjugation of sorts to ask a “plus petite” person to sit in front when standing would allow them to look their best. Gigi also recognizes mistreatment in her struggle to find attractive, well-fitting clothes in the marketplace. She evocatively expresses this meaning in her story of shopping for a proper fitting bra (Figure 4.55).

Actually buying a bra on a rack, I have NEVER been able to do that <heated>. Normal people, apparently, because I’ve never been one, they just say “I need a bra”, they go to their car and they actually drive to wherever and they say “I’m going to go buy a bra today” <scoff> I would loooove to be able to do that, to just say ‘I’ll have that one in pink’ instead of you know tormenting <frustrated>. I’ve gone into a store and they’ve measured me and then four hours later it’s like “well we can’t fit you” or else “we only have this one that we could possibly fit you with” and it looks like SCAFFOLDING from the CN tower and has to be ordered from I don’t know, Tehran or something.

The limited options available for a person her size is taken as evidence of being under-represented and undermined by the marketplace; it is a sign that overweight people do not matter enough for retailers to make basic, affordable options available for “people like me”, let alone all the colored and patterned options that fill the racks for thinner people. Gigi feels forced into a state of discomfort: “you just finally buy something in desperation because I mean you can’t go without. But you buy something that *doesn’t fit*”.

Gigi’s story captures an important critical perspective. Feminist scholarship has long criticized the fashion industry for its emphasis on ultra-thin female bodies. Fat studies scholars, in particular, have asserted that clothing size standards reproduce stigma and inequality around body weight/size. Clothing size carries strong moral and aesthetic meanings that influence women’s identities, social status, and bodily practices (Bishop et al., 2018; Ellison, 2020). Larger clothing sizes and clothing for purportedly uncommon proportions are typically found in a designated “plus size” section within department stores and specialty shops. The inaccessibility of extended size ranges outside of these designated spaces symbolically marks “plus size” with stigmatized status and, in women’s shopping experiences, this becomes a clear indicator of personal failure to “fit” within the frame of acceptable body ideals. Along with other everyday indignities, such as not fitting into chairs, overweight individuals often cite clothing as a marker and reminder of being “fat”. There are also economic burdens of being “plus-size” in that “having to” purchase from specialty shops for items such as bras or wedding dresses, for example, often means a price mark-up (Bishop et al., 2018).

Previous research has shown that, for some women, struggles with clothing size precipitate body work, including dieting, exercising and undergoing surgical procedures. For many women, clothing size and fit serves as an evaluative measure of “success” in managing and/or re-shaping the body (Bishop et al., 2018). Tiggemann and Lacey (2009) noted that there are many inherent aspects of shopping for clothes that detract from its enjoyment for women who are heavier, including the focus on numerical size and the closer than normal scrutiny of one’s body in a dressing room. The disappointing sense of being unable to find a garment that fits or suits “may simply serve as a potent reminder that their body is not ‘right’” (p. 286).

Gigi certainly comprehends this “potent reminder” in her miserable personal experience of shopping for a bra. However, instead of walking away focused on her body as not “right”, she interprets the experience as symbolic of how society treats overweight people like “garbage”, telling them to self-discipline their bodies in order to fit within the marketplace instead of being more body inclusive. Gigi illustrates her resistance to internalizing this message by including an image of a garbage can in her ‘this is not me’ photos (Figure 4.56).

That’s not what I am, although you know you could almost believe that’s what you are when you’re overweight if you were to listen to everything that’s told to you through media and through other subtle cues that are given to you, including doctors and medical professionals and you know – I mean I’ve had lots of subtle cues that are passed my way...if I was to believe them I would have come to believe I’m garbage a lot of times.



Figure 4.56 Gigi – This is Not Me, Garbage

Although forced into wearing the *one* uncomfortable bra found at her local store that cuts into her sides, Gigi does not do so silently. She readily expresses her disagreement with the status quo and, in doing so, shows others her “spicy” persona. She goes against the grain by shifting the locus of the “body problem” outside her-self.

The women in this study expressed a belief that weight-loss focuses on attaining a healthy weight over an ideal weight. Moreover, they state that a healthy weight should be individualized and set in context of real life, such as Gigi’s meaning of size 10 (Figure 4.22). Likewise, Sarah voices her resistance to limits or

demands placed upon women's body by society in several ways. She speaks of embracing curves and feminine features that women "should have".

In terms of my body, *I like it*. Like I wouldn't want to be taller, I wouldn't want to be anything like that or like smaller framed. I don't like the really skinny kind of idea of what women *think* they should look like. Probably a long time ago I would have thought that, but now that's changed...I would like to be womanly <chuckles> like the big hips which some women don't feel like they *should have*, but it's very – I think it's very *feminine* and people should embrace that.

Sarah values a body that is fit, strong and feminine and expresses desire to look after her body. Focusing on what she thinks, feels, and values about her body, Sarah expresses "I wouldn't ever want to be too skinny" (Figure 4.57):

Some people might say that she's actually a nice figure, but this one she's – to me is skinny and *not fit*. Like she has very thin thighs, doesn't look like she has any muscle on her thighs, very like knobby knees and I don't think that's attractive at all. Some people would think that is. Like *I think* your thighs should touch, not like all the way but you should have like a little space kind of at the top, but I think like *women should have those thighs*.

Sarah redefines the parameters for her embodiment in setting aside ideals about "what I'm supposed to look like" and conceptualizing "too skinny" as excessive, undesirable and unwanted. Sarah identifies media representations of the female body as an "airbrushed version" of womanhood and states how bodily appearance can be deceptive as a measure of health. For example, Sarah expresses that skinny does not equate to healthy or fit nor does being a marathon runner equate to caring for and respecting limitations of your body. This insight helps Sarah to set realistic inspirations or benchmarks for her body.



Figure 4.57 Sarah - *This is Not Me, Too Skinny*

Moreover, in her experiences with pole dancing, Sarah has developed a counter-narrative of body acceptance and active embodiment, which supports woman of all shapes/sizes to be attuned with, draw enjoyment from, and feel sexy in their bodies. Sarah emphasizes that, for her, resistance to harmful messages means putting up boundaries on what she allows into her consciousness. For example, Sarah remarks, "some people are like 'Oh certain people shouldn't wear skinny jeans' <snarky tone> and *I wear them*", regardless of

being quintessentially “skinny” or not. With this basic to decision to wear or not wear “skinny jeans”, Sarah illuminates how choosing to think of her body in negative or positive terms in comparison to ideals bears potential to either limit or enhance her embodied self. As a positive role model for other women, Sarah values being “real” and approachable. Her experience of the woman who introduced her to pole dancing as relatable made the activity seem inspiring instead of intimidating:

I think probably for me it was “oh well you know she’s not like that person I had pictured in my mind” so I was more comforted with the fact that I could do it, you know it was “if she can do it then maybe I could do it”...like a girl out of a magazine, it wasn’t like that. She was very you know comfortable, casual clothes, like she didn’t have bleach blonde hair or fake fingernails or – It was a real person, so that was more comforting. I think that really helped.

As a class instructor, she now hopes to “give back” by helping other women to realize the potential strength and fitness, have fun, and learn to be comfortable in their bodies. Denise equally talks about leading by example in her role as a mentor to young women whom she works with in the beauty industry, which she regards as fraught with competing messages.

Sally resists conforming to stereotyped expectations about what she can do or become. I discussed how this relates to Sally’s views on body capability both in terms of physicality (e.g.,



Figure 4.58 Sally - Not Me, Bride to Be

running, yoga) and career potential. It also applies to expectations for womanhood in her family of origin that conflict with Sally’s aspirations for a career in politics. Sally once again reveals her healthy rebel side in her “not me” photos. She captures the image of a “Bride to Be” banner (Figure 4.58) to represent her resistance to stereotyped gender roles.

It is a bit of an old stereotype of a woman being at home, very 1950’s housewife, dinners on the table when your husband gets home kind of thing, but that’s always kind of in the back of my mind as <shudders> yeah I – that’s hell for me. You think I take a bit of a feminist slant? <sarcasm> Yeah, I probably would in that there is more to life than being a Mrs.

Sally remarks that she cannot foresee satisfaction on this “traditional path” and, in truth, feels an aversion to being circumscribed to roles of wife and mother. Relating to her young niece, Sally expresses how she wants to model the possibility to carve your own path.

My sister is very much you know the typical mom who is living the dream, the mini-van lifestyle with a baby and a family and I know that my niece will see that in her mom and you know idolize that – maybe not idolize that, but maybe visualize that in *her future*. But if anything I would like to be – would like to tell her when she’s old enough to understand it of course that *there are other paths for you to take* and to honestly think critically about what you want in life because it’s not just *straight and narrow*, it’s not just black and white.



Figure 4.59 Sally - Not Me, Carbon Copy

At times, Sally finds it “hard to shake off those expectations” that she *should* want traditional ideals of marriage, motherhood, and feminine beauty for herself and, in these times of vacillation, it takes efforts to fortify herself on the self-determined path she has chosen. In her “not me” photos, Sally includes the image of a Chanel window display (Figure 4.59) featuring a group of

identical Minnie Mouse-like figures in power suits, sunglasses and pearls. This image represents the inauthenticity that Sally ascribes to striving to fit in, “look a certain way”, or “be like everyone else”. In her view, adopting this pursuit may neglect the option to become someone of greater substance. Referring back to her photo of the peacock (Figure 4.29), Sally affirms that she wants to be noticed and praised for her character and strengths over her looks. She considers this attitude to be a mark of maturity and wisdom compared to her teens:

When I was 16, the only thing I wanted to do was fit in and be like the other girls. Now I’d rather be applauded for my uniqueness and originality than be seen as some sort of clone or carbon-copy of another woman.

Parallel to Ivana’s message to choose for herself (Figure 4.54), Sally showcases a position from which she can explore what is possible and resist being painted into a corner. The broad message the women tell themselves here is that they *can* resist and *choose* not to buy into prejudicial, subjugating or constrictive ideals that threaten positive self-feelings and the capacity to showcase their best self.

Taking a positive psychology view, being a healthy rebel incites empowerment. It draws out self-protective and -enhancing instincts so variously conceptualized as faith, courage, feistiness, confidence, and so on, to propel choice and decisive action. For instance, the “waiting” that Ivana speaks of can be seen as promoted by subjugating messages about overweight that Ivana has internalized, such that she will not be taken seriously as an overweight interior decorator or that she will be ridiculed if she dares to dress her current body in the outfits that she has fashioned in her mind. Ivana starts to confront these beliefs and identify the need to detach them from herself via her counter-narrative of self-discovery, acceptance, and empowerment. Ivana emphasizes this aspiration with lively images that recapitulate her best self as dancing (Figure 4.21), “flowing” (Figure 4.35), being fierce (Figure 4.14) and “fabulous” (Figure 4.36). Her notion of being “bad” (Figure 4.37) in service of self-development cogently states the positive meaning of rebellion. By the shifting the narrative in this regard, Ivana’s weight feels less encumbering; though her physical size remains unchanged and the reality of weight-prejudice continues, Ivana’s ability to deconstruct the intrapsychic weightiness and obstacle of her embodied subjectivity serves to bolster fortitude and resilience.

4.6.3 Self as Coping Resource

The self as a narrative construct, internalized, integrative and evolving across time and circumstance, is illuminated as the foundation of resilience in the women’s stories. The story that each woman tells herself about who she is, what she needs and values, and what she has already overcome is presented as a source of resolve, endurance, and conviction. Taking it a step further, the women highlight how a healthy sense of self is like a tool to return to in difficult times, in order to (re)grasp and, in turn, harness inner strengths to effectively contend with new challenges. As the reader reflects on preceding thematic clusters, you may readily recall anecdotes that already lend support to this notion. Here, I make explicit how the women’s self-understanding, of the core values, qualities, attributes, and aspirations that constitute selfhood for each of them, function to aid in coping.

Madeline revealed this subtheme most explicitly, in relation to her story of overcoming marital abuse. In this story, her-self is characterized as resolute, full of determination and purpose, and steadfastly protective.

I think that when a person is abused, when your ex-husband <angry tone> chokes you until you pass out, pushes you down the stairs, and holds a gun to your head it would be *pretty darn easy to break..pretty darn easy to just let*

your leaves wilt and fall off, turn color and die. But there again, my faith, my stubbornness said “NO DAMN WAY” <defiant laugh>

Madeline credits her survival – her capacity to bend and not break (Figure 4.51) – to her strong faith and tenacious spirit, which guided her towards healthier, more fulfilling circumstances. Using her photo of a misty lake (Figure 4.60), Madeline refers to core values and beliefs as “anchors” that will steer and steady her through future uncertainty and challenge.

The mist, that would sort of be the *uncertainties* of what the future holds. Yet to me there’s *no fear in that*, you know that the mist will lift and you’ll just face whatever’s there. I don’t know what’s going to happen in the future...but I know there are anchors there, like the picture has the tree in the foreground and the back and that’s how I see my life. I don’t know what’s going to happen, I don’t know what’s to come, but I know I have anchors to hold onto.



Figure 4.60 Madeline - *Me I Aspire to Be, Anchored*

Madeline reveals the importance of being true to self in the context of resilience. As mentioned, she uniquely interpreted the three photo categories with respect to time. She pictures ‘this is not me’ as the unwanted or unhealthy self that she embodied in the past. Madeline expresses that coming through adversity has reinforced her healthy sense of self and determination to maintain well-being

in the future. Having weathered the storm of domestic violence and depression to reemerge like a rainbow (Figure 4.52), a symbol of self-recovery and renewal, Madeline vows “I won’t go back” to that discordant and self-destructive place again.

There was a time when I was in a dark place mentally, but I put it in the “not me” group, to what I don’t want to be because I’ve been there, I’ve come out on the other side as a rainbow and I won’t go back to that dark place...because *I do not want to be that* <adamant> and I will work – do whatever I can to not be that.

That personal change is often precipitated by salient life events, crises, or trauma is well-recognized (Ogden & Hills, 2008; Pals, 2006). The term “post-traumatic growth” (PTG), coined by Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004), has been used to capture this phenomenon. The PTG framework essentially reiterates, in the context of mixed-methods research, the process of re-storying or reconstructing the self in relation to trauma that Crossley (2000a, b) theorized. PTG states that introspecting and “processing” the psychological impact of an adverse event is

necessary to enable its use as a source of new conceptions and patterns of relating to the self (Pals & McAdams, 2004). Pals (2006) referenced the idea of “authoring your own second chance” by relating to adverse events as a “narrative catalyst” for positive self-transformation in the present. Dweck (2006) similarly conceptualized the effect of a growth mindset.

Relating to adversity as a precipitant or “catalyst” to positive development is in keeping with the women’s narratives of resilience in the face of personal crises or salient life events in this study. An anecdote from Madeline captures a defining moment of empowerment and resolve that she experienced with her abusive ex-husband, which catalyzed her to seek healthier circumstances.

He became very abusive in every way that you can imagine – emotionally, physically, verbally, sexually – and the last night that I actually saw him by himself he held a gun to my head. That’s when something in me snapped and I just – it kicked in, I threw the gun from his hand and I looked him in the eye and I said, “if you ever do that again you better be prepared for one of us to not walk away because one of us will not” and I said “I don’t intend it to be me”.

Madeline says how something in her “snapped” and “kicked in”, as if an inner capacity was ignited and became operative. She describes reacting in a primal way in this moment on an instinctual will to survive that had been burgeoning within her. As this inner capacity became embodied, Madeline recognized herself as stronger than she thought, like the dragonfly (Figure 4.2) she pictured. She was able to leave the marriage and set herself on a path of positive change. Catalyzing experiences can be found in other women’s narratives. Sally, for example, narrates her experience of relationship break-up as cause to reevaluate and reconnect to self in a positive way, (re)defining her-self as the ultimate source of knowledge and authority on what is best for her. Sarah describes learning about what “really matters” in light of her mother’s battle with addiction and deaths in her family. Both Sarah and Sally voice salient experiences of outdoing their own expectations as cause to re-think embodiment and transform their embodied selves.

Ivana describes a mounting awareness of inner potentials or “surprises”, as she says, as growing dissatisfied with dormancy and “screaming to get out”. She uses her image of the fuchsia flower (Figure 4.38) to symbolize her aspired self “opening” and her budding sense of strength; like the flower in its form and color, Ivana says:

I have substance. I’ve never been drawn to wispy little things, little floral patterns. I’ve always been drawn to something bold. So, I guess that speaks for me as well. It’ll – *it holds*, it’s not going to fall apart.

Ivana refers to the “richness and depth” of the fuchsia color depicted across several images (Figures 4.36, 4.37, & 4.38) in her collection, as “that’s me..it’s there”, ready to flourish and “be vibrant”. Her words display becoming awake and intentional. Rather than a sudden development, there is a subtle compounding of experiences and insights across time as creating cause for re-evaluation. Though Ivana emphasizes how she is still working up the courage to “put herself out there”, she has already made a powerful connection to inner drives that required courage; she had to look deep and work to ascertain what exactly is missing or unrealized in her-self.

Likewise, Denise’s capacity for introspection and self-examination emerges as a fundamental means through which her-self becomes such a rich coping resource. Returning to the photograph of Denise’s tattoo (Figure 4.19), it is significant that this image represents *her own* eye, big and green with long lashes, within which the beauty symbol resides, as opposed to a generic eye. Like Denise’s remarks about listening to her own “smart voice”, the depiction of her eye denotes Denise, herself, as the ultimate “beholder” or observer. It is her view that matters most. Validating and empowering herself as the “expert” on “me” contrasts moments in Denise’s narrative of looking to others, such as her father, for approval.



Figure 4.61 Sarah - This is Not Me vs Me I Aspire to Be, Being Green

A healthy sense of self arises in this sub-theme as not only a foundation, but a compass that can guide one’s purpose and direction. Even when others or societal messages underestimate or undervalue their embodied self, the women cite how their implicit understandings of self-worth and the intention that the self, as a narrative, provides can see them through. For Sarah, doing her part to “be green” by showing respect for the environment in her daily life (Figure 4.61) offers a sense of consonance and being efficacious; even in the face of such overwhelming concerns that can be slow to change, like environmental issues, Sarah can regard herself as acting to make a difference.

You know you're taught to respect people and elders and that kind of thing but why not respect our planet too, our land, like we're doing some damage to it. People don't seem to notice, but I think it's really important that even like teaching your children that caring for the environment is important.

With Sarah's narrative, the self also emerges as a place to turn in times of self-doubt, where she can review gains and remarkable shows of strength in her past to re-supply fortitude and validate "expertise" she already possesses. In this regard, the embodied self as a foundation also



Figure 4.62 Madeline - *This is Me, Birds in Flight*

represents home and shelter, a place where one takes refuge and gathers strength. There is a similar inoculating quality about the self as "positively unique" described earlier; this meaning supports (re)discovery of assets that can be "used to my advantage", as Sally says, and employing creative strengths in healthy rebellion when the self is obstructed or being adversely treated. Storying self after adversity,

Madeline connotes a freedom that comes with forging a self-determined path and being purposefully "on my way", as she says, analogous to her image of birds in migratory flight (Figure 4.62).

As "I" becomes the central, efficacious force in the women's stories about their embodied selves, so too emerges a sense of affirmation and empowerment to guide them through their specific circumstances. I have depicted the encircling of meaning amongst the Embracing Yourself, Creating Your Best Self, and Resilient Self clusters using bidirectional arrows in my graphic representation (Figure 4.1). Parsing the meaning into three distinct superordinate themes served to highlight various angles and nuances of the women's experiences that, when taken together, form a full, interrelated picture of the phenomenon; though, it is acknowledged that a bounded thematic structure is imposed for the purpose of communication. It follows that this thematic trio can also be seen as informing, either directly or indirectly, the final thematic cluster regarding women's experiences of coping with adversity specific to weight-loss dieting practices. This pattern of influence is also shown with arrows in my graphic.

4.7 (Re)establishing the Self in a Healthy Lifestyle

The women translate their capacity for resilience into reconstructing the meaning and practice of dieting. They describe re-evaluating weight-loss dieting in their lives in light of experiences of dieting as hindering versus contributing to their best selves. They think critically to inform a new position on weight-loss activities or behaviors, including ways to narratively conceptualize the goals and atmosphere of weight-loss, and what constitutes an unhealthy versus healthy approach. All the women express understandings of dieting as “problematic”. These understandings were based upon recollections of struggling to change their body weight/shape via restrictive dieting methods, which led to negative feelings about the embodied self as well as discord between their personal motivation to diet for self-improvement and the aversive experience of dieting per se.

As opposed to aligning with traditional notions of “restrictive dieting” or messages of the diet industry, the women re-story themselves and their actions for self-improvement, including body work, within a broader framework of health promotion and self-care. This framework is elucidated as self-affirming and derived from the self – informed by skills, knowledge, insight, and values – shifting the discourse on changing one’s weight/shape from an oppressive, externally imposed demand into something more self-determined. Narratively re-casting past experiences of dieting that were debilitating, self-defeating, associated with repeat failure, and heightened body-self dissatisfaction into learning opportunities aids participants in establishing a healthier way forward with body work. The self is re-established as central, the driving force in deciding on goals and how to go about weight-loss, dietary and/or exercise pursuits, instead of prescribed programs and plans that felt dissonant, external, and even harmful to the self.

4.7.1 Self & Body in Sociocultural Context

The participants voice a critical awareness of limits, demands, and pressures placed upon women’s bodies by messages that idealize thinness and stigmatize overweight in Western society. With an understanding of being a woman of a certain weight/shape and a chronic “dieter” in sociocultural context, they move to question the status quo of “dieting” and redefine what this practice means for their sense of self and embodiment. The women expressed irritation with the media’s promotion of increasingly unhealthy and unreasonable images of female thinness. They reflect on how this discourse influences girls’ body image at an early age,

including their own journeys from girls to women and observations on the experiences of other girls/women in their lifeworld.

Chiefly around the time of puberty, the women recall a growing awareness of the significance and implications of their bodily weight and physique. This was especially true for those women who were overweight in childhood. In looking back, from a position of adult wisdom, they now see how a process of internalization implicitly began to shape the way they looked upon and lived in their changing bodies, how the gaze and remarks of others were interpreted, and even how they related to the embodied presence of peers (e.g., developmental differences, being bullied). The women also referred to the influence of available role models (e.g., family members, movie or fashion icons) and sources of validation that they looked to (e.g., parental approval, attention from boys) back then.

This process of narratively situating self and body in context is enlightening and promotes not only self-understanding, but also self-compassion in relation to body-image struggles over the lifespan. For instance, Denise identifies how she began to internalize pressure towards an unrealistically thin ideal from a young age.

I think for me I was a synchronized swimmer for 10 years – started that when I was 5. The girls were always really pretty, and tall, and skinny and I remember we were about 12-years-old and we would have weigh-in to see where your weight was at, you know when finished your year and at the end of summer when you started back up again, “Oh well it looks like you put a little weight on over the summer” my coach said. *That’s not good for a 12-year-old* <angry tone>. So that was probably a moment in time where it resonated like oh well probably shouldn’t have that extra weight.

Denise recounts this memory as a moment where she began to look upon her own body differently, mirroring that “critical gaze”, and it “resonated” that she needed to watch and control both her eating and weight. She also shares about having a modeling agent critically dissect her teenage body, relating to her as a commodity rather than a person. This experience led Denise to doubt her felt sense of embodiment as an athletic, 16-year-old girl and problematize her body.

Basically, you’re standing there in your bra and panties and they were measuring and weighing you and they were like “Yeah, could lose a couple inches off the hips and probably drop about 5 pounds” and I’m thinking “Where? I just finished swimming for 10 years, I’m toned, like I’m athletic”.

Ivana recognizes overweight stigma as socially constituted yet powerfully self-disciplined in her life, seeing how she has internalized and continued to play out harmful messages in her body-self relation. She comments on the need to change this conversation by

externalizing stigma out and away from herself. Ivana explores the ambivalence of being (un)comfortable in her body with an artistic image of a full-figured torso in lingerie (Figure 4.63) that she simultaneously regards as “not me” and “me I aspire to be”.

I guess being “not me” is that I don’t feel comfortable *just being me like that*, just putting on clothes *like that*, kind of letting it – you know being able to buy lingerie or clothes *that would fit my shape* and just *be me...* You know I can *see myself as that* but then I find it somewhat repulsive – I admire someone that could *do this looking like that* <pointing to image> and then on the other hand I find it somewhat repulsive so I *want to do it* and *yet I don’t want to*. And to have someone *like it*, to have someone that thinks it *is nice* – because I would think that most people would find that *disgusting* and if you do like it, then there’s something wrong with you.



Figure 4.63 Ivana - *This is Not Me & Me I Aspire to Be, Full-Figured & (Un)comfortable*

She reads a conflicted meaning as “admirable” yet “repulsive” in imagining what it could be like to embody the comfort it takes to don lingerie, feel good “looking like that” and have “someone like it”; this experience seems so foreign and unimaginable to Ivana as she struggles to drive a wedge between her embodied self and overweight stigma to embrace body positivity. Ivana’s story about this image echoes the powerful negative effect of internalized body shame, which recent research has drawn to attention (Duarte et al., 2014; Pila et al., 2015, 2017; Woodward et al., 2019).

Several women in this study described a combined influence of the beauty and diet industries in promoting their experiences of body dissatisfaction. As a professional working within the beauty industry, Denise remarks that the industry is judgmental and focused primarily on outer appearance when this should matter less than the underpinning of self-worth and -care. At the fitness gym where she works, Sarah observes how other women, like herself, become hyper-aware and overly critical of their bodies on display instead of embracing active embodiment. Middle-aged participants, such as Gigi, voice compassion for young women that are contending with even thinner ideals today compared to the days of their own youth:

I think many women have to fight. I see so it much in young women today who are *constantly* battling the image of who they are told they *should* look like. I think it's even HARDER for women today. They're always fed this this message that they need to be like STICKS which – I mean I thought it was hard enough when I was growing up, but I think it's even harder now. If they were to follow the message of how thin they *should be* according to the media, it wouldn't even be *healthy* <irritated>.

The reach and impact of sociocultural discourse upon women's bodies and lives is not taken for granted, but a clearly demarcated presence in the women's narratives that, with age and accumulated experience, they have grown mindful of and endeavored to rally against.

Regardless of their own body size/shape, each of the women related especial awareness of the harmful discursive constructions that overweight people are flawed and objectionable. Gigi contrasts the devaluing of overweight individuals with the rewards and advantages offered for thinness in Western society. The dichotomized meaning made of thinness versus fatness is so imbedded in the fabric of Western society and insidiously at work that, for many, the implications thereof may go unnoticed; however, Gigi emphasizes that the negative lens through which she is seen and treated as an overweight woman exists as a fact or truth in her world. She states, "it's no wonder you get to feeling like this" and "how come we're treated like this?" about her bra shopping experience as she comprehends, with self-compassion, a reason for the struggle beyond her own body. Gigi equates overweight stigma with other kinds of discrimination and contextualizes her struggle as a common plight of overweight women, "people like me", with whom she feels a shared sense of being limited or marginalized.

Both Sally and Ivana describe a felt sense of the "critical gaze" in being in the world with others and expectancy of being seen through a lens of prejudice due to their bigger bodies. Sally adds another layer to the issue in expressing awareness of the gendered inequality of weight prejudice. Research has suggested that women in Western society are more likely to be negatively impacted by weight bias than men because of the strength of the attractiveness mandate for women on top of perceptions of fat people as weak-willed and out of control (Smith, 2012). Sally considers being an overweight woman as amounting to a double obstacle in her chosen career path of political communications.

My manager at work – she's the only female manager –she says "Sally it's a boys club and you have to put your foot down and not let them take your foot off the ground..it's very male-centric and the fact that I am *a woman* and on top of that an overweight woman means that it's a lot more effort that I'll have

to put forward, than say a normal shaped guy, while competing for a job or a promotion or just trying to be a social person making friends.

Thinking critically about sociocultural messages around thinness similarly helps Sarah to realize “that not everyone has to *look a certain way*” and focus on “understanding for me what I think is a beautiful person or a beautiful body – and that it’s not one body either”.

The women narrate themselves as becoming critical consumers of the diet industry itself. With re-approaching dieting, Madeline describes herself taking a stand against the restrictive and prescriptive version of dieting she has known; that is, dieting that is instructed and evaluated by an external source, dieting that has “made me feel like a failure”, and dieting that led to feeling put apart from success stories. Madeline perceives that the diet industry and reality television oversimplify the problem and set up false expectations about weight-loss by giving the impression of a simple fix and one-size-fits-all approach, which does not realistically account for the individualized emotional-psychological work involved.

Programs like “The Biggest Loser” give a false sense of success. They give you the impression that oh yeah you buy the books and follow the DVDs and all this and you can lose all this weight, but none of these programs focuses on the mental issue, you know, and there is so much more emotional and mental issues to dieting than just the losing the weight.

Likewise, Ivana questions messages that trivialize weight-loss, noting her own experience of being told by health professionals to simply, “Go home, lose weight, you’ll feel better”. This message is at odds with her lived experience of the physical and psychological work it takes to lose weight. Madeline astutely considers how the diet industry is invested in fatness. She recalls times when diet programs were working for her, but she felt that program staff tried to thwart her progress (e.g., said she was “losing weight too fast”) and wonders if they were taking advantage of her for profit. The women reveal themselves as knowing agents in the context of dieting experiences. They are capable of reflecting critically on dissatisfying experiences with commercial diet programs and organizations, including how these ways of “dieting” and agendas therein clashed with their personal values and intentions. Gaining insight and self-compassion regarding their sociocultural context supports an emerging position of resistance and empowerment to make a positive change.

4.7.2 Disillusioned & Conflicted in Dieting

The women relate a growing disillusionment with traditional ideas and practices of “restrictive dieting”. Gigi has come to believe dieting is “never positive”, as she recalls cycles of

falling off and recommitting to diets and the experience of emotional unpredictability with evaluating progress by a number on the scale. Ivana describes how she has often felt alone and increasingly ineffective at dieting; though she has “worked at it” it has not “worked for me”. There is a sense of self-blame and shame associated with continuing to diet unsuccessfully, which sits in tension with the women’s stories of increasing skepticism about what the diet industry is selling and its ability to provide their desired outcome. Regarding food and weight, Denise reveals a tension between controlling the body via the “solution” of restrictive dieting versus alleviating inhibitory feelings in finding a new approach. She identifies the allure of testimonials that present the before-and-after image and exact number of pounds lost. This dominant narrative in weight-loss culture has been highlighted by feminist scholars as a key contributor to the enduring cultural resonance of dieting and other forms of body work in women’s lives (Fox, 2017; Orbach, 2009; Groven & Braithwaite, 2016). Like other woman in this study, Denise questions the hidden agendas and reality of this dominant narrative. She specifically observes how weight-loss advertising “plays on insecurities” to sell a service or product.

I think the ads play on my insecurities or any woman’s insecurities that diet, that they’re just like “hmm, here’s the before girl and here’s the after, here she was fat and here she is skinny. And she’s frumpy and depressed here and oh wow she’s – her face is full of color” and usually they always have their hair and make-up done, they’ve got fabulous clothes on. It’s like “Wow. I could be that girl. Fresh-faced and happy” whereas maybe if you’re not thin you’re unhappy.

In all of this, Denise questions, “is it worth it?” Dieting has been disappointing for her. It has been a shameful and an uncomfortable way of being such that she tries to conceal or deceive others about her “dieter side” or present a front of “normalcy” by highlighting non-dieter behaviours (e.g., eating a candy bar) and using self-deprecating humor. Dieting has produced only fleeting satisfaction and does not seem viable over the long-term; while she may be “down a dress size” as a result, she does not *feel* good on the inside like the “after girl” displays. It ultimately does not give her what she needs or produce what she is longing for.

All the women talk about ways that “dieting” has failed to meet their needs. For instance, Ivana and Madeline share how personal experiences have cast doubt on messages about relying on a support network promoted within diet culture. Both recall feelings of lacking guidance and understanding from others in dieting, even when involved with commercial weight-loss

programs. Madeline reports feeling isolated in weight-loss programs done online and in-person. Attending programs in-person, she felt that attendees lacked a common goal and did not really support one another when it became merely a social activity (e.g., going out for wings after the meeting). She notes how these experiences actually limited, rather than supported, her ability to be successful at weight-loss.

Over time, the women recount a growing sense of conflict surrounding their involvement with the status quo of “dieting” and weight-loss culture. For Sally, recurring feelings of ineffectiveness and dissatisfaction across dieting attempts calls to question her motives and whether the approach of restrictive dieting is “right for me” or best way “to go about” weight-loss. Sally has “leaned on” dieting for its promise of rewards and of appealing to others by demonstrating dietary restraint. However, as she reconsiders her experience of achieving weight-loss in the past only to regain weight, she expresses skepticism that achieving a thinner shape will actually enhance her personal satisfaction. Sally conveys a resentment for dieting as a “life-long, endless pursuit” that is time-consuming, demands restriction and, in the end, intensifies feelings of being overwhelmed and burdened over and above just being overweight. Seeing herself engage in an activity that lacks true reward and is inconsistent with her own ideology and values (e.g., unconventional, critical thinker) yields personal conflict. This conflict leads Sally to reassess “dieting” as an imperative or obligatory activity to meet societal expectations. This reassessment is in keeping with feminist critiques of restrictive dieting as self-discipline (Bacon, 2010; Bordo, 2003; Lupton, 2013) and illustrative of arguments from HAES proponents of the necessity to shift the focus off of weight onto holistic health and well-being (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Tylka et al., 2014).

Gigi recalls her early days of dieting in a small, rural community where she felt that knowledge and options regarding weight-loss were limited and less accessible. She uses the term “formal” diets to refer to specific programs, plans, or strategies offered by the diet industry. Gigi states how as a girl and teen she followed these “formal” diets with dedication even though they were awful. She refers to the diet foods available back then as “just murder”. Over her history with dieting, Gigi describes becoming “turned off” from structured programs, plans, and organizations, not unlike her memories of struggling to choke down the broiled fish or liver that was provided by prepared diet plans. Gigi believes that going on and off various diets over the years has “fiddled with” her natural body metabolism, creating lasting difficulty to lose weight.

Sarah's narrative clarifies this growing tension about dieting as she talks about her view of “restrictive” dieting practices in effect leading to working against herself. Sarah claims a “negative attachment” to the word “diet” for the inherent meaning of restriction that, in her experience, has ultimately led to feelings of being ineffectual, debilitated, disembodied and at odds with herself.

Especially when you feel like you’re depriving yourself somehow and you don’t see the benefits, you’re like “why am I torturing myself?”

She believes that the inherent restriction contributes to diet failure, with the dieter feeling “defeat before you even start” owing to a history of preceding “failure” and diet-breaking and the negative emotional cycle tied to the same. Sarah’s narrative recalls what researchers have termed the what-the-hell effect (Polivy & Herman, 1985) as she talks of giving up entirely after “falling off the wagon” and having to “find excuses” to explain or rationalize the offense of “indulging” or “breaking” one’s diet. Like Sally, Sarah regards traditional dieting as done to the body-self rather than intrinsically motivated, enhancing, and consonant. Moreover, in Sarah’s view, the restriction of it all, in particular, is seen as compromising her ability to sustain positive self-feelings while trying to lose weight and, at times, amounting to “torturing” and “depriving” oneself.

Denise likewise experiences restrictive dieting as inconsistent with her best self. She denotes dieting as a solution that does not sit well with her intellect, although she continues to feel emotionally seduced or drawn into it. This conflict is exemplified in Denise’s repeat use of the words “not good”, “dumb”, and “stupid” to describe dieting per se and the thin ideal and her emphasis of the shame and secrecy about being a dieter. Denise expresses desire to relinquish the pressure and responsibility of watchfulness over her body, perceiving this as unceasing in dieting because you not only must lose weight but also maintain thinness. She wonders if, in some ways, just letting it all go and getting fat might be easier, but this does not sit well with her healthy sense of self either. Previous research on the experience of failure in dieting has similarly reported dieters’ struggles to make sense of discord between behaviours and selves, and cope with the uncertainty that this discord produces (Buchanan & Sheffield, 2017; Green et al., 2009).

“Dieter” emerges as an unwanted self-identity within these women’s stories. Ivana describes how being a “dieter” is something she has always been despite her desire not to be. The need to diet in itself signifies “being problematic”, yet Ivana keeps at it because she wants to rid herself of the “problem” by losing weight. Gigi similarly expresses being a “dieter” as something

that she has always been, having spent years “twisting and turning” herself with it, but would quickly give it up if she could. There’s a “damned if I do, damned if I don’t” scenario at work in these descriptions of being a dieter from Ivana and Gigi, a sense of feeling wrong either way, and a connotation of persisting at dieting as a necessary evil.

Ivana also describes dieting in secret due to body shame and, more importantly, to keep others from seeing her fail at weight-loss. Ivana, Sally, and Gigi contrast having to diet with being normal and healthy. The loss of normalcy associated with being overweight and, in turn, having to diet queries if shedding weight – actually being successful at dieting – may offer the possibility of shedding this unwanted self? Interview studies of individuals who achieve and sustain weight-loss in the short-term have shown that “exiting stigma” is possible but not easy and that maintaining weight-loss over time does not necessarily alleviate stigma. Separating oneself from stigma requires navigating barriers with social labelling and feedback as well as mental obstacles of uncertainty and doubt about embodied subjectivity after weight-loss. Moreover, the reality of the post weight-loss body typically falls short dieters’ idealized expectations, necessitating a process of reconciling the gap between the fantasy and reality of thinness (Granberg, 2006, 2011). Polivy and Herman (2002b) described a pattern of “false hopes” among chronic dieters that maintains the cyclical pattern; specifically, placing unrealistic demands on themselves for behaviour change and maintaining unrealistic expectancies about the rewards of thinness induces continual diet attempts despite the pain and difficulty of the task.

These research findings and the present women’s stories of dissatisfaction with dieting lead to wondering if it is possible to continue pursuing weight-loss as a goal whilst shedding the shame and dissonance of being a “dieter”? This question comes further to the surface as the women describe the shift of ideology that they are endeavoring to make regarding weight-loss in their lives. The women represent their conflict with the status quo of dieting as a turning point that stimulates re-storying themselves. This account is in keeping with Pals’s (2006) conception of a “springboard” effect, brought about by emotionally and mentally processing adversity.

4.7.3 Healthy Lifestyle vs. Restrictive Dieting

The women contrast the restrictive nature of dieting with a conception of healthy lifestyle change as they reconsider what constitutes wellness and where weight-loss fits into this picture. Reflecting on her past weight-loss efforts, Sarah expresses how “it made me realize that dieting

is not the answer”, that dieting “isn’t the way to go” to enhance her physique and support her definition of health.

The word “diet”, it’s too restricting. And that’s the biggest thing. I’ve tried a lot of them, not for very long, but I’ve tried them and gave up right away because they are too restricting. It’s an unreasonable *way to live*.

Sarah’s account of restrictive dieting is to waver uncomfortably, “going on and off the wagon” akin to periods of sobriety and relapse. She experiences dietary restriction as “unreasonable” in its imposition of demands, confinement and denial of the self. Like others, Sarah regards this way of “dieting” to be an oversimplified and glorified solution in terms of her overarching goal to be a healthier person. Thus, she resituates herself and her pursuit of body modification within the framework of a healthy lifestyle change. But what does it mean to lead a healthy lifestyle?

Sally equates a healthy lifestyle with getting back to basics, suggesting a return to her most fundamental values. She experiences a meaningful sense of simplification with focusing on living healthfully in the present and making mindful decisions about food and exercise that, on the whole, uphold good self-care.

It means that I feel better about myself. When you feel better about yourself you have little to no body image issues, you feel healthier, you maybe lose some pounds. I don’t focus on the whole *losing pounds bit* because I think that’s kind of getting ahead of myself. But just kind of at the very basic level, just trying to eat well and put on my running shoes and just be *basically healthy* and not try to *jump the gun* and say “Oh this is a goal, I have to lose a certain amount of pounds or weight or whatever”. I think that it *says something* – when you do take care of yourself it sends a message about how you feel about yourself to others who might be observing.

She depicts this idea of getting back to basics with photographs that hold the subject matter in focus, namely her bicycle and asparagus as symbols of healthy living, while the rest of the scene



Figure 4.64 Sally - *Me I Aspire to Be, Healthy Lifestyle*

is blurred (Figure 4.64). Denise explains that leading a healthy lifestyle involves watching what she eats and portion control; however, like Sally, she regards herself as making food choices in a spirit of being mindful and informed about nutrition, as opposed to restraint and self-criticism. Along with healthy eating, Denise values regular exercise and physical fitness within her healthy lifestyle. She expresses the benefits of regular exercise for both physical and psychological well-being and takes pride in being an “exerciser” (Figure 4.65).

The women’s accounts of a healthy lifestyle emphasize actions over outcomes and a philosophy of living in the present as opposed to living for the possibility of future weight-loss. A healthy lifestyle is not a temporary state. It is not done in pursuit of a specific end-goal, as is



Figure 4.65 Denise - This is Me, Exerciser

often the case with dieting. Instead, a healthy lifestyle is conceived as a broader philosophy to live by. A healthy lifestyle is characterized by several shifts of emphasis: being measured and integrated as opposed to strictly imposed; being conscious and mindful of choices as opposed to self-disciplined or -restrictive; and adopting a broader aim of improved health and well-being as opposed to a narrow focus

on losing pounds. The framework of healthy lifestyle is integrative and considers diet, exercise, and weight as facets of a healthy person, in keeping with the notion of embracing yourself and your body from a holistic perspective.

Gigi views the adoption of a healthy lifestyle as “whole living” and promoting holistic health, including eating healthy yet flavorful foods, working on fitness and mobility, and addressing needs for mental and spiritual well-being.

Well I’m just now trying to just go just natural. I just – I have turned myself totally off the formal diet plans and programs, all of that. I just *cannot, cannot* go back there.

Her use of the descriptor “formal” again references an outward structure, a following or being in accord with accepted or prescribed forms and conventions. According to Gigi, formal dieting is artificial and inauthentic: “not real life”, “not real living”, and “not real food”. In contrast, she describes “going natural” with her new approach to weight-loss, characterized by greater self-reliance, freedom, faithfulness to real life, and opportunity for spontaneity. Gigi notes how

educating herself about nutrition and the physiology of weight-loss has expanded her understanding. Likewise, acquiring cooking skills and talents has helped her learn to prepare healthy foods with flavor.

In contrast to her past dieting approaches, Ivana similarly regards the need for a holistic framework that considers the multi-dimensional determinants of health as well as her personal values. For example, Ivana shares how coping with chronic pain impacts her ability to exercise. This means that she needs to balance weight-loss and pain management to optimize her well-being. But, living a balanced lifestyle is not just about diet and exercise. Ivana describes how a healthy lifestyle also attends to other things that matter, including her relationships with self and others and personal projects. The other participants expressed this same sense of broadened context and consideration of things that matter within their conceptions of a healthy lifestyle.

Taking a self-determined approach to weight-loss and body work was deemed important within the frame of a healthy lifestyle. This meaning was recounted as a lesson learned through successive struggles to follow and be successful with structured diet plans or weight-loss programs. In a healthy lifestyle, Madeline regards her efforts to lose weight as part of becoming a healthier person. She approaches weight-loss from a standpoint that feels more nourishing than the past because it prioritizes her intrinsic motives. Although the activities of weight-loss (e.g., portion control) may resemble that of restrictive dieting, Madeline's lived meaning of the task is significantly changed by focusing on her needs and self-enhancement. Equally, Ivana has reached a crucial realization that to be successful at losing weight, she must be self-motivated and self-directed. Throughout her narrative, Ivana repeats the importance of making change "for me", "not for anything or anybody", and regardless of societal messages or the ideas and critiques of others. Gigi states how she no longer sees her past ways of trying to lose weight as the "ticket". She declares "I'm just not going back" and describes this decision as "freeing". Being self-directed in weight-loss or as she Gigi puts it, "doing it my way this time" provides renewed impetus and energy.

Balance and moderation were other ideals that emerged in association with a healthy lifestyle and the reconstituting of weight-loss behaviours within this framework. Making a lifestyle change is difficult, requires ongoing commitment, and a process of continual readjustment towards goals. However, unlike dieting, Sarah perceives that this philosophy affords greater capacity to be moderate and kind in relating to herself, which enhances her motivation.



Figure 4.66 Sarah - This is Me & Me I Aspire to Be, Moderation

Moderation is a meaningful concept for Sarah regarding her present efforts and aspirations to eat healthier and improve her physique (Figure 4.66). Sarah describes moderation as being flexible with herself and, on the whole, seeking balance with food choices; for example, she can have “treats” and enjoy all foods within reason and without overindulging. Flexibility alleviates the negative cycle or inner conflict associated

with dietary restriction, deconstructs the morality associations about “good” versus “bad” foods or “diet-breaking” and supports a more compassionate stance on her eating behaviour. For Sarah, it facilitates working with (rather than against) her-self and finding a middle-ground in terms of her values.

Healthy doesn't always make you happy. Eating salad doesn't make you happy. There is a *balance*. You have to *exercise as well* to be healthy and happy. A skinny woman might actually have more body fat than a curvy woman just because they don't have any muscle mass, so they might *look* healthy to somebody else but really they're not. Finding that balance – there is a fine line because you can cross it easy enough both ways. I also know people that run those crazy ultra-marathons and I don't think they're healthy either. Like they *look great* and I'm sure they eat great, but they run these 150-kilometer races and pretty much are in the hospital when they're finished, so *that can't be good* for you either, right, so trying to find the *middle*.

Sally also expresses the meaning of “integrating” healthy eating and exercise into her life versus life being consumed by these behaviours. The atmosphere of mindfulness, over restriction and vigilance, means that decisions to enjoy dessert or forgo running to relax in front of the television are not felt so intensely. Referring to pictures of her running shoes (Figure 4.39) and asparagus (Figure 4.64), Sally says:

It's not something that I should have to *feel bad about* when I *don't do it*, but just kind of be conscious of it..be mindful of it.

Sarah adds that it is necessary to strike a balance between enjoyment in the short-term and acting in a way that moves you towards values, aspirations, and goals over the long-term.

Similar to Sarah, Madeline makes a distinction between moderation and self-deprivation. The extreme sense of control and dietary restraint often felt with traditional dieting is likened to

self-deprivation by Madeline for how it compromises her sense of well-being. By contrast, moderation means exercising a healthy and sufficient level of control that helps her to lose weight without compromising well-being. Madeline ascribes feelings of greater stability and confidence to living a healthy lifestyle in comparison to her past experience of “yo-yo dieting”. In the context of restrictive dieting, Madeline says that food was always overpowering her to “give in to it”, which led to feeling like a “failure”. With a shift of approach, she describes reclaiming the capacity to enjoy herself and care for her body along the way to losing weight. Similarly, after years of fad and time-limited diets, Denise expresses that she is now approaching things the “right” way; that is, an approach that is true to her-self, draws upon her “smart voice”, and emphasizes a balance of healthy eating and exercise.

The women reflect an overall understanding of “healthy lifestyle” as something that is more manageable, attainable, and self-affirming than “dieting”. As compared to restriction of “dieting”, there is a sense of liberation that comes with the notion of healthy lifestyle in the women’s narratives, especially related to concepts of moderation, balance, and flexibility. A study by Epiphaniou and Ogden (2010) found that women who had successfully lost weight perceived a shift from restriction (at their heaviest weight) to liberation (current reduced weight) in their sense of self. Interestingly, the women in the present study narrate a similar shift about their embodied selves within the frame of a healthy lifestyle, despite not yet achieving their physical weight/shape goals. Moreover, the framework of a healthy lifestyle and adopting a holistic view on the embodied self, in fact, de-emphasizes weight. This observation highlights the positive significance of the change of ideological framework from “dieting” to healthy lifestyle for the women’s sense of self and embodiment in the present study.

In addition to finding a better way to reach their weight or physique goals, this movement away from dieting per se was motivated by the women’s desire to align their actions and values. Sally perceives that a healthy lifestyle change has greater substance or credibility than “dieting”. This shift in ideology affects a change of spirit, with Sally’s narrative becoming more optimistic about weight-loss and improved esteem. She adopts a moderate view that healthy behaviour change requires time and work to incorporate into your life and transform into habits. But, despite the hard work involved, Sally appears more at ease with aligning herself and her actions with this notion than a label of “dieting” or “dieter”. Gigi re-stories past failures to lose weight in a similar manner; as opposed to eating the wrong things, dieting incorrectly, or not being

disciplined enough, the true problem was that her approach, in hindsight, did not align with her values, neglected ingredients she needed for success, and failed to consider the “big picture”.

4.7.4 Focusing on Self-care

Within the framework of a healthy lifestyle change, the women focus on self-care as an essential component to their embodied selves and holistic feeling of wellness. Similar to self-determination, pursuing weight-loss from a position of self-care has a positive impact on the women’s sense of empowerment and expectations regarding outcomes. In contrast to reservations about the potential of restrictive dieting, Sally expresses hopefulness about the broad rewards that she sees as possible through leading a healthy lifestyle that espouses self-care. As noted above, the specific focus on losing pounds is no longer the driving force or pressure for her, relegated as one of several positive outcomes that Sally sees as possible through living healthier. Likewise, Sally’s worries about how others may perceive or judge her move into the background here. In the past Sally described dieting to lose weight as an obligation that was very much motivated by others’ perceptions of her. But within the framework of a healthy lifestyle change, Sally appears to be making changes to her diet and activity in a spirit of owing it to herself and investing in her best self. Sally arrives at a certain truth that caring for herself first, focusing on *her* happiness and wellness, ultimately shows others how she deserves to be treated.

Madeline critically reflects upon the meaning of “nourishment” for achieving her weight-loss goals in relation to the unhealthy atmosphere of restrictive dieting, relationships that have and have not supported her towards weight-loss goals, and the kind of intrapsychic or psychological space she creates for her embodied self. Nourishing a healthy body and self are tantamount. Madeline emphasizes the practice of self-care with building healthier habits and coping mechanisms that meet her needs. In particular, Madeline attends to her struggles with “emotional eating” by seeking healthier alternatives to comfort herself and soothe difficult emotions.

<deep sigh> I almost feel like I’m being held hostage by food. I think people that have an addiction to alcohol, drugs, smoking have an easier time breaking free of the addiction than a person that is addicted to food because you can get help, there’s medication that you can take to stay away from that. If you remove yourself from the environment of drinking, drugs, or smoking, although you have to go through the withdrawal, the temptation isn’t there. But how do you remove yourself from eating? I want to change from living to eat to eating to live. When you live to eat you know food is so much a focus of your life whereas if you eat to live food becomes less important. You are still

focused on a healthy, balanced diet but you know it's "okay I'll have this for lunch and then I can go and do this".

In this excerpt, Madeline describes transforming her lived relation to food to make space for other meaningful pursuits and learning to be "satisfied" and fulfilled emotionally.

Ivana considers how she could better nurture and care for herself on the path to weight-loss as she contrasts the discourse of self-discipline and self-encouragement. She aligns self-discipline with traditional or formal "diets" and messages promoted by diet culture to diligently "watch" and restrict both eating and body weight. Her account of varied diet plans and programs is consistently painful, without self-compassion or encouragement. Ivana denotes how she is now trying to adopt a more self-encouraging stance in pursuing weight-loss. She contrasts the body as lived in and compassionately considered versus the body as at war with or a rival to the self. She also contrasts the idea of being your own cheerleader versus oppressor in dieting.

You've got to do it for yourself. Because if you're doing it for a boyfriend or a dress or a whatever, *it's not going to last* – it's not. If you're not doing it for yourself..again it's not going to last. <speaking passionately> If you *really want to do it*, it doesn't matter if somebody knows or doesn't know, whether you've got a cheering team or you don't have a cheering team – I've got people that are supporting me now and I've got people that don't even know about it and I don't care, I really don't. It's okay because *it's for me*..and that's the thing that's different about it this time.



Figure 4.67 Gigi - *This is Not Me, Resigned to Poor Health*

An intrinsic motivation towards improved health likewise supports Gigi's pursuit of weight-loss as "just about me". Her present effort to lose weight, even when arduous and time-consuming, is "dedicated" to her health and wellness, ignoring all else.

Right now, I've dedicated this point in my life to *really working on things*, to taking some time and really working on my health – that's just what I'm doing and I'm a *big project*.

In this regard, Gigi addresses ways that she may have neglected self-care in the past. Proponents of HAES argue that a new paradigm of relating to the body, such as mindful eating and activity, can be "a way of healing a

sense of body distrust and alienation from physicality that may be experienced when people are taught to over-ride embodied signals in pursuit of externally derived goals, such as commonly

occurs in dieting” (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011, p. 8). Gigi voices the meaning of “healing” in her story of re-establishing herself on a new path of “whole living”. She expresses unwillingness to simply resign herself to the deleterious health effects of obesity. For example, while not denying the risks of obesity for cardiovascular health, Gigi states that she will not simply accept heart disease as “my destiny” (Figure 4.67).

Denise is trying to practice and become skilled at contentment and self-care in her life. She regards contentment as a felt sense of being in control and at peace in terms of her thoughts and emotions, as opposed to her “demon” (Figure 4.28) running the show. Practicing



Figure 4.68 Denise - Me I Aspire to Be, Contentment

contentment relates to living mindfully. Denise aspires to relate to herself in a way that permits relaxing, slowing down, and easing off her body-self to attend to her needs for balance and rejuvenation, as depicted with her Buddha statue (Figure 4.68). In terms of physical appearance, Denise tries to be mindful of goals to optimize and care for her body rather than perfect it. According to Denise, life is “better with exercise”. She finds stress-relief in exercise and notes how she experiences reduced anxiety about “watching” calories or her weight when she maintains a regular routine of physical activity. For Denise, being an “exerciser” (Figure 4.65) also supports active embodiment, as an opportunity to enjoy being in her body, appreciate body functionality, and experience a sense of physical competence.

An attitude of self-care also has implications for how the women conceptualize body ideals. The notion of self-care follows from the broader meaning of Embracing Yourself, wherein I began to discuss the women’s manner of re-storying the thin ideal to support getting comfortable with their bodies. In their narratives, the women reclaim authorship and redefine weight and shape-related goals via the concept of an optimal or best body, as defined by “me”. Madeline talks of pursuing thinness to a degree that is reasonable and healthy “for me and my body”. Ivana’s description of a body that is the “right fit” for her (Figure 4.23) is similarly compassionate and contains an optimistic quality of self-discovery:

I don't have numbers or sizes in mind, whatever it be it be. I know that when I get there it – it will be right. It doesn't have to be a J-lo size or whatever size. It's just going to be there when it's there.

Likewise, Gigi illuminates a body ideal that optimizes her wellness with the meaning of being Size 10 (Figure 4.22). Refocusing on individual wellness over size is in keeping with the turn towards assessment and treatment of the whole person among health specialists in the fields of body image, eating disorders and bariatrics (Bacon, 2010; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Freedhoff & Sharma, 2010; Kater, 2012). The concept of “best weight” (Freedhoff & Sharma, 2010), based on an optimization principle, has been described as the weight a person can sustain while enjoying life and experiencing the benefits of improved health. According to Freedhoff and Sharma, establishing weight goals and metrics of success at the level of individual wellness “has far more value than any specific ‘ideal’ or unrealistic body mass index” (p. 1). The concept of an optimal or “best weight” revealed in the women’s narratives reflects attunement to self-care needs and desires as well as one’s individualized context. Its positive function is analogous to that of the best self.

In keeping with Freedhoff and Sharma’s (2010) account of “best weight”, Sarah explains how a number on the scale or clothing size does not inform you about someone’s health and fitness. Accordingly, she emphasizes having reasonable and meaningful data on which to evaluate her body.

I know now not to focus on just a number on a scale because it doesn't tell you about your body composition so most women are like “Oh my god, I weigh that much” but they don't know how much of that is water or bone mass or muscle mass, which is huge. So, I think *now* I wouldn't say I want to lose 20 pounds, I'd say I want to lose this much body fat percentage.

As compared to the external measurement of restrictive dieting, Sarah regards the discourse of healthy lifestyle as supporting an embodied evaluation of success; in addition to body composition, Sarah considers her embodied experience and whether her actions show respect and care for her body to be important metrics. An attitude of self-care supports Sarah to maintain wellness in her efforts to enhance her physique and fitness.

In general, the women describe setting aside goals of achieving a specific weight, size, or ideal shape in favor of a broader goal to enhance their experience of embodiment and embodied subjectivity. This broad goal for body-self relation is entwined with positive changes they want to see in other aspects of their lifeworld, including relationships and personal aspirations or

projects, as I have discussed. By taking a more self-determined path, setting their own goals and standards for success, the women see themselves moving in the right direction – towards greater health and well-being. The representations of embodiment associated with a healthy lifestyle are a positive contrast to that of restrictive dieting, as described in the Body as Obstacle cluster. In addition, the movement in the women’s narratives to (Re)establish the Self in a Healthy Lifestyle is influenced by their accounts of overcoming adversity in other contexts of the lifeworld, as described in The Resilient Self cluster. These patterns of relation that I point out here are depicted visually in the thematic representation of themes (Figure 4.1). The framework of a healthy lifestyle seems to alleviate the externalized pressure and burden of losing weight that many of the women had been feeling. It helps them to feel more in-charge, efficacious, and attentive to the broader meaning of living a healthy, meaningful life. Given that self-efficacy has been positively linked to outcomes in weight-loss research (Cochrane, 2008), this positive shift in the women’s narratives prompts the question of whether a framework centered on health promotion, such as the HAES movement (Bacon, 2010; Tylka et al., 2014), may more effectively support weight-loss success than a framework specifically centered on weight.

CHAPTER 5: STUDY TWO RESULTS & DISCUSSION

5.1 Case Study: Introducing Michelle

Michelle is a 25-year-old Caucasian woman for whom weight-loss dieting first began “all the way back” at the early age of 11. She described a turbulent family upbringing, with times of financial strain, being responsible for siblings, and an overall sense of lacking healthy parental guidance or support. Her parents divorced when she was a toddler, after which Michelle and her siblings remained with their father. Her father later remarried, and it was Michelle’s stepmother who first encouraged her to “diet”. In hindsight, Michelle perceives that her stepmother modeled an unhealthy approach to weight-loss dieting related to her own efforts to cope with being overweight and body image issues. Michelle remembers being overweight from an early age and being bullied relentlessly for it. Within her life story, Michelle recounts years of victimization and lacking the adult support she needed as manifesting into being a “troubled” teen, who suffered with poor self-esteem and body-image, depression, substance use, and disordered eating behaviour that included cycling between restrictive and binge eating, over-exercising and abusing diet pills. Michelle went to live with her mother in late high school. At his time, Michelle says, “I was starting to get into trouble and Mom wasn’t around to really tell me any different. I was learning for myself”. Michelle began skipping school and delved further into substance use and partying. She was then sent to live with her grandparents in their small town, where she was able to complete Grade 12 and began to “straighten out” her path.

Michelle stories how instability in herself was reflected in marked weight fluctuations, unhealthy coping, looking for validation in the “wrong places” and in unhealthy relationships. However, as a young adult, Michelle sought counselling and is proud to say, “I’ve turned my life around”. Michelle has a stable relationship with her fiancé and, at the time of the study, was adapting to life as a first-time mother to a 1-year-old daughter. She was also near completion of a training program in early childhood education. Being diagnosed with health concerns, including epilepsy and gallbladder dysfunction, and the birth of her daughter catalyzed Michelle to seek positive change with regard to diet and physical activity, body-image and the self. Michelle’s narrative account centers on her journey to re-story her embodied subjectivity and selfhood following trauma and find a healthier path to lose weight that sustains, rather than compromises, her embodied self.

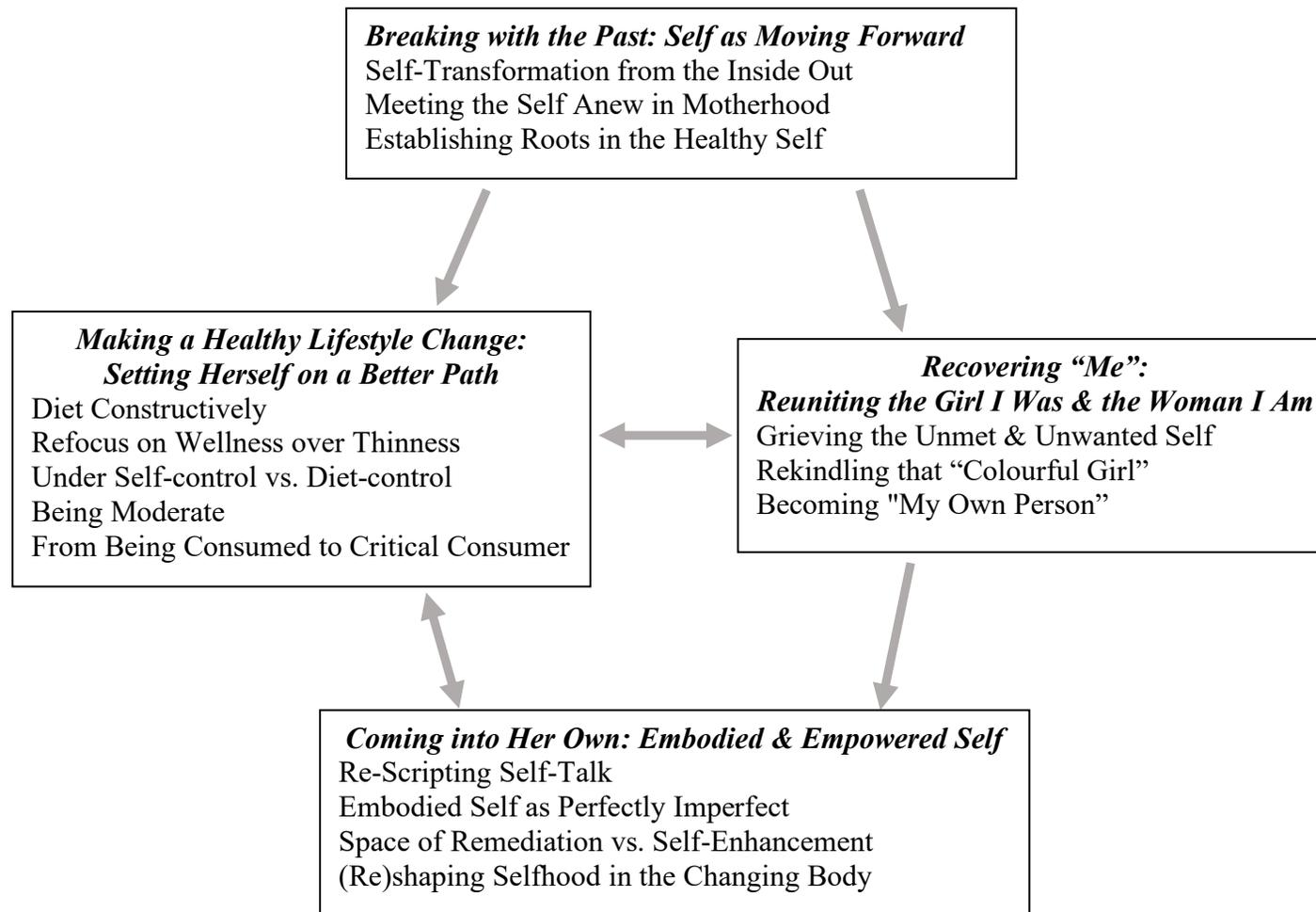


Figure 5.1 Graphic Representation of Thematic Structure for Study Two

5.2 Thematic Structure & Photo-Diary Storyboard

The thematic structure that resulted from analysis of Michelle's narrative account and photographs is graphically represented in Figure 5.1. This graphic discloses four super-ordinate themes, comprised of nuanced subthemes, and positions these thematic clusters as interrelated, using arrows to illustrate the relational flow or patterns of influence between meanings. As with Study One, this graphic is a tool to visualize the thematic structure and interconnections therein at a gestalt level. It is intended to augment and be read alongside the written description of themes in this chapter.

In addition to the life story and semi-structured interviews, Michelle captured her experiences with dieting in a photo-diary over the 8-week span between our first and third interviews. Michelle's photo-diary is pictured as a storyboard in Figure 5.2, with images numbered sequentially. I studied this storyboard as a whole as well as the individual images throughout my analysis of the transcripts. In our first interview, Michelle chose to share a collection of photographs of herself at different points in her life. This collection seemed important to telling her life story. These photographs will not be included in this chapter so as to protect Michelle's anonymity. However, I note that she refers to them in telling her life story to not only show how her body appeared, but equally to communicate her felt sense of embodiment at the time the photos were taken. I now discuss the four thematic clusters that emerged from my phenomenological analysis of Michelle's case.



Figure 5.2 Photo-Diary Storyboard

5.3 Breaking with the Past: Self as Moving Forward

An essential theme in Michelle's story surrounds her lived sense of self and embodiment over time, specifically regarding the connection between past and present. Michelle speaks of "breaking with" and "breaking out" of her past; that is, to untie or disentangle, move away and separate from the past, so as to re-establish the meaning of past experiences for her present embodied self. Time was understood through: (1) the life story that Michelle narrated about her experiences with body-image and weight-loss dieting from childhood to adulthood, and (2) the narrative and photo-diary account of her current endeavor to make a healthy lifestyle change, spanning six weeks of participating in this study. Breaking with the Past illuminates how Michelle narratively reconfigures the meaning of selfhood and embodiment across time in both of these contexts. Michelle expresses the importance of relinquishing the uncomfortable hold that the past seems to have on her by taking time to heal herself, introspect, and understand the impact of past events and experiences in a new way. From an adult perspective, Michelle reconstructs meaning to re-place events and experiences in terms of self-development. As examined in prior chapters, Crossley (2000a, b) discussed the process of narratively (re)making the meaning of traumatic experiences in order to re-establish a healthier connection, renewed positively, wholeness and coherence to the self. This process is revealed within Michelle's story of suffering childhood bullying and turning against herself in the past then striving to recover and rebuild a healthy embodied self in the here-and-now.

Michelle aspires to be present within herself, her body, and meaningful activities in her life; this "place" is right where she needs to be, in contrast to the ever-present sense of being dragged down by the past and/or living in disquieted anticipation of a future where "flaws" are "fixed". Michelle comes to regard the past as part of how she came to be today, but no longer binding or restraining. Her narrative reveals the substantial effort to put the past in its place and not let past experiences continue to negatively influence or narrowly define her present.

Just trying to *make it go away* I guess is the big one. Just telling it to *go away* and just to you know shake hands and be on its ways because it's really – who needs the *control of it* for a person. Well yeah, like I have a family now. I've got other things to worry about than all this stupid dieting stuff and self-image and being always *conscious* about it and you know it needs to go away... Why? It's how many years ago? <frustrated> Right, how many years ago? Just *shoo it away* <chuckles>. I *really shouldn't keep that*. I *carry it* and I *shouldn't carry it* anymore.

She acts to change things now by choosing to “let go” of the past, actively “shoo away” its negativity like swatting a fly. She reconciles past and present akin to “shaking hands” to create a peaceful, workable relation within her narrative of selfhood. Her account also illuminates the positive transformative effect of re-storying the past for Michelle’s sense of self as becoming, moving forward from present to future. With newfound understandings, the lived meaning of self-present to -future is notably different from her tale of strained and burdened development up to now. Michelle insightfully grasps that she cannot realize her best self and associated aspirations through old, broken paths; she needs to find a new pathway by restoring her healthy self. There are three subthemes within this cluster that reveal this movement.

5.3.1 Self-transformation from the Inside Out

Michelle’s narrative of personal transformation is about self and body as lived. Although weight-loss is a part her self-change “journey”, changing the external body emerges as secondary or concomitant to change from inside out. To “know inside out” is to become intimate with and comprehend something or someone in its entirety. To “turn inside-out” is to carefully examine or search something, often creating a mess and certain amount of disorder in the process. Michelle illuminates these meanings of inside out through her experience of coming to realize that *she can* surmount painful and traumatic experiences by examining the intrapersonal landscape of how she thinks about and relates to her-self and body. She describes a pattern of looking for solutions to her distress and unhappiness outside herself, “always searching” for something or someone “to make myself happy”, such as attention from others or becoming thinner by dieting and thinking “if only” this will make things better. However, looking across her lived experience, Michelle affirms that the true path to happiness goes beyond this surface-level. Surface change only offers temporary alleviation, but deeper and more meaningful change entails going deeper and getting underneath the unhealthy “cycles”, as hard as that may be. Regarding the idealization of thinness and beauty in relation to happiness, Michelle states:

Once you change your body, it changes your life, you could be happy but then you might find something else that could be wrong and then you have got to change that, which changes your life again. It’s just this continuous thing, so if you do it right *the first time*, I think it will be okay. If we all get on board to just talk about weight-loss positively, to do it – if you’re shown the *right way*, to do it *the right way*, then I don’t think these issues would become as what they are today. People talk about getting plastic surgery and then they’re doing this liposuction thing or they’re – you know just it’s *one thing after another*. You know a girl wants bigger breasts, “oh my nose is crooked”, well let’s fix

your nose, and then it's like you know they finally get one thing and now they're like "oh wait minute I got something down here", right <chuckling>. Like it's just *ongoing*, so it's like if we're shown properly once then I think it will all stop.

Michelle talks about pursuing change "the right way", as in the way that promotes health and well-being and leads to lasting satisfaction, as opposed to fleeting happiness and ultimately propagating a state of unrest. For her, shifting from "bad habits" to the "right way" necessitates self-exploration to make sense of experiences developmentally and comprehend the error of her ways. I expand on this shift of discourse about dieting specifically with the next thematic cluster.

Michelle begins her story at age 11, when she first tried to lose weight by dieting. Upon transferring to middle school for Grade 6, the experience of being bullied for her body escalated and she felt the full weight of the word "fat" as melded to and identifying "me" in a painful way. Michelle initially uses distanced language (e.g., "you" instead of "I") and depersonalizes her narrative by speaking in generalities about bullying as commonplace developmentally.

It started of course, the kids picking on each other, you know "you're chubby", "you're fat" kind of thing. So then of course you cry and you're sad.

However, as Michelle continues to tell her story, she progressively delves into the emotional depth of how it felt to be in her body through such experiences. This process of gradually approaching emotion in her narrative parallels Michelle's description of gradually uncovering the depth of the wounds she incurred in childhood bullying upon reaching adulthood. For Michelle, being "picked on" meant being picked apart and treated as disembodied object or depersonalized. She recalls "money was an issue" in her family home that amplified her vulnerability to bullying; financial strain meant not always having healthy food to eat (e.g., more starch in her diet), which contributed to weight gain, and becoming a target to bullies when she could not afford to dress in fashionable clothes.

I didn't really see it, but then other children just keep, you know, "you're fat" or I'd always get picked last because I remember being heavier. I didn't really see it. I didn't really understand so I'm like "why?", right. I didn't really have many friends, so I was kind of I guess what they called the *loser*...so that would be I guess the start of like the bullying part of it <voice cracking>.

Michelle encounters painful emotion as she recalls the sense of isolation in being put apart from her peers, the loss of innocence or normal taken-for-granted quality of childhood embodiment, and "downfall" of her sense of self- and body-esteem. She emphasises the confusion felt as a child in not understanding why she was being mistreated and observes how

the cruel voices and objectification of her tormentors insidiously became internalized, as she began to see and feel terrible about her body-self and socially retreat.

I remember eating alone, trying to just eat by myself so no one could bother me. Yeah, the name-calling still for Grade 7 and 8 and then I remember hiding food at home to eat it for later kind of thing. I remember the start of Grade 9...wondering why I couldn't fit into some of my clothes <disheartened>. I was getting really *upset* and really *sad* because – and then I had to start wearing sweatpants because *nothing fit*.



Figure 5.3 *Hiding & Covering Up*

The image of young Michelle resigned and sinking into ill-fitting shirts and baggy pants illuminates a loss and obscuration of her healthy self, much like shapeless clothes masking one's physical form. Michelle adopted the strategy of covering her body, as a weakness or source of vulnerability, to hide from persecution. She depicts this meaning with a photograph (Figure 5.3) of her oversized black sweatshirt and sweatpants laid out on the floor in a lifeless, disembodied state. The pattern of always dressing in baggy, typically dark coloured and uninteresting, clothing began as a defensive “habit” that she has carried into adulthood. Indeed, past

research has identified that it is common for women to use clothing as a behavioural strategy to draw attention toward or away from different parts their bodies and manage body distress by hiding “problem areas” (Frith & Gleeson, 2008). With maturity, Michelle describes increasing conflict about her habit of “covering up” and longs to put this pattern of wearing baggy, dark, and shapeless clothes in the past, along with the poor body image and low self-worth that these clothes have come to symbolize.

During her high school years, Michelle recounts how her relationship with food grew more complicated and life “went downhill”. Feeling lost, alone, and unable to cope with bullying and its psychological impact, she turned to food as comfort at times and, in other times, tried to exert control by skipping meals, starving herself; “it was constantly *not eating* and then *overeating*” and bouts of exercising to excess. Her narrative captures this time of her life as a self-defeating spiral or cycle. Bullying at school coincided with family turbulence at home and Michelle could not seem to find a refuge or safe place, or guidance to see her way through.

A lot of the boys were calling me “margarine” and they’d make barking sounds, so I would just sit by myself. I remember just sitting by myself, just not – you try to come back with something but then of course they’re going to bug you on that, because you can’t come up with a comeback or whatever. Like it’s so hard <upset>... It was just *endless*.

In Grade 12, Michelle turned to experimenting with drugs. With getting high and not eating, Michelle lost weight and yet being thinner did not amount to the “solution” that she had naively thought it would be.

The weight was starting to come off...I was getting so thin. I started wearing tighter clothes just to show that I wasn’t *fat anymore* and then of course that led to different *attention* at the time that I didn’t understand – you know all the boys used to pick on me but now the boys like me, right. So that led to being sexually active at a very young age and of course you think relationships are important at that time or what I thought were relationships but *wasn’t*.

In the absence of healthy self-esteem, going from the “loser” to “boys like me” was seductive and Michelle felt drawn into “what I thought were relationships” but were actually situations of being taken advantage. This meaning is clear now in a way that she was not able to comprehend back then. Michelle’s narrative illuminates how overt mistreatment was so normalized that these “misused relationships” felt like an improvement, being noticed or regarded as special. She relates feelings of shame and embarrassment about “flaunting myself in different ways” to get attention or “trying to be cool”, unable to see at the time how it was “just using myself in the wrong way”. Being thinner and gaining male attention, though seemingly a positive change, did not result in the improved self-esteem, wholeness, and positive resolution of problems that Michelle had hoped. When her substance use and partying got “out of control”, Michelle was sent to live in a small, rural community under her grandparents’ care where she explains that her life started to “straighten out”. She stopped using drugs and partying, graduated high school, and developed relationships with peers where for the first time she did not have to try so hard to gain acceptance. It was eye-opening to re-experience being with peers and to start building healthy friendships that nurtured self-worth. Michelle uses phrases like “straightening out” and “smarten up” to narrate the restoration of order, decreased confusion and clearer direction she experienced at this time, marking a new beginning or major shift towards her healthy self.

Comprehending self across time, Michelle discusses how negative thoughts, feelings and self-defeating behaviour have been “weaved into myself”, such that to recover and sustain a healthier way forward she needs to detach or disentangle the same from her-self. In redefining

her present embodied self, all this energy that had been wrapped up, tightly coiled or wound around the past can be seen to unfurl, open, and ease like the catch of the throat that releases in letting tears flow or the tightness in the chest of breath anxiously retracted that subsides as you remind yourself to “inhale, exhale”. Around age 19, Michelle voiced her need for help and her stepmother enabled her to access professional counselling. The experience of counselling helped Michelle to understand and externalize anger that she had displaced or turned inward. She marks this externalization as the first step in her story of breaking with the past and finding her assertive voice. From that point on, Michelle narrates several times of veering off the healthy path in terms of body image and eating behaviour. Learning from her mistakes or missteps, she continues to get herself “back on track”, each time with greater self-understanding and resolve to stay true to her healthy self. Compared to the ambivalence that Michelle recalls in the past, she identifies a readiness and courage within herself now to step into a psychological space of vulnerability where she can uncover core problems and enable herself to “break out”. Michelle says “there’s no point” in worrying about the past anymore or feeling stuck in wishing it were different. While this retrospective activity no longer has purpose, trying to reconcile or come to terms with the way in which past suffering has affected her is meaningful. It means accepting and “getting over” the past and relocating to a new “place” within herself figuratively; “getting there..it’s a big journey” but it is worthwhile because “I’ll be at peace”, says Michelle.

Research has demonstrated that other people can influence an individual’s feelings about the body and embodied self in a profound way. Being a victim of bullying about the body is associated with body dissatisfaction, lowered participation in physical activity, depression, and disordered eating behaviours (Eisenberg et al., 2003; Holman et al., 2013; Neumark-Stainer et al., 2002; Menzel et al., 2010). Among adolescent girls, Duarte, Pinto-Gouveia, and Rodrigues (2015) found that associations between victimization experiences and increased depressive symptoms were mediated by both heightened body shame and a severe form of self-criticism, which they referred to as the “hated self”. Data gathered by Duarte and colleagues (Duarte et al., 2014; Duarte & Pinto-Gouveia, 2017) has identified the role of body shame in the development of feelings that the overall self is “defective” and destructive intrapersonal patterns of relating to the self, marked by criticism, rejection and contempt among women. The role of shame about the body and self has increasingly been implicated in understandings of excessive body image

concern and disordered eating (e.g., Woodward et al., 2019) and approaches to healing have highlighted the importance of developing self-compassion (e.g., Kelly et al., 2014, 2016).

Pelican and colleagues (2005) gathered life stories from 103 adults related to food and eating, physical activity, and body image using interviews and focus groups. Their findings revealed a theme about the “power of others” whereby some participants felt especially protected or strengthened and others reported damaging experiences in relation to others’ comments about their bodies. The majority of stories about teasing and bullying centered on being overweight or large in size/shape, with more women recounting such experiences than men. Bourdieu (1984) coined the term “habitus” to refer to the residue of an individual’s past (and typically early) experience. Through sedimentation, past experience is said to form into habitual, practical knowledge that continues to shape one’s present – perceptions, thoughts, and actions – and thereby manner of being with self and others (Crossley, 2001). In his writing, Crossley (2001) dialogues with phenomenology to deepen Bourdieu’s concept of habitus; he cites Merleau-Ponty’s (1994) assertion that “the body is the vehicle of being” (p. 82), that we are embodied in the world, and therefore self-development occurs through bodily experience. To the extent that bullying was directed toward women when they were young, Pelican and colleagues (2005) reported that it appeared to sediment feelings of low self-worth in their participants’ stories. One female participant’s story “revealed how teasing can falsely shape a person’s body image”, something akin to a self-fulfilling prophecy; this participant recalls how, for much of her life, she perceived her-self through the negative lens of her early tormentors. Pelican and colleagues’ (2005) findings confirm how “people’s past experiences shape current experiences by creating layers of “sediments” that then shape the ways people perceive or encounter their environment” (p. 61). This process is certainly visible within Michelle’s narrative about the negative impact of early bullying experiences on her development. It is signified in her description of the sedimentation process as “weaving” certain self-defeating thoughts and behaviours into “me”.

Michelle talks specifically of untethering the present from the past, essentially deconstructing “habitus”, to reconstitute and permit her embodied self to flow and to relinquish shame in favor of self-acceptance and self-compassion. She conveys this re-negotiation of selfhood across time as “letting go”, meaning to stop carrying the past, to unbind and overcome it such that the past no longer dictates present experience. She captures this meaning from the outset of her photo-diary (Figure 5.3), with the image her sweatshirt and sweatpants on the floor.

I felt that *enough was enough* and it's time to put *those* objects on the floor and just leave them there. Let the floor *wear it* because I don't *want to wear them anymore*, that's what I was trying to get *out of*. So that's why I took the picture..that the floor is wearing my clothes <chuckling> and that it's good to be up to see it, standing over top of it, kind of thing. I'm higher up than what – than I was so down below and I'm up that much higher, to kind of give that perception of *growing from that, leaving it behind*.

Michelle highlights her bird's eye perspective as photographer, standing over the past, rising above and out of that place. She says with emphasis, "I don't want to wear them anymore" and narrates herself as gaining, rising above and moving forward in time and space relative to the past. Accepting that change is uncomfortable at first, like breaking in a new pair of shoes,



Figure 5.4 *It's Ok to Wear Shorts!*

Michelle exclaims, "I have to break myself into it..I need to break out of that". With the next image in her photo-diary (Figure 5.4), Michelle represents her effort to "break out" of always wearing pants and get herself into a pair of shorts for summer. This change of wardrobe represents a positive reconstruction of meaning about embodiment in which "It's ok to wear shorts!". In this image, Michelle

uncovers her body in small ways, revealing bright coloured toenails and a colourful tattoo that give a peek of insight her best self. The positive message captioned on a bright pink post-it note is an offering of self-encouragement to uncover and step out of hiding. The message has a small relative presence in the image but presents a significant infusion. Michelle characterises her experience of shopping for a pair of shorts as "searching" for this positive meaning. She describes exerting her willpower to step into discomfort with trying on shorts in a retail dressing room. This use of willpower in service of a healthier embodiment contrasts the past force of will it took for Michelle to starve and hide her body in baggy clothes. Moreover, her use of willpower in this "search" is balanced by being patient and compassionate with herself.

Michelle states that, though it sounds "cliché", working through personal issues really does "make you *stronger*". She relates that sometimes you have to look back in order to unburden yourself, and move forward:

Just letting it go and just living in the now and not having to carry all this baggage with you.

In reconstituting the past, Michelle endeavours to define her embodied self beyond adversity she endured, as growing from and in spite of it. She aims to narratively mend the disrupted sense of self and compromised embodiment felt back then, transitioning through that painful time, so that it no longer feels so “heavy”. Michelle describes the experience like “opening a door to *release*” emotionally. Her sense of lived time and possibility for selfhood is unlocked as she begins to feel lighter and transformation spreads out in her life from a core shift in values, like concentric rings radiating out from a rock dropped into a pond.

Michelle’s narrative illuminates the therapeutic quality of investing time to introspect, to work on yourself inside out by first laying everything out and then putting it back together in a new way. At the outset of our photo interview, Michelle states:

Putting all the pictures and writing to *actual use* instead of you know – you talk about it, and then to actually do it, it’s quite *different* and it is – to me it was very *therapeutic*, the weeks that I did this – over the weeks it has spanned.

She highlights the importance of not just paying lip service or going through motions, but doing the *work*, the labour and practice of realizing and sustaining therapeutic change. “I’m trying to conquer the mental aspect of when I’m really not benefiting myself”, Michelle explains, to put insight to action by letting go of old ways of thinking and behaving that are no longer adaptive in her lifeworld. She regards it as “foolish” to self-perpetuate a cycle of turning against herself, “calling yourself names and feeling *gross about yourself*”, that was tearing her apart and straying from “that colourful girl” that needed support. Michelle wishes that someone was there to intervene and guide her younger self onto a healthier path, to act as a beacon in the dark: “I wish that it was shown to me properly”.

However, moving forward, she is no longer that girl or tied to that time. Michelle has new understanding and can draw on inner resources to create better for herself: “Now it’s *totally* different because I’m an adult, I know how it all *works now*”. Adulthood opened a door to understand things clearly (e.g., societal pressure toward thinness, why people bully or use others). Having a more mature concept of how the world works casts her own situation in a new light; it enlightens what she has been through. As an adult, she is empowered to obtain the information and knowledge required, to reclaim parts of self-past that hold meaning and let go of that which no longer serves. Accordingly, Michelle reconstructs her sense of self and body in the ways that *she* needs, to authorize rather than hide, encourage rather than criticize and so regain worth and strength. Though Michelle finds it “overwhelming” and painful to face her past, in

sharing her story with me she says: “I have to let it go. I have to share it and tell – I just can’t keep it in”. Michelle recognizes the value of this psychological work. Reconnecting to herself in this process fortifies Michelle’s confidence that she can cope with what the future brings, particularly in supporting her daughter through challenges as she develops from girl to woman.

5.3.2 Meeting the Self Anew in Motherhood

The movement of *Breaking with the Past* is especially poignant for Michelle in light of her budding relationship with her 1-year-old daughter. Within Michelle’s narrative, motherhood is marked as a transformative point for self-development. Coming into motherhood effects a change of perspective for Michelle’s sense of self as lived over time and in relation to other; it is an eye-opening experience of meeting herself anew. In this way, Michelle’s story reveals something about the power to rectify or mend a disrupted past self through a healing relationship in the present; she symbolically re-parents herself in trying to forge a healthier developmental path for her daughter than she experienced. Michelle often uses the word “girl” in referring to herself, perhaps illustrative of the significant re-storying that is happening for her in relation to the catalyst of motherhood. Experiencing now what she was not able to as a girl struggling with being overweight and bullied, Michelle is actively re-embodiment and empowering her-self to find a constructive way forward.

Michelle talks about “setting a positive example and doing it the right way” in terms of nutrition and eating behaviour, healthy self-development, positive embodiment, and self-care. For Michelle, developing healthier eating behaviours and ways of relating to her embodied self are necessary to fulfill parental responsibility to help her daughter grow into a healthy woman. Being a “healthy Mom” becomes a higher purpose, clarifying certain “truths”.

She needs to come first, so that puts it – *it shoos it away*. I can’t think about it anymore because if I do, it’s going to consume – she’s not getting the attention that she needs. It’s not going to help her.

Michelle’s relationship with her daughter overrides any past confusion and firmly grounds her in a discourse of health, in instinctively knowing what is healthy and good “for her” (i.e., for her daughter). Becoming “Mom” has redefined her lifeworld in such a way to expand her horizon and enlighten “more important things” to concern herself with than body insecurity and weight.

In reflecting upon her past, Michelle also speaks of “setting things right” for her daughter, as in putting time or events in new order, correcting meaning, or making good on an unfulfilled promise. Advancing her parental duty to provide favorable, nurturing conditions is

contrasted with thwarting child development. She resolves to not impart anxieties onto her daughter because “it’s not fair”. It will deprive her daughter of “fun times” if food or the body become warped into something they do not need to be. For example, Michelle shares about the quintessential experience of enjoying ice cream cones on a hot summer day with her daughter.

It was so fun enjoying the ice cream with my daughter. It helps her to learn how to eat an ice cream cone. It was so cute watching her open her mouth wide and shove the ice cream in her mouth and then shiver because it was cold. So you know <sigh> if I don’t learn how to enjoy it, it’s not going to teach her how to enjoy it, right – you know it’s *fun for her* and why am I going to *take that* fun out of her life just because I’m having issues <with intensity>.

Michelle meets the loss and suffering of her younger self with heightened compassion as she re-views her past, as imagined through the eyes of her daughter. The sense of reunion for Michelle with her child self is reflected in the whimsical quality about many of her photographs. In her narrative, Michelle reveals the meaning to “let the child be a child” and shelter children from harsh realities, support them to explore and imagine, be playful, curious, and seek out instead of shy away. Michelle wants to help her daughter hold onto the essential “magic” of childhood, the simplicity, innocence, and joy that this time in life contains, for as long as possible. She wants her daughter to be happy, eager, intuitive, and strong in her-self. Michelle appreciates that establishing these building blocks will help her daughter sustain a healthy self as life inevitably grows more complicated. From the viewpoint of being a “healthy Mom”, Michelle’s past adversity is redefined as a marker of experiential knowledge and strength that she can use to make things different. Reflecting on the unhealthy path she started down with her stepmom, Michelle desperately wants to prevent her little girl from “going through it”.

I don’t want her to have to do that <tearful> so I have to try to be positive about that and just change it, so that’s why I’m trying to adapt a healthy lifestyle now so that she doesn’t have to deal with the bullying.

The impetus to find a better path is amplified, so Michelle can facilitate a different story for herself and her daughter.

The mother-daughter relationship has been identified as an important site by researchers in terms of how women learn to “do gender” (Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2007). Hurd Clarke and Griffin (2007) explored women’s retrospective accounts of their mother’s influence on body image development. Their narratives represented a range of both positive and negative experiences of being socialized about embodiment and womanhood. As girls, they learned from their mothers’ commentary about their developing bodies as well as the attitudes toward

embodiment and choices about body and beauty work that their mothers modelled. Hurd Clarke and Griffin asserted that the mother-daughter is an important vehicle through which young women can learn to resist and transmute sociocultural norms that can restrict embodiment and esteem. Moreover, they highlighted how “doing gender” is often ingrained, passed on unconsciously across generations. Thus, it is important to recognize that, “rather than mothers being to blame for (or the sole cause) of their daughter’s negative body image, both mothers and daughter are constrained in a social context that emphasises female appearance” (p. 703).

In beholding her own development of body image and self-worth anew through her daughter’s eyes, Michelle feels empowered to break with past cycles. She reflects on her relationships with female role models, including her mother and stepmother, and how sociocultural discourse has influenced her socialization. And, in the relationship with her own daughter, Michelle finds a clarity of purpose and meaning that helps her begin to mend her own wounds and unmet needs of the past. This catalysing and therapeutic quality of Michelle’s lived relation with her daughter is expanded upon within the upcoming Recovering “me” cluster.

5.3.3 Establishing Roots in the Healthy Self

With her photograph of a tree (Figure 5.5), Michelle represents the meaning of “fresh” with respect to positive transformation. The angle of her image, gazing upward into the outspread branches and fresh green leaves, captures an optimistic and expansive feeling. It also



Figure 5.5 Feeling “Fresh” & Renewed

reflects Michelle’s efforts to redirect attention away from past negativity and emotional pain. The word “fresh” signifies new opportunity and different perspective. It also conveys a sense of renewal, brightness, and clarity.

Michelle signifies how it takes time to establish a healthier way of being, like a tree putting down strong roots into the earth. She relates a sense of disconnect between knowing and feeling at times, as she pursues healthy change. Though she is no longer that vulnerable and mistreated girl, sometimes the near presence of the past makes it hard for her to internalize the safety that adulthood brings and act on wisdom that she has gained. Eventually “it will become

common sense”, she says, as she actively works to establish new patterns of relating to herself and body and re-embodiment activities in daily life.

Hurd Clarke and Griffin (2008) explored how adult women (age 50-70 years) understand the impact of personal traumas (e.g., abuse, adverse childhoods, illness, infidelity) on their body image and embodied experience over the life course. Many women reported that experiences of trauma resulted in feelings of body insecurity, disparagement of the body, hypervigilance, and low self-esteem that persisted into later life. Through their stories, these women illuminated ways that they consciously manipulated their bodies to distance themselves from the trauma experience and their persecutors. For instance, like Michelle, some women described efforts to conceal the body with their clothing choices. Others sought to change their physical appearance by dieting or cosmetic procedures. The association between traumatic bodily experiences and negative body image or eating disorders has been well-articulated in the literature. Theories have focused on unhealthy eating and dieting as a response to negative emotional states and core struggles with low self-esteem, shame, and disempowerment (e.g., Piran, 2016b; Polivy & Herman, 2007; Vartanian et al., 2018; Woodward et al., 2019). Hurd Clarke and Griffin (2008) discussed how maladaptive coping strategies, such as disordered eating, substance abuse or self-harm, occur more often among individuals who were victims of prolonged abuse or revictimization. The women in their study spoke of “turning points” or pivotal events in their lives that precipitated reaching out for professional therapeutic support and embarking on internal process of self-reflection and recovery to transcend the deep-felt impact of trauma, akin to Michelle’s account of entering motherhood.

For Michelle, breaking with her past and enacting positive change is conceived as a (re)integrating process within the self – where new ways become a natural part of who you are and the way you live – and are ultimately sustained by the felt sense of consonance and contribution. Roots grow stronger and mature with time and experience. Michelle identifies how development of such “roots” is vital to stability and staying “on top” amidst challenge; “still always learning, but never making that mistake ever again of letting yourself go”. The past emerges like a worn path in the grass – easy to fall back into – and time bears potential to solidify gains and allow grass to grow over old paths as new ones are established. Moreover, in contrast to the sense of disrupted time and development of being caught in a “bad cycle”, a healthy sense of self is regarded as grounding and stabilizing.

Living all by myself, I remember I was moving from place to place and I was getting so thin because I wasn't eating and I was always running and I was abusing the Hydroxycut. I thought I was going to lose my job because I kept leaving work because I was so sick. It was from those pills. I was getting so dizzy. Just hardly eating anything and then headaches from that. That wasn't good. And then I finally flushed them all and I said, "that's enough of that". And then things would be okay for a while and then of course it would bounce back...where you think "okay I've got it under control" and then when you start losing too much weight you're like "okay it's good, we'll stop", you know "we'll keep going, we'll keep losing the weight" and then you just stop because you're like "okay well you know I've lost all this weight, I can go have some ice cream and because I'm so thin already I can just keep eating", and then *you just lose yourself* so then you gain all that weight back again and then you have to do it *all over again* and then it's a *complete cycle* <defeated>.

She is no longer lost, precarious, dizzy, and "out of control". Her past self was caught in an "up and down" tumult, disconnected from healthy needs, and preoccupied with things outside the self. In the present, Michelle affirms her-self as the locus of control and source of direction. Even though Michelle's life story contains a lot of pain, she reports that it is "uplifting" to reflect on "how much I've grown". Keeping this perspective inspires Michelle to stay "on track" and uphold new conceptualizations. It "puts me back in my place", she says, to remind herself of the healthy path that she is pursuing.

5.4 Making a Healthy Lifestyle Change: Setting Herself on a Better Path

This super-ordinate theme explicates how, in Michelle's experience, breaking the past cycle of "bad dieting" occurs concomitant to addressing struggles with body-image and the self that has she has carried through time. This in tandem relation is represented graphically with a bi-directional arrow between clusters in Figure 5.1. Specifically, Michelle re-establishes her sense of self and body, including weight-loss goals and activities, along a better path.

I'm trying to put diet as a lifestyle change instead of dieting, so then it's a different way that I can grasp it. Sometimes I lose focus on that and then I go back to the whole starvation thing where it's like "if I don't eat, I'm okay"...and then I'm like "okay I have got to stop, I'm losing my mind" kind of thing. So right now, for me it's going back to my daughter, it's like she needs to eat healthy.

In this excerpt, Michelle "goes back" to her daughter as accentuating the need for healthy change, prompting to reset her embodied self in a healthier discourse on eating and weight-loss.



Figure 5.6 Tired of the “Bad Cycle”

In her narrative, Michelle contrasts the deprivation and restriction of her past “bad habit of dieting” with “the positives” or contribution that approaching things “the right way” can bring. In the past, she describes feeling cut-off from her bodily sensations and needs (e.g., starving her body), denoting “bad” dieting as causing fragmentation of her embodied self in a similar way as being bullied. Michelle represents feeling weary and worn down, simply tired of it all, regarding the status quo of chronic weight-loss dieting. She captures this

feeling with the line drawing of a woman (Figure 5.6) and her journal entry:

The picture of tired is me being tired of this constant circle of dieting and how much control it can have over a person’s life. So much more to worry about than: not eating, eating too much, I’m too fat, I don’t like myself, BLAH BLAH BLAH! TIRED!

Bombak and Monaghan (2017) explored the experience of embodiment over time amongst 13 women (age 30-50) who struggled with obesity. Biographical time and weight trajectories were an explicit lens in the researchers’ analysis, so as to consider the body as an ongoing “project” and its frequent refusal to be reshaped according to intentions. Bombak and Monaghan discussed how women’s stories illuminated complex, intersecting narratives of hope, stagnation, and disordered eating distress with respect to weight loss. Narratives of hope were characterized by the prospect of weight-loss success and having a “good life” in a thin(ner) body. Narratives of stagnation reflected a sense of life stalled by unsuccessful dieting and chronic weight-cycling. Narratives of disordered eating distress centered on personal suffering and health risk incurred by weight-loss dieting that triggered disordered eating. For women who endorsed the latter, Bombak and Monaghan described how “previous weight-loss efforts effectively cast a shadow over the promissory culture of slenderness, rendering this a ‘fat fabrication’” (p. 933). These participants were mostly likely to abandon the goal of weight-loss and align themselves with HAES-based ideology. Like Michelle, these women’s past distress underpinned their present efforts to embrace body positivity and acceptance, and reinforce to themselves that pursuing thinness was not a panacea for life’s ills but, in fact, came at serious personal cost.

For Michelle, her past disordered eating distress is a “shadow of the past” that reminds and reinforces her efforts to set upon a healthier path. Michelle constructs old ways of thinking, perceiving and acting established in the past as unhealthy and self-damaging. In this way, these “bad habits” become anthropomorphised in Michelle’s story as an enemy to rally against. She narrates a path forward by breaking “bad habits” and forging new ways of relating to the body-self around food, weight, and weight-control. Her new path is situated within the discourse of “healthy lifestyle” and in pursuit of wellness and self-enhancement. This meaning is expressed in five subthemes.

5.4.1 Diet Constructively

Michelle endeavours to diet constructively, the “good way” and “right way” as she puts it, in taking an approach that is healthful and beneficial as opposed to being destructive or exacerbating problems. Maintaining a healthy weight and being physically active are understood as part of leading a healthy lifestyle. Michelle reconsiders past efforts to change her body weight as unhealthy coping and a self-defeating cycle.

I remember many times eating in the bathroom <crackle in voice> or else during the celery dieting in Grade 9, I remember throwing a lot of my lunches out. I remember having a lot of headaches because if you don’t eat, you know you get headaches, right. So yeah, just throwing a lot of food out and then that’s when at home sometimes I would hide some food later to eat. Trying not to eat too much at mealtimes with the family. [long pause] Yeah I just saw food as like...I tried not to eat it and then right away I’m like ‘oh man if I eat this, I’m going to gain the weight’..yeah it was a very psychological thing.

Food was initially turned to as comfort but became something to be feared and avoided around weight-gain. She recalls very restrictive diets (e.g., celery soup diet) and extreme behaviour (e.g., starvation or diet pills) to lose weight as “bad dieting” that literally made her sick. Stating of her younger self, “I thought that’s the way you do it”, Michelle contrasts her adult self as knowing better and focused on being a healthier person overall.

Michelle no longer identifies with dieting per se, but with developing a “good eating habit” and maintaining a healthy diet. Illuminating a key shift from past to present, she says:

It’s better to say “healthy lifestyle choices” or something like that instead of saying “dieting” because then it’s – it is much easier.

Michelle has educated herself about nutrition and is adopting an approach that utilizes the Glycemic Index (GI) model. She explains how the model gives a structured short-term program to initially help “reset” your diet, shifting from eating high to low GI foods, but then becomes

self-directed according to basic principles and helpful recipes. Michelle regards the teaching and resources of this model as healthy guidance that she had been missing previously and takes comfort in following it.

I think now finding this recipe book and being on the – I guess the diet now will definitely benefit because it's *helped me out* in wonderful ways so I see myself in the future, it will *be better*. And when you go grocery shopping, just having – I guess avoiding all that stuff will be a good start too because if you have good choices in your pantry or the fridge or whatever, it'll be that much easier so you don't actually have to think about it. I definitely see in the future that *it will* – it's *going to be easier* and I'm so happy <chuckling>. I see that it will get me there..like I can still – my fiancé is a picky eater, so there's lots of different recipes that I can make for him so that he can be a part of it too and then I can just – and it's all healthy choices, so *it will be good in the end*.

She likes that the approach focuses on “regular” food, such that it is inclusive and supports her to find foods and recipes that work for her family. Her comment that it will “be easier” conveys a sense of calm, direction and manageability about this approach in comparison to the misguided ways of her youth. For Michelle, “doing it right” and starting “fresh”, like her tree (Figure 5.5), means a sense of pride in herself, easing of anxiety around food and the body, and finding a way that maximizes benefits and minimizes harm.

Michelle goes back to the root definition of “diet”, meaning what you eat and a focus on nutritious, balanced eating, rather than a contrived period of being “on” a dieting program or regime. She relates increased optimism, how life feels “better” and she feels confident about weight-loss in following this improved approach centered on healthy choices.

Sticking with the low glycemic recipes in the book, like it's all really good food that's at a low-calorie intake and it really does cut down your carbohydrate cravings and it's really helping maintain your weight. So, you're not losing your mind, like you can still allow yourself these snacks or whatever but it's – in the end you really don't want it because these foods are really nutritional. I really find that the recipe book is helping. It's really delicious. It's easy to prepare.

In contrast to the past, this new path to weight-loss and improving overall health does not mean “losing her mind”, a reference to losing herself, feeling lost and “out of control” in the past. Michelle emphasizes the pleasure and enjoyment she is experiencing in shifting her approach, with the “delicious” and “easy to prepare” foods, feeling efficacious, and having freedom to choose and savor all kinds of food. From this frame, weight-loss becomes more of a by-product or natural consequence of living healthier, rather than principal focus.

Echoing the notion of establishing roots in the healthy self, Michelle states, “I’m still trying to get the hang of it” and firmly “grasp” this new way of thinking and being.

Even though I have a more stable “lifestyle change” I still have the thoughts of limiting what I eat or having less of in a day, so I won’t gain those extra pounds. I eat still but then the next day will skip a meal to make up for it. I sit and think, well how does that work...and it doesn’t work but, in my mind, I feel it does.

Dieting constructively is a transition that feels awkward in its newness; Michelle says, “it does make sense, but I – just sometimes I can’t grasp it myself”, about working to establish her footing and develop an intuitive sense of this new approach. She specifically talks about trying to “conquer the mental aspect” of falling back on “bad habits” in “knowing that I’m really not benefitting myself”. Even while it “makes sense” conceptually, getting “the hang of it” in practice emerges as a gradual process of trying and recalibrating action according to ideology.

5.4.2 Refocus on Wellness over Thinness

In keeping with the inside out concept of transformation, Michelle deconstructs her long-held goal of “being thin” to embrace the more expansive notion of being a “well” person. She expresses how this mental shift entails “letting go” of distorted or magical beliefs about thinness.

Just to be part of the other girls that *are that thin*, I think just to be *popular* is what I always tried to reach for. Just to be part of the rest of society, how everyone is portrayed. You know, be thin, this is the *way to look*, this is the *way to be*, you know like this is – *you’ll be happy* and however it’s – that’s just how society goes. To be thin because you’re able to wear those short-shorts and *look flawless* and be able to wear a bikini and *be like the rest of them, right*. And so I’ve wanted – because I wanted more friends, so if I get that way then I’ll have all these thin friends around me and it’ll be great <sarcasm>...But that’s just a dream – you know that’s – like I can’t <laughs> *IT’S PHOOEY* <laughs>.

Michelle recognizes how she was drawn to thinness as a way to fit in and be accepted, given her experience of feeling put apart from “normal” peers due to her bigger body size. The language she uses in this excerpt is reminiscent of advertising jargon and reflects a naiveté about believing in the rewards of thinness, which characterized her younger self. However, with a maturity of perspective, Michelle is equipped to examine the reality versus fantasy of thinness. To believe that getting to that “thin girl”, as she says, will make your whole life better is “just a dream”, not a reality. Michelle now readily identifies how such messages exist as convention, “that’s just how society goes”; she is tuned in, comprehends the agenda of the lingo, and can see through the allure. With the weight of the past lifting and the protection of newfound insight, Michelle

displays humor and lightheartedness in calling it all “phooey” or nonsense and laughing at ideas that she once painfully took to heart. Similarly, Donaghue and Clemitshaw (2012) reported that bloggers expressed surprise and dismay at their prior willingness to naively believe that their selves/lives would be fundamentally transformed by becoming thin. The belief that successful feminine identity would be undermined by corporeal departure from the thin ideal was seen as tremendously hard to shake in bloggers’ own developmental trajectories, much like Michelle’s experience.

Michelle has reconciled herself to the fact that the image of thinness long held in her mind is not sustainable nor compatible with the healthy self she aspires to, both physically and emotionally. She sees the thin ideal as short-sighted in terms of her goals for broader lifestyle change. Teasing her understanding of health and wellness apart from thinness per se reaffirms that being a healthy person, having well-being, and actualizing her best self goes beyond surface-level change. Michelle articulates how she has been putting impossible pressures on her embodied self and merely fooling herself to think that being thinner would solve what had been feeling wrong within herself and her life.

To be that ideal body, I think I’ve always – that’s what I’ve always tried to do is to get to that *thin girl*, but it won’t happen... I’ve talked to family members about it, just the way that my body is, it won’t *let me be that thin* <empathic> so I don’t why I *drive* myself to do all this stupid stuff to myself to try to make myself *so thin* <upset>. It won’t happen, I’ll look *so sick*.

Once again, speaking to a disconnect between knowing and feeling, Michelle expresses that if she actually listens to supportive people around her and her own voice of reason and compassion, her vision of “that thin girl” is not realistic or commensurate with being healthy for her body composition. So, then she questions if “I” know this, why keep “driving myself” to extreme lengths to be “that thin girl”, to “make myself so thin” by forcing myself into an impossible shape? Disentangling and rebuilding the connection between esteem and body appearance by nourishing yourself in the body you have emerges as a way forward in Michelle’s narrative, especially as she speaks of modelling to her daughter that “eating is okay”, to accept and care for your body, and to experience being active in ways she was not able to as a girl.

I wasn’t very active through elementary school or anything like that. I tried to play sports but I jiggled too much, so I didn’t want to run. I tried faking sick a lot <voice cracking> so I wouldn’t have to do any of that... I remember like sneaking food in my desk and when the teacher wasn’t looking, I’d eat. But yeah it was a lot of up and downs. Eat all the time and then I don’t <tearful>.

Overcoming past ways of thinking and internalizing a new script is something that Michelle sees as coming through practice, self-awareness and self-encouragement. Previous research has revealed women's experience of disconnect between knowing versus feeling in trying to give up "dieting" in favor of size-acceptance. Among participants in a fat acceptance blog, for example Donaghue and Clemitshaw (2012) found that many comments reflected women's sense of "knowing" that they are (or would be) better off accepting their bodies yet, at the same time, "feeling" a powerful draw to be thin. Being accepting of their bodies, while considered a healthier and more secure view of embodied selfhood, was complicated by the well-rehearsed nature of feminine weight-loss culture and realities of thin privilege in society. Michelle responds to this state of tension with a narrative conception of breaking the unhealthy cycle of dieting in her life and re-setting herself on a healthier, more embodied and self-determined path.

5.4.3 Under Self-control vs. Diet-control

In contrast to the feeling of "losing yourself" to the extreme and cyclical nature of "bad dieting", Michelle feels that pursuing a healthy lifestyle is helping her to get a handle on optimizing health and maintaining connection to her embodied self while trying to lose weight. She no longer feels "balled up", in a mess, troubled and confused, as in the past.

It's just – it's *balled up*, that it's just uncontrollable. You can't – there was no stop, right. It was just a big ball and then now – now it's finally settling out.

Michelle describes the negative quality of weight-loss dieting as a controlling presence, having the "run over your life".

It's the voices that tell you "no" or "if you eat it, don't eat later" <chastising>. So all of that negative – it sucks because you can't enjoy food, right. Everyone likes to go for beer and pizza, and I don't even go near that <upset>. Right? Pizza is so – it brings all your friends together and if you're not eating it, they're like "oh why is she not", you know – and then it's I guess coming down to that, you're avoiding group gatherings and society's made food into a bad thing right, so it's hard <deep sigh> – hard to get a balance.

This "constant chattering" cuts you off from just living. The simple pleasure of gathering with friends for beer and pizza, for instance, becomes muddied with anxiety about "good" and "bad" foods. Yet, isolating herself in avoidance of said conflict is not a healthy solution. Speaking further to this notion of feeling under diet-control versus self-control, Michelle shares the following anecdote in her journal:

My cousin and I went out dancing and I felt that I shouldn't eat anything or else the food I would eat would make my rolls poke out and I wouldn't look

good in my leggings. As I got in the car on our way there, I started to feel weird because of lack of food so I had something to eat when I got there. Why the heck do I do this to myself!? I know myself that I have an awesome “diet” to follow and it’s perfect for myself, but I insist on doing these stupid things to myself. I try to better myself with staying true to eating right and changing my mind frame of “bad dieting” but I keep letting myself go back.

A healthy voice rises up to question unhealthy behaviour, identified as “done to” as opposed to for herself and oppressive instead of “staying true” to herself that knows better and values wellness over thinness. This experience of tension relates back to Michelle’s longing to unburden herself and put the ugly parts of the past behind her, like the image of her black sweatpants and sweatshirt (Figure 5.3).

Michelle’s narrative about learning to lose weight the “right” way espouses consistency between lived self and lived project, defining your own terms and choosing your own path. With this narrative shift, the locus of control and motivation for change becomes intrinsic, which has a significant impact on the lived experience of undertaking change and evaluating progress. Michelle’s narrative distinctly contrasts the positivity surrounding her healthy lifestyle change in the present and her account of starting with dieting the “wrong way” as a girl.

When I was 11, my Stepmom was...helping me, I don’t know how to really – really word it. Because she’s a heavy-set lady herself, so I don’t know if she was trying to get herself going as well with it. But I remember – I can still remember to this day, she had loose-leaf paper up on the bulletin board in the kitchen by the dishwasher. I had to weigh myself every day, so you recorded it on the paper. I had to watch what I ate and then she’d make me run up and down the stairs a whole bunch of times. [...] I remember in high school, we went on this celery soup diet, like I hated it and, I don’t know, maybe it’s because again she wanted to do the diet herself so of course I was like “sure yeah” because well I was a heavy-set girl too so I’m like “why not”.

Michelle accentuates the potency of these memories with the phrase “to this day” and her use of repetition in “had to”, “she’d make me”, and “hated it”. She is ambivalent about using the word “helping”, perhaps analogous to the feeling of uncertain impetus, just going along with it, and acting not by choice, but as a manner of doing what she was told to do back then. Conversely, Michelle experiences improvements in her mood and self-image, greater personal agency, and feels more confident about her actions in endeavoring to lead a healthy lifestyle. Additionally, Michelle talks about how good she felt in sharing “the positives” of her new take on weight-loss with her stepmother.

I even helped my Stepmom to get started on a right path for her lifestyle change. Kept it all positive and made sure she knew nothing is impossible and to make sure to not obsess over it and do it so she can feel good and still be able to enjoy herself.

There is a narrative mending and events coming full circle that can be appreciated in this story of “helping” her stepmother learn “the right way to go about it”, without distorting or withholding quality of living; “that’s how it *should be*..you know trying to break that cycle”, Michelle says.

5.4.4 Being Moderate

Reconstituting goals and actions within a discourse of leading a healthy lifestyle, Michelle finds ease of anxiety about food and her body. She experiences the same chiefly in association with the underpinning ideology of moderation.

You can still eat healthy and still enjoy a couple cookies and – *you’re still healthy*...but not being so hard-core with it, like putting *your whole life* into it. It’s *finding the balance* of how to enjoy it properly.

Being moderate in the context of Michelle’s life means “finding the balance” and trying to “keep it the best that I can”, rather than restricting herself with being focused so exclusively on thinness. Michelle contrasts the self-discipline, angst, and instability in “bad dieting” against her current effort to be mindful; that is, cognizant but not anxiously seeking to control, and invested but not preoccupied regarding food and her body. Going “overboard” in taking behaviour to either extreme of overeating or starvation is juxtaposed with the sense of balance and self-compassion about being moderate in terms of eating behaviour.

I just *live in today* and then for example when I go grocery shopping, I make sure I provide myself with healthy choices.

From this viewpoint, every day is conceived as a new opportunity and rather than give up on herself in the face of setback, like the what-the-hell effect described by Polivy and Herman (1985), Michelle tries to maintain a kind of homeostasis with, on the whole, making healthy and reasonable choices.

Michelle denotes this shift in framework as helping to “just be okay with myself”. Used like a verb, to “be okay” reflects a state of calm connectedness to self, active presence to the fullness of the present moment, and learning “let go” in situations when her control over food is limited (e.g., social gatherings). Michelle is able to reassure herself that “it’s okay now”, she is strong and doing well.

Just being stronger I think now <voice cracking> to try not to keep those past memories in my mind, but to have them there just to support myself to doing

things the right way and not the wrong way. Because there's always a right way to go about things instead of letting yourself wander on aimlessly. Instead of always looking back and yeah trying not to set too many goals because when you try to set too many goals, I find myself – then I *lose reality*. Then I want to try to chase what's ahead instead of working on *right now*.

She maintains a balanced perspective with healthy goal setting that considers the bigger picture of how you she wants to feel and what she wants to do in her body. And, she stays grounded in the present. She is not “chasing” the end result only to miss out on the journey nor looking back with angst, regret or longing, but endeavouring to find contentment in the here-and-now.

Being moderate is simultaneously grounding and freeing in Michelle's story. She talks about freeing herself mentally and emotionally from the “constant natter of dieting”, referring to idle chatter about unimportant things, and the sense of being “always worried”. She says, “it's like you're free from jail” and that “gives you more energy to focus on all the things that are more important”. Her reference to confinement reflects a sense of obligation to the worry and angst of it all, but with questioning “obligation to whom? who says it has to be like this?” in her narrative, Michelle sets herself on a healthier path. Being moderate also means expanding opportunity and space for the activities of life. Michelle comprehends this sense of space in recently returning home to gather with family in celebration of her sister's graduation.

We ate, had beverages, laughed, and just had a great time. Not once did I feel I had the urge to think about eating too much or making sure I could fit in my dress. *I had no worries*, like I was just enjoying it and I didn't let the food or anything get in the way of *being with family*.

Worries about eating or weight did not override enjoyment and Michelle felt more open to being in-the-moment, taking it all in and feeling the fullness of meaning about “being with family”. In the way that moderation supports compassion and flexible thinking, Michelle can hold weight and shape-related goals in balance with other goals that are part of living a meaningful life. She can take a positive sense of direction from these goals, without them overriding all other things or diminishing her present embodied self.

Michelle expands on the relation between moderation and indulgence in her experience. For instance, seeing her daughter delight in eating an ice cream cone for the very first time reminds Michelle that it is healthy to *enjoy* being indulgent.

I didn't have any guilt or feel terrible that I ate the ice cream. I enjoyed it and I kept it to an enjoyable amount. Instead of getting two scoops I got just one and that was just fine. I'm really happy to see changes in myself and not letting it interfere.

which she lives and the personal value system she wants to uphold. She explains how it has been “eye-opening” to realize just how consumed she has been by issues of weight in the past.

It really opens your eyes because once you’re— I was so focused on, for the longest time, “oh when is this 10 pounds going to go? When am I – how am I going to do it? You know if I don’t eat..” <rising intensity>. You know, your *mind just starts chattering* and it’s *non-stop* and you’re <scoff> you get *tired* and you just can’t. It’s just – it’s *not fun*.

As she narratively resituates herself as informed and knowledgeable about the issues, Michelle reformulates the “problem” at a societal level, within harmful ideals and pressures toward thinness. She shares an article with me, captured in her photo-diary (Figure 5.7), that speaks to issues surrounding healthy eating in society. Encountering this article as a critical consumer highlights to Michelle just how insidious and ingrained sociocultural messages about weight and thinness truly are. Observing a group of young women in conversation on the night she went out dancing with her cousin causes Michelle to reflect on earlier times from a new perspective.

I was eavesdropping on all girls’ conversation because they were all nitpicking at themselves and talking about dieting or you know “I didn’t eat”. It’s always around and I don’t know if it will ever go away. It just drives me *nuts* because it’s such a *bad cycle*. Society makes it really *hard* because you’ve got to have this certain image. It’s *all focused on being slim* and it’s *always constant*. I felt – it *hurt me* and it *crushed me* to hear these girls just being so worried about it too <upset>. You’re *out dancing*, having a good time, you know, you shouldn’t be talking about that right now <chuckles>. It’s the *top priority* and it *shouldn’t* and – I *let myself* do it that way too – it’s *always there* and it’s like you’re going crazy because it’s *constantly there*, ‘eating blah blah blah dieting’. You *can’t* just *let it go*.

With the aid of wisdom, Michelle can see clearly the need to “break the cycle” for herself and at a societal level. She remarks, “that’s it” and “I let myself” become absorbed in this body image dissatisfaction discourse and illusion of thinness. Michelle experiences a deep compassion, feeling “crushed” at the sight of younger women plagued in same way she was. It recalls her own feelings of loss and wishing she could take back time, if only she knew then what has she has grown to understand.

And then you try all these stupid other diets and like “try this because this will work”, “you can lose this many pounds in so little time” and..*it doesn’t work*. And then you *constantly hear dieting everywhere*. And I’m like “Really, when is this going to – like when is this cycle going to stop?” <irritated> because these girls, they’re so pretty and they’re worried about “oh my god, what I ate and how do I look in these clothes” and it’s like we’re out having a good time

and you're worried about this right now <irritated>. But that's the whole concept of it – it just – it really does consume you.

Michelle characterizes negative messaging as a “constant” presence. She then flippantly puts in its place, “eating blah blah blah”, as just disturbing, irrelevant and meaningless noise. Michelle recognizes messages about the ideal body are “everywhere” and how this really can “consume you” in a destructive manner, as it feels “endless” to try to live up to societal ideals. For instance, she comprehends pressure to be thin as promoting dissatisfaction and yet even when you are thin, there is the conceptualization of being “too thin” or not being thin in the right way. She regards the “whole concept of it” as an impossible reality. However, Michelle notes that she tries to draw the positive from the experience.

I was trying to take that as positive motivation for myself that – because that's how I used to think. I can't do that. So then it kind of gives you a kick in the butt to be like “you've got to change that and stop”.

Michelle narratively casts herself as awakened, re-embodied, and motivated to be a critical consumer. She is ready to disrupt and challenge the status quo. Michelle relates a sense of misplaced priorities in focusing on body insecurity and thinness over all things; “I tried to make it *my mission* to be like that” but was “trying to reach something that I just couldn't”. This “mission” has gone unchallenged in her own life and society for too long.

Michelle narrates a repair of the “bad cycle” within her own family both in sharing her experience of a healthier approach to weight-loss with her stepmother and resolving not to transmit issues onto her daughter. Her emphasis on the “right way” regarding intent, goals, approach, and beliefs of reward in pursuing bodily change is likewise reparative. It is about no longer letting thinness compromise or rob women of positive experience. Not only savvy about negative discourse, Michele appears alert to counter-discourse that conveys positive messages for women's embodiment. For example, Michelle shares her views about the Dove “Love Your Body” commercials, which feature women of various body shapes and sizes.

That Dove campaign for real women. Such an awesome thing because they had – on the commercial there's larger women in their underwear <surprised> YEAH. So I'm like “Go them!”, you know they're so awesome <chuckling>. Because you're like “Wait, you know she's got a similar body as I do and she's on fricking T.V.’ So what?..how?..” <questioning herself>.

Michelle's growing awareness of competing messages in her sociocultural context highlights the need to question and exercise personal choice. This awareness guides Michelle as she strives to internalize a healthier discourse on body-self that encompasses wellness at all sizes and

propagate this understanding for other young women, especially her daughter. This shift in Michelle's narrative about healthy lifestyle change is analogous to the paradigm shift in public health discourse of Health at Every Size (HAES). Shifting focus from weight onto health-promotion for people of all sizes, HAES advocates for body acceptance, intuitive eating and active embodiment (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014; Tylka et al., 2014). These messages are also captured in Michelle's account of re-storying the embodied self and the meaning of weight-loss in her life.

Michelle's reconstruction of weight-loss dieting as "bad" or "wrong" follows from experiential understanding of its perils and risks as well as her increased knowledge about nutrition, physiology of weight-loss, and body positivity discourse. Similarly, Donaghue and Clemitshaw (2012) examined how the narrative of "diets don't work" was tied to women's perceptions of dieting as an unhealthy "temptation", hard to fully shake in spite of knowing it was "bad" for them. Whereas in the past, these women could have convinced themselves that losing weight and staying thin was just a matter for finding the "right" diet and sufficient discipline to eat and exercise "correctly", they described being unable to maintain this thinking from a position of greater and more critical awareness of the issue. For Michelle, repositioning her embodied subjectivity on the matter of dieting likewise necessitates a shift of framework on weight and weight-loss, lest she continue dieting at increasing dissonance.

Becoming a critical consumer functions to reposition Michelle on societal problems of body image, healthy weight, and weight prejudice. Michelle's daughter has helped her to find this voice in catalyzing a re-viewing of her past struggles with the same. Likewise, Michelle feels a heightened sense of compassion and responsibility for change regarding social injustice in raising a daughter and looking to her daughter's future. She contrasts her own experience against the protected, nurturing and empowered space she seeks to create for her child. The way that Michelle describes herself past versus present and the forceful energy with which she advocates critical and empowered ideas are reflective of positive change. She shifts from being a victim of social injustice into roles of advocate for change and creator of her embodied self. This process of disentangling and rebuilding discourse in Michelle's story continues to unfold through meanings of recovery, re-embodiment, and empowerment in the next two superordinate themes.

5.5 Recovering “Me”: Reuniting the Girl I Was & the Woman I Am

As part of *Breaking with the Past*, Michelle refers to recovering parts of “the girl” she was, which were fragmented and “lost” to the traumatic experience of being bullied, struggling



Figure 5.8 *Cracked & Disembodied*

with depression and disordered eating. She illuminates how rediscovering these parts of “me” and reuniting them within her present narrative of self is an essential aspect of healing. Within Michelle’s narrative, Recovering “Me” arises as recapturing something of the innocence before trauma and melding it with the wisdom gained in the aftermath to realize a newfound strength of self.

She depicts this notion of transformation with opposing images of a cracked egg (Figure 5.8) and whole egg (Figure 5.9), meaning to reassemble my-self as “whole”.

The picture of the whole egg is how I’m starting to *feel* – healthy, whole, stable, energy, delicious. And then the cracked egg is how I was feeling *previously* and that I’ve changed from a *cracked egg* to a *whole egg*. A cracked egg meaning a mess, in pieces, can’t seem to get myself back together. Going from one extreme to the next, of going up and down and up and down and then finally *now* it’s starting to be *whole* where it’s steady, I’m not struggling.



Figure 5.9 *Becoming Whole*

With this metaphor, Michelle reveals coming into a healthier sense of self as reassembling pieces or fragments to create a new, meaningful whole and intrapersonal sense of stability. She states how “having everything fall into place” is experienced like a new “me” unfolding and moving in a forward direction developmentally, but also a return to the familiar, something true that had been locked away in the past and was psychologically out of reach. Her image of the cracked egg is presented bare and stark with a shallow depth of field against the backdrop of the dark counter. The opposing image features a background of vibrant green blades of grass in which the whole egg sits upright with a long view into the distance. Her

narrative of transformation from “cracked” and disembodied into “whole” is reflected in the manner of reconstructing dieting into a healthy lifestyle, as explored above, and cast across the three subthemes of this thematic cluster.

5.5.1 Grieving the Unmet & Unwanted Self

Michelle describes the meaning of being a “loser” in relation to the painful experiences of being relentlessly bullied about her weight. Loser is a potent and divisive word with synonyms such as failure, write-off, incompetent, and doomed to disappoint, all of which surround the stigma attached to fatness in Western society. Michelle shares about the time “at my heaviest”, around 300 pounds. She shows me photographs of herself from this time as part of her life story and tells of the burden of embodiment as a “heavy-set girl” struggling to cope.

I remember in gym class we had to do these different circuit things and just always being *last*. Track and field, I hated it. <sigh> I was *last* and so I ended up walking and everyone was yelling at me to hurry, “It’s running you’ve got to run” <talking fast>. Like “I’M TRYING”, you know, “I can’t” <angry>. And, I remember in the summertime when we were camping, my inner thighs would start bleeding because the heat rash and walking. So, I always wore *pants* and still to this day I’m the girl *that wears pants* <emphatic>.

Michelle highlights both her physical pain and emotional suffering with an unwanted sense of self and trying to be active in her overweight body. Such passages in Michelle’s story, reveal her unmet need for support and the isolation she felt when no one stepped in to really help or try to ease her pain, even as she visibly struggled with her body’s limitations.

In addition, being bullied about her physical appearance taught Michelle to feel more ashamed, afraid, and unsafe in her body. And, so she learned to withdraw and “hide” by covering up her body in a manner that felt inauthentic and unwanted but necessary to cope.

I’m such a *fun and goofy girl* but when – I remember in high school I used to partake in Halloween and *dress up*, wacky hair day, like *I did all of that*, but then as soon as the bullying and all that dieting caught up with me, *I stopped*. So there goes my personality out the window <upset>...you know, you just *let it go* [...] Like when I was a cat for Halloween, well they made fun of me because of you know the Fat Cat Vacuum Cleaners – *now that was the last time* I ever did anything for Halloween. Or like birthday parties, wearing dresses, I never wore *anymore dresses* because I *hated my legs* and people pointed, “oh your knees are so fat”, you just get *bugged* all the time <angry>..so it’s like you just get *let down* and it just goes out the window so you don’t bother anymore.

Such ridicule robbed Michelle of the joy of dressing up and partaking in social events like Halloween, an occasion which is supposed to offer free license to pretend and express creativity.

However, expressing her “fun and goofy” personality was twisted into something negative, where Michelle learnt that it was not worth the risk to reveal herself. Similarly, Michelle describes how a special clothing item that she felt excited to wear could be disfigured into a painful experience by her tormentors.

I remember we went to Mexico in Grade 9 and I had bought a dolphin print sarong. I wore that with a nice blue top and then this guy that I liked, he was like “oh do you hear that? Here’s the ocean. You hear the dolphins?” and of course I looked down and I’m like “oh you’re talking about me, great” <cynical>, so I never wore that ever again.

The experience of positive embodiment in expressing herself through clothing was disrupted in being objectified so cruelly.

As Michelle grew more self-conscious in being marginalized, embodiment was construed into a painful, shameful aspect of self. Concealing her body in shapeless, baggy clothing so “no one could see me” assuaged feeling uncomfortable in her own skin and averted being discovered or noticed in a bad way. Referring to the past photographs of herself, Michelle says:

You know with very low self-esteem and body image *I hated shopping*. I couldn’t find pants that fit. Just I – I just hated it, so I’d find the baggiest – like in these different pictures I had sweaters, like I always wore things to cover up.

Adding complexity of meaning, Michelle reveals “covering up” her body in baggy clothes as obscuring or distorting the image of her-self as a person, akin to wearing a disguise. In this regard, a duality emerges about “covering up” as protection and imprisonment, a refuge to hide from persecution that has also kept Michelle trapped in body shame. In her present experience, Michelle says that bodily awareness, such as the sensation of her legs rubbing together, clothes “hugging” her body or exposing skin, causes anxiety. She feels hyperconscious about these sensations like a painful reminder of the past.

Today it’s gorgeous outside and I’m fully dressed, again...I’m trying to undo this person that always wears pants and sweater all summer. In the hot weather, I *still wear* long pants <self-critical> and it’s still hard for me to wear *shorts* just because my *legs rub together* and the *shorts ride up*, so I can’t do it.

Michelle denotes her manner of dress as an unnecessary “habit”, out of sync with the weather. She longs to “undo this person”, to detach from this unwanted self, yet there is a safety and familiarity about “covering up”. Similarly, Michelle describes sucking in her stomach as a behaviour that she has “seriously mastered”, though not typically thought of as a valued skill. Behaviours like covering up and sucking in her stomach represent a vigilance, with which her

thinner peers did not have to concern themselves owing to a different embodied experience. Michelle initially judges herself harshly in calling such behaviours “stupid” and “embarrassing”. Yet, with deepened insight, there is shift in her narrative from self-criticism regarding the unusualness of such “habits” into feelings of grief and compassion about having to cope in this way. Insight offers Michelle clarity and new understanding of unwanted ways she has represented her-self in the past.

Michelle recalls how the emotional pain and low self-esteem felt “at my heaviest” remained with her even when the weight “came off”. The emotion to her narrative even as she achieves thinness in her teens is notably devoid of wellness, as the self remains incomplete, disembodied, and “cracked” (Figure 5.8). Wellness is regarded as a basic foundation, a past unmet need that Michelle is working to rectify in her present. Reflecting on the past from an adult perspective, Michelle comprehends how she was misguided and naïve in “wasting” time on the pursuit of thinness or seeking attention from the “wrong people”. These pursuits “were not the way” to feel better but “that’s all I knew at the time”, Michelle says. In looking back, she can now offer “the girl I was” much-needed compassion to narratively recover the “me”, the healthy parts of her-self, that she lost touch with; and, through grief, mend the fracture or tear in her narrative of self from past to present.

The meaning surrounding an unwanted sense of self in Michelle’s narrative is supported by Rice (2007), whose study explored the accounts of women (aged 20-45 years) of becoming a “fat girl” in a Canadian context. Findings illuminated how a sense of marginalization in an unfit body became crystalized, throughout recurrent and cumulative childhood experiences, into an “unfit identity” or deep sense of personal inadequacy. Rice aptly explained how, for the women in her study, the “designation of their bodies as “fat” laid a foundation for forced accommodation to an unfit identity, imbued with incapacities associated with female fatness that negatively affected and shaped their embodied being” (p. 165). In their accounts, participants revealed how messages about body standards and stereotypes permeated their school experience from dress codes, to the playground, to physical education classes and fitness tests, team selection, and placement in class pictures. These women felt they had little access to alternative frameworks to question and escape these meanings, much like Michelle felt as a “heavy-set girl” struggling to understand and cope throughout her school years. The analysis by Rice highlighted the enjoyment of physical activity until being labeled as the “fat girl”. The felt burden of this label

eroded participants' sense of physical agency, more so than their actual or potential range of ability, and thereby inhibited them from engaging and experiencing their bodies in movement. The women in Rice's study recounted how fatness came to dominate selfhood, as a defining characteristic thought to express something essentially faulty or flawed about their personhood. Moreover, they described how "fat girl", as a marker of personal disorder and/or social undesirability, has translated and been carried in adulthood as "fat woman". These findings parallel Michelle's experience.

Building upon these findings, Michelle's narrative sheds light on the meaning of grieving for yourself to let go of an unwanted self-identity that was forged in past pain, develop self-compassion, and re-story the impact of trauma to re-embody a healthy self. The simple idea of changing out of pants into shorts for the summer represents a significant shift of embodiment in Michelle's experience.

I told my fiancé, "I need to *go find shorts*. I don't want to be that girl AGAIN wearing *pants* and *a sweater..all summer*" <emphatic> and it felt good to say – to *not be that girl again* <crying>..so it's good <chuckles back tears>.

To get out of her pants and sweaters and step into shorts to enjoy the summer heat is a physical and emotional release, a symbol of letting go of the unwanted sense of self as bullied, ashamed,

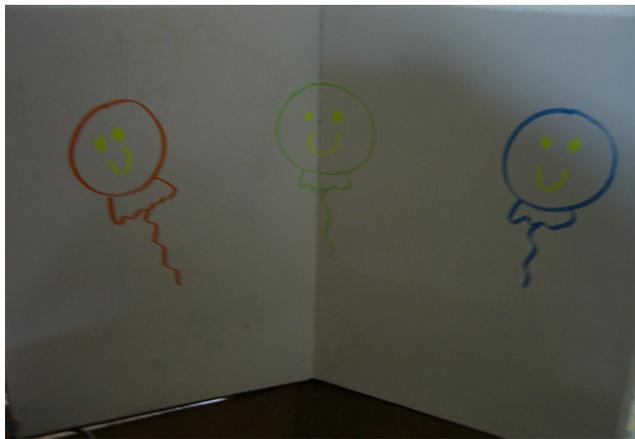


Figure 5.10 Letting Go

and afraid. Michelle signals this contrast in her photo-diary as she points between two images: "like wearing shorts (Figure 5.4) and you know putting the clothes on the floor" (Figure 5.3). She harnesses feelings of loss and regret to move forward and reshape her present and future for the better. Roese (2005) discussed how regret, as a product of "if only" thinking, has a

role in learning, insight, and self-improvement. Though it feels bad, such counterfactual emotion has positive value in signaling the need for change. With a resilient mindset, regret begets opportunity and spurs problem-solving to better oneself in the present. This concept resembles the growth mindset conceptualized by Dweck (2006). In this vein, Michelle demonstrates resilience in being able to translate the loss and regret of her past into a catalyst to grow towards her healthier potential.

Feeling for “the girl I was” fortifies Michelle’s compassion as she fully embodies “the woman I am”. Talking about how she might title her life story or summarize it on a book jacket, Michelle states: “A girl trying to find who she is..trying to learn..and trying to *overcome*”. She draws a message about turning adversity into growth from her story, to become one’s best self in spite of all that may stand in your way.

The main thing is it can *take over your life*. It can *swallow you up*, pretty much to really sum it all up. Because from that first person to bully you to that first thought of “I’m fat”, *you’re done* – if you don’t talk to somebody, if you don’t get the proper information. You know my life has gone by so fast now that I wish I could have <sigh> *done things differently*. Instead I wasted so much time with the wrong people and dieting and trying to lose weight and then gaining too much weight and then it’s – like everything, it just *it swallows you up*. It really does. It’s like if I knew then, what I know now. If I could go back.

Like being overtaken by a powerful wave, Michelle stresses the fragility of development, how all the negativity internalized and unfolding into unhealthy dynamics can “consume” and “swallow” you down if there is no one there to help or intervene. She uses her hand-drawn image of colourful balloons (Figure 5.10) to illustrate “letting go” and feeling lighter, as she divests her present self of the painful past.

A lot of *weight* was lifted of my shoulders, you know you let a balloon go and it just flies, it just – you know it doesn’t have a path to take, it just *goes* and then I just felt like, yeah all these balloons that were *hanging onto me*, they’ve taken the weight and it’s *gone*...it’s like I can be *free* again, like I’m not worrying about things.

Michelle shows how she has been holding on tightly to the strings of “all these balloons”, symbolic of the past, and now reaching a place of readiness to let go, to stopping worrying and carrying this burden any longer, she lets go of the strings and the balloons float away. This image is reminiscent of a wound healing physically to leave behind a scar; though no longer painful as when the wound was incurred and no longer compromising present well-being, the scar symbolizes lived experience. Michelle identifies the image of “letting go” as a point of building momentum in looking across her photo-diary (Figure 5.2).

The manner in which Michelle re-positions herself on the past and reconstitutes its meaning through grief and “letting go” reflects an internalized narrative of growth. In an analogous way, qualitative findings from Conti (2018) demonstrated that women who recover from eating disorders do not regard their painful experiences as “gone” or “erased” – nor do they choose to – but instead draw upon growth meanings to convey self-transformation. For Conti’s

participants, their histories were denoted as having shaped self-understanding and became a position from which to recover their voice, reclaim themselves, and reengage with life in ways that mattered, espousing a richer connection to meaning, values, and hopes that constituted selfhood. Similar meanings of growth and self-transformation unfold in the remaining subthemes of Michelle’s account of Recovering “Me”.

5.5.2 Rekindling that “Colourful Girl”

Michelle expresses that she “used to” be playful, uninhibited, enjoy clothes and dressing up for special events. But, feeling distressed, bullied about and struggling to change her body, all of a sudden “caught up with me”; it added up in a way that started to affect her personhood. Michelle stopped being authentically “me”. She states, “you just *let it go*”, you give up, stop trying, and “forget” those parts of yourself. Michelle voices the “need to get colour back in my life again”, like flushed cheeks instead of pallor, and bring back that “colourful girl”, as if to revive a certain spark she once possessed. She captures this meaning by drawing her self-portrait in coloured markers (Figure 5.11).

I drew a colourful girl wearing a skirt and tank top to resemble *myself*. Used bright colors to represent happiness and my new love for getting myself back into colour. And I’m WEARING A SKIRT <gleeful> that’s above the knee.



Figure 5.11 Self-portrait

Her drawing shows a creative and child-like spirit, not inhibited or bashful, but authorizing herself to just draw “me” as seen in her mind. Michelle explains, “I’m an artsy person, so I’m trying to bring that back again”. Michelle is trying “to portray” this side of herself. “Getting myself back into colour” is a new way of being which contrasts the colourless and lifeless images of her black sweatpants and sweatshirt (Figure 5.3) and being tired (Figure 5.6). The descriptor, “colourful girl”, evokes an image of being spirited, vibrant, unique, and living with joyful abandon. Colour is used as a metaphor with several idiomatic expressions that are in keeping with Michelle’s meaning:

“to lend colour” is to embellish or add to something; to “show one’s true colours” is to reveal what you are truly like, and “with flying colours” captures success and triumph. Michelle speaks of the “colourful” parts of her younger self as a dormant capacity. Though she cannot fully go

back to this time, as she is no longer a child, she is trying to reclaim lost pieces so they may blossom in a new way in the here-and-now.

The last time I went to my dad's, I was looking at all the pictures of like when I was younger <quietly giggles in remembering fondly> like I was goofy, like always smiling, you know in those younger pictures. It's like why? <confused> Michelle didn't – like that's not me to be sad and to be worrying about all that negative stuff. I guess it has become a part of me because I've weaved it into myself..and that's not who Michelle is <sigh>, like I was such a happy-go-lucky girl, I didn't have a care in the world, I was so fun and just..and then that world was gone when I was introduced to all this dieting and that was my new world of focusing on all that, right. Now I'm trying to get back to that happy-go-lucky world again <chuckling>.

The need to rekindle healthy parts of her child self has become especially apparent with becoming a mother and watching her daughter innocently and freely take in new experiences. For instance, playing in the water with her daughter at the lake recalls a carefree quality that Michelle used to feel and would like to recapture in her present experience.

We all went to the lake and I wore my bathing suit. My daughter was not looking at you know my jiggly *thighs*. She's worried about *playing* in the water and the sand, like burying her legs in the sand, and it's not such a *big deal* to her.

Michelle is transitioning out of camouflaging her body in baggy, dark clothes into wearing “fun clothes”. She is reawakening to the richness and wholeness of colour. This

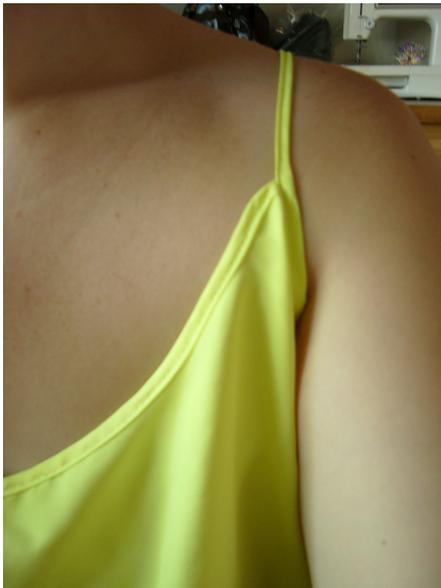


Figure 5.12 *Getting Myself Back into Colour*

transition is less about the clothes per se and more about Michelle's feelings of esteem and empowerment as the woman in the clothes. Research has found that women with higher self-esteem are less likely to try to cover up or conceal the body than their counterparts and, instead, aim to stand out in a positive way by their use of clothing (Tiggemann & Lacey, 2009). As an adult, Michelle has greater control and capacity to reshape the bleak and one-dimensional feeling of always being in those clothes, just as she now “knows how to *handle* a bully”. She reveals the significance of re-experiencing self “in colour” in the story of her new yellow shirt (Figure 5.12).

Having colours, it just – it keeps you intact with having fun and being cheerful. When I wear the yellow shirt, it's just..I'm *laughing a lot* and *feel really good*

and I just – I’m *out and about* and it feels GOOD <optimistic>. Going from wearing all black all the time, like the pants and the sweater <points to Figure 5.3>, I think it does portray your – like being tired <points to Figure 5.6> and you know kind of feeling groggy and whatnot and the colour does *change* and I *used to do all that* in elementary school, like wacky hair day. I did *all that stuff* and then the road DOWNWARDS with all the past experiences and now bringing back that fun girl that I used to be, *it’s coming back* and it feels good. I’m very creative and when I wear the yellow shirt, it’s just..I’m *laughing a lot* and you *feel really good*. I’m *out and about* and it feels GOOD <optimistic>.

Rekindling that “colourful girl” begins as an intrapersonal undertaking and then radiates outwards. Michelle reveals “colour” within her embodied attitude and activity, as she dresses and carries herself. She references a sense of flowing, feeling enthusiastic and bright-tempered, in “laughing a lot” and being “out and about”. Life “in colour” is full-bodied and awakened to nuanced meaning. Re-experiencing her embodied self in living “colour” is also a reminder to “keep intact”, as a whole person, and stay true to her healthier path.

Michelle expresses how her therapeutic work is “finally showing” in terms of enhancing her outward appearance and her felt sense of mutuality between inner and outer self. She captions this as becoming “stronger” and “more beautiful”. Looking across her photo-diary (Figure 5.2), she remarks how the images become more colourful as symbolic of her transition.

From these on, like they’re colourful ones, the balloons and stuff <points to Figure 5.10 and subsequent images>. Just to show happiness and – because everything is so bland and then it’s starting to get lively.

The increased presence of colour is symbolic of her transition: from the black, heavy, and empty image of her sweatshirt and sweatpants (Figure 5.3) to the image of her wearing the bright yellow shirt (Figure 5.12). Colour initially arises quietly on the sidelines in her photographs with the pink post-it note (Figure 5.4), then a larger burst with the balloons (Figure 5.10), eventually radiating out in her self-portrait (Figure 5.11) and yellow shirt (Figure 5.12), and culminating with a colourful crayon message (Figure 5.13) in the final image.

5.5.3 Becoming "My Own Person"

Michelle voices the idea of becoming "my own person" and finding self-acceptance through relinquishing unwanted selves of the past, such as victim role and living in uncomfortable, fearful existence in her body as a girl. She describes the act of choosing self-acceptance, to “be fine with myself”, as a new path. With embracing this shift in thinking as part of “me”, internalizing it as foundational knowledge, Michelle builds capacity to act as such and reclaims authorship over her story.

But *now*, I'm learning that I am my own person and it shouldn't really matter what other people think. *It's hard* but it's a very *true saying* that, you know, you have to love yourself before others can love you...when you really look at it, *everyone is their own* and it shouldn't really matter, right. *It really shouldn't matter*. There are always people that judge but, in the end, it really shouldn't matter *what I look like*. I guess just learning about myself that it's okay to be *me* and it's – that's the that way that *I am*.

On this point, Michelle's story recalls the process of narrative reconstruction (Crossley, 2000a) and "processing" the deep-felt impact of past adversity to reconstitute it as a "springboard" for positive change (Pals, 2006; Pals & McAdams, 2004). Pals (2006) specifically references becoming the "author" of your own "second chance" in drawing new meaning and strength out of past traumatic experiences. For Michelle, embracing her individuality and acting with this authorizing spirit is about focusing on her own self-evaluation – what *she* thinks, feels, and values – and standing tall. The path forward of empowerment to "be me" and do it her way is observed in how Michelle reconstructs dieting into a healthy lifestyle, concretized as she adopts a new motto or mantra of "Enjoy food! Enjoy Life!" (Figure 5.13).

It's a saying I'm trying to use more and more for myself to always be on top of the good of dieting and such. Everyone *holds weight differently*, so it doesn't matter or give others the right to bully or comment on a person's weight. A person shouldn't limit themselves – cold food is meant to be enjoyed on hot days and not meant to feel bad about. I'm hoping this cycle will break for everyone that is experiencing difficult times in dieting and body image. You should enjoy food and enjoy life and *food* does bring us together...food shouldn't *hold you back*, right. So, I hope that people can find that *balance*, like *I have* to enjoy food and ENJOY LIFE <optimistic>.

Here, Michelle really shows how he has developed from the naïve and misguided young girl into her "own person". She describes coping successfully with pressures toward thinness and even



Figure 5.13 New Mantra

helping to guide others, like her stepmom, in a healthier weight-loss approach as well as advocate for systemic change. This "saying" or mantra promotes the kind of positive outlook and dialogue that Michelle needs to realize her best self. With this shift, she recreates psychological space surrounding food and the body. In this newfound space, she should not restrict eating in ways that limit lived

experience, a range of body sizes is considered acceptable, and she will no longer condone bullying or belittling a person for their body. As her healthy and best self “breaks out of that shell”, Michelle becomes more assertive and displays an energetic resilience that challenges her past tormentors as well as the scars of anxiety that she has carried.

She further reveals the “stronger me” in stepping outside of familiar comfort zones to (re)discover positive embodiment in colourful summer clothes. Michelle shares more about her experience of purchasing the yellow shirt (Figure 5.12).

I put it on and I looked at myself in the mirror, in like the full-length mirror, and I’m like “oh my gosh. Really? <surprised> I look great. This is awesome” so I *got it* <enthusiastic> and there was this other shirt, it’s pink and it has a pattern on it. I haven’t worn that one yet because it opens up in the back, so I still have to break myself into it, but *I bought it* because I *need* to break out of that. I haven’t worn it yet. It’s still *hard*. Even when I put it on, I take it off right away and put something else on because it’s still that shell but <sigh> I have to *let it go*. Because it’s going to ruin the fun times *ahead*.

She emphasizes, “I got it” as a sense of being daring and seizing the opportunity, empowering herself across the threshold of discomfort. Michelle explains how, despite her initial positive reaction in the dressing room, she dismissed the yellow shirt and walked away from the purchase at first; but something compelled her to go back and buy it. Making the purchase is an act symbolic of breaking with the past to “do me”.

I’m looking at this shirt and I’m like <scoff> “No I’m not picking a yellow shirt, that’s not even going to happen” <dismissive>. But then I went back, like “I *am* going to get this because why – I don’t have *anything to worry about*”, right. *I have nothing to worry about* <resolute>. So, when it’s *sunny*, and I’m still wearing these *pants* and *sweaters*, I’m like “No, I’ve got to” <cringing>, so then I *whip out* my yellow shirt and I put it on <energized>.

Being “my own person” is about empowerment. In this excerpt, Michelle illuminates the need to trust that she will instinctually *know* what is good for her or the right path to take. To re-story time as “that was then, and this is now” is to uncover and open possibility for her present self.

The notion of becoming a “stronger” and “more beautiful” person is also depicted by the imagery of a whole egg (Figure 5.9). The egg in its design is paradoxical, possessing both a vulnerability and a hardness; despite its fragile shell, when upright, as Michelle has depicted it, an egg has capacity to bear a surprising weight atop its peak. This paradox offers comment on resilience. There is a courageous quality to the vulnerability that Michelle had to embrace in order to grieve and “let go” of the past. Moreover, she maintains this vulnerability in the form of

authenticity as she recovers healthy pieces of “me” that she needed to bring forward to the present and resolves to be “my own person”.

While it is the last image in her photo-diary (Figure 5.13), Michelle elaborates that “Enjoy food! Enjoy life!” represents a hopeful “new beginning” about more than just food; it is about regaining balance on the whole, in her sense of self, body, activities and projects. In our photo interview, Michelle comments that the similar bird’s eye composition of her first (Figure 5.3) and last (Figure 5.13) photo-diary images is significant of “evolving into a different person, someone stronger”.

Realizing a lot about letting things control you in different ways. To me the perspective of this <points to Figure 5.3> is standing over top of it and not letting it stand overtop of you...I’m just realizing that I took a picture of standing over top of this too <points to Figure 5.13> that I’m throwing this away and then I’m taking up “Enjoy food! Enjoy life!”.

Making a shift of ideology and meaning supports Michelle to establish a more agentic and empowered sense of self and a capacity to savor life experience, rather than remain on the sidelines in limiting herself or feeling bad. In our final interview, Michelle says, “I don’t care anymore” and laughs playfully as we discuss changes that Michelle can “actually see” in herself. She presents with a lightness about herself, which she associates with no longer feeling “such a heavy burden” in daily life. Whereas “not caring” is often taken as an indifference or apathy, here Michelle offers the expression of “I don’t care” in a spirit of empowerment and caring about the “right” things. The distressed sense of care (more aptly concern) has lifted and she is, instead, focused on caring deeply for her embodied self and the things that truly matter.

Research has identified the development of increased agency and empowerment as important for healthy embodiment (Del Busso & Reavey, 2013; Paquette & Raine, 2004; Piran, 2016b). A recent study by Holmqvist Gattario and Frisen (2019) explored the experiences of young adults (age 26-27; 15 women, 16 men) who were able to overcome negative body image from adolescence. This study found that developing increased agency and empowerment constituted a major turning point in participants’ body image trajectories. The development of positive strategies to support a healthy body-self relation was also central to accounts of recovery. Such strategies included practicing body acceptance, learning to challenge and avoid negative body-related information, understanding the risks of overfocusing on beauty and body ideals, developing a more holistic self-identity and pursuits unrelated to appearance. Michelle’s narrative about making a healthy lifestyle change and becoming “my own person” reflects an

embracement of these positive strategies. The movement of Recovering “Me” can be seen as facilitating the set of subthemes that comprise next thematic cluster, as depicted with arrows in the graphic representation (Figure 5.1). The next cluster expands on the positive ways that Michelle seeks to become embodied and empowered.

5.6 Coming into Her Own: Embodied & Empowered Self

As she stories herself reaching a new level of maturity, a point in development where she is more comfortable, finds renewed strength and confidence, and feels more effective and fulfilled, Michelle appears to be Coming into Her Own. Referencing the photo of the tree (Figure 5.5), Michelle writes in her journal:

The tree is how I feel. Full of life, full, growing, not perfect, tall, breathing. I love *me* no matter what! It made me realize that you’re going to have bad days and you’re going to have good days <chuckling through tears>.

There is a natural relation between good and bad days, much like sadness and joy across time in Michelle’s narrative; but, with coming into her own, the aspiration of putting down roots in a healthier self begins to feel like a reality. Like the spanning branches of the tree she pictured, Michelle expands her lifeworld through compassion for self and body, along with a bit of “tough love”, and by creating space for growth. The interrelated nature of the meanings in this cluster and Michelle’s endeavour to sustain the perspective and practice of a healthy lifestyle is represented with bi-directional arrows in my graphic representation (Figure 5.1).

5.6.1 Re-Scripting Self-Talk

In her narrative, Michelle describes a need to reclaim control over self-talk, particularly the ever-present feeling of self-critical dialogue. This subtheme relates back to the notion of becoming a critical consumer. Michelle recognizes that a self-critical or disparaging manner of relating to herself intrapersonally has a negative impact on her embodied subjectivity and her ability to act in terms of aspirations. She shares about the process of re-scripting the way to be with her-self and live in her body. Returning to the meaning of the tree (Figure 5.5) that she wrote in her journal, Michelle questions:

Why are you harming yourself and trying to smother yourself with all these negative images and thinking, “Inner thighs, you suck”? <angry>, you know like it’s so *stupid* <sigh> and it’s not even worth the time to worry about it.

The image of the self-critical statement, “Inner thighs, you suck!” (Figure 5.14), is how Michelle found herself when she was in the dressing room trying on a pair of shorts. She regards this

moment as “letting myself down” as opposed to building herself up or standing up for her embodied self.

I was looking in the mirror and my eyes just went right to my *inner thighs* and then I felt <points to Figure 5.14>. And that’s what didn’t – I just let it go, like “I’m not going to wear this” and just let myself down. I’m like, “oh man, this sucks”, you know I let my body get in the way of wanting *to break out* and actually *wear shorts* <disappointed sigh>.

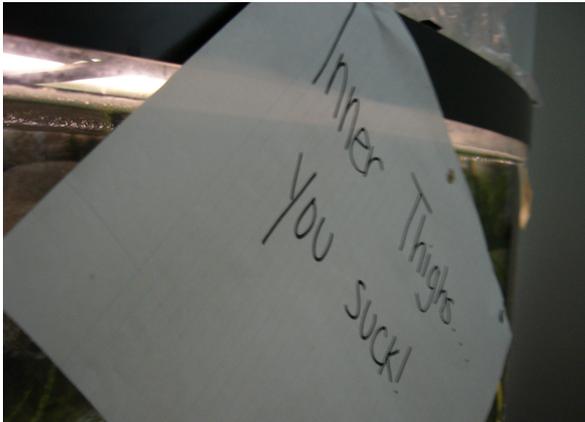


Figure 5.14 Self-Criticism

Michelle conveys defeat in this experience of “letting” negative judgment about her body interfere with accomplishing a positive goal, basically letting the voice of insecurity and self-criticism win. However, Michelle considers an alternative voice as she says, “I’ve got to shut that off” and stop “smothering” her embodied self in negativity.

The action of “smothering yourself” conveys a strong image of the harmful presence of internalized self-critical and self-disciplinary discourse. Michelle reformulates her thinking and behaviour within the concept of nurturance to flip the script into being accepting and encouraging in the way she relates to her embodied self. This alternate script is captured by her image of “It’s ok to wear shorts!” (Figure 5.4), translating “can’t” into “can” via a compassionate, nudging voice.

Based on interviews with women ranging from 21 to 61 years-old, Paquette and Raine (2004) found that the dynamic nature of body image is often mediated by women’s own internal contexts of self-criticism versus self-confidence. These contexts were not mutually exclusive. However, women who tended to be predominantly self-critical experienced more body image distress and were more inclined to hold themselves to unattainable ideals. Predominantly self-confident women, on the other hand, appeared more aware and reflective about the influence of external pressures towards thinness and relied on a strong sense of self to sustain positive feelings about their bodies. Some of the women in Paquette and Raine’s study recognized the process of internalizing and reproducing sociocultural norms within their intrapersonal relationship, while others felt that they could no longer distinguish between external influence and their internal context. Paquette and Raine stated that internalization, as a form of oppression and coercion, is particularly insidious because it appears “natural”.

As Michelle seeks to shift her internal context and, accordingly, reflects upon the influences of her negative body- and self-image, the issue of concern within her story also shifts from having a “problematic” body to “problematic” thoughts. She identifies how it is not reasonable or “even worth the time” to engage in negative self-talk. This “bad habit” or kneejerk response was learned from mistreatment “because bullies *drilled it into you so much*” with painful repetition.

It does take over you so you kind of lose that sense of who you are...but I’m trying to just *be positive* about it and just *work with it*.

For Michelle, embodiment has felt “always uncomfortable”, like trying to navigate a field of landmines. For instance, she describes a hyperawareness about where and how clothing touches her body and trying to use posture (e.g., suck in stomach) or gesture (e.g., arms in front of torso) to disguise her body. These behaviors serve to create a protective distance between her body and the world but, correspondingly, divide her body and self. Michelle needs to defuse this meaning about embodiment and disrupt the pattern of “nitpicking” her body, concerning herself excessively with inconsequential details, by practicing body compassion and acceptance. Rather than focus on trying to “smooth out” her body (i.e., make it continuous without irregularities or bulges), feeling healthier and happier entails “smoothing” the anxiety, apprehension, and shame about being in her body. Self-criticism is a slippery foe, “you look at one thing and then you fall back”; it is quick to wedge itself into the conversation and, like blinders, cause you to lose sight of your healthy embodied self. Michelle reifies the meaning of “letting go” by casting self-criticism as an old pattern of behaviour, no longer desired as part of “me”. This reconstruction serves to bolster her effort to establish a healthier mindset as an intrapersonal “new normal”.

Michelle expresses this shift within the story of accomplishing her goal to lose the remaining 10 pounds of her pregnancy weight-gain. She describes how these 10 pounds felt like they “hung on forever” and led to much self-doubt. Encountering the new number on the scale was startling, as only the night before she had been feeling down and judging her body harshly as “huge” and “jiggly”. The reality of being 10 pounds lighter than she thought caused Michelle to rethink the accuracy of her self-perception, particularly when gazing at her body through the negative lens of self-criticism. Michelle states how she had been ignoring and avoiding her “urge” to exercise, taking this as further meaning of the need to cultivate positive embodiment and “listen to myself”. In hindsight, the time spent scrutinizing and prodding her body in front of

the mirror, calling it “gross” and “huge” in her mind, seems like a senseless “waste” as opposed to her healthy, constructive instinct to feel better in her body by getting some exercise.

I still had about a month left on my gym membership and it’s really hard to get to the gym. They have the daycare there, but it’s a lot of work to haul my daughter there and I’m like “I don’t want to do it”, it’s an *excuse* really. And then I said, “that’s it”, I pre-paid up for the week and *I went*, I took her, like “*I’ve got to go*”.

In this excerpt, Michelle conveys the meaning of tuning into her healthy voice to catch those times when she is getting in her own way and give herself a dose of “tough love”.

Realizing that weight-loss had happened unbeknownst to her amplified the meaning of “letting go”, not only of past adversity but the burden of self-defeating thoughts and behaviours.



Figure 5.15 Thumbs-up for Me

Michelle returns to her image of the balloons (Figure 5.10) to signify celebrating her success and “party time”, as in breaking free of the strings to the past that had been “hanging on” (more so than the 10 pounds) to let loose. In her photo-diary, she gives herself a thumbs-up (Figure 5.15); a small gesture with big meaning about honouring herself in times of struggle and celebrating herself in success.

It’s a feel-good thumbs up. A thumbs-up for the wonderful transition that I feel I’ve been on and I think I succeeded! A thumbs-up for congratulations..so it’s good <tearing up> When I went and I saw the 10 pounds – that gives you extra motivation to keep going...and it kind of keeps you on the road, “remember those 10 pounds, I *did good* and then *just keep going, you’re going to do great*” <rhythmic, motivated speech> and just keep *telling myself positive things.*”

Michelle becomes emotional talking about the ways that insight has empowered and “helped me to transition myself from how I was stuck”. Her tears feel different in this moment together compared to that of painful memories in her life-story. They are tears of joyful relief in “letting go” and feeling proud of gains she has made. In her narrative, Michelle identifies with both continuity and change of selfhood from past to present, stating “that was then. I can be proud of what I have now” and “I’ve got this now”.

5.6.2 Embodied Self as Perfectly Imperfect

Following from “being my own person”, Michelle redefines embodiment around the notion of being perfectly imperfect. She mentions her photo of the tree (Figure 5.5) once again to express this meaning:

I look outside and I’m like “the tree is perfect”. Like it’s breathing. It has so many different flaws, you know, some of the bark is coming off, some of the tree’s leaves are down and it makes think that “okay I feel like a tree today” <laughs>. It’s still providing you know fresh air and to help you breathe.

The tree appears “perfect” in its imperfections, worthy of attention, full of vitality, and contributing value. So too, Michelle embraces her body as perfectly imperfect by learning to enjoy being embodied and smile at her body, celebrating instead of judging its parts or “flaws”. She captures this meaning with a creative and evocative photograph of a happy face symbol overlaying her mid-section (Figure 5.16).

It’s *hard to show that*, like you know the stretch marks from having a baby and from the previous weight of being so *large* and it just – *it’s hard* because it’s *scars* right. You’re like “I don’t want to show that” <cringing>, you’re very self-conscious. So then with having the 10 pounds gone and feeling a lot better, I’m like this is probably the best way, having a smiley face on my stomach, to show that yeah, you’re feeling good <excited>.

Recreating embodiment through acceptance, trying to accept “who I am” and my body as part “me”, imbues new meaning into bodily imperfections; as Michelle says, “the *stretch marks* that



Figure 5.16 Perfectly Imperfect

are on my body, they tell a story”, a story about development, time passing, and growing stronger. As Michelle studies her photo-diary (Figure 5.2), she isolates Figure 5.16 as a standout image of “getting stronger as a person”. Michelle stresses how impossible it would have been for her to do this photo in the past; yet, in the present act of taking this photograph, she says “I was laughing through the whole picture. I was having fun and actually it

was okay”. Michelle uses strengths of being artistic and fun-loving to reshape and celebrate her body. She reconstructs the mid-section of her body, which has been an area of particular concern for her, into something new and more beautiful with this image.

I'm not *judging* the picture. Like before I'd be like "oh god, like the sides you know they're bulging out" <distressed>. But *I'm not judging that*, I'm seeing – I focus more on the smiley face than anything else. I don't see anything bad in the picture anymore or when I look at myself anymore <confident>. It's changed now how I wear clothes. Like I don't care. Everyone has rolls, you know it's like that *huge acceptance* to be *fine* with who you are because it's really not a big deal because there's other things to be excited about rather than be like "oh my gosh my sides are poking out", you know, not letting it *take control*...yeah not judging anymore. It's having *fun*.

She communicates learning "to be *fine* with who you are" as a developmental process. Concerns of the past become trivial as she learns to comprehend the whole of her body, selfhood, and life situation. In viewing this image (Figure 5.16), one cannot help but smile. Michelle smiles back at the smiley face on her stomach instead of "judging the picture", dissecting it or fixating on specific parts. This photo corresponds to the new way of perceiving her past with an appreciation for the whole and with clarity on the important take away messages.

Michelle reconstructs her present efforts to enhance her physical body and embodiment around being "flawless in my terms". She describes this meaning as a "smoother" figure in her clothing, not being "frumpy", and improving her body fitness for daily activities. This aspiration is more comprehensive and relevant to Michelle's lifeworld than the narrow ideal of being thin. She can reassure herself that she does not need to survey her body for the appearance of bulges or rolls and can relinquish this precarious state in "trying to *be fine* with myself".

It's still hard to not wear *baggy* clothes. I'm trying to wear clothes that fit to your body. You can still wear slimming clothes and still look good...Like I try to break out of that shell..to wear clothes that you can still feel comfortable in but not have to put a sweater on right away or wear sweats all the time because then that's, you know, it's *hiding*..hiding what you are underneath, which shouldn't really matter and I really want to *get over that* because I don't want my daughter to go through it <voice cracking>.

Vicariously, Michelle teaches her daughter "to be okay" with who she is, fostering self-worth at a basic level, so she will not experience the shame that makes you want to hide yourself or that distorts the body you inhabit and food you need for sustenance into disorder.

I want her to know that <crying> – just that – *to be herself* and that she can be okay to eat, to be okay to wear what she wants, right. Not to have to *hide*.

With a shift of discourse, Michelle reformulates a goal to make the most of or optimize her physical appearance. In doing so, she makes room for positivity and to (re)discover embodiment in a hitherto unseen way.

On that night that I went out, I wore the yellow shirt and the leggings, and it made a huge difference. When I walked in, I started dancing right away, I had a smile, like I didn't care, and that really showed with people because you know people were looking— because well under the black light my yellow shirt glows – so everyone was looking at my shirt and then I actually got other girls to come *dance*...your happiness portrays to others, so I was like “this feels good because I got other people up that were *sitting*”, like *it does show*.

Wearing the yellow shirt (Figure 5.12) out dancing, Michelle was fully present to the lived experience. She states how it was remarkable “for me to actually feel good” and observes how presenting herself positively led others to take positive notice of her, in a way that affirmed her healthy sense of self. She finds meaning in being an encouraging presence for others who, like herself in the past, were just “sitting” on the sidelines. In addition, Michelle welcomes physical sensations that once triggered such anxiety.

It's so weird to have the *material touch your skin* <surprised> when you're so used to baggy...then it feels good because it's like “you know what, this – I've never *felt that ever*”.

This example in Michelle's story showcases how positive body image is more than absence of negativity, just as emerging research into the construct of positive body image has elucidated (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015).

As Michelle's sense of embodied self grows more positive, her lifeworld seems to expand. Michelle remarks at the increased range of activities that she and her daughter are enjoying together.

We go *biking*, we go *walking*, we go to the park and like I'm not sitting here, like “I don't want to go do things because I'm fat”.

She delights in wearing colourful new clothes and “being able to eat delicious food and not feel gross”. By our last interview, she had even ventured to wear the open back shirt that initially sat in the closet as she mustered courage.

That pink shirt I finally wore a couple weekends ago, like it was so <sigh of relief> it was a *different feeling* to have open back. But I felt really – I felt so PRETTY, you know like oh this is great <giddy >. But before I know that I wouldn't *ever wear* anything like that.

“Breaking out” of the past and old patterns affects positive change in Michelle's lived experience of being in and evaluating her body. The difference that feeling good, whole, embracing flaws and being compassionate on the inside can make, is revealed in seeing herself as “pretty” on the outside. And, just as negative cycles are self-propelling, seeing and feeling she is beautiful,

propels a positive change of being and acting in her world that is self-affirming. In this respect, Michelle's story supports past research findings on the meaningful presence of positive body image constructs, such as body appreciation and compassion (Berry et al., 2010; Liss & Erchull, 2015; Tiggemann & McCourt, 2013; Wood-Barcalow et al., 2010).

5.6.3 Space of Remediation vs. Self-enhancement

Michelle distinguishes between living in a space of remediation versus self-enhancement. A focus on remedying perceived flaws is defeating, "you're always focused on the negative", and disconnects from "that sense of who you are", your sense of self as a whole person. It detracts from what matters on the grander scale as "you're trying to work on *getting rid* of the bad energy rather than working on say a talent or something *positive about yourself*". Michelle depicts the space of remediation with imagining her body like sliced bread (Figure 5.17).

I'm like "oh I wish I could you know like *peel it off*, just like *get rid of it* so I don't have to deal with it."

Treating her body like object that she can "slice" or "peel", strip away at, and pare down feels cruel, disparaging, and disembodied. Her image of sliced bread presents a marked contrast to the



Figure 5.17 Objectifying the Body

previous photograph (Figure 5.16) of being perfectly imperfect, which suggests an enhancing of the body in lived space. Michelle remarks how she was imagining her body like sliced bread only the night before realizing that she had actually lost 10 pounds. She contrasts ideals of self-attack and self-care for her body, relating the latter to embodying an activity you enjoy and intuitive eating. This contrast affirms the argument of feminist scholars, such as Blood (2005) about the need for women to move "away from viewing their body as an object that can be molded and shaped...towards experiencing their bodies as lived in" (p. 125). Michelle exemplifies how this shift is needed to foster more holistic and healthy experiences of embodiment. Michelle's lived sense of hiding in a rejected and flawed body-self, trying to get rid of "problems" she was being criticized and bullied for, is contrasted with a sense of self-development, building something positive about yourself like a skill or talent. She reflects the meaning of a missed opportunity,

incurred cost and thwarted potential: “I remember always just sitting..I just *sat* and just *covered up*” when “I could have been out *doing* other things instead of hiding”.

Pila, Solomon-Krakus, Egelton and Sabiston (2017) explored the cumulative experience of body and weight concerns among women aged 50 to 65, noting how prominent experiences of weight stigma in childhood (e.g., not fitting into desks, demeaning comments of peers or educators) had shaped perceptions of body and self in an enduring way. The women’s accounts in this study revealed a constancy and consuming nature about weight struggles over their lifetime. They shared about “never feeling good in my skin” and ways that body concerns upstaged other life domains. Weight concerns became a reason to avoid activities where their body would be on display and thereby vulnerable to judgement (e.g., change rooms, physical fitness activity) and to limit themselves in general life domains (e.g., professional development, social relationships). The prominence of self-conscious emotions – a sense of embarrassment, guilt, or shame about the body – followed these women through time. Furthermore, in their analysis, the authors shed light on the profound impact of overweight stigma and discrimination on women’s overall self. Their participants narrated this meaning as the idealization of a life without a “weight problem” and pursuit of a life that felt “beyond my reach” or like a “mountain I’ve never quite climbed”.

In her experience, Michelle similarly regards her past self as consumed by body insecurity, which detracted attention and effort away from “the good things in life” and caused her to self-restrict potential lived experience. However, arriving at this insight in her present seems to ignite Michelle to deal with insecurity head-on and equip her daughter such that body-image issues do not “get in the way”, “distract”, or compromise her healthy development.

I don’t want her to have to go through this because it takes over your life from what you really need to do. If you *lose track* you can’t have the life that you want to live because you’re trying to chase something else. You’re very distracted. Like say you have a talent and you’re trying to do something with it, you know, you get so distracted, you leave that talent behind. But really *you shouldn’t*, and you should be pursuing – like *anything*, sports or gymnastics or whatever, right. And if you let this eating thing, well anything, get in the way, you’re going to lose it <emphatic>. I want her to live to her potential.

In this vein, optimizing her body weight and physique is reconstituted as an aspect of being a “healthy Mom”. Michelle explains, “I’ve got to *keep up* with my daughter”. Having excess weight and poor physical fitness is seen to drag her down, contribute to feeling “tired” and “sluggish”. As a parent, Michelle wants to be mobile and progress with her daughter as she

explores activities and learns about the world in her body. For example, Michelle states “I need to feel comfortable in a bathing suit” because “she loves the water”.

Michelle relates her experiences of observing a heavier girl riding her bike in shorts, seemingly without worry as a signal of her own self-restriction.

The girl was riding her bike and she had a lot of cellulite on her legs and like *she was totally fine in shorts* <with intensity>. It’s like why – you know, *she had no worries*. She’s wearing shorts and her legs are jiggling while she’s riding a bike <thumps hand on table>, but like – so it’s to use her as *strength* and *it is okay to wear shorts*, like there’s nothing *wrong* with it <emphatic>.

With a burgeoning strength of speech and gesture, Michelle responds to the call from within to stop holding herself down, telling herself it is “wrong” or not permissible to be a certain way, do or wear certain things in her body. Michelle takes the positive example of another woman as a sign and “uses her as strength” to relinquish her own unhealthy self-discipline and welcome a self-compassion that similarly authorizes embodied activity. Operating from this stance, activities, foods, or clothing options that she might have previously disregarded and held back from are reconstituted.

I feel like I have more *opportunity* now to do a lot of things because I’m not *limiting myself* to being stuck in pants and sweaters and worried about peeling layers off – just different opportunities to do different things, to enjoy outside...I was running with my daughter in the jogger <excited> and it was like “I haven’t run in a long time” <laughing>. It was different not to worry about – you know of course you still jiggle but it wasn’t in the back of my mind, with taking all that energy I had been putting into negative things and focusing more now on the fun things and *enjoy food, enjoy life* <laughs>.

Similarly, in her narrative, Michelle reveals how self-acceptance and aspirations for self-improvement can co-exist. She relates insight that changing something essential about selfhood would be to disavow self-acceptance; if she were to make that kind of change, then “I wouldn’t look like me because that’s not Michelle, right”. But, with approaching personal change from a stance of enhancement, instead of disapproval or dislike, she can stay true to and become a better self. For instance, Michelle speaks about looking and feeling put together in an attractive way, giving effort in the context of self-care to optimize her appearance and fitness. She says, “I don’t want to look *sloppy* where everything is hanging out or jiggling”; showing little to no concern for how she looks is unbecoming and would not reflect her best self. She values how it feels to be in “fun”, nice-fitting clothes and express creativity in her look. She also wants to enhance her physique, not necessarily “where you’re all muscular and stuff” as idealized in the media, but to

a level that facilitates being comfortably embodied in living the life she wants. Weight-loss is about feeling confident, comfortable, and nourished in her body. In pursuing weight-loss on her own terms, Michelle can, maintain a balance – she can “Enjoy food! Enjoy life” – consistent with a space of self-enhancement.

5.6.4 (Re)shaping Selfhood in the Changing Body

The notion that stretch marks can tell a meaningful story mentioned earlier is also an expression of how Michelle negotiates the challenge that pregnancy has posed for her embodied self. She experienced the corporeal change of pregnancy, especially the weight gain, as going “downhill” in terms of body image. It has been a struggle for Michelle to slim down to her pre-pregnancy weight and reclaim the post-natal body as comfortable. Though the outcome of a child was most welcome, pregnancy itself was nonetheless a disruption to her embodied self.

I don't regret having my daughter. But *all that pregnancy weight* was a *failure* <discouraged> because it pushed everything back and it's *taking forever* to take it off...I'm trying to get back.

Michelle recalls what it was like to be in her body in the time just before she became pregnant with the memory of wearing a particular dress:

Before my daughter I had this dress. It was when I did the GI Reset Kit the first time and I lost all that weight. I was feeling good and I wasn't going bonkers over the whole dieting thing. I was doing really, really good. I had this long dress and I want to wear that again, so that's motivating me to try to get back to where I was before. And then it's like “well I don't know if that's possible?” because it's different now after you have a kid, you know there's different factors coming into that. But if I go about it the *right way* then I *can* <chuckles>...when I was looking at pictures of myself in that dress, I felt really happy and I *looked happy* and you could just *see* when I was wearing it how confident I felt and stuff like that and I was like “well I want to be *back there*” so that's what I'm trying to do.

Physical weight loss or gain is associated with personal progression or regression, respectively, in her narrative; however, the regression or setback with the post-natal body is not felt with intensity of failure or defectiveness as times of being bullied for her body. The sense of instability about the embodied self is contextualized as a normative challenge in womanhood and held within an atmosphere of psychological safety, in her position as adult, as compared to say the pubertal change of adolescence.

Becoming pregnant, carrying a baby, losing the “baby weight”, and adapting to other bodily changes post-pregnancy stirs a reshaping or organizing anew about embodiment. The new

body-self is reconciled with prior understandings and experiences of such. Fitting back into “that dress” is symbolic of a reconnection to an earlier way of being embodied in which positive feeling was palpable. Michelle desires to relocate the self now into that past body, carrying with her the present experience of motherhood that has been so poignant. In this way, there is a tension between going back and staying present around the meaning of bodily change in pregnancy, which complicates the task of reshaping selfhood across time pre-natal to post-natal. Getting back to that “me”, the embodied self you knew before pregnancy, is possible to an extent with losing pounds. Yet, it cannot be denied the embodied self is forever changed in certain ways through pregnancy and the transition into motherhood. Physically, of course, pregnancy leaves its “mark” upon the body beyond weight. But, more importantly, as discerned in Michelle’s story, bearing and bringing a child into the world has transformed what it means to be embodied and what constitutes a healthy self. The beauty and magnificence of children seems to defuse or evolve the felt sense of weight gain in a way likened to Michelle’s remark that stretch marks “tell a story”.

Michelle’s story about reconciling past and present in relation to pregnancy bears resemblance to Recovering “Me” around the meaning of bringing parts of a younger self forward to reshape womanhood for the better. The idea of self-enhancement (as opposed to remediation) also applies to the interplay between time and embodiment in pregnancy. The meaning that Michelle conveys is not to deny nor fight against the natural impact of time and events upon her body, but to remain invested in representing herself corporeally as best as she can. This meaning is not about the objective body per se (e.g., being a specific weight or perceived as thin); it is more about recapturing a quality of embodied subjectivity that has been disconnected. Michelle is unsatisfied to let the meaning of being in “that dress” become a relic of the past as she negotiates her embodied subjectivity post-pregnancy.

Pregnancy certainly poses a conundrum for women, with bodily changes like getting bigger and fatter (re)interpreted as a positive sign in this context, an indicator of progress and health of their growing baby. Research has suggested that while pregnancy enables women to transgress the idealized female body, they nevertheless contend with outside opinions of their body as “fat” and notions of appropriate weight-gain while being pregnant (Johnson et al. 2004). Furthermore, the opportunity to take pride in the pregnant body is only temporary, as talk of getting “back to normal” or “bouncing back” quickly befalls women (Johnson et al., 2004; Roth,

Homer, & Fenwick, 2012). Nicolson, Fox and Heffernan (2010) explored women's accounts of pregnant and postnatal embodiment across three generations. They found an increased emphasis on getting the body "back" as soon as possible postnatally for younger generations. However, in reality, these women experienced a significant transition period before the body was recognized as their own once again, related to size and shape changes, recovery from childbirth, and the experience of breastfeeding.

Roth, Homer and Fenwick's (2012) analysis of how women's magazines portray pregnancy revealed an overriding concern with regaining the pre-pregnancy body, captured by the term "bouncing back". This term, commonly used to describe recovery after illness, conflates post-partum bodily changes with "unnatural" and "unhealthy", and equates the effort to recover one's pre-pregnant body with that of illness-recovery. The childbearing body must quickly return to its pre-pregnant state, all signs of having carried and given birth surpassed expediently. Within magazine discourse, even breastfeeding was construed as strategy to optimize weight-loss and regain thinness. Roth and colleagues identified the ideology of the unchanged female body, interrupted only briefly by pregnancy, as particularly prominent in celebrity accounts. While a few celebrities represented the alternate discourse of appreciating and celebrating their new body; but, as this was uncommon, they tended to validate or defend themselves.

Michelle's narrative represents such tensions about post-partum embodiment and getting "back" her old body. The way that Michelle contends with pregnancy's impact on embodiment sheds light on what it means to take the bad with the good in life. She reintroduces body- and self-acceptance, the notion of being perfectly imperfect, and the value of optimizing the embodied self as pertaining to the changing body in pregnancy and post-partum. This complexity of meaning surrounding the embodied self in childbearing may apply to other developmental junctures of navigating bodily change in women's lives such as puberty, menopause, or aging. Sometimes the change the body incurs with development has a readily observable beauty to it, as with bearing a child, but it can also be undesired or adverse, as with illness or aging for some individuals. Interestingly, research suggests that women are more likely than men to perceive positive body image and embodiment as effortful, needing to be continuously "worked at" in their lives (Holmqvist Gattario & Frisen, 2019).

For Michelle, reconstructing time surrounding selfhood to facilitate a more flexible understanding of "me" has helped to reintegrate the bad and the good, the "me" that endured and

the “me” that has transformed. This manner of re-storying seems to offer the necessary conditions for Michelle to find her footing in the context of disruption and aim to optimistically hold amidst the fluidity of the future. Michelle ascertains the meaning of personal change as integrated, sustained, and continuing to unfold as you and life circumstances do. As such, it is necessary to evolve and adapt to uphold wellness and nurture a healthy way of living.

Keeping living in the now, keep with this healthy lifestyle that I’ve *found* and just *keep going with it* because then that will change my life in the long run of being happy, my daughter will be happy <optimistic>.

The passage of time feels buoyant, like “summer is flying by”, when Michelle empowers herself to embrace the positives about being in her body, like “wearing my skirts proudly” and “enjoying the outside in shorts”. The urgency of time, as in “you only get one life” or “the time is now” reverberates in her accounts. Michelle regards co-existing meanings of being present and moving forward, in coming to terms with imperfections about life experience as it unfolds.

That was then and I’m not that anymore, I’ve got *this now*, so I need to work on *this*. So, that’s I think becoming more beautiful. I have to try to just *stop* and you know just accept that *I am beautiful* and *this is it*.

CHAPTER 6: GENERAL DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

The purpose of the present research was to explore women's lived experience of chronic weight-loss dieting beyond the obvious intention to change body weight/shape to gain insight regarding the meanings of self and embodiment therein. I aimed to shed new light on the phenomenon by uncovering the meaning about embodied subjectivity and (re)construction of the self in relation to the body and weight-loss. This chapter draws together the findings of Study One and Study Two in relation to the Developmental Theory of Embodiment (Piran & Teall, 2012) and understandings of healthy embodiment (Piran, 2016b). I offer a summative critique that suggests how the present findings are consistent with this framework and echo the paradigm shift that is being advocated within public health discourse on weight. Additionally, I consider how the present findings about self-transformation related to adversity, in general, and restrictive weight-loss dieting, in particular, offer support for theories of narrative reconstruction, post-traumatic growth, and emergent discourse on self-care. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the project, future research directions and considerations for women's health.

To begin, I summarize the thematic findings from the two studies. *Study One* explored the meanings of self and body in relation to weight-loss dieting across the narrative accounts of six women (age 20-55 years) seeking to change their body weight/shape. Analysis across these accounts led to the development of five thematic clusters: (1) Experiencing the Body as an Obstacle to Self-Actualization, with a felt sense of overweight as overshadowing the self, being constrained and suppressed in the body, and inhabiting the body as discomfort and dissonance; (2) Embracing Yourself, characterized by adopting a balanced self-view, bolstering self-worth, and seeking to get comfortable in the body; (3) Process of Creating Your Best Self by learning to work with (rather than against) the self, making space for self-development, empowering yourself, being true to self, and affirming the self with others; (4) Resilient Self as shown with converting adversity into growth, resisting harmful discourse, and tuning into the self as a coping resource; and (5) (Re)establishing the Self in a Healthy Lifestyle through critical reflection on one's body-self in sociocultural context, experiences of feeling disillusioned and conflicted in dieting, distinguishing a healthy lifestyle from restrictive dieting, and focusing on self-care.

Study Two explored the lived experience of self and body over time with weight-loss dieting through the in-depth study of a single case. Michelle, a 25-year-old woman, gave an

exceptionally rich narrative account of the struggle to overcome body-image issues and establish a healthy embodied self across her journey from girlhood to womanhood. The case study findings are presented as four thematic clusters: (1) Breaking with the Past, an understanding of self as moving forward by transforming from the inside out, meeting the self anew in the experience of motherhood, and establishing roots in the healthy self; (2) Making A Healthy Lifestyle Change that encompasses a constructive approach to weight-loss, refocusing on wellness (over thinness), reaffirming self-control (versus diet-control), an ideology of being moderate, and being a critical consumer of sociocultural discourse; (3) Recovering “Me”, a reconciliation of “the girl I was” and “the woman I am” through grieving unmet needs and the unwanted self, rekindling the “colourful girl” lost to trauma, and becoming “my own person” in the present; and (4) Coming into Her Own, fostering an embodied and empowered self by re-scripting self-talk, storying the embodied self as perfectly imperfect, shifting from self-remediation to self-enhancement, and grasping the complexity of re-shaping selfhood in a changing body.

6.1 Re-Storying Lived Self & Body: The Development of Positive Embodiment

These thematic findings illuminate the complexities of body-self relation in women’s lived experience as well as the meaningful endeavor for women to (re)construct a healthy sense of self and embodiment amid narrowly defined body ideals and pressure toward thinness. The Developmental Theory of Embodiment (DTE), posited by Piran and Teall (2012), offers clarification about the protective and disruptive factors for women’s experience of embodied subjectivity. This theory is a useful framework to contextualize the experience of (re)constructing the embodied self, voiced across the two studies, and to consider the implications of this meaning with respect to established knowledge about healthy embodiment.

According to the DTE, beginning in childhood, gender-related social experiences have potential to shape the health of an individual’s body-image and embodiment in three domains: physical freedom, mental freedom, and social power. First, physical freedom centers on opportunities to connect to body functionality, find enjoyment and feel competent in physical activity. In contrast, the joyless activity aimed to “repair” the body and fit into harsh external standards invariably provokes a sense of struggling to control one’s body. While largely positive experiences foster a sense of physical freedom, a preponderance of negative experiences leads to what has been termed “physical corseting”: being forced into an uncomfortable mode of being

and doing. Within this domain, experiences that promote the body as a site of positive connection, that support personal agency, and that enhance attunement to self-care needs and desires are considered protective. Experiences that disrupt or dissociate from healthy embodiment, block embodied agency, and create painful associations about being in the body constitute risk factors.

Second, mental freedom is concerned with internalization of sociocultural constructions, ideals and expectations on embodied experience. A healthy sense of mental freedom is opposed to “mental corseting”: becoming tightly bound to a negative and self-critical mindset. Protective factors for mental freedom include a sense of having your own voice, capacity for self-assertion, and meaningful engagement in non-appearance related activities. In this regard, the ability to navigate and adopt a critical stance on stereotypes and restrictive sociocultural constructions of femininity (e.g., messages of objectification, deficiency, docility or deference to others, and disowning own’s appetites in pursuit of control) is considered to be a developmental challenge.

Third, social power references the body as social capital. Experiences of mistreatment, marginalization, or stigma based upon identity characteristics tend to compromise social power. By contrast, a sense of social power is promoted by an environment that offers positive relationships, support for empowered feelings unrelated to appearance, and safe space to talk about embodiment struggles as well as effective resistance strategies. In sum, the DTE asserts that positive embodiment is developed through experiences of physical freedom, psychological freedom and empowerment. By contrast, experiences of being physically and mentally corseted and disempowered increase the likelihood of disrupted embodiment (Piran, 2016a; Piran & Teall, 2012).

The imagery of corseting evokes the culturally embedded nature of the thin ideal and notions of femininity with which women contend in Western society. Through the voices of the women in this project, we comprehend how a personal journey from girl to woman that amasses a preponderance of negative experiences of embodiment can contribute to a felt sense of corporeal abnormality and unacceptability. Further, we see how such feelings about the body inevitably risk the self, extending in such a way that obscures, overwhelms, and restricts embodied subjectivity and agency. The operation of physical corseting is clearly observed in the women’s accounts of struggling to re-shape their bodies according to impossible standards over repeat attempts at weight-loss dieting. In Study One, physical freedom is illuminated in the

contrasting meanings of the embodied self as overshadowed, obstructed, and constrained versus the embodied self as holistically embraced, worthy, and a site of comfort and personal agency. In Study Two, physical freedom is revealed as part of Michelle's developmental process of recovering from childhood trauma. She reconnects to the meaning of comfort, enjoyment, and freedom in her body and rekindles positive aspects of her embodied self that had become disrupted, covered, and silenced.

The present research has implications for understanding how sociocultural messages can restrict lived experience in powerful ways, related to the process of internalization and the mental corseting that follows. The women shared experiences of negative body image, feeling disembodied, consumed, and turning against the body-self. They described feeling unable to freely express themselves or pursue self-enhancing activity related to stigma, fears of judgment, and "me" being contingent on weight-loss. Piran (2016a) suggested that corseting acts to restrict freedoms in the body: "women's experience of agency to act in and on the world is disrupted; instead, they often act to alter their own bodies" (p. 190). The body becomes "problematized" and body-self relation becomes strained in the context of restrictive ideals, physical and mental corseting. In this regard, the present research provides insight into the exacting and far-reaching consequences of societal pressure towards thinness and overweight stigma for women's bodies/subjectivities.

At the same time, the possibility of recovering physical freedom, mental freedom and empowerment is represented in the present findings. Women sought to reformulate the "problem" outside their bodies by becoming critical consumers and by grasping the etiological role of restrictive sociocultural discourse (and proponents thereof) in shaping their histories of bodily suffering and pursuing weight-loss at the expense of wellness. Consistent with prior research (e.g., Coffey, 2013; Davis, 1995, 2009; Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012), the women positioned themselves as critical, resistant subjects who were able to "see through" messages about thinness and fatness even while struggling to fully escape their influence. As Murray (2016) contended, it is unrealistic to simply ban the sociocultural influence of thin idealization on embodied subjectivity and "choose" to accept oneself in spite of being "fat". She also raised how a conception of the fat body as needing to be "set aside" or "overcome" in order to accept and realize the self presents a fundamental contradiction: If the "fat" body is conceived as a "block" in this way, how can it be positively inhabited? Furthermore, if subjectivity is always

inevitably embodied, then is it really possible to “separate” from or move “beyond” the body in comprehending the self? In Study One, such tensions manifest in women’s accounts of the body as an obstacle to the self yet striving to embrace and empower the embodied self on a more affirming path to health and betterment. In Study Two, Michelle revealed how bodily conflict contributed to a disembodied, fractured sense of self and conflictual body-self relation, which she endeavours to mend in her temporal narrative to re-establish “wholeness”. Such findings illuminate the intersubjective, dynamic, and unfinished nature of women’s embodied subjectivity.

Based upon the present findings, the meaning of insight and reflexivity appears crucial to resetting the trajectory of development. The women’s stories suggest that becoming conscious of the self-defeating nature of reproducing and reifying restrictive ideals can present an opening; that is, an opportunity to recover one’s own voice, liberate embodied subjectivity, and meaningfully re-engage as an ally and agentic force in enhancing one’s development. Study One explicated the meaning of re-storying mental corseting to enhance well-being, resiliency and unblock the path to self-actualization. With Study Two, the meaning of freedom from mental corseting was captured in Michelle’s story about “bad habits”, a residue of the past, that she needs to “break out” of in establishing a healthier path. The positive function of a holistic and more compassionate lens through which to see and experience embodied subjectivity echoed across the studies. As dissonance rose between opposing self-talk or mindsets, a gap began to form such that the women could comprehend the depth to which they had internalized messages of stigma, restriction, and delegitimization. Such insight brought about a shift of perspective that functioned to open lived space; and, within that space, it was possible to re-experience their embodied selves beyond any past disruptive and painful connotations, to build self-worth, body-acceptance, and new associations with the body. Qualitative research on women’s recovery from eating disorders has similarly illuminated the centrality of (re)constructing an authentic and complex sense of self, characterized by broad facets, greater self-acceptance and self-awareness of needs (Cruzat-Mandich et al., 2017), and understanding the past as having shaped self-understanding and personal growth (Conti, 2018).

For the women in this research project, examining their own conceptions of body and self in-context, in effect, produced actionable insight. Responding to insight enabled them to narratively deconstruct thinness and weight-loss, resist being “corseted”, and expand the activity

of the embodied self. The women described re-aligning themselves with a discourse of expanded body ideals and central focus on wellness, which signified the need to be attuned and respond with agency to needs, be moderate, trust self-knowledge, and use the self as a touchstone for personal evaluation. In both studies, the themes map a possibility of transitioning from suffering into self-advocacy. With re-storying the meaning of the embodied self, the women related feeling less “weighed down” (van Manen, 1998) by negative conceptions of the body, less constrained by the overweight or “fat-feeling” body, and less inclined to just lie in “wait” (Glenn, 2010) on the promise of thinness.

In studying women’s accounts of becoming the “fat girl”, Rice (2007) highlighted the limited power and resources in girlhood to challenge the emotional pain of an “unfit” sense of self. Yet the women in her study revealed how, even as girls, they found creative strategies to resist unwanted meanings and create a positive self; for example, some girls honed their comedic talents to rebuff disparaging perceptions, many focused on developing their intellectual or artistic talents, and others actively contested stereotypes by asserting their physical abilities. Study One illuminated the role of creativity in self-making. Across the narratives of Denise, Madeline, Gigi, Ivana, Sally and Sarah, creativity not only represents a niche or means of making space for self-expression, but also a developmental capacity that facilitates discursively reconstituting the embodied self over time. Whereas earlier in development the emphasis may have been to “fit in”, look and act like everyone else, at a certain stage of maturity, an understanding of being “different”, unconventional, or having unique characteristics takes on new meaning. As Rice (2007) observed, a positive re-construction of “different” may function to resist and divest oneself of an unwanted, devalued sense of self and re-story a sense of personal strength. In Study One, women’s accounts of self-improvement and body work demonstrated how preserving positive aspects of selfhood unrelated to appearance can support feeling grounded and empowered even as one pursues change. Study Two gave a rich account of how coming of age, in the case of Michelle, meant gaining access to resources, maturing of insight, and enhanced power to assert and care for her embodied self. Accordingly, Michelle felt able to reflect upon her past with newfound wisdom and, bolstered in her new role of motherhood, introspect and intrapersonally (re)engage in a way that was not possible at an earlier stage of her development. These findings reflect the importance of the social power domain of the DTE model.

To further understand the characteristics of healthy embodiment, Piran (2016b) applied a grounded theory approach to data from a series of studies involving school-age girls, young women (age 20-27 years), and older women (age 50-70 years). Her findings conceptualized embodiment along five core dimensions: (1) body connection and comfort vs. disrupted body connection and discomfort; (2) agency and functionality vs. restricted agency and restraint; (3) experience and expression of desire vs disrupted connection to desire; (4) attuned self-care vs. disrupted attunement, neglect and self-harm; and (5) inhabiting the body as a subjective site vs. objectified site. This conceptualization provides an integrative look at the contradictions, the sense of push-and-pull that, in experience, characterizes the women's narratives of struggling to build and sustain a healthy embodied self in the present research. The notion of "movement" referenced in my thematic descriptions can be imagined as a trajectory of growth and improvement, to shift from the negative to positive side of these five dimensions of embodiment. Shifting away from physical and mental corseting is to re-establish positivity and healthful embodiment. It means that the body, as a part of "me", is inhabited, treated with respect, listened to and cared for. As a site of subjectivity, the body reveals not only how "I" look, but what "I" can do and supports agency in meaningful activities, projects, and causes.

The present research illuminated the complexity of embodiment and selfhood as storied by women without pathologizing or casting women as passive, disempowered subjects. Across the narrative accounts, women storied their experiences of struggle in their bodies/subjectivities, as targets of discursive pressures and constraints, alongside their experiences of being knowledgeable, critically reflecting, resisting and exercising agency to optimize their embodied selves in context. In other words, negative and positive experiences were held in balance in the women's comprehension of their own personal development. Piran (2016a) identified older adulthood as a productive stage for positive transformation of women's embodied subjectivity. In conducting life-history interviews with older women (age 50-70 years), Piran uncovered the meaning of recapturing earlier joyful, uninhibited, and competent experiences of physical activity, establishing safety where it had been violated in the past, becoming attuned and responding to personal needs with agency. Piran explained how these meanings recalled lived experience before corseting was "normalized" as part of womanhood and challenged "long-held constraining feminine molds" (p. 186). Interestingly, my case study of 25-year-old Michelle has advanced similar insight about reconstructing meaning and psychological transformation over

time. The women in Study One ranged from 20 to 55 years-old and, along this age span, likewise voiced the significance of making a positive shift in their way of relating to the body and self. Perhaps women's capacity to bring about positive transformation of body and self as lived is not about age or life stage, but a matter of personal recognition and readiness, arriving at a pivotal point, concerning the need for positive change. It is possible for diverse conditions or events in women's lives to bear insight that directs them onto a similar path of development, of seeking to improve and embody their best self. In this vein, I now explore the significance of adversity in catalyzing the present participants' re-storying of the self.

6.2 Re-Storying Adversity: Personal Growth & Resilience

The findings of this project shed new light on the meaning of coping with adversity not only in the strains and perils of weight-loss dieting, but in broader circumstances in women's lives including relationships, career, health, personal loss and regret. The negative and positive are held in meaningful juxtaposition in the women's stories of adversity, as part of meaning-making and re-storying self across time. Crossley's (2000a, b) theory about narrative reconstruction comes to life in the written descriptions of themes and photographic images from both studies. In Study One, the findings revealed how the overweight or "fat-feeling" body constitutes hardship in everyday living (e.g., overweight stigma, struggles with food, shopping for clothes). Beyond bodily distress, Study One explored the meaning of overcoming such adversities as critical influences, abusive relationships, restrictive environments, mental health and addiction, and amassed loss. In their narratives, the participants showcase their capacity for personal growth and resilience. They described using their diverse strengths, such as intelligence, spirituality, humor, social activism, and creativity, to forge a healthy rebellion, courage and strength of character. Acting on inner capacity enabled them to traverse difficult terrain and, from the other side, establish new understanding and embolden themselves to step out of "comfort zones". In Study Two, Michelle's story elucidated the particularly traumatic impact of being bullied about her body and lacking the "proper" guidance or support. Michelle described doing the best she could to cope but, despite her best efforts, her body-image and psychological health "went downhill". As a young adult, Michelle processes these past experiences to recover strength and positivity about herself and spur her development of healthier coping mechanisms. Her case illuminates meaning about approaching self-improvement and weight-loss goals "the right way", from a framework of wellness wherein self-acceptance and self-improvement co-

exist. Compared to Study One, the case study findings offer a rich portrait of lived time and developmental dynamics with regard to personal transformation.

The present research supported an understanding of the healthy self as multidimensional, coherent, and integrated, yet paradoxically fluid and transmutable in relation to time. The framework of self as narrative enhanced my ability to contend with contradictions about subjectivity in the analysis process. I could conceive of meaning about self and embodiment as simultaneously known and unfolding, like a story that is being (re)written. My analysis across both studies presents the embodied self like a work-in-progress or long-term project in the positive sense of development. Both Crossley (2000a) and van Manen (1998) referenced the phenomenologically “unseen” nature of selfhood and embodiment. Their perspectives elucidate how our temporal and corporeal orientation to the world can be taken-for-granted until disruption or breakdown “shakes” this core of our being. In keeping with the theory of narrative reconstruction (Crossley, 2000a, b), the ability to reconfigure meaning about the past-present-future appeared central to adaptation of both selfhood and embodiment in the present women’s lives. The findings from Study Two, in particular, describe the healing potential of narrative to reconcile past and present; then, from a newfound sense of self as “whole” and “rooted”, (re)experience embodiment and selfhood in everyday life. These findings build upon existing understandings of how women cope with the impact of adverse life events and bodily trauma on body image and embodied subjectivity (e.g., Hefferon et al., 2010; Hurd Clarke & Griffin, 2008).

In addition to the narrative perspective of Crossley (2000a), the concept of post-traumatic growth (PTG) aided in understanding the narratives of transformation in the present research. Tedeschi and Calhoun (2004) conceptualized PTG in five main areas: greater appreciation in life; changed sense of priorities; warmer and intimate relationships with self and others; greater sense of personal strength; and recognition of new possibilities or paths for one’s life. This kind of meaning was captured in the personal growth trajectories of the women in Study One. In particular, post-traumatic growth was captured by the Resilient Self cluster. Though, PTG is also influential to *Creating Your Best Self*, for example in the meaning of self as a coping resource and source of direction. The thematic findings of both studies around empowerment, resilience, and recovery of health speak to the significance of mindset (Bauer et al., 2008; Dweck, 2006;) and retell concepts from humanistic psychology such as self-actualization (Maslow, 1968) or the fully functioning person (Rogers, 1963). Hurd Clarke and Griffin (2008) discussed how women

who have endured traumas may take on the persona of “survivor”, which helps them to convert adversity into strength and propel the development of effective coping strategies, self-efficacy, and resilience. This idea resonates with the re-storying process captured by the Resilient Self in Study One and with Michelle’s trauma recovery process in Study Two.

In the context of the present research, Pals’s (2006) analogies of the “springboard” effect and “authoring a second chance” are particularly poetic expressions of the catalyzing quality about positive change in adversity. Study Two offered emotional insight into the power of harnessing pain, regret, or loss through grief (Roese, 2005). It also gave remarkable insight into the narrative disruption of motherhood, a welcome and positive happening in Michelle’s life story. Though pregnancy challenged Michelle’s embodiment in complex ways, the experience of becoming pregnant, bringing a child into the world, and becoming “Mom” undeniably stirred her impetus toward wellness. Seeing her own past suffering anew, through the lens of motherhood and the burgeoning relationship with her daughter, propels Michelle to transform the distressing ways that her past was bleeding into her present. The heightened need for change was not only for her health, but to attend to the developmental needs of her daughter.

The relevance of PTG situates the present findings in the wider context of qualitative studies on coping with physical illness, injury or pain, and mental health concerns. Phenomenological studies have shown how illness can disrupt the body-self as temporally known and, in the context of coping and recovery, necessitate a process of re-making such understandings (e.g., Lau & van Niekerk, 2011; Smith & Osborn, 2007; Smith & Rhodes, 2014). As an advocate of positive psychology, Hefferon (2013, 2015) argued that the role of the body in optimal functioning and PTG merits greater consideration. Hefferon, Grealy, and Mutrie (2010) conducted an IPA of 10 breast cancer survivors’ stories about the positive benefits of this trauma experience. The authors presented the theme of “new body” as a timeline of negative to positive embodiment. The experience of cancer compromised their participants’ ability to take corporeality for granted, which created new awareness of the entwined nature of body and self. Initially this awareness was negative, with diagnosis and treatment, but it changed for the better as they positively reconnected with and became more profoundly aware of their bodies and gained newfound appreciation for health and body function. In a similar way, the present findings juxtapose pain and enjoyment, distress and fulfillment, defeat and empowerment, languishing and flourishing along women’s narrative trajectories of embodied self.

Hefferon and colleagues (2010) shared some of the evocative ways that their participants signified transformation, for example by invoking the image of metamorphosis from cocoon to butterfly or a plant starting to bud. With their photographs, participants in Study One often used symbolism and analogy to poignantly communicate their understanding of transformation, such as meanings in nature, tattoos, artwork, fashion, and literature. The nature of the life history interview and photo-diary activity in Study Two naturally lent itself to more specific examination of experience over time. However, the scope of time in Study Two was primarily past to present, whereas Study One offered greater insight into future aspirations and possibilities for embodied self with including “this is me I aspire to be” in the photography activity.

The perception of becoming stronger in the self is a well-documented PTG outcome (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). In the experience of breast cancer, Hefferon and colleagues (2010) suggested that becoming physically stronger led to becoming psychologically stronger. In the context of weight-loss dieting, the present research found that the reverse may also be true. The women in this project described working on the psychological component of struggling with their bodies, including unwanted associations and feelings, internalized stigma, and self-critical thinking patterns. And as their embodiment improved, they related experiences of being able to act with greater agency and authenticity in the body so as to put themselves “out there” or expand their lifeworld. Past studies of transformation in weight-loss dieting have uncovered a transition from restriction to liberation in relation to successful weight-loss (Ogden & Hills, 2008; Epiphaniou & Ogden, 2010; Throsby, 2008). In the present research, women did not identify physical weight-loss as producing change; instead, as part of transformation, weight-loss was deemphasized or made secondary to psychological meanings about the body as lived and overall wellness. Participants in Study One elucidate the meaning of Embracing Yourself in which the body was one part of the holistic self and it was important to, for example, offer compassion and acceptance, consider what the body (and embodied self) could do, and seek to optimize the self in the body. In Study Two, Michelle expressed the meaning of being perfectly imperfect and re-discovering embodiment “in colour”. Moreover, the notion of making peace or declaring a “truce” with the body in the context of reconciling health concerns (e.g., Hefferon et al., 2010) parallels the discussion of “balance” and viewing the “whole” person that was communicated in the present findings about coming to terms with body weight/shape.

6.3 Re-storying Dieting: Embracing A Healthy Lifestyle & Self-Care

The women who participated in this research project narrated themselves as active agents not only in their efforts to re-story their embodied selves, but to recover positivity by shifting away from conventional ideas of restrictive dieting into a discourse of healthy lifestyle and self-care. This meaning was undisputed, resounding across the women's narratives. They spoke of becoming disillusioned with dieting culture and repeated diets that "did not work for me", consumed subjectivity, heightened distress and anxiety, and unreasonably restricted enjoyment. The present re-conceptualization of weight-loss dieting is supported by the literature. Hartmann-Boyce and colleagues (2018) conducted a systematic review of 23 qualitative studies on self-directed weight loss to examine how reframing is used and experienced. Reframing was defined as a conscious change in the way one thinks or feels about weight-loss attempts to enhance its experience and/or facilitate success. Most studies involved people who had tried to lose weight previously, but none focused explicitly on reframing. Hartmann-Boyce and colleagues found that the most common example of reframing was to construe prior weight-loss attempts as "dieting" and move away from this concept with current attempts, using language such as "the way I eat" or "way of life". This shift was common across genders, nationalities, and past weight-loss trajectories. The researchers commented that "diet" was often rejected by participants for its temporary or transitory nature and the self-restriction it entailed. Weight-goals were likewise realigned with improving health and lifestyle, as opposed to obtaining slimness. Building upon this finding, the present research offers deeper insight into the lived experience of moving away from the traditional restrictive dieting frame of weight (loss) and ways that understandings of self and self-care are reconstituted within a healthy lifestyle.

Seeing through the "allure" of dieting and taking a critical stance on the diametric extremes of idealizing thinness versus derogating fatness, the women in the present research endeavoured to find a healthier, more positive and adaptive framework from which to seek body and self enhancement. Adopting a healthy lifestyle was regarded as holistic. It did not focus solely on weight. It prioritized wellness (over thinness), consonant with values. It was self-directed, reasonable and informed. It offered greater flexibility and compassion with focusing on the ideology of moderation, balanced choices, and self-care. Re-storying dieting practice was informed by and occurred concomitant to the process of transforming past distress and disruption in their embodied selves. The holistic perspective reconstituted physical shape/weight as one part

of personhood. And, although being a healthy weight remained important, this notion was resituated and redefined in the context of wellness (over thinness) and optimizing well-being. Accordingly, being overweight or identifying “flaws” about one’s physique no longer carried the same degree of burden as in the context of external pressure towards feminine ideals.

Given the background of feminist constructionist theory, I considered whether notions of healthy lifestyle and self-care that emerged in women’s narratives were simply a re-packaging or re-branding of the self-discipline discourse. The meaning of weight and dieting in women’s lives has long been associated with ideals of thinness and femininity, messages of self-discipline, and fitting into restrictive molds of bodily aesthetic. It has been suggested that people diet based upon false beliefs about the possibility of weight-loss and rewards that follow (Blood, 2005; Bordo, 2003; Fox, 2017; Granberg, 2006; Orbach, 1998/2016) or for the sake of their health, about which there remains debate (Grogan, 2017; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011, 2014). A feminist perspective adds that women, in particular, diet because they have been ideologically persuaded by restrictive ideals and the discourse of self-discipline surrounding body work in Western culture. The feminist account aids in understanding how internalization occurs, for example how being “watcher” of eating and weight can become part of the self even if undesirable, and how body-image concerns can be normalized as part of womanhood (Blood, 2005; Bordo, 2003; Heyes, 2006; Murray, 2016).

However, it is clear that notions of false consciousness and/or women being “duped” into the dieting maelstrom do not fully account for the resonance of weight-loss dieting as a female practice. These notions do not explain why women knowingly choose to diet in spite of knowledge about the problematic ideology of thinness and false hopes. Heyes (2006) spoke theoretically to this contradiction in posing the question, “how can I speak from my normalized position as a dieter simultaneously with my critical position as a diet resister?” (p. 127). This contradiction perplexed me as I embarked upon this very research project and it became clear that weight-loss dieting was a complex and multifaceted issue for women. In the present research, being a “dieter” emerged as a kind of unwanted sense of self for most women. In fact, the women who participated in the present project were all very articulate about the harmfulness of the thin ideal, “hidden agendas” of weight-loss organizations, and false claims that anyone can become and remain thin given the right approach and sufficient effort. The women cited the negative impact of the same for girls and women in society and expressed that, alternatively, a

diversity of body types ought to be celebrated. Nevertheless, healthy skepticism and appreciation of anti-dieting discourse did not dissuade their desire to feel better in their bodies with losing weight or improving their physique.

Heyes (2006) contended that existing conceptions centered on self-discipline and glorification of the thin ideal elide the paradoxically enabling elements of weight-loss dieting. Drawing on the technologies of the self posited by Foucault (1988), Heyes (2006) argued that the pursuit of weight-loss also represents a process of working on the self. It was not until Heyes immersed herself in the culture of Weight Watchers that she reportedly began to understand the satisfaction that many women experienced not only by losing weight, but also by “working on themselves” albeit in a confined context. Even though women volunteered for the present research under the terminology of “dieting”, I quickly came to understand that this word had negative and positive connotations under the context of thinness versus health, respectively. Past research has asserted that not all behaviour labeled as “dieting” is equally harmful, with the determining factor really being motivation for appearance versus health (Benau et al., 2019; Putterman & Linden, 2004; Vartanian et al., 2012). Research has also shown that “dieting” can be hard to define, as the term may be used to represent to a wide range of weight-loss behaviours that have different psychological impacts (Ogden, 2018; Santos et al., 2017; Timko et al., 2006). In the present project, women used the word “dieting” to refer to both the context of thinness (negative) and health-promotion (positive).

In the framework of a healthy lifestyle, the emphasis shifted from prescriptive, externally imposed dieting to self-determined strategies and goals for improving health and well-being. This shift illustrates the significance of intrinsic motivation for personal change and sheds new light on the notion of exercising agency in the context of limited options to optimize oneself. In the present project, restrictive dieting was experienced as disabling and by-and-large provoked negative feelings about embodiment and the self, contrary to thinking of Heyes (2006). However, “working on” the body and self in the context of a healthy lifestyle and self-care was narrated as enabling and self-enhancing. The shift of context within which body work took place, away from the ideology and negativity weight-loss dieting per se, was important for women to transform this meaning for the better.

Rose (1996) identified three types of technologies of the self: relating to the self despotically (mastering yourself), epistemologically (knowing yourself), and attentively (caring

for yourself). The despotic notion of mastering yourself is in keeping with the self-disciplinary, repressive manner of relation explicated by the feminist perspective. It is concerning to realize ways that the dieting industry, especially commercial weight-loss programs, appropriates and exploits the language of “care” for profit. As Heyes (2006) suggested:

Whatever skills and capacities dieting might enhance are, in the rhetoric of the commercial program, immediately co-opted back into a field of meaning internal to weight loss. *Only* losing weight, they would have us believe, can lead to true self-knowledge, self-development, self-mastery, and self-care (p. 145).

The intention of self-care is subverted via messaging that is not actually attentive, but despotic in disguise. Similarly, the common knowledge that dieting “doesn’t work” becomes obscured via appropriation of the “lifestyle change” discourse, selling restrictive dieting under new labelling that alludes to self-improvement alongside such reductionisms as “change your body, change your life”. Body acceptance and empowerment are even used within media to sell products to women. This situation is undoubtedly confusing and muddies the positive meaning that, according to present findings, women are trying to make for themselves.

Heyes (2006) talked about the possibility of “uncoupling new capacities from docility, and of recruiting those capacities to care for the self” (p. 146). As women navigate the complex discourse around body weight, the path of a healthy lifestyle that espouses self-care represents a nurturing contrast to self-criticism, self-restraint, self-remediation. It would seem that *in spite of* their negative experience of “dieting” in the traditional sense, women were able to expand and recreate a positive space within which to reclaim and “recruit” capacities for personal change in an enhancing, compassionate, and caring way. Though the potential for self-care to be distorted and undermined as another form of self-discipline exists, I believe that women have the capacity to discern or more aptly *experience* the difference as embodied subjects. In the present research, the reconstruction of healthy lifestyle and self-care was considered to be multidimensional, challenged assumptions about fatness and weight-loss, and reconsidered the problem and solution for body-image concerns in similar ways as the Health at Every Size (HAES) paradigm (Bacon, 2010; Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Tylka et al, 2014).

A HAES-based ideology also promotes body acceptance in a realistic way, where being ambivalent about one’s body is considered normal and to be expected (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014). Feminist scholars have advocated compassion regarding women’s ambivalence about

body acceptance and reluctance to give up on dieting, considering how this entails rejection of large, dominant discourses about thinness and the self-transformative potential of weight-loss (Donaghue & Clemitshaw, 2012; Fox, 2017; Murray, 2016). Fox (2017) argued that the prevailing narrative in dieting culture glorifies the self-transformative potential of weight-loss as a way to “perfect” one’s life and realize widespread personal change. Aligning this narrative with the wider progress-driven temporality of Western culture, Fox highlights how the abject “fat” body is relegated to the past while the “thin” body compels living for the future. For individuals with weight concerns, this dichotomy risks an “evacuated” or “empty” present, characterized by liminality or living in-between, and being “held hostage” to promises of thinness that may never materialize.

Regarding the present research, women offered themselves compassion and room for struggle in their narratives, expressing how making change takes time. Self-improvement and lifestyle change efforts were reframed under an optimistic and compassionate notion of the self as a work-in-progress, with self-care at the center. This position presents a markedly softened version of the progress-driven ideology referenced by Fox (2017). While not entirely distinct (in language or meaning) from discourses of personal responsibility for health and progress, the essential core of self-care facilitates women’s sense of reclaimed ownership over the agenda and evaluation of “improvement”. As opposed to being consigned to the past or living in the “liminal present”, attitudes of self-care, compassion, and holistic wellness enhanced women’s capacity to be present and engaged in life’s happenings whilst seeing themselves as becoming.

Women owe it to themselves to be skeptical and critical to open up to genuine epistemological and attentive ways of relating to themselves. Heyes (2006) explained that knowing the self is an outcome of Foucault’s notion of self-care, but in weight-loss culture this outcome is entwined with diet success. For instance, to know yourself equals capacity to avoid and take action before a diet lapse happens. However, the women in the present research spoke of self-knowledge in a much broader sense. The discourse about becoming “the person you really want to be” in weight-loss culture often assumes the aspiration of authenticity, attained by liberating oneself from the body, discovering the “thin self” trapped within the overweight body (Blood, 2005; Fox, 2017; Murray, 2016; Throsby, 2008). This discourse appears to be an oversimplified notion in contrast to the meaning of self-transformation discerned in the present research. Working on the self by improving eating or losing weight was not simply to conform,

but to transform at a first-order or fundamental level; for example, the narrative of eating healthier was not about doing what a diet or society says, but doing what makes “me” feel good about myself in my body. The meaning of becoming one’s best self was understood across intrapersonal, interpersonal, and wider societal contexts. Counter to stereotypically feminine ideas of being pleasing and caring for others first, participants in Study One talked about re-balancing care for others with more attentive and prioritized care for self and deconstructing the power of the “critical gaze”. The findings of Study Two also highlight the meaning of caring for and accepting the self as foremost. Adding to Study One, Michelle’s case further revealed the meaning of becoming “my own person” as related to fulfillment and optimal functioning.

Liberation has been tied to “shedding stigma” along with the weight which, in turn, enables successful dieters to undertake activities that they previously felt incapable or unwilling to do (Epiphaniou & Ogden, 2010; Granberg, 2011; Throsby, 2008). In the present research, women also voiced the deeply felt impact of stigma and its association with self-restriction; however, their narratives assert the importance of liberating oneself in the body regardless of its form. The notion that acting with agency and authenticity is contingent on body weight was seen as an unhealthy and disparaging way of relating to the self. This old way of thinking was annotated for revision under the frame of listening and responding attentively to one’s needs. Study Two associated body-objectification with a disembodied sense of remediating “flaws” or trying to get “rid” of problems regarded from the outside, in contrast to the positive subjectivity, potential, and opportunity associated with self-enhancement. In my analysis of Study One, optimization was applied to understand healthy goals for improving the self and body. Like the notion of best self, the concept of a “best weight” emerged, as defined by individual determinants of wellness (Freedhoff & Sharma, 2010).

Familiar tropes of the “new me”, “thin self”, and “plastic body” that is infinitely malleable often characterize popular discourse about bodily transformation (Bordo, 2003; Fox, 2017; Gallagher & Pecot-Hebert, 2007; Heyes, 2007; Orbach, 2009; Throsby, 2008). The meaning of transformation in the present research did not reflect “me” as an entirely new or novel entity; a sense of personal continuity was retained even in change, but self and embodiment could be experienced anew, expanded, discovered, and (re)created through opportunity or challenge. Self-change could also come in the form of recovery, restoration, or rejuvenation. There is perhaps a tension between ideas of “true me” and enhanced “me”, but both

are regarded within the narrative accounts in the present project and, in the context of health and wellness, do not appear to be mutually exclusive.

6.4 Project Strengths, Limitations, & Future Directions

6.4.1 An Integrative Approach

Several aspects of the present research embraced an integrative approach. A combination of verbal and visual methods of data generation was used. The theoretical framework drew together phenomenological, feminist constructionist, and positive psychology perspectives to generate a rich, contextualized understanding of the phenomenon at hand. The methodology of IPA (Smith et al., 2009) was supplemented with perspectives on hermeneutic phenomenology (van Manen, 1997/2017), embodied interpretation (Todres & Galvin, 2008), and photographic data (Olliffe et al., 2008). Lastly, lived experience was explored at the individual- and group-level. I consider the integrative approach to be a strength of the present project but, of course, such decisions also pose challenges that are important to consider.

6.4.1.1 Incorporating Photographs

The combination of photo-elicitation with in-depth interviews was a significant methodological strength of my project, which added substantial richness and dimension to the data in several ways. First, photo-elicitation enhanced participants' freedom to direct the dialogue, as compared to the traditional interview approach, and proved to be a very expressive means of accessing the lifeworld to gain a "phenomenological sense" of understanding. Photographs facilitated entrance into places and moments of participants' lives wherein the body-self was constructed and disrupted, which may have otherwise remained hidden. The participants added depth and layers to their stories with their photographs, often using them to express quite emotional and tacit experiences. The addition of a visual method was especially beneficial for some participants in Study One who struggled to put words to their experience and respond to questions on the spot, providing an alternative and poignant way to express themselves.

The present research capitalized on the potential of photographs to describe and illuminate beyond words. Research has highlighted how the reflective nature of visual research methods, like photo-elicitation, helps participants to expose what is "hidden" and make explicit what is implicit. It presents opportunity to reflect upon and explore taken-for-granted aspects of experience in a way that is not usually done, giving participants distance from what they are

usually immersed in (Elliot et al. 2017; Radley, 2011). Radley (2011) made a distinction between “looking at” and “looking behind” photographs. He argued that the value of photo-elicitation research is to investigate not just what a picture shows or how pictures are “talked into being”, but to fully regard the “act of picturing” as a meaning-making process. In making this distinction, Radley stated:

It moves us away from the view that photographs show what is there (a realist view), or that the content of pictures is sufficient as data. It also questions the idea that photographs are simply talked into being, so that an analysis of talk about pictures provides, on its own, an adequate investigation of their potential. If psychologists are to look behind pictures, it is to the practices of showing that they should attend, so that how people make sense with pictures becomes important (p. 27)

The incorporation of visual data in the present research was a provocative and enriching way to comprehend and communicate women’s lived experience of the body, self, and weight-loss dieting *with* and *through* photographs. Previous research on women’s body image (e.g., Del Busso & Reavey, 2013) has utilized pre-existing photographs as visual aids or stimuli in the interview context; however, the present work used participant-generated photographs as data, explicitly considered and integrated with verbal data in the analysis.

Second, proponents of photo-elicitation have argued that it bears potential to address issues of power dynamics in research relationships and become an empowering way for participants to “speak” and potentially challenge traditional explanations or assumptions regarding the phenomenon of interest (Bates et al., 2017). In the present project, the photography activities and photo-elicitation interviews facilitated deeper communication, reflection and critical thinking and created a more participatory and interactive environment. The method was advantageous for cultivating a feminist research ethic, which emphasizes women as experts on their own lives and seeks to facilitate empowerment and collaboration in data generation (Campbell & Wasco, 2000; Devault, 1990).

Third, the photo-elicitation interview encouraged reflection on the sense-making process and presented opportunity to (re)construct the meaning of photographs in studying and talking about them as a collective. Similar to Frith and Harcourt (2007), I observed how participants shifted between telling me about the experience storied in their photographs and (re)storying this experience in retrospect. Participants reported that they enjoyed the process of creating the

photographs, even though it was time-consuming, and felt it was helpful in being able to explain their experiences. Many women in Study One commented that looking at and talking about the images as a collective led them to new realizations. In Study Two, Michelle's use of the photo-diary allowed both of us to appreciate the temporal unfolding of her experience and explore this together. In keeping with previous research (e.g., Balmer et al., 2015), the experience of capturing and reflecting upon meaning through photographs was described by many participants as therapeutic, to a greater degree than a solely verbal exchange. The photo activities were viewed positively by participants as a creative process that contributed self-awareness and insight in making sense of experience. This finding is also consistent with literature that suggests visual methods enhance participant's comfort, and make the interview experience more intriguing, creative, and less intimidating (Glegg, 2019; Pain, 2012).

Fourth, the photographs enhanced the validity and trustworthiness of the present data. The photo-elicitation method entailed member-checking and enabled validation of verbal data from prior interview(s). The practice of triangulation between different data sources has been advocated a means of ensuring quality in qualitative research (Elliot et al., 2017; Treharne & Riggs, 2014). Moreover, the photographic images contributed to my aim of evocatively and vividly representing women's experience, acting like a window into the lifeworld in much the same way as transcript excerpts and anecdotes. The interpretative and co-constructed nature of the IPA framework and tenets of embodied interpretation gave space to creatively bridge the gap between simply describing experience and moving into a metaphorical and aesthetic mode of representing participant's lived experience and meaning-making process. Beyond the interview context, the stimulating and evocative capacity of participant-generated photographs to "show" meaning is revealed as the women's images amplify their "voice" throughout my thematic descriptions in Chapter 4 and 5.

Visual methods have gained traction in qualitative research to support data generation, analysis and representation. The strengths of incorporating photographs that I have identified in the present research are consistent with the literature. After reviewing the rationale for visual methods cited in 109 qualitative studies across diverse disciplines, Pain (2012) concluded that their key contribution is towards data enrichment and enhancing the researcher-participant relationship. Based upon the existing literature, Glegg (2019) outlined a typology of five intended purposes for applying visual methodologies along with qualitative interviews: to (1)

facilitate communication for a broader range of participants, (2) enrich the quality and validity of data, (3) enhance the researcher-participant relationship, (4) aid in the representation of findings, (5) and effect change by amplifying participants' voices and raising awareness. Photo-elicitation methods, in particular, have been cited as useful to reconstruct experiences, support in-depth description, and provide more comprehensive access to the lifeworld. A reflexive approach to photographic data stimulates awareness and emotional connection to the content, thereby enhancing the impact of other forms of data (Frith & Harcourt, 2007; Gregg, 2019; Papaloukas et al., 2017). Pain (2012) highlighted how a combination of verbal and visual methods can enhance understanding by prompting new insights and connections, in considering that language and images are processed in different areas of the brain. Photo-elicitation methods have also been shown to contribute to trustworthiness and rigor of findings within health psychology and mental health research (Glaw et al., 2017; Papaloukas et al., 2017).

Of course, there are added ethical and practical considerations with using visual methods that had to be navigated in this project. Pertinent ethical issues to consider with the use of visual methods include confidentiality and consent, the risk of misinterpretation or misrepresentation, authorship and ownership of images (Balmer et al., 2015; Bates et al., 2017; Elliot et al., 2017; Glegg, 2019). Research has also documented the practical challenges of developing shared researcher-participant expectations about photographic activities and the potential barriers participants face (e.g., time, access to subject matter, unfamiliarity of the task) in depicting experiences (Burles & Thomas, 2014; Hodgetts et al., 2007; Papaloukas et al., 2017). These issues were important to consider and address within the present research. In addition, the lack of clear guidance about best practice for combining verbal and visual data in phenomenology was a challenge (Bates et al., 2017; Papaloukas et al., 2017). Challenges notwithstanding, phenomenological research would benefit from continued exploration of the synergistic potential of visual methods.

Continuing the present line of research, the combination of life story interviews and photo-diary methods used in Study Two could be used to explore the embodied selves and meaning of weight-loss for other women who have had traumatic bodily experiences. A focus group approach, as an alternative or accompaniment to one-on-one interviews, would be another useful avenue for future research on women's experiences of self and body in weight-loss dieting. It is possible that the conversational context of a group of women, with whom

participants comprehend a kinship about struggles with body-image and weight-loss, would illuminate new meaning. Moreover, telling one's own story, both verbally and through photographs, in a group setting may be an empowered means for women to give voice to experience, discuss the complexity of body-self relation, and explore the meaning of weight in their lives. This situation could present a distinct contrast to the group context represented by commercial weight-loss organizations (e.g., public weighing). It would also be fruitful to examine the value of other visual mediums of data generation, including drawing or painting one's experience and capturing experience using video or vlogs. The latter is especially relevant, given the cultural resonance of social media practices. Finally, as most of the women in this project were focused primarily on dietary change in their efforts to lose weight, it is important to explore whether the present findings extend to weight-loss experiences that place greater emphasis on exercise and fitness.

6.4.1.2 Combining Theoretical Perspectives

Along with integrating verbal and visual methods, it was beneficial to supplement the IPA approach of Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009) with teachings from other compatible perspectives. IPA is not a prescriptive framework or recipe; it is presented as a guiding framework that a researcher must adapt to their particular way and topic (Smith & Osborn, 2003). The IPA framework lent structure and procedural explanation, which was helpful to a novice qualitative researcher. However, as compared to van Manen's (1997/2016) hermeneutic phenomenology, IPA does not explicate the process of free imaginative variation to determine incidental versus essential meaning and does not offer as complete a picture of the lifeworld (Finlay, 2009). Guided existential reflection, cogitating on the various dimensions of the lifeworld accounted for by van Manen (1997/2016) and Ashworth (2016), was a valuable heuristic in the present analysis to open up and interrogate the narrative accounts for possible meaning. Likewise, the framework of embodied interpretation (Todres, 2007; Todres & Galvin, 2008) and embodied reflexivity (Burns, 2003; Finlay, 2006) added value not only in the search for meaning within the women's stories, but in seeking to represent the findings in an evocative manner.

Theoretically, the present research was underpinned by an understanding of women's experience of embodiment and selfhood as simultaneously lived experienced and social construction (Crotty, 1998). I presented an argument for rapprochement between these theoretical perspectives in Chapter 3, highlighting their integrative value towards illuminating a

rich picture of lived experience and privileging personal agency while also appreciating the ways that experience and meaning is constituted by sociocultural discourse (Cosgrove, 2000; Crossley, 2000b; Crotty, 1998). This framework supported a phenomenological inquiry that drew heavily upon feminist constructionist perspectives, the concept of self as narrative, and tenets of positive psychology. The integration of these multiple perspectives influenced the research questions and choice of methodology to address them. And while my analytic strategy was phenomenological, there is undoubtedly a strong presence of the constructionist and narrative lens within my data analysis. Language such as “discourse”, “construct”, “narrative”, “stories” and “re-storying” recurs throughout my discussion of the project findings.

Phenomenological and narrative inquiry widely intersect both in theory and practice. Phenomenology draws upon narratives as a means to access lived experience. Narrative inquiry views human experience as constituted in narrative form and is theoretically founded in phenomenology. As opposed to experience per se, narrative inquiry is typically interested in the way that people make sense of experience by encoding it in narrative. Some narrative methods focus more on the micro-level qualities of stories (e.g., plot, characters, chain of events) that are important to the sense-making process while others focus more on the macro-level, examining ways that certain stories allow and limit possible ways of living (Davidsen, 2013; Griffin & May, 2012). Phenomenology and narrative have been understood as compatible and successfully integrated within existing research in psychology and health science (e.g., Lindsay, 2006; Davidsen, 2013; Groven & Glenn, 2016).

6.4.1.3 Complementary Vantage Points

A challenge that I encountered in this research project, common to phenomenological investigations, was to strike an appropriate balance between the individual voice and shared meaning. Within phenomenology, a central question concerns whether one should aim to produce general descriptions (i.e., as one shared by many) of the phenomenon or focus on explicating individual experience? Some phenomenologists emphasize the aim of clarifying general structures (essences) of a phenomenon. In contrast, other phenomenologists explicitly seek idiographic meaning, which may or may not offer general insights (Finlay, 2009). Being idiographic, as an objective, seeks to describe and explain particular events and things in the dynamic context in which they occur (Robinson, 2011). The debate between nomothetic (general) and idiographic (particular) approaches to knowledge is longstanding in psychology.

The most persistent objection to idiographic approaches has been that, whatever descriptive advantages they may afford, generalizable knowledge cannot be obtained. Conversely, idiographic approaches maintain a commitment to detailed and textured analysis, which is not possible in nomothetic approaches that focus on aggregated data. Researchers have argued that, instead of dichotomy, nomothetic and idiographic approaches be more aptly viewed as complementary and considered valuable in combination (Lamiell, 1998; Robinson, 2011; Salvator & Valsiner, 2010).

The integration of group (Study One) and single-case (Study Two) studies in the present research afforded complementary strengths. Smith (2004) contended that the value of the case study approach has often been neglected in psychology. Considering the rich and compelling narrative account that Michelle gave, the case study was indeed a worthwhile approach. I was able to give full attention to her particular plight, and the developmental nature of her lived experience than was possible in Study One. However, it was not possible to claim saturation, as with Study One, which does limit the transferability of the case study findings. Single case studies are said to offer insight into individual essences, as opposed to shared or universal essences. Although, a case study may well generate ideas or hypotheses to be examined at a general level and/or have applied value in clinical practice (Finlay, 2009; Salvator & Valsiner, 2010; Smith, 2004). The case approach of Study Two offered a detailed portrait of the dynamic and unfolding experience of embodiment and selfhood over time; the in-depth look at Michelle's experience cultivates a different understanding from which to return to the shared meanings of the women in Study One and vice versa. The different vantage points of these studies, taken together, offer a balanced look into the landscape of weight-loss dieting in women's lives, the complexities of embodiment, and cooccurring developments and/or disruptions of selfhood.

6.4.2 Caveats to Conclusions

The present research findings have limited generalizability in terms of ethnic, social, and sexual diversity in that they are based on a small sample of women, exclusively Caucasian, heterosexual, and from middle to upper middle-class status. It is also important to note that the concepts and theories of body ideals and femininity on which this project is based are founded in a Western context and thus may not generalize to women's experiences in non-Western countries. Accordingly, the present findings allow for conclusions about this certain group of women, rather than women in general, and highlight issues that warrant future study in extended

populations. The frame of intersectionality recognizes the value of considering multiple, intersecting social categories that influence health, such as age, gender, race, sexuality, weight status, disability, and social class. According to Hankivsky (2012), “intersectionality focuses on examining how social locations and structural forces interact to shape and influence human experience” (p. 1713). Feminist scholars have noted the explanatory limits of research that focuses on single or typically favored categories of analysis (e.g., sex or gender) and the need to consider co-constitutive relations between various aspects of social identity (Hankivsky, 2012; Smith, 2012). On the topic of body image, weight and embodiment, further research is needed to understand how, at an individual and structural level, multiple identities interact to produce or protect against health risks, especially with regard to weight stigma or sizeism (Himmelstein et al., 2017; Smith, 2019).

The fact that the present findings are based on retrospective, in-depth accounts also limits conclusions that may be drawn about development. The present research attempted to capture dynamic experience from a largely retrospective standpoint, apart from the timespan over which the participants captured their photographs. While the nature of the methodology was more expansive and time-oriented in Study Two, with the life story interview and photo-diary, it nevertheless remained short-term. A longitudinal qualitative study would lend specific insight into the processual and developmental interrelation of embodiment and selfhood as well as the role of weight-loss practices over the lifespan. The majority of investigations into women’s embodiment have considered development by sampling different age groups at a static point in time, rather than following the same participants over time. It could be informative to explore women’s experience at multiple time-points. For instance, a follow-up interview with the present participants in 10-years could explore how constructions of self, embodiment, and the role of weight-loss practice have continued or changed with time. The added value of longitudinal approaches is to allow the researcher to detect change as it occurs and not just in reflection.

The use of narrative accounts introduces questions about accuracy of self-presentation, as participants typically offer a retelling that is more coherent and orderly than what was actually experienced (Crossley, 2000a). It bears questioning whether or not the precision (e.g., exact sequence of events) of a participant’s account really matters in terms of accessing the participant’s subjective meaning of experience, this truth that is of utmost interest to phenomenological inquiry. But, impression management, whether overt or unconscious, and the

plausible desire to appear as “good participants” or appear profound by providing researchers with the data they are looking for, indeed represents a potential cost of benefitting from the richness and nuance available through narrative accounts that should be considered. A feminist research ethic of interviewing and the photo-elicitation approach both emphasize collaboration and the authority of participants as the “expert”. This focus towards rapport in the researcher-participant interaction and the opportunity to build rapport over multiple interviews may attenuate the risk of impression management constraining the present data. I also remain cautious about making any definitive claims from my findings in recognizing that interpretive research involves engaging in possible meanings.

Moreover, in qualitative inquiry, meaning is co-constructed in the researcher-participant interaction and thus is it necessary to consider how this process influences project findings. Regarding the present research, how might the context and framing of the studies or the manner of questioning in interviews influence and/or constrain the actual data generated? We inevitably constrain the data generated by how the study is contextualized and framed. The very nature of the research objectives, questions asked, and methods used had the effect of introducing concepts into participants’ lifeworlds such as positive and negative experiences of weight-loss dieting or inquiring of self-past, -present, and -aspired. My advertisement of the research project (Appendix A) specifically called for participants who were interested in talking about their experiences and doing a creative photography activity. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that participants’ narratives expressed meaning about being introspective and creative. It is also possible that this approach to advertising precluded some individuals from participating, such as those who did not consider themselves “artistic” but could have nonetheless offered unique perspective.

6.4.3 Being an Embodied Researcher

As a final consideration, I share observations about how my social position and embodied presence entered into the research experience. Embodied subjectivity is produced through both discursive and lived experience (Burns, 2003) and researchers concerned with topics of embodiment should extend the practice of reflexivity to the embodied experience of researcher and participant (Finlay, 2006; Todres & Galvin, 2008). In the present project, there were moments when participants’ responses to my physical appearance and body size illuminated a potential barrier. For example, before we sat down to our first interview, one woman skeptically questioned why I, as a woman who is petite and relatively slim, would ever be interested in the

present topic. Encountering me in my body, which she perceived as not deviating too far from the thin ideal, this participant quite reasonably doubted how I could relate to her experience in a bigger body and, perhaps, whether I could be trusted to understand her lived experience. If I were overweight, would she have questioned me in this way? Or, would there have been an unconscious sense of likeness that naturally lent rapport? It was important to develop commonality with participants to facilitate rapport and openness in our interviews. And so, I might disclose something about my subject position as woman growing up and living in the cultural milieu of the thin ideal; for instance, sharing how I too had dieted, judged my body negatively in comparison to ideals, such as the “perfect” bodies of girls with whom I danced in my youth, and been present in a profound way to the complexities of embodiment among important women in my life. In this way, I navigated an “insider” versus “outsider” position related to my own corporeality in the relationships that I developed with women participants, who themselves represented various sizes/shapes. I discerned how my empathetic understanding of weight as “woman’s issue” may be perceived as more or less authentic and legitimate given my corporeality.

Furthermore, I experienced tension at times between my positions as fellow woman and researcher, as I contended with the possibility that, with my body, I could be seen as reinforcing and colluding in feminine ideals that women revealed as cause for distress and disruption. This was a quandary given that my motivation for the research project was ultimately advocacy, a desire to contribute to the cause of enhancing women’s embodied subjectivity. Del Busso (2007) disclosed a similar challenge regarding her embodied position as a woman and feminist in the context of researching women’s experiences of embodiment, upon realizing that participants perceived her body as “hereto-normatively feminine” and “non-resistant” (p. 312) to ideals of female embodiment. Del Busso discussed how these moments called for critical, reflexive attention to the interview as an embodied interaction and consideration of how her own body and the bodies of participants are inscribed with power. Likewise, as I came to appreciate the embodied nature of my interactions with participants, that I could not “silence” or ignore my own physical size/shape, I found that it was important to remain empathetically attuned to participants and attend reflexively to my manner of self-presentation.

My experience as a woman interviewing women also recalled Devault’s (1990) discussion of the traditional nature of “woman talk” and developing ways of listening “around

and beyond words” (p. 101) in both the interview context and interpreting narrative accounts. According to Devault, paralinguistic cues and seemingly incidental features of speech can signal or disclose meaning about the interactional exchange. Bearing this in mind, I chose to transcribe and, in my analysis, attend not only to the words of participants’ stories but the way things were said, the emotional tone, and moments of hesitation or having to work at articulating experience as possible signals of meaning. Indeed, I found these features of the narrative exchange to be helpful in directing points for deeper study and considering possible meanings in my process of analysis. I observed how the women in the present project often used the phrase “you know” as a signal of complexity about what they were trying to communicate and a request for understanding, just as Devault described in her interview experience. In addition, “you know” sometimes expressed an implicit understanding about talking woman-to-woman, an unquestioning stance that I would already understand in some way. In the same manner, participants might state the word “right” at the end of a sentence, asking if I agreed without really asking and interpreting approval without my explicitly saying so. Contemplating these features about the women’s narratives in hindsight, through the process of analysis, illuminated the co-creation of meaning in interviews in a way that I had not previously appreciated. Conducting research interviews in the future, I would be more attuned to listening for this layer of intersubjective meaning in-the-moment.

Sharma, Reimer-Kirkham and Cochrane (2009) noted how researchers often take account of their social location or position without depicting themselves as embodied or may explore the embodiment of participants while the researcher’s embodied experience remains absent. In this vein, a number of researchers have highlighted the need to re-embodiment or bring the body back into qualitative health and social science research (Finlay, 2006; Hefferon, 2013; Todres, 2007; Todres & Galvin, 2008). Burns (2003) argued for “embodied reflexivity” as a stance of attentiveness to what emotions and bodily states can reveal about the phenomenon under study. Embodied reflexivity attends to ways that nonverbal communication and a researcher’s embodiment can contribute to co-construction of meaning in the research process. Finlay (2006) distinguished bodily empathy, being attentive to participants’ bodies and their existential experience of embodiment, from embodied self-awareness, reflecting on one’s own body signals and experiences in the context of interviewing and analyzing narrative accounts. According to Finlay, it is important to stay focused on the participant, using embodied reflexivity as a tool to

open up and further understanding; focusing too much or to exclusion on embodied interpretation can privilege the researcher's voice at the expense of the participant's voice or stray from the phenomenon as lived. With similar caution, Burns (2003) stated that embodiment does not express a "truth" but expresses conditions of possibility among multiple possibilities.

My experience of embodied interpretation and reflexivity was quite empowering as a researcher and facilitative to my aim of capturing thematic descriptions that "speak" or "palpably point". Like another heuristic or tool, I used my own emotional and physiological reactions to the women's stories as reason to pause, consider, or dig deeper into analysis. I also used embodied interpretation to evaluate whether my choice of words or phrases to describe emergent themes felt "right", as meaningfully capturing my felt sense of participants' meaning as I listened to them story it. Finlay (2006) eloquently described this experience:

I not only focused on, but used, my bodily reactions. The sensations in the pit in my stomach, the hollow beating of my heart, my creeping skin. I became aware that I was experiencing these embodied reactions. The power of these unexpected sensations pushed me further in the analysis. I could somehow "feel" I was onto something important [...] The process of focusing then enables the body, of its own accord, to bring the words, image, memory, understanding or new idea that are needed to solve the problem. The physical body, in response, will experience some easing or release of tension as it registers the "right-ness" of what comes from the felt sense. The easing of tension tells us we have made contact with a deeper level of awareness and we are on the right path. The body discloses (p. 25).

Finlay's words evoke my experience of embodied interpretation. Engaging in a kind of dialogue or dialectic with my felt sense as I sought to interpret the meaning of participants' narratives was illuminating, powerful, and offered unexpected insight.

Engaging with my own embodiment as a qualitative researcher was reminiscent to my experience of honing clinical insight or intuition, learning to use myself as a "therapeutic tool" in training to be a practitioner. In conducting this research project, I recognized that it can be hard for me to "turn off" responses that have become a way of being, as a result of developing my skillset and sense of self as a clinician. However, in the participant-researcher relationship, I also developed ways of asking questions and approaching personal disclosure that were distinct from my experience of the client-therapist relationship. I approached the research through embodiment

as a woman foremost, trying to set my “clinical hat” aside. Conversely, in my role as therapist I have learned to be aware of the potential impact of my “other” identities, such as age, ethnicity, and gender, but chiefly be a clinician first. In future work, I would be interested to continue exploring how embodied reflexivity and interpretation can be used to facilitate data collection and, with more experience, take this aspect of qualitative analysis further.

6.5 Contribution & Considerations for Women’s Health

In sum, the present research opens up the “mess” that is women’s lived experience of chronic dieting; it has shed light on the complexity and scope of women’s understandings of embodiment and selfhood in relation to existing cultural systems of meaning about thinness versus fatness, weight-loss, and self-improvement. Approaching the research questions from my integrative theoretical framework and as an embodied researcher enabled me to give voice to women’s stories of strength, coherence, and growth amidst struggle, ambiguity, untidy and unfinished meanings about the body-self. The powerful union of verbal and visual description, and dual vantage points of shared and idiographic also aided in conveying a deeply nuanced sense of women’s lived experiences. In this way, through the participant’s words and images, we can comprehend more fully what it is for women to be/become embodied subjects in the context of challenging and contradictory discourse about their bodies/selves.

The interconnections between women’s endeavor to positively (re)inhabit the body and (re)construct a healthy sense of wholeness, self-worth, self-acceptance, empowerment, and resilience are revealed and explored from this broader framework. Women emerged as active agents in the process of re-storying their lived experience of the body-self in relation to the pains and perils of weight-loss dieting as well as traumas in other domains of life. Their narratives interpret a recovery of positivity by shifting away from notions of restrictive dieting into a discourse of healthy lifestyle and self-care, and the meaning of uncovering and drawing upon personal strengths to realize positive change.

The present findings have implications for health education and promotion work on body-image and weight-loss for women. In the context of growing concern about weight as a public health issue, the present research adds support for existing knowledge about the development of positive embodiment (Piran, 2016b; Piran & Teall, 2012), the complexities of embodied subjectivity (Budgeon, 2003; Del Busso & Reavey, 2013; Piran, 2016b), and the need for a paradigm shift that de-emphasizes weight in favor of wellness (Bacon & Aphramor, 2014;

Tylka et al., 2014). Previous research has offered support for the effectiveness and sustainability of health-promotion initiatives that link self-acceptance and body-nurturance to healthy behaviour (Bacon & Aphramor, 2011; Moulding, 2007; Penney & Kirk, 2015). However, as this work has been largely quantitative to date, the present research contributes a qualitative perspective among a sample of Caucasian women who represent diverse ages and body sizes.

The present findings echo multidimensional, dynamic understandings of positive body-image (Tylka & Wood-Barcalow, 2015; Webb et al., 2016) and add to our understanding of ways that women adaptively cope with body image distress or concern (e.g., Berry et al., 2010; Frith & Gleeson, 2008; Ogle & Damhorst, 2005). Rather than narrow focus on changing the body, the findings of this research speak to the value of broader personal change from the inside out. Learning to relate to the embodied self positively can support new behaviour and broader goals for health, one part of which may be tending to physical needs for nourishing foods and exercise. But, with wellness at forefront, any changes made to eating or exercise serve to enhance body function for the life you want to lead, with weight-loss secondary and an outcome that may or may not come naturally.

Weight-loss is clearly important issue to women about which they want to contribute. This was clear from the outset of this project with the positive response to my recruitment posters, drawing more volunteers than I could reasonably accommodate. The women who participated were eager to share their stories, feel heard, and self-reflect. The participants in Study One advocated the need for a more constructive and encouraging position from which to approach weight-loss to counter the deleterious effects of weight stigma and pathologizing stance of “fixing” one’s “problematic” body. In Study Two, Michelle’s particular case has highlighted the value of health promotion initiatives at an early age, such as the Healthy Bodies program for children (Kater, 2012). Consider how life may be have different for Michelle if she had an adult to teach her to defend herself against unhealthy pressures and stigma regarding weight, develop a broader sense of self, and learn healthy ways to care for herself, eat well and stay fit. There are certainly words of wisdom to be found within the women’s stories in this research project for fellow women who are struggling and professionals supporting women on issues of body-image and embodiment.

I believe that the stories herein shed light on a discourse about the body and weight-loss in women’s lives that is less pathology-driven and emphasizes the fullness or totality of ties to

the self. Ultimately, the promotion of a multifaceted discourse about women's relation to their bodies/selves and a path to health promotion that capitalizes upon women's personal strengths as well as their capacity for insight and empowered self-care may be an important avenue to facilitate healthy embodiment. Further, women's stories of adapting to and creating positive personal change in broader contexts of adversity may uncover such strengths and capacities, which can then be translated into the context of body-image and weight-loss concerns. Placing women's voices at the forefront of this investigation, as a legitimate source of knowledge, is consistent with the feminist ideal of cultivating an atmosphere of empowerment for women to speak out and evoke change in their lives. In considering the meanings ascribed to women's bodies by constructions of thinness and femininity, creating space for women to voice their struggles and develop resistance to sociocultural pressures on their bodies/subjectivities is particularly important for promoting health and well-being. I am proud to represent and make a contribution to this cause.

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APPENDIX A: Recruitment Poster



Does it seem like you are always on a diet or trying to lose a few pounds?

Has dieting been a constant or ongoing experience in your life over the years?

Are you currently trying to lose weight or change your shape by dieting?

If you answered “YES” to these questions, please consider participating in the first study of this research project...

I am a graduate student in Clinical Psychology at the University of Saskatchewan. Under the supervision of Dr. Gerry Farthing, I am conducting a research project focusing on the stories of women who are engaged in chronic dieting to lose weight or change their shape. In this study, I am interested in learning about how women who diet view themselves and what they consider important to their sense of identity. I am looking for volunteers to participate in 2 interviews (around 60 minutes each) and a creative photography activity.

To be eligible for this study, you must meet the following criteria:

- a) Female
- b) 18 years of age or older
- c) Currently engaged in dieting with the goal of losing weight or changing your shape
- d) Feel that you are someone who is always watching her weight or shape, and has made multiple or continual attempts at dieting
- e) Do not have an active eating disorder diagnosis
- f) Willing to describe and reflect on your personal experiences with dieting

For more information about the study, please contact:

kimberley.makela@usask.ca

If you do not have access to email please call Dr. Gerry Farthing at 966-8925

This study has been approved by the University of Saskatchewan
Behavioural Research Ethics Board

APPENDIX B: Study One Consent Form



INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in the first study of a research project entitled *Exploring Women's Experiences of Identity in relation to Chronic Weight-Loss Dieting*. This project is being conducted as part of a Doctoral thesis in Clinical Psychology. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask questions you might have.

Researcher: Kimberley Makela, Department of Psychology, kimberley.makela@usask.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Gerry Farthing, Department of Psychology, 966-8925, gfarthing@stmcollege.ca

Purpose and Procedure: The purpose of this study is to explore how women who are engaged in chronic dieting view themselves and what they consider important to their sense of identity. Your participation in this study would involve taking part in 2 one-on-one interviews and a creative photography activity. The interviews are expected to last 60 minutes each, on average, and will take place at a mutually convenient time and location. All interviews in this study will be audio-taped and transcribed, so that there is an accurate record of the discussion. The photography activity is expected to take no more than 90 minutes of your time.

During the initial interview, you will be asked to respond to questions on the subject of your identity, including your perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about who you are as a person and what is important to your view of yourself in the present and into the future. You will also be asked to talk about your attitudes towards and experiences with your bodily appearance as well as dieting and how these experiences may or may not be meaningful for your sense of identity.

The photography activity will take place between the first and second interview. For this activity, you will be asked to take pictures as a way to represent how you view and define your identity. The activity will involve taking three different kinds of pictures: pictures that say "This is me", "This is not me", and "This is me I aspire to be". You will be provided the option of a one-time use camera or welcome to use your own digital camera to take the photographs. In both cases, the pictures will be printed at no cost to you.

During the second interview, we will look at your photographs together and I will ask you to tell me about their meaning or significance. I may also ask for your reactions to the pictures you have taken and ask you to reflect on what it was like to take the pictures.

Potential Benefits: If you choose to participate, you will have the opportunity to talk in-depth about your sense of identity and to share, in your own words, about your experiences with body weight/shape and dieting. Your involvement may help you to gain knowledge about yourself or a greater sense of self-awareness. The findings of this study also have the potential to enrich current research understanding about what is important to the identities of women who chronically diet and about what role, if any, dieting may play in their identities. It is important to note that these are possible benefits and are not guaranteed.

Potential Risks: Some of your perceptions about your identity and your experiences with weight-loss dieting may be quite personal and sensitive in nature, and it is possible that you will experience some discomfort in sharing these experiences in the interview. It is very important for you to know that you are free to decide what you will or will not share. You can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with and may choose to turn off the tape recorder at any point in the interview. After any of the interviews, if you want to talk about the thoughts and feelings you are having, I will provide you with a list of counseling resources in the community that you may contact.

Please recall that this study is not intended for individuals with an eating disorder. We may choose to discontinue a participant's involvement in the study if, at any time, your participation raises concern for Dr. Farthing and myself regarding the possibility that you may have an eating disorder. In this case, your data will be deleted from the research project and appropriately destroyed beyond recognition. Contact information for available counseling resources would be provided as well as an offer to assist the participant in making contact with such resources.

Storage of Data: All data, including the interview transcripts, audiotapes, consent forms and photographs, will be stored in a securely locked drawer in the office of the researcher while the study is in progress. The audiotapes will be destroyed after all the participants' tapes have been transcribed and samples of the transcripts have been checked for accuracy against the recordings. Upon completion of the study, Dr. Gerry Farthing will securely store all the data, at a secure location at the University of Saskatchewan. This data is kept for a minimum of five years. When the data is no longer required, it will be destroyed beyond recovery.

Confidentiality: The findings from this study will be reported in my Doctoral thesis and may be used in subsequent academic publications or conference presentations. The findings will be presented as common themes, and direct quotations from the individual transcripts will be reported to illustrate the themes. Where permitted by your consent, photographs will also be presented alongside the written description and quotes as a way to visually illustrate the themes. Measures will be taken to maintain confidentiality of the information you contribute to the study and ensure that it is not shared outside of the research team. You will be asked to choose a pseudonym (an alias or fake name) that will be used to protect your identity. The pseudonym will be substituted for your actual name in all instances within the transcripts and final report. Additionally, any personally identifying information will not be included when describing the characteristics of the participants in the final report. While the study is being conducted, all the data will be stored securely and labeled with your pseudonym to assure confidentiality.

Prior to the data being written up, you will be given the opportunity to review the complete transcript of your interviews, and to add, alter, or delete information from the transcript as you see fit. You will then be asked to sign a transcript release form to indicate that the transcript accurately reflects what you said during the interview and that you give permission for me to use quotations from the transcript.

You will also have the right to choose how the photographs you contribute to the study may be used. After you have taken your photographs and we have talked about their significance during

the second interview, I will ask you to indicate the conditions under which you give permission for me to use your photographs. You will be given the following three options to choose from:

- I give permission for my photographs to be used as raw data only, which means that they are not to be viewed outside of the research team.
- I give permission to publish only those photographs that do not reveal my identity in the final report, and subsequent academic publications or conference presentations.
- I give permission to publish all photographs in the final report, and subsequent academic publications or conference presentations.

Your photographs will be used only under the conditions you indicate. To protect the rights of third parties, you will be instructed not to take any pictures of other people or identifiable objects or places. It is also important to note that under no circumstances will photographs be used for financial gain.

Right to Withdraw: Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time, without penalty of any kind. You also have the right to refrain from answering any question(s) that you do not wish to answer. If you withdraw from the study at any time, any data that you have contributed will be destroyed at your request. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until all participants' data has been pooled for analysis. After this it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred, and it may not be possible to withdraw your data. You will also be informed of any new information that may affect your decision to participate.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the research project, please feel free to ask at any point; you are also free to contact the researcher or supervisor at the email addresses or numbers provided above if you have questions at a later time. If you are interested in learning about the study's findings, you may request a copy of the final report from the researcher or supervisor at any time. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on July 27, 2011. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Ethics Office (966-2084). Out of town participants may call collect.

Consent to Participate: I have read and understood the description of the research study provided above. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research study, understanding that I may withdraw my consent at any time. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

(Name of Participant)

(Date)

(Signature of Participant)

(Signature of Researcher)

APPENDIX C: Study Two Consent Form



INFORMED CONSENT FORM

You are invited to participate in the second study of a research project entitled *Exploring Women's Experiences of Identity in relation to Chronic Weight-Loss Dieting*. This project is being conducted as part of a Doctoral thesis in Clinical Psychology. Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask questions you might have.

Researcher: Kimberley Makela, Department of Psychology, kimberley.makela@usask.ca

Supervisor: Dr. Gerry Farthing, Department of Psychology, 966-8925, gfarthing@stmcollege.ca

Purpose and Procedure: The purpose of this study is to explore women's sense of identity related to the experience of chronically or continually dieting. In terms of the scope of dieting experiences that are of interest, this study will include a focus on women's present-day experiences with dieting as well as their past experiences with dieting throughout their lives. Your participation in this study would involve taking part in 3 one-on-one interviews and a creative photography activity. The interviews are expected to range between 60-90 minutes each and will take place at a mutually convenient time and location. All interviews in this study will be audio-taped and transcribed, so that there is an accurate record of the discussion.

During the initial interview, you will be asked to tell the story, from childhood to present-day, of your experiences with your bodily appearance and with dieting. The second interview will take place within 2-3 weeks after the initial interview. This interview will be used to clarify and extend aspects of the story you shared in the first interview. You will be asked to respond to questions about how dieting experiences that have occurred throughout your life may relate to your perceptions, thoughts, and feelings about who you are/were as a person and what is/was important to your sense of identity. You may also be asked to talk about specific dieting experiences you may have had and, more generally, about the role of dieting in your life.

The photography activity will begin following the first interview. For this activity, you will be asked to keep a photo-diary over a period of approximately 6 weeks. You will be asked to take pictures that reflect your experiences with dieting during this time – in particular, those relating to how you feel about yourself and your body. You will be provided the option of a one-time use camera or welcome to use your own digital camera to take the photographs. In both cases, the images will be printed at no cost to you. During the 6-week period you will have the freedom to choose when to take photographs and how much time you give to the activity on a day-by-day basis. It is expected that the activity will take no more than 10-15 minutes per day, on average. During the third interview, we will look at your photographs together and I will ask you to tell me about their meaning or significance. I may also ask for your reactions to the pictures you have taken and ask you to reflect on what it was like to take the pictures.

Potential Benefits: If you choose to participate, you will have the opportunity to share, in your own words, about your experiences with body weight/shape and dieting, and to reflect on how these experiences may be meaningful for your sense of identity. Your involvement may help you

to gain knowledge about yourself or a greater sense of self-awareness. The findings of this study also have the potential to enrich current research understanding about the possible significance or meaning of dieting experiences in women's everyday lives and conceptions of identity. It is important to note that these are possible benefits and are not guaranteed.

Potential Risks: Some of your perceptions about your identity and your experiences with weight-loss dieting may be quite personal and sensitive in nature, and it is possible that you will experience some discomfort sharing these experiences in the interview. It is very important for you to know that you are free to decide what you will or will not share. You can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with and may choose to turn off the tape recorder at any point in the interview. After any of the interviews, if you want to talk about the thoughts and feelings you are having, I will provide you with a list of counseling resources in the community that you may contact.

Please recall that this study is not intended for individuals who are currently struggling with an eating disorder. We may choose to discontinue a participant's involvement in the study if, at any time, your participation raises concern for Dr. Farthing and myself regarding the possibility that you may have an eating disorder. In this case, your data will be deleted from the research project and appropriately destroyed beyond recognition. Contact information for available counseling resources would be provided as well as an offer to assist the participant in making contact with such resources.

Storage of Data: All data, including the interview transcripts, audiotapes, consent forms and photographs, will be stored in a securely locked drawer in the office of the researcher while the study is in progress. The audiotapes will be destroyed after all the participants' tapes have been transcribed and samples of the transcripts have been checked for accuracy against the recordings. Upon completion of the study, Dr. Gerry Farthing will securely store all the data, at a secure location at the University of Saskatchewan. This data is kept for a minimum of five years. When the data is no longer required, it will be destroyed beyond recovery.

Confidentiality: The findings from this study will be reported in my Doctoral thesis and may be used in subsequent academic publications or conference presentations. The findings will be presented as common themes, and direct quotations from the individual transcripts will be reported to illustrate the themes. Where permitted by your consent, photographs will also be presented alongside the written description and quotes as a way to visually illustrate the themes. Measures will be taken to maintain confidentiality of the information you contribute to the study and ensure that it is not shared outside of the research team. You will be asked to choose a pseudonym (an alias or fake name) that will be used to protect your identity. The pseudonym will be substituted for your actual name in all instances within the transcripts and final report. Additionally, any personally identifying information will not be included when describing the characteristics of the participants in the final report. While the study is being conducted, all the data will be stored securely and labeled with your pseudonym to assure confidentiality.

Prior to the data being written up, you will be given the opportunity to review the complete transcript of your interviews, and to add, alter, or delete information from the transcript as you see fit. You will then be asked to sign a transcript release form to indicate that the transcript accurately

reflects what you said during the interviews and that you give permission for me to use quotations from the transcript.

You will also have the right to choose how the photographs you contribute to the study may be used. After you have taken your photographs and we have talked about their significance during the third interview, I will ask you to indicate the conditions under which you give permission for me to use your photographs. You will be given the following three options to choose from:

- I give permission for my photographs to be used as raw data only, which means that they are not to be viewed outside of the research team.
- I give permission to publish only those photographs that do not reveal my identity in the final report, and subsequent academic publications or conference presentations.
- I give permission to publish all photographs in the final report, and subsequent academic publications or conference presentations.

Your photographs will be used only under the conditions you indicate. To protect the rights of third parties, you will be instructed not to take any pictures of other people or identifiable objects or places. It is also important to note that under no circumstances will photographs be used for financial gain.

Right to Withdraw: Your participation is voluntary, and you may choose to withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time, without penalty of any kind. You also have the right to refrain from answering any question(s) that you do not wish to answer. If you withdraw from the study at any time, any data that you have contributed will be destroyed at your request. Your right to withdraw data from the study will apply until all participants' data has been pooled for analysis. After this it is possible that some form of research dissemination will have already occurred, and it may not be possible to withdraw your data. You will also be informed of any new information that may affect your decision to participate.

Questions: If you have any questions concerning the research project, please feel free to ask at any point; you are also free to contact the researcher or supervisor at the email addresses or numbers provided above if you have questions at a later time. If you are interested in learning about the study's findings, you may request a copy of the final report from the researcher or supervisor at any time. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on July 27, 2011. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Ethics Office (966-2084). Out of town participants may call collect.

Consent to Participate: I have read and understood the description of the research study provided above. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research study, understanding that I may withdraw my consent at any time. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

(Name of Participant)

(Date)

(Signature of Participant)

(Signature of Researcher)

APPENDIX D: Study One Interview Guide

Semi-structured Interview

- Introduce myself and review the consent form. Thank you for deciding to join my study. It is nice to have people who are willing to share of themselves and their time. I hope that you will enjoy participating in this project.
- **Outline purpose of first interview:** I am trying to understand how women who are engaged in chronic dieting view themselves and what they consider important to their sense of identity. Today I will be asking questions about how you view, think, and feel about yourself and what is important to you, so that I might try to understand your sense of identity. I will also ask you to talk about your experiences with body image and dieting, and how those experiences might fit into your view of yourself as a person.
- An important point I'd like you to keep in mind is that there are no right or wrong answers here. I am interested in working together with you to learn about your understandings and experiences. On that topic, you are the expert and I really value what you have to share.
- In sharing your understandings and experiences, please give me as much detail as possible so that I can really understand what it is like for you.
- Take your time, don't feel rushed. If you are having a hard time finding the right words to describe things at times, just take a moment to think about it.
- Remember that you are free to decide what you will or won't share, and I will respect that.
- Do you have any questions before we get started?

Opening Questions

- I'd like to start by first finding out more about you, some of the details of your life like how old you are?...Are you married or dating anyone?...Do you have any children?...What do you do for a living?...What is your education background?...Where were you born?...What do you identify as your ethnicity?...Anything else you'd like me to know about you?
- I'd also like to know about your history with dieting....When did dieting first start for you?...How have you tried to lose weight or change your shape?...What does dieting typically look like for you?...What are you currently doing to lose weight/change your shape?...When did that start?

Primary Questions

Descriptive Questions

- How would you describe yourself?...What is important for me to know about you?
- Who are the important people in your life (e.g., family, close friends)?...How do you think they see you?...How would they describe you?
- What do you value or consider most important in your life?
- How do you feel about yourself in general at this point in your life?...What aspects do you like/dislike about yourself?
- Tell me about your goals or aspirations (personally/interpersonally/socially/career)
- How do you see yourself in the future?...Are there certain things you want to achieve or ways you would like to be in the future?

Analytical Questions

- What makes you who you are as an individual or person?
- What has been constant about you as a person across time (e.g., attributes, values, goals)?
- What makes you unique?...What makes you an individual who is different from others?

- Are there important parts of who you are that you think you don't or aren't able to show to others?...What keeps you from showing those parts of yourself?
- What significant life experiences do you think have contributed to who you are as a person?
- Is your sense of who you are today in any way different from how you used to see/think/feel about yourself?...In what way?...What do you think contributed to that change?

Questions Related to Dieting

- What do you think contributed to your decision to diet?
- Have your experiences with dieting in any way influenced the way you view/think/feel about yourself?...How have your experiences with dieting contributed (positive or negative) to your understanding of who you are?
- Is being a “dieter” something that you see as important to who you are?...Is being a “dieter” important to who you aspire to be in the future?
- How would you describe your body?... How do your attitudes and feelings towards your body play a role in the way you see and/or feel about yourself as a person?
- How do you think you would feel about yourself as a thinner person (if you achieved your ideal body)?...How do you think others would see you?...Would anything else about you or your life change if you lost weight or changed your shape?
- *Possible probes/prompts to extend, deepen, and encourage detail in the narrative:*
 - What was it like?
 - Tell me more about that.
 - Why?...How so?...In what way?
 - Is there a specific story/example that you can recall?
 - What is significant for you about that?
 - What do you mean by *x*?
 - Go back to *x* and help me understand more.
 - What were your thoughts/feelings/reactions?
 - How did you cope?
 - How did you perceive/feel/think about yourself/your body in that instance?
 - What circumstances led to or brought about that understanding/insight/feeling?
 - Is there something you can compare it to (e.g., other experience/analogy/metaphor)?

Closing Question: Is there anything else you would like to tell me or that you feel we have missed?

Introduce the Photograph Activity

- Before we finish today, I'd like to introduce you to the photography activity that I would like you to do before we meet for our second interview. Refer to the *study one photograph activity instructions* to describe: the purpose/goal of taking photographs; how the images will be used in the second interview; camera options and arrangements to obtain images in time to print for the second interview.
- With the digital camera, I know that it is a real temptation to review and edit pictures that you think aren't good. We all do this with capturing snapshots. But, for this activity, I ask that you try not to judge or edit your images when you are taking them. I'm not looking for professional, composed photos or conventionally beautiful photos, but rather photos that are telling or significant to you because of the meaning behind them. So, give yourself permission to just take the images and refrain from looking at them. During our interview, we can look at them together and you'll be able to share with me if things didn't turn out quite like you planned.

- One final note, it is important for ethical reasons that you do not take pictures of other people or identifiable objects/places, as these third parties have not consented to participate in the study.
- Do you have any questions about the activity?

Closing Comments: My experience is that participants need about 10 days to two weeks to do this activity. At that point, I'll send you an email to see how it is going for you, so that we can anticipate when to schedule the second interview...Thank you very much for your time today. It was a pleasure to talk with you and I look forward to meeting with you again soon.

Photo Elicitation Interview

Opening Question: Thank you for meeting with me again. I've been looking forward to talking with you about your photographs. But, before we get started on that discussion, I'd like start out today by inviting you to share any thoughts or ideas you may have had about what we talked about in our previous interview, after having a chance to reflect on it...Did you have any further insights into what we talked about that you would like to share?

Discussion of the photographs

- Let's now turn to look at your photographs together. All of your pictures are laid out here and organized into the three groups: "*This is me*", "*This is not me*", and "*This is me I aspire to be*". I'm interested in hearing your story about these pictures. I want you to interpret them for me in as much detail as possible, telling me why each image was taken and what it represents or symbolizes to you. I'd like you to lead me through the pictures in whatever way you decide. You don't have to go about it in any particular order, and you can feel free to go back and forth between images. I will simply follow your lead and interject questions along the way. Okay?...Where would you like to start?
- *Possible probes to extend, deepen, and encourage detail in the narrative:*
 - General probes: What was that like?; Tell me more about that; In what way?; How so?; Why?; What do you mean by x?; Go back to x and help me understand more; Is there a specific story/example you can recall?
 - What aspect of your identity does this picture represent?
 - Tell me what is significant for you here.
 - Why did you take this picture (and not another)?
 - What does the picture say about you?...What does it say about the way you view and define yourself?
 - What does the picture say about the way you would like to see yourself in the future?
 - What does the picture say about what is important to you?
 - Tell me about your experience of taking this picture....What were you thinking/feeling as you took this picture?
 - What is your reaction to the person/object/place depicted here?...What thoughts/feelings come to mind as you look at this image?
 - What does this image remind you of?...Does the image evoke any particular senses (e.g., sounds, smells, tastes), experiences, or memories?
 - Is there an experience/analogy/metaphor you can compare the image to?
- *Prompts to elicit discussion of certain images or picturing experiences:*
 - What is happening in this photograph?...Tell me about what this image represents.
 - Were there any photographs that you didn't or couldn't take, but would have liked to have taken?...Tell me more about that.

- What comes to mind as you look across the images as a collective or whole?...Are there any images that stand out?... Are there any images that stand in comparison or contrast against one another?
- Which picture(s) best captures your sense of identity?
- Before we end today, I'm interested in hearing from you about what the experience of taking the photographs was like for you?...Did you gain anything from it?...Did you find it difficult in any way?...Did creating and discussing these pictures bring about any new insights into your sense of identity?

Closing Question: Is there anything else you would like to tell me or that you feel we have missed?...What was your experience of participating in this study?

Closing Comments: Thank you very much for participating in this study. It was a pleasure meeting with you again. I will be in touch with you once I have our interviews transcribed and then we can arrange a time for you to look over the transcripts.

APPENDIX E: Study Two Interview Guide

Life History Interview

- Introduce myself and review the consent form. Thank you for deciding to join my study. It is nice to have people who are willing to share of themselves and their time. I hope that you will enjoy participating in this project.
- **Outline purpose of first interview:** Many women in our society have tried to lose weight by dieting, many of whom find themselves constantly dieting or going on and off periods of dieting. With this study, I am interested in exploring women's sense of identity related to their experiences with chronically or continually dieting throughout their lives. So, today I am interested in hearing your life story about experiences you've had with your bodily appearance and with dieting.
- An important point I'd like you to keep in mind is that there are no right or wrong answers here. I am interested in working together with you to learn about your understandings and experiences. On that topic, you are the expert and I really value what you have to share.
- Take your time, don't feel rushed. If you are having a hard time finding the right words to describe things at times, just take a moment to think about it.
- Remember that you are free to decide what you will or won't share, and I will respect that.
- I'll be writing down some notes while you talk. I'm not evaluating what you are saying. I'm just jotting down ideas or questions so I can remember them later.
- Do you have any questions before we get started?

Opening Questions

- I'd like to start by first finding out more about you, some of the details of your life like how old you are?...Are you married or dating anyone?...Do you have any children?...What do you do for a living?...What is your education background?...Where were you born?...What do you identify as your ethnicity?...Anything else you'd like me to know about you?
- I'd also like to know about your history with dieting.... What does dieting typically look like for you?...How else have you tried to lose weight or change your shape?... What are you currently doing to lose weight/change your shape?...When did that start?

Generative Narrative Question: I would like you to tell me how the life story of your experiences with your body image and with dieting occurred. The best way to do this would be for you to start from childhood, with the little girl that you once were, telling me how you saw and felt about your body at that point in your life. Then continue your story forward, telling all the things that happened in your life to do with your body image and dieting one after the other until today. Please take your time in sharing your story, and give as much detail as you can. For me, everything is of interest that is significant to you.

- **Additional prompt to start the narrative:** Imagining yourself as that little girl you once were, where does your story of these experiences begin?...What is the first memory you have, as a little girl, of when your bodily appearance became somehow important?
- **Prompts to continue the narrative until the end:** What is the next part of your story?; Tell me what happened next; Go on; Please continue; What happened after that?
- **Probe aspects of the narrative that were not exhaustively detailed:**
 - You told me before about *x*. I did not quite understand _____. Could you please tell me that part of the story in a little more detail?
 - Can we go back to the part of your story when you talked about *x*? Tell me more about what that was like.

- Help me to understand what was significant for you about *x*.
- When you said *x*, what did you mean by that?
- Please tell me more about the circumstances around *x*.

Balancing Phase (aim at theoretical accounts of what happened and at balancing the story, reducing the ‘meaning’ of the whole story to its common denominator)

Looking Across:

- When would say dieting first started for you?...How do you think the role of dieting in your life has evolved since then?
- How has your body/dieting been significant at different points in your life?
- Would you say that there things about the way you experience your body/dieting now that were not always true for you?...What has changed?...Why do you think this change has occurred?

Looking Back:

- What is it like to reflect on your life story of these experiences you’ve had with your body and dieting from where you are now in your life?
- What do you understand now about yourself that you didn’t understand back then?

Compare and Contrast:

- I was particularly struck by the part of your story where you talked about *x*. How does that experience stand out in your story?
- It was very interesting to me when you talked about *x*. How do you think that part of your story compares/relates to other parts of your story?...How was it similar/different?

Looking for themes:

- Did you notice ideas/feelings/actions that came up frequently throughout your story?
- How would you summarize your story?...If this story were written up as a biography, what would be written about on the back of the book jacket?
- For you, what does this story say about the significance of experiences you have had with your body/dieting within your life up until now?
- What was it like for you to share this story with me?...What are you thinking and feeling in response to sharing this story?

Closing Question: Is there anything else you would like to tell me or that you feel we have missed?

Introduce the Photograph Activity

- Before we finish today, I’d like to introduce you to the photography activity that I would like you to do before we meet for our second interview. Refer to the *study two photograph activity instructions* to describe: the purpose/goal of taking photographs; how the images will be used in the second interview; camera options and arrangements to obtain images in time to print for the third interview.
- With the digital camera, I know that it is a real temptation to review and edit pictures that you think aren’t good. We all do this with capturing snapshots. But, for this activity, I ask that you try not to judge or edit your images when you are taking them. I’m not looking for professional, composed photos or conventionally beautiful photos, but rather photos that are telling or significant to you because of the meaning behind them. So, give yourself permission to just take the images and refrain from looking at them. During our interview, we can look at them together and you’ll be able to share with me if things didn’t turn out quite like you planned.

- One final note, it is important for ethical reasons that you do not take pictures of other people or identifiable objects/places, as these third parties have not consented to participate in the study.
- Do you have any questions about the activity?

Closing Comments: I'd like to schedule our second interview within 2-3 weeks from now. Is there a time that would be convenient with you in this time frame?...Or, would you like me to be in touch in the next week about these arrangements?...Thank you very much for your time today. It was a pleasure to talk with you.

Semi-structured Interview

Opening Question: Thank you for meeting with me again. I'd like to start out today by inviting you to share any thoughts or ideas you may have had about what we talked about in our previous interview, after having a chance to reflect on it....Did you have any further insights into what we talked about that you would like to share?

Outline purpose of second interview: The point of today's interview is to follow-up on the story that you shared with me last time we met. There are a few things you shared that I would like to understand more about. I'd also like to ask you some questions about specific dieting experiences you may have had, and about the role of dieting in your life. In sharing your insights and experiences, I ask that you please give me as much detail as possible so that I can really understand what it is like for you. Does that sound okay?...Let's get started.

Primary Questions

Role of Dieting in Everyday Life

- I'd like to begin by talking about the current dieting experience that is ongoing in your life. Please describe what your everyday life is like with dieting?...Right now, what is dieting like for you personally?...How do you feel about yourself when you are dieting?...How does that compare to when you are not dieting?
- What do you think contributed to your decision to diet?...In general, what motivates you to diet?
- So many women in our society have tried to lose weight by dieting or find themselves constantly on a diet throughout their lives. What do you think about this?...What do you think this says about the role or meaning of dieting in women's lives?...How does that fit for you?
- Do you feel that is dieting an important part of your life?...What is it about dieting that makes it important to you?...How do you think your life would be if you stopped dieting?
- Have your experiences with dieting in any way influenced/changed the way you view/think/feel about yourself?...How have your experiences with dieting contributed (positive or negative) to your understanding of who you are?...How might dieting contribute to who you are becoming or the person that you see yourself as in the future?
- Is being a "dieter" something that you see as important to who you are?...Is being a "dieter" important to who you aspire to be in the future?
- How would you describe your body?... How do your attitudes and feelings towards your body play a role in the way you see and/or feel about yourself as a person?
- How do you think you would feel about yourself as a thinner person (if you achieved your ideal body)?...How do you think others would see you?...Would you be a new person in some way?...Would some part of you come out that couldn't be seen before or that wasn't there before?

Specific Dieting Experiences

- How would you describe the experience of success/failure in dieting?...How have you experienced success/failure in dieting?
- In your opinion, has dieting in some ways made a negative contribution to your life or how you feel about yourself? (other adjectives: distressing, debilitating)... Is there a specific experience/example that comes to mind?
- In your experience, is there a positive side to dieting?... Have there been ways that dieting has made a positive contribution to your life or how you feel about yourself? (other adjectives: enriching, affirming, life enhancing)...Please give me an example.
- In your view, do you see dieting as an opportunity for personal growth or change in your life or in the way you see yourself?...How has this been true/not true in your experience?
- There seems to be this message in the media around weight-loss of “Change your body, Change your life”. Is this something you’ve encountered or thought about in your experiences with dieting?...Does this message have meaning for you?
- *Possible probes/prompts to extend, deepen, and encourage detail in the narrative:*
 - What was it like?
 - Tell me more about that.
 - Why?...How so?...In what way?
 - Is there a specific story/example that you can recall?
 - What is significant for you about that?
 - What do you mean by x ?
 - How would you summarize x ?
 - Go back to x and help me understand more.
 - What were your thoughts/feelings/reactions?
 - How did you cope?
 - How did you perceive/feel/think about yourself/your body in that instance?
 - What circumstances led to or brought about that understanding/insight/feeling?
 - Is there something you can compare it to (e.g., other experience/analogy/metaphor)?
 - Has x always been true for you?...Or has x somehow changed over time?...What do you think brought about that change?
 - How does that experience compare/relate to past/other experiences you’ve had with your body image/dieting?
- *Prompts to follow-up on the life history narrative and relate its content to the current interview (integrate in main body of interview where appropriate):*
 - Last time you shared about x . I would like to understand more about ____?
 - I’d like to revisit what you shared about x in our last interview. Help me to better understand ____?
 - In your life story, you talked about x . I’m really interested in hearing more about that, and how that fits with ____ we’ve talked about today.

Closing Question: Is there anything else you would like to tell me or that you feel we have missed?...Before we end today, I wanted to follow-up on how the photography activity is going for you...

Closing Comments: Thank you very much for your time today. It was a pleasure to talk with you. I look forward to meeting with you again in a few weeks time to talk about your photographs. Would you prefer to make arrangements for the next interview today?... Or, would you like me get in touch with you in the next week or so to make arrangements?

Photo Elicitation Interview

Opening Question: I've been looking forward to talking with you about your pictures. But, before we started on that discussion, I'd like to first give you space to share any thoughts or ideas you may have had about what we talked about last time, now that you've had a chance to reflect on it....

Discussion of the photographs:

- Let's now turn to look at your photographs together. All of your pictures are laid out here and organized in chronological order, as best as I could tell. I'm interested in hearing your story about these pictures. I want you to interpret them for me in as much detail as possible, telling me why each image was taken and what it represents or symbolizes about your experiences with dieting. I'd like you to lead me through the pictures in whatever way you decide. You don't have to go about it in any particular order, and you can feel free to go back and forth between images, refer to your written reflections, or move images around. I will simply follow your lead and interject questions along the way. Okay?...Where would you like to start?
- *Possible probes to extend, deepen, and encourage detail in the narrative:*
 - General probes: What was that like?; Tell me more about that; In what way?; How so?; Why?; What do you mean by x?; Go back to x and help me understand more; Is there a specific story/example you can recall?
 - What aspect of your dieting experience does the picture represent?
 - Tell me what is significant for you here.
 - Why did you take this picture (and not another)?
 - What does the image(s) say about your attitudes/feelings towards your body?
 - What does the image(s) say about the way you were see/feel/think about yourself?
 - How does the experience depicted in this picture compare/relate to past experiences you've had with your body image/dieting?
 - Tell me about your experience of taking this picture...What were you thinking/feeling as you took this picture?...How does that compare to where you are at now?
 - What does this image remind you of?...Does the image evoke any particular senses (e.g., sounds, smells, tastes), feelings, or memories?
 - What is your reaction to the person/object/place depicted here?... What thoughts/feelings come to mind as you look at this image?
 - Is there another experience/analogy/metaphor you can compare the image to?
- *Prompts to elicit discussion of certain images or picturing experiences:*
 - What is happening in this photograph?...tell me about what this image represents.
 - Were there any photographs that you didn't or couldn't take, but would have liked to have taken?...tell me more about that.
 - What comes to mind as you look across the images as a collective or whole?...Are there any images that stand out?...Any images that stand in comparison or contrast against one another?
 - Looking across the pictures, do you notice anything about how your experiences may have developed or evolved across the 6 weeks of dieting?...How did things change (stay the same)?
 - What do you think the image(s) say about your motivation to diet or your reasons for dieting?...Do the images speak to what you have to lose/gain by dieting?

- Which picture(s) best captures how you were feeling about your body while dieting?...Which picture(s) best captures how you were feeling about yourself overall while dieting?
- Before we end today, I'm interested in hearing from you about what the experience of keeping the photo-diary was like for you?...Did you gain anything from it?...Did you find it difficult in any way?...Did creating and discussing these pictures bring about any new insights into the significance of dieting in your life and identity?

Closing Question: Is there anything else you would like to tell me or that you feel we have missed?...What was your experience of participating in this study?

Closing Comments: Thank you very much for participating in this study. It was a pleasure meeting with you again. I will be in touch with you once I have our interviews transcribed and then we can arrange a time for you to look over the transcripts.

APPENDIX F: Study One Photo Activity Instructions

In this activity, I invite you to play with photographs as a way to represent how you view and define yourself in your world. This activity involves taking three different kinds of pictures. For one kind of picture, I want you to describe yourself. To do this, I would like you to take 9 photographs that tell who you are. These photographs can be of anything, just as long as they reveal something about who you are. These pictures should say *“This is me!”*

For the second kind of picture, I want you to describe who you are not. To do this, I would like you to take 9 more photographs. These photographs can be of anything as long as they say *“This is not me!”*

For the last kind of picture, I want you to describe who you aspire to be or the person you envision yourself becoming in the future. To do this, I would like you to take 9 more photographs. These photographs can be of anything, as long as they reflect what is important to your sense of who you will be or would like to be in the future. These pictures should say *“This is me I aspire to be!”* Remember that you are the only one who can take these pictures, so you cannot take any pictures of yourself.

At the end of the activity you will have taken a total of 27 pictures. While taking your pictures, you may find it easier to shift between the three different kinds of pictures than to take all 9 of each kind at once. To help keep track of your pictures, I have provided an information sheet on the back of these instructions that I would like you to fill out. When you take a picture, please record the number of the picture from 1-27 and a very short description of what is in the picture under the appropriate heading.

During our second interview, we will look at your pictures together and I will ask you to tell me about their meaning or significance. I may also ask you to respond to the images you have taken and to reflect on the process of taking them. I have provided the option of a one-time use camera or you are welcome to use your own digital camera to take the photographs. If you are using the one-time use camera, I will arrange to pick it up when you are ready and have the pictures developed in time for our second interview. If you are using your own digital camera, please email me the pictures once you have them ready and I will have them printed in time for our second interview.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this activity!

Photograph Tracking Sheet

Photographs that say "*This is me!*"

Photographs that say "*This is not me!*"

Photographs that say "This is me I aspire to be!"

APPENDIX G: Study Two Photography Activity Instructions

This activity involves keeping a photo-diary about what dieting is like for you over the next 6 weeks. I want you to take pictures that capture your experiences with dieting during this time – in particular, I want you to take pictures that represent: (1) how you are feeling about your body while you are dieting and/or (2) how you are feeling about yourself overall while you are dieting. I encourage you to take pictures that reveal your perceptions, thoughts, feelings, insights, etc. on this subject. The pictures can be of anything, just as long as they say something about your experience with dieting.

You can also choose how often to take photographs over the coming weeks. Do not feel that you have to take pictures every single day. However, I do ask that you take photographs on a regular basis, so that the series of pictures will more strongly capture your ongoing experience. During our third interview, we will look at your pictures together and I will ask you to tell me about their meaning or significance. I may also ask you to respond to the images you have taken and to reflect on the process of taking them. I have provided a small notebook as a place for you to record any personal reflections that accompany your pictures or that occur throughout the process of thinking about and taking your pictures. Recording your reflections in this way will help me to understand the context of your picture taking and will help you to later recall your experiences from across the entire 6 weeks of keeping your photo-diary.

I have provided the option of a one-time use camera or you are welcome to use your own digital camera to take the photographs. We will be meeting for our second interview in 2-3 weeks time. A few weeks later, when the 6-week period of keeping your photo-diary is coming to an end, I will contact you to make arrangements to collect your pictures for printing and schedule our third interview. If you are using the one-time use camera, I will arrange to pick it up when you are ready and have the pictures developed in time for our interview. If you are using your own digital camera, I will ask you to please email me the pictures once you have them ready and I will have them printed in time for our interview.

Thank you for taking the time to participate in this activity!

APPENDIX H: Transcript/Data Release Form



TRANSCRIPT/DATA RELEASE FORM

Interview Transcripts:

I, _____, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interviews in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interviews with Kimberley Makela. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Kimberley Makela to be used in the manner described in the Consent Form.

Photographs:

Please indicate below the conditions under which you give permission for me to use your photographs:

_____ I give permission for my photographs to be used as raw data only, which means that they are not to be viewed outside of the research team.

_____ I give permission to publish only those photographs that do not reveal my identity in the final report, and subsequent academic publications or conference presentations.

_____ I give permission to publish all photographs in the final report, and subsequent academic publications or conference presentations.

I hereby authorize the release of these photographs to Kimberley Makela to be used only under the conditions I have indicated here. I also understand that any photographs that reveal the identity of individuals who have not consented to participate in this study will not be published and that under no circumstances will photographs be used for financial gain.

I have received a copy of this Transcript/Data Release Form for my own records.

Name of Participant

Date

Signature of Participant

Signature of Researcher

APPENDIX I: Permission to Use Photo Activity Protocol

From: Noland, Carey C.Noland@neu.edu
Subject: RE: interest in your auto-photography method

Date: March 17, 2011 at 12:10 PM
To: Makela, Kimberley kimberley.makela@usask.ca

Hi Kimberly,
I am glad that you are using the protocol. You have my permission to use it verbatim. Good luck and let me know how it went when you are all done. Hopefully you will get it published somewhere.
Best of luck,
Carey

Carey Marie Noland, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Communication Studies Joint Appointment College of Business Northeastern University
Boston MA 02115

International Village Faculty in Residence

From: Kimberley Makela [kimberley.makela@usask.ca] Sent: Thursday, March 17, 2011 12:07 PM
To: Noland, Carey
Subject: interest in your auto-photography method

Hello Dr. Noland,

My name is Kimberley Makela and I am a Ph.D. student in the Clinical Psychology program at the University of Saskatchewan. In the development of my dissertation research I have recently come across your article entitled "Auto-photography as a Research Practice: Identity and Self-Esteem Research" from a 2006 issue of the Journal of Research Practice. My Ph.D. research is will be exploring the embodied identities of chronic dieting women and I am planning on using a combination of interviews and auto-photography as part of my methodology. I was very interested in the photography activity you used in case study #2 in this article asking participants to take pictures that say "this is me" and "this is not me". I noted that an article by Phoenix, C. (2010) in the Journal of Aging Studies has used your method to explore the embodied identities of bodybuilders. This is an approach that I think would be similarly fruitful to use in my own work and thus I wanted to request your permission to use the instructions verbatim that were provided in the appendix of your article.

Thank you for your time and for considering this request.

Sincerely,
Kimberley